

THE ART OF LIFE, THE DANCE OF POETRY: GENDER, EXPERIMENT AND EXPERIENCE IN MINA LOY AND DIANE DI PRIMA

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Abstract

Mina Loy and Diane di Prima's experimental poetic contributions to their early "situational avant-gardes" (the 1910s Modernists and late 1950s Beats in New York) vindicated the relation of gender and experiment within their countercultural movements, redefining these groups' poetic and ideological tenets. Firstly, I will connect and contextualize these two poets as part of American feminist avant-garde tradition. Then, I will study their early poetry's specificities and their common particularity: a gendered approach to the interconnectivity between experiment and experience. The article develops the idea that Loy and di Prima's "motional" poetics of alternate forces of expression and linguistic experimentation is a dynamic materialization of the ambivalence involved in their bodily and spatial experiences of inclusion and exclusion as bohemian women poets in their urban environment and their artistic communities. The last section theorizes the way these embodied positionalities, and the continuum formed by environment, space, body and language, interrelate with Loy and di Prima's feminist motional avant-garde poetics based on material feminist philosophies and postmodern and experimental literary critics' views.

Keywords: Mina Loy, Diane di Prima, American women's poetry, feminist avant-garde poetics.

Resumen

Las contribuciones poéticas experimentales de Mina Loy y Diane di Prima a sus “vanguardias situacionales” (Modernismo de principios del veinte y finales de los cincuenta en Nueva York) reivindican la relación entre género y experimentación dentro de estos movimientos contraculturales, redefiniendo así los principios ideológicos y poéticos de tales grupos. En primer lugar, el artículo conectará y contextualizará a estas dos autoras como parte de la tradición vanguardista feminista estadounidense. Seguidamente, se analizarán las especificidades de sus poesías tempranas y la particularidad que comparten: la aproximación desde el género a la interconectividad entre experimento y experiencia. Este artículo desarrolla la idea de una poética de “moción” o en movimiento que alterna fuerzas expresivas y de experimentación lingüística y que supone la materialización dinámica de la ambivalencia espacial y corporal, de inclusión y exclusión, que Loy y di Prima experimentaron como mujeres poetas bohemias dentro de sus entornos urbanos y artísticos. La última sección teoriza cómo estas posicionalidades, y el continuo formado entre entorno, espacio, cuerpo y lenguaje, se interrelacionan dando lugar a una poética vanguardista feminista “en movimiento”, basándonos en la reciente filosofía de los feminismos materiales y en críticas literarias postmodernas experimentales.

Palabras clave: Mina Loy, Diane di Prima, poesía de mujeres estadounidenses, poética feminista experimental o vanguardista.

1. Connecting Women’s Avant-Garde Poetries: Early Bohemian Reinventions in Loy and di Prima

Although Mina Loy’s poetic oeuvre, since Roger Conover’s edition of her poems in the mid-nineties, has achieved a deserved acknowledgment as representative of female Modernism, this has not been the case for di Prima or other Beat women poets in relation to contemporary American experimental poetics and Beat literature. Critical works on Loy assigned her the place she deserved as one of the main avant-garde women poets of the Modernist period (Kouidis, Burke, Shreiber and Tuma). On the other hand, several anthologies and works since the late nineties (Knight, Peabody, Johnson and Grace) have tried to place Beat women poets and writers as relevant figures in the predominantly male Beat canon. In spite of the critical and editorial effort, we are still worryingly short of studies of Beat poetics (Charter, Elkholy) and in feminist works on American women’s poetry.¹

Diane di Prima has become the most popular of the Beat women writers and poets, partly due to her prolific and still active writing career, but she lacks a scholarly

published work devoted solely to her writing (Quinn 2003: 175). On the other hand, Beat women's literature has hardly been studied in relation to previous and posterior American women's experimental poetics. In the same way, Mina Loy's poetry has not been seriously analyzed through a comparative lens in relation to other experimental women poets beyond the Modernist period.

Throughout this section I would like to support the possible dialogue and connections between Mina Loy and Diane di Prima's early poetries taking as common denominator their gendered stand as women poets within their different avant-garde movements and positioning them theoretically within feminist literary critical studies of American women's avant-garde poetics. The influence of Modernist women writers on Beat female poets has been acknowledged (Johnson and Grace 2002: 15), but there is still no critical study connecting Modernist with Beat women poets. My intention here is not so much to prove a generational dialogue between Mina Loy and Diane di Prima as to show how two avant-garde women poets embedded in different countercultural groups in US literary and cultural history (i.e. the New York Modernists of the first decade of the twentieth-century and the New York Beats of the late fifties and decade of the sixties) develop similar creative strategies of poetic reinvention in order to generate their own alternative feminist experimental poetries.

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I would like to contextualize Loy and di Prima within the lineage of American feminist avant-garde poetics providing a comparative perspective and taking Elisabeth Frost's *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* (2003) as a theoretical framework for this undertaking. Frost considers that a feminist theory of women's avant-garde writing has been thwarted until recently not only due to the "patriarchal quality of much of avant-garde rhetoric" (2003: xxi), but also because an incompatibility has been assumed to exist between a feminist consciousness and an experimental aesthetics within literary scholarship since the second-wave American feminist movement. Experimental women poets and critics since the 1980s have challenged the feminist critical model that considered women's poetry should express an authentic personal voice through accessible poetic language in order to celebrate and reflect real and universal female experiences (Frost, Wills, Tarlo, Heijinian, Armantrout). This article shares these avant-garde feminist critics' emphasis on breaking up the artificial poetic dichotomy between experience and experiment in women's poetry and on considering that experimental poetics can reflect gendered experiences and feminist political agency.

An avant-garde work, Frost suggests, is an artistic practice that combines formal innovation with political engagement, implying an intrinsic relation between ideas and form (Frost 2003: xv). Another defining characteristic of the avant-gardes is

that they become art communities or movements where individuals identify with each other and share same beliefs and practices (*ibid.*). Regarding this last point, avant-garde American women poets alter this characteristic since they seemed to “resist a notion of affiliation” (Frost 2003: xiv) not only with their avant-garde groups, but also with the feminist movements of their period, highlighting the isolation and singularity of their gendered avant-garde poetics. According to Frost, the most important trait women of the historical avant-gardes share is an ambivalent and contradictory relation to the aesthetic and political principles of the “male-dominated avant-garde groups” they belonged to (Frost 2003: i, xii). Susan Suleiman, in her well-known thesis on the female avant-garde, suggested that these women writers lived a “double margin”, since they were at the edge of mainstream culture as a dissenting voluntary choice and also became involuntarily outsiders from their groups due to gender (in Frost 2003: xviii). This ambivalence relates to the sexist marginalization they found within their bohémias, which has been well documented and acknowledged by feminist critics: feminist issues were neglected in avant-garde circles, women were excluded from publication processes, and the marked gendered characteristics of their poetics were ignored in definitions of avant-garde literary principles. As Frost asserts, it is a fact that women “have rarely been the spokespeople, theorists, or anthologized representatives in their avant-garde groups” (2003: xviii).²

Avant-garde women poets’ creative responses to this conflicting ambivalence entail a poetic fluctuation of “alliance and divergences” from their groups’ philosophies and innovative practices (Frost 2003: xiii). This tensional movement emerges not from a wish to write in opposition, but from a desire to articulate an alternative poetics of their own and “to create a language for a new feminist consciousness” (Frost 2003: xiii). The approach to avant-garde creativity as syncretic resolutions challenges the tendencies to “destroy past traditions” (Frost 2003: xii) that we see in the case of Modernism in relation to a Romantic ethos and aesthetics, and in the Beats in relation to previous Modernist precepts towards poetry and the modern world.

The perspective of the avant-garde scholars Noland and Watten exemplifies the recent emphasis of situated modernist studies during the last decades. They consider that traditional avant-garde studies have privileged abstract “historical” and “conceptual” categories in detriment of an emphasis on location and the “very specific set of circumstances” in avant-garde communities that make them “locally and contingently” produced groups.³ Approaching these charged moments of cultural exchange or renovation as “situational avant-gardes”, these critics consider that identitary elements such gender, ethnicity, relation to the environment or displacement can diversify and open definitions of avant-garde practices.

In this light we should take into consideration the differences between Loy's and Di Prima's milieus: two countercultural urban niches that fostered very different approaches to their historical moments. Both Modernist and Beat poets believed in the medium of experimental poetics as a political means towards a change of consciousness within culture, but did not share the same conception of the roles of language and the subject in relation to the world. The crucial changes modernity in Western culture brought at the beginning of the twentieth-century developed what Michael Davidson calls "the question of solipsism" (2005: 234-235). The restlessness about "the dissolution of individual consciousness" (ibid.) and the condition of alienation found expression in aesthetic experiment and in what Eliot theorized as the "extinction of personality" and Pound as the "disavowal of the Romantic ego" (Frost 2003: xx, Davidson 2005: 235). On the other hand, the post-World War II new American poetry, where Beat poetics is framed, based itself on the flourishing of the individual against political repression and on a reaction to elitist formalism and New Critical paradigms. This brought about a recovery of a Romantic aesthetics of spontaneity, authenticity and confession and a search for a lost humanity and expressivism in poetics that was reflected in Beat manifestos and poetic performative practices (Davidson 2005: 241).

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Regarding the differences on gender politics, the Modernist New York of the beginning of the twentieth century enjoyed a much more progressive spirit than the Beat marginal community of post-war America, which grew surrounded by very rigid gender stereotypes that relegated women to the domestic suburban space. The Modernist Village of 1910s, where Loy was immersed, encouraged gender equality in society and in the artistic scene more explicitly than the Beat Lower East Side and Village of the late 1950s, where di Prima lived (Stansell 2009: xi, Keller and Miller 2005: 76, 84).

Being aware, then, of the differences between Loy and di Prima's "situational avant-gardes", I would like to connect them as feminist avant-garde poets following the main elements that define this tradition as set out in Frost's study. The first one is that they believed in experimental poetics as a political and aesthetic strategy to transgress rigid gender divisions in the social and creative spheres. Secondly, their lack of alliance with their male-centered groups because of gender concerns generated a "novel exploration and a singularity of approach" to feminist consciousness and poetry (Frost 2003: xvi), which was further deepened by a lack of affiliation with a feminist collective. Loy's feminist ideas connected more with the feminist wave that started in the 1930 and developed in the 1960s that centred on the cultural and psychological differences between men and women.⁴ Di Prima's early poetry's feminist consciousness was a first isolated stage of awareness in the later collective voice of American second-wave

feminism, which gathered strength at the end of the sixties and she would represent in her later poetry.

Frost's main defining element of women avant-garde poets: their ambivalence in relation to their own movements' aesthetic and ideological paradigms, was also shared by Loy and di Prima (2003: xi-xiii). Their feminist avant-garde poetries conjoined and filtered the categories of experiment and experience as understood by Modernist and Beat philosophies of poetry through the inscription of gender issues. They also challenged the "double marginalization" of women avant-gardists through a positive creative impulse that responded to their own socio-historical contexts. This gendered creativity was captured in the interconnection between their own experimental bohemian lives and a motional poetic force in their poetry that joined the expression of female experiences and poetic innovation.

Loy and di Prima's feminist motional poetics (which will be textually analyzed in the following sections and theoretically studied in the last) involves expressive and technical movement (based on lexis, syntax, aural and visual qualities of words and poetic units) between placelessness and locatedness, between expansion and contraction: a motional tendency that feeds and diverts from the countercultural stands and poetic practices of solipsism and impersonal experiment in Modernists, and expressivism and openness in Beats (Davidson 2005: 235, 241).

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I will focus on Loy's and di Prima's poetic contributions within very specific temporal and spatial coordinates: the Modernist avant-garde artistic period of the 1910s in New York, in which Mina Loy participated from 1916 to 1919 (Burke 1996: 3, 211); and the period from 1953 to 1965, which corresponds to Diane di Prima's arrival in the midst of New York's Beat bohemia (di Prima 1990: 198).⁵ The reason for this choice is that it is in this early poetic work when their "alliances and divergences" as women poets within their groups was lived and transferred most intensely into their work, locating the incipient pulse of their creative resolutions and feminist avant-garde poetics.

What mostly intensified their ambivalence in this period was that Loy and di Prima regarded their gender as potentially enriching for their poetry and lives as bohemian women. Both these poets wrote consciously inserting female experience and an assertive (but not essentialist) female voice. Female experiences such as sexuality, heterosexual romance, and maternity were rarely treated openly by Modernist and Beat women poets, because feminist perspectives of gender difference were considered an obstacle for intellectual inclusion in their movements. Loy and di Prima claimed poetic space for these issues just as they claimed a position as gendered subject within their avant-garde male-centered groups. We can also perceive stylistic echoes in their treatment of female experiences: a straightforward tone in their exposition of sexuality, writing

against feminine stereotypes on sex and romance and foregrounding the materiality of sexual bodies in order to emphasize femaleness; a direct treatment of the complex relationship between creativity and motherhood; or the use of cynicism and irony toward discourses of heterosexual love, leading to a mock revision of the love lyric. The next two sections will be devoted to these aspects and the interconnection of experiment and female experience in the early poetry of Loy and di Prima.

2. The Outward Motion of Female Experience: Modern Masks and Mina Loy's Poetic Experiments

Mina Loy was a multifaceted British-American artist who also wrote experimental and openly sexual love poetry and introduced her cosmopolitan European spirit and avant-gardism to the intellectual and artistic circles of New York in the mid-1910s. As Carolyn Burke let us know in her famous biography of the author, Loy left London early in her life to study art in Munich and Paris, where she became a popular painter, later moving to Florence where she joined the expatriate artistic community. There she met Mabel Dodge and Gertrude Stein, who greatly influenced her feminist and experimental views about life and poetry. When Loy arrived in New York in 1916 she had already published "Love Songs" in the avant-garde magazine *Others* (1915), soon achieving the reputation of an immoral writer of sex. The same magazine dedicated a whole issue to Loy's thirty-four poem sequence "Songs to Joannes" two years later. Mina Loy met Marcel Duchamp, W. C. Williams, and Man Ray in New York, among other artists and intellectuals, and she was also a regular of the Arensberg circle's eccentric bohemian parties. When interviewed by the *Evening Sun* as typifying the modern New Woman, Loy asserted that you had to "fling yourself at life in order to discover new forms of self-expression" (Burke 1985: 37), relating the need for experience with experimental creativity.

Mina Loy's poetry was rediscovered academically in the late nineties and recovered as part of the Anglo-American Modernist female experimental tradition together with Marianne Moore, Gertrude Stein and H.D. It has been suggested that these women poets used different strategies of concealment through poetic formal innovation to mask their speaking subjects and talk about women's new awareness of the self and desire in the modern world. Avant-garde women poets that wanted to express genuine subjective experiences felt restricted by elitist Modernist standards of literary quality. Those who focused on an intense expression of emotion through more traditional forms (e.g. Edna St. Vincent Millay, Amy Lowell, and Elinor Wylie, among others) critically remained within the tradition of

sentimental “poetesses”. Modernist manifestos repudiated a Romantic ethos and claimed a detachment of the poetic self from personality, autobiography and feeling, as proposed by Pound’s “direct treatment of the thing” and Eliot’s escape from emotion in his theory of impersonality in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”. Loy’s peculiar combination of avant-garde formal experimentation and her political treatment of women’s experiences such as love and sexuality places her work at a unique frontier between the two modernist female tendencies: the experimental and the experiential ones.

Margaret Dickie suggests that Modernist experimental women poets struggled “to conceal their [female] subject in a hermetic style [through] a restrained rather than released expression” (1993: 235). As she explains: “these women shared [the anti-Victorian] antipathy to sentimentality, [but their conflict lay in] both the boldness of their experimentation and their hesitant search for a way to express their own way of seeing” (1993: 235). Loy seems to deal successfully with this by incorporating subjective experience and emotional expression in her experimental poetic speakers; thus, transgressing the anti-sentimental precepts of masculinist Modernism and recreating a poetic space for female experience and experiment in her writing.

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I will focus on some poems from the thirty-four poem sequence “Songs to Joannes” because they appropriately represent Loy’s poetic subject’s oscillation between the two categories of experiment and experience. These frequently analyzed poems consciously alternate experimental form detached from emotion and an experiential poetic “I” that expresses female experience, conveying within their limits an ironically smooth motion between the two approaches to the representation of love. Loy’s avant-garde love poetry is a parody of the tradition of the love lyric and the cultural stereotypes of heterosexual romance assigned to men and women. The poetic “I” is experimental not only because it becomes an unusual female agent of sexual desire, but also because more than a pre-existent observer it constructs itself performatively throughout the process of linguistic experiment and through the expression of the amorous/sexual experience. The chameleonic speaker becomes an experiential entity in a process of becoming through poetic experiment.

In poem I, the “spawn of fantasies” represents the relation among the following poems as creative offspring made of hybrid moods on love that move from satire to romantic enthrallment. The image of the “spawn”, very much related to the experience of maternity in conflict with creativity in Loy’s case, marries the possibility of intellectual and imaginary fantasies brought to life in experimental avant-garde poetic fragments.

The Art of Life, The Dance of Poetry:...

I

Spawn of Fantasies
Silting the appraisable
Pig Cupid his rosy snout
Rooting erotic garbage
“Once upon a time”
Pulls a weed white star-topped
Among wild oats sown in mucous-membrane

I would an eye in a Bengal light
Eternity in a sky-rocket
Constellations in an ocean
Whose rivers run no fresher
Than a trickle of saliva

These are suspect places

I must live in my lantern
Trimming subliminal flicker
Virginal to the bellows
Of Experience

Coloured glass. (Loy 1999: 53)

We find a parodic reformulation of what Loy intends to do through the sequence in the figure of “Pig Cupid”, who stirs and pools out fairy tales and cultural clichés on romance, and who becomes a mutation and experiment itself sharing the experience of a filthy body and a romantic soul. This satirical figure is a poetic image that reflects Loy’s own creativity, which experiments with the expression of the amorous experience. The pulled “white star-topped weed/ sown in mucous-membrane” reveals the sexual truth behind romantic discourses of “eternity and constellations”. The play with the words “I/eye” at the beginning of the second stanza conveys the poetic speaker’s nature as double: seer and object of gaze, whole and torn in the sentence and the sequence, and whose identity is constructed through motion and alternate positioning. The physicality of the last two lines (“running no fresher/ Than a trickle of saliva”) transforms Pig Cupid’s garden of love in a “suspect place” which must be cautiously approached by women. The poetic “I” prefers, therefore, to remain within the light of intelligent irony, knowledge, and experience protected from the effects of romantic love and its hidden face: sex.

The prominent features of Poem I are poetic experimentation and the shocking accounts of sexual processes. The feminist political message of Loy’s poetic discourse lies in this physicalization of love and romance. The linguistically focused experiment of her poetry originates in her relation with the visual arts, Gertrude

Stein and the Italian Futurist movement. She learned about the materiality of language and the potential of meaning in the disruption of grammar, sentence structure and punctuation from Stein. Futurism taught her to despise tradition and search for daring innovation expressing dynamism and multi-perspectivism in poetic form.

I would like to argue here that beyond modern masks of experimentation intending to annul the emotion of subjective experience common through different strategies in Modernist women authors, Loy is able to counteract the inhibition of the expression of female experiences in her avant-garde love poetry by placing her brief poems between reality and language, the intimate and the social. The sequence has been reiteratively interpreted also as autobiographical, representing Loy's love affair with the Futurist intellectual Giovanni Papini in order to justify the changes of mood between satire and elegiac expressivity. My interpretation suggests that this dancing quality between irony and sentimentality, linguistic experiment and feminine expression, does not relate so much to a past disillusion as to a creative negotiation and willingness to experiment and experience life and poetry from an avant-garde feminist and gendered perspective.

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From poem II to poem III we perceive a motion from anti-sentimental experiment to a melancholic emotion of loss, not only in relation to her lover but to the poetic speaker's failed maternal desire. In poem II the voice impersonates a hyperbolic sexual gaze, taking over a masculine role as agent of desire in traditional love lyric and transgenering scopophilic discourses in romance.

II

The skin-sack

In which a wanton duality
Packed
All the completion of my infructuous impulses
Something the shape of a man
To the casual vulgarity of the merely observant
More of a clock-work mechanism
Running down against time
To which I am not paced
My finger-tips are numb from fretting your hair
A God's door-mat

On the threshold of your mind. (Loy 1999: 53)

The "masculine" discursive position of the female poetic subject, avid for sexual pleasure, is undermined by a "feminine" wish for procreation. The "skin-sack"

encapsulates an ironic duality, it contains the potential culmination of the poetic speaker's maternal desire but it also represents the failure of a pathetic anti-hero who is unable to suit her fruitless impulses, thus demystifying the unattainable male lover figure in traditional romance.

The theme of procreation runs through the sequence in close relation to an overt expression of sexuality and a sense of unrequited love, as in poem III where the lovers "might have given birth to a butterfly":

III

We might have coupled
In the bed-ridden monopoly of a moment
Or broken flesh with one another
At the profane communal table
Where wine is spill't on promiscuous lips
We might have given birth to a butterfly
With the daily news

Printed in blood on its wings. (Loy 1999: 54)

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The inclusive "we" and the lyric intimacy cancels the cold emotional distance suggested in the other poems. The experience of the irrevocable moment lost in the past and the unconsummated sexual desire position romantic longing as the key sentiment in this fragment. The poem projects again the image of a childless woman in search of maternity: the butterfly as allusion to "Joy", the love child of Psyche and Cupid, is stained by the reality of the war of nations (World-War I) and the sexes (heterosexual confrontations and gender divisions). The melancholic mood of the following poems in relation to lost babies sometimes achieves surrealist impact: "The starry ceiling/ Vaulted an unimaginable family/ Bird-like abortions [...] One bore a baby/ In a padded porte-enfant/ tied with a sarsenet ribbon/ To her goose's wings" (poem IV) (Loy 1999: 55). We find here the idea of a failed maternity in the shocking aborted characters and in the image of the wing caught by the baby (winged creatures are recurrent symbols of freedom throughout the sequence). Loy's poems are an instance of an open and public consideration of the relation between romance, sexuality and maternity from the point of view of female experience. As Rachel DuPlessis suggests, the sequence places Loy ahead of the sexual agenda of the Greenwich Village feminist bohemians (1998: 51), who advocated free love and men and women's equal partnership in romance. Not only does she unveil the dangers for women (physical and psychological) of this ideology of freedom and equality, but she also foresees much of the psychological implications of gender power dynamics that a second-wave of feminism will analyze in detail half a century later.

It is well known that Ezra Pound invented the term *logopoeia* to describe Mina Loy and Marianne Moore's experimental style: "depending upon language itself, it is the dance of the intelligence among words and ideas [...], a language commenting upon its own possibilities and limitations as language" (Kouidis 1980: 99). I consider Loy's "dance of words and ideas" (i.e. discursive abstraction, formal innovation and intellectual play) intrinsically connected to a gendered experiential poetic subject. Poetic voices in "Songs to Joannes" dance and fluctuate between a Modernist mask of impersonality and a sentimental lyrical stance. The poetic "I" that irreverently profaned love in the first poems becomes the abandoned woman longing for the absent lover from poem V to VII and in further poetic fragments.

Mina Loy's poetry resembles her life as a bohemian woman artist: her oscillating moods, her identity in flux, her transatlantic journeys and her creative zigzags throughout her career. These movements are also reflected in the impulsive dance of her poems, back and forth from cold to warmth, from intellectual parody to elegy, from unemotional experiment towards the inclusion of female experience. This motional dance is accurately represented in the thermometer earring that Man Ray photographed in his famous portrait of Loy.⁶

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3. Contained Beats of Feminist Experiment: the Naked "I" and Diane di Prima's Embodied Experiences

After the Second World War, United States poetry reacted to the Modernist evasion of personality emphasizing a return to a Romantic approach to the self. The expression of the poet's voice became central in the new avant-garde poetry, which advocated an "open" poetics (as suggested in the well-known poetic manifestos of the time: Charles Olson's "Projective Verse", Frank O'Hara's "Personism", or Kerouac's "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose") that asserted a critical individualism within the post-war American conservative society.

The term "Beat" broadened towards the late fifties to represent American post-war countercultural hipsters. Beat poets, writers and artists were defined by a particular historical period and by bicoastal community bonding (New York and San Francisco). Their bohemia shared a way of life and a new vision of art and poetry through experimental aesthetics: "spontaneous composition, direct expression of mind, jazz-based improvisation; factualism, [...] following breath line, prophetic utterance" (Johnson and Grace 2002: 2). In this scene, women Beats were regarded as peripheral figures within the movement due to the fact that their intellect and artistic productions were not given the attention they deserved by their male-centered group, who was deeply influenced by the society's sexism of the post-war period and believed in Romantic ideals of masculine individual

heroism which were anti-feminine in essence. Luckily, late nineties groundbreaking anthologies (Peabody, Knight) intended to recover Beat women writers' stranded or unpublished work and positioned them as central authors in the canon.

Kerouac's "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" (Charter 1992: 57) and Ginsberg's performative poetics, made public in the reading of "Howl" in 1955, established Beat aesthetics as an outwards movement of expression for the modern self through the visionary assertiveness of the bardic song. However, many Beat women poets were more influenced by the "armored women", as Diggory calls them, of the modernist poetic tradition writing after Dickinson, than by the "naked men" followers of Whitman (Johnson and Grace 2002: 15). An early generation of women Beats did not share a cosmic universality or a transcendental vision beyond embodied limitations, which for a masculine heroic search implied a rejection of romantic attachment, domesticity, family and heterosexual ties. Their poetry focused on the physical reality of interrelations, intimacy and female sexuality, since their struggling poetic voices had to resolve the integration of certain issues such as their relation with men, maternity, or the conflict between femininity and creativity within their bohemian lives.

My interest lies in di Prima's early poetic work, published in the late 1950s and beginning of the 1960s, because it presents an intense experimentation with lyrical tone, mood, and the expression of experience from a gendered perspective.⁷ Her gendered poetics reflected bohemian female experience as intimately located and situated in time and space, advancing contemporary women's poetry's political telling of the private. Di Prima represents poetic selves that do not share an approach to experience from the perspective of a detached observer of the world (a Cartesian notion of experience), but as decentered "Is" that build themselves through experiential events of interrelation with others and lyrical "Yous". Her speakers become (as in the case of Loy) an experiential poetic experiment in process.

This postmodern reconfiguration of experience relates also to di Prima's experimentation with tone, mode and linguistic approach to the poem. A tendency towards enclosure and crafted containment in relation to form and the expression of emotion hinders her participation in the experiment of "openness" in poetry that was being practiced by Beats. The experiential poetic "I" in di Prima's early poems does not observe landscapes of the world or utters breathed rhythms, but interacts in private terrains of social gendered experiences through short and intellectually arranged lines, leaning on silences and blanks and on the control of syntax and emotion, moving from the Romantic exultation of experience that defines Beat poetics, towards experimentation with a naked gendered "I" and with forms of contained expression in poetry.

Her alternative avant-garde articulations are a result of the innovative aesthetics of the movement together with her own feminist ethics of life as a bohemian woman. In this sense di Prima joined life and art by practicing an experimental approach to poetry and femaleness. Of Italian-American descent, Diane di Prima soon searched for an independent life in the bohemian Lower East Side “to raise her rebellion into art” (Butterick in Charters 1992: 359) and published her first books of poetry and fiction — *This Kind of Bird Flies Backwards* (1958) and *Dinners and Nightmares* (1960). In the 1950s she was seen “as a writer-bohemian, Manhattanite bad girl, renter, and a center of commune living” (Lee 2010: 48). Many of her early poems reflect on the conflicts of the bohemian woman as female artist, on social encounters in the community, on maternity and on heterosexual relations. In what follows I will analyze some of di Prima’s early poems about these issues.

A rearticulation of creativity and femininity within Beatness is reflected in “Three Laments”. These are three short and incisive poems whose directness, unsentimental and sharp humorous tone can be read as exposing the reality of the material and physical limitations found in the search for artistic genius, as a way to mock Beat masculine dreams of creative greatness from the more realistic and marginal point of view of a Beat woman.

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1
Alas
I believe
I might have become
a great writer
but
the chairs
in the library
were too hard
2
I have
the upper hand
but if I keep it
I’ll lose the circulation
in one arm. (Di Prima 1990: 15)

The whole poem transgresses Beat literary precepts of impulsive spontaneity, expressive ego-centered abstraction and disembodied self-awareness. At a formal level, street language is countered by contained and broken lines, breath in diction is stopped by line-end choice; the expected grandeur of the poetic experiential “I” is hindered by the petite size of the poems themselves.

Her early love poetry also illustrates a situated, intimate and bodily approach to experience and the experiment with the lyric “I/you” within contained poetic forms and images. In “More or Less Love Poems” di Prima continues using ironic distance in order now to parody the genre of the love lyric through fifteen fragments that suggest the realities of power dynamics and the lies of romantic exultation in actual heterosexual relationships:

*

In your arms baby
I don't feel no
spring in winter
but I guess I can do
without galoshes.

In your arms baby
I don't hear no
angels sing
but maybe I forget
to turn on
the phonograph.

*

In case you put me down I put you down
already, doll
I know the games you play

In case you put me down I got it figured
how there are better mouths that yours
more swinging bodies
wilder scenes that this.

In case you put me down it won't help much. (Di Prima
1990: 8)

As in Loy's “Songs to Joannes”, di Prima's love lyric positions the female speaker in a discursive place traditionally reserved for male lovers. Active in love and desire, the naked “I” in these poems refuses to assume the role of a narcissistic lover that projects idealization on the beloved and instead chooses to represent the more common experience of the problems of intimacy, the recognition of the other as individual, and the complexities of real love. Decentering the lyric energy through an anti-visionary poetic voice that rises from an embodied knowledge, di Prima represents women's experimentation with new roles as Beat lovers and poets.

The experience of maternity is a particularly recurrent theme in di Prima's early poems. Her treatment of this issue generally reflects a desire to be a mother and the difficulties in integrating this experience within her bohemian circle. Di Prima did not center so much on the incompatibility between creative expression and motherhood, as other women poets have done (e.g. Adrienne Rich or Mina Loy), as on the problematic fit of this reinvented identity as mother-poet within the Beat ethics of life that advocated individualism, anti-domesticity, and lack of intimacy in heterosexual relations. In fact, she had five children (from different partners) while she wrote prolifically and was politically active. Di Prima's double achievement was to position her female voice into avant-garde Beat poetics *and* to create an innovative new experiential and poetic space for herself as Beat mother. As Anthony Libby suggests, single motherhood and biracial children for di Prima may also have symbolized a rebellion against conservative American society (2002: 51), but also a vindication within avant-garde patriarchy, moving beyond the "double marginalization" for avant-garde women with the practice of creative bodily experiences such as giving birth and writing. This affirmative potential challenges Beat masculine code of coolness and distance from emotional attachment (coined "the rule of Cool" in Beat circles [Johnson and Grace 2002:7]), as shown in her early poem "I Get My Period, September 1964". In this poem, di Prima negotiates the experience of unfulfilled maternity with the voice of an angry poetic "I" who reproaches her lover for not making her pregnant (reminding us of Loy's poem II):

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How can I forgive you this blood?
Which was not to flow again, but to cling joyously to my womb
To grow, and become a son?

When I turn to you in the night, you sigh, and turn over
When I turn to you in the afternoon, on our bed,
Where you lie reading, you put me off, saying only
It is hot, you are tired.

You picket, you talk violence, *you draw blood*
But only from me, unseeded & hungry blood
Which meant to be something else. (Di Prima 1990: 51)

The lyric interrelation between the I/you dyad, situated in the enclosed intimate space of the couples' bedroom and the contained poem, plus the physicality of blood, draws the male revolutionary political message into the material presence of the female body, exposing the consequences of the man's ideological actions (i.e. lack of communication and loss of connection) on that body. Unlike other poems by di Prima on lost babies through abortion, this particular poem plays irony on the love lyric genre because the yearning is not towards the actual beloved but

towards his capacity to give her the real beloved: a baby. If menstruation becomes a symbol in the feminist imaginary, and a physical reality of the female body, of the connection between inside and outside, di Prima experiments in this poem by reflecting on this female experience, which itself embodies avant-garde women's ambivalent position of inclusion and exclusion within their groups. This poetic expressive experiment can be seen as a space where the dialogical dance between outward expression of the social experience of the world and the contracting impulse towards the material use of the body of language and the language of the body can happen.

Di Prima's work represents Beat women poets' negotiations with the precepts of Beat aesthetics. She moves from a Romantic expression of an experiential "I" towards a poetic experimentation regarding the expression of female experiences. Her poems focus on the reality of her life (maternity, love, etc.) and on the motion of subjectivity within oppositional dilemmas: being woman and poet. Her imbricated poetic and real selves move between the experimentation with her experiential subject in the poem and the experience of life experiment as bohemian woman. Poetry writing becomes for di Prima a creative locus of freedom to disentangle and reveal her own contingencies as embodied subject through the use of the experimental play with images, tone and mode, visual line or lexis. Her gendered avant-garde Beat poetics relate to physical or body *beats*: the pulses and rhythms of a motion between life and art. The materiality of the language in her poetry portrays naked subjects as poetic bodies, subject/bodies who move through the experience of writing and who *become* during the process of the experimental poem.

4. Loy and di Prima's Feminist Motional Poetics: Poetry as Dance, Life as Art

Young Loy and di Prima wrote and lived in the bohemian enclave of lower Manhattan. The importance of urban space for women's identity processes of public reinvention in Western modernity has been suggested by several feminist critics, since the city provided mobility and visibility to the female subject and to women's bodies (Wilson 1991: 8; Felski 1995: 19). In this section I present the idea that Loy and di Prima's gendered embodied experiences (of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion) as female avant-gardists within their urban locale and bohemian groups played an important part in their early poetry of experiment and experience.

Philosophical, psychological and cultural views on women's experience of embodiment and space are useful to understand the basis of this possible

connection. Both writers moved away from domestic spheres with a bicultural background into the public ground of artistic and revolutionary activism, implying a trajectory of geographical mobility from home towards male communities.⁸ Unlike male artists and writers, who generally return to the symbolic mothering place/space of identification through a projection on other objects (e.g. nation, women, lovers), creative women's psychological search becomes more problematic due to their own bodies' mothering potential. From a philosophical view, space (i.e. cultural, physical, conceptual) is a patriarchal site of exclusion for the female subject even though women's bodies symbolize and represent the origin of matter and spatial materiality (Grosz 2000). This paradox is at stake in the female subject's endless negotiation with space, explaining why factors such as location, position and the relation of movement in opposition to stasis are key in women's identity and creative processes. Phenomenologically, critics have also studied how female embodied perception of space generally expands body contours to include the external surrounding, therefore having a more flexible internal experience of bodily boundaries and material limits (Grosz 1994, Battersby 1999).

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These theories may indicate that women's experience of embodiment and space entails a moving positionality and hardly match the principles of a Cartesian separation of an objective detached self with the experience of the environment with which it interrelates. Cartesian philosophy differentiated in the eighteenth century two categories that were until then intrinsically related: experience and experiment (Scott 1992: 27). These two terms share an etymological root: "they are the flora of *experiri*, to try, and related to *periculum*, which includes both the idea of attempt and peril" (Lauterbach 2000: 187). But as postmodern feminist critic Joan Scott has influentially theorized, experience from then on, being this "internal or external, subjective or objective", "established the prior existence of individuals" (1992: 27): a separated self or consciousness that was able to evaluate and react to the world from a detached position generating knowledge through observation. The category of experiment became relegated to the sphere of the scientific objective systematization of this experience; a system that also implied an anterior knowing subject. Scott emphasizes that subjectivity is never prior to experience: "It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience" (1992: 26), thus challenging the historical separation of the terms and advocating an understanding of the process of subject formation as a continuous experience of, and experiment with, the environment in which it is embedded.

Language directly partakes in this interconnected experience and experiment of the forming subject with the environment where it grows. Scott further refuses a separation between experience and language, since language is a system of meaning

that constantly establishes situations and positionalities that affect individual agency (1992: 34). Contemporary feminist literary critics have reached similar conclusions regarding the interrelated nature of both terms in the dynamics of women's experimental poetics. Clair Wills and Harriet Tarlo have denounced the artificial separation between experiment and experience in feminist poetry criticism derived from the American women's movement. They argued that an experimental kind of poetry that centers on its own linguistic and poetic processes does not necessarily preclude an expressive subject reflecting female experience (Tarlo 1999: 101) and, on the other hand, that a women's experiential poetics does not always entail a unified subject nor a pristine nature of language as representation of experience (Wills 1994: 41).

Following Scott and these feminist literary critics' views, I would like to suggest that Loy and di Prima's poetics reflect this interconnection between experience and experiment through a feminist motional poetics which partly originates in their particular embodied and spatial experiences of urban bohemia. These female experiences should be understood as entailing an anti-Cartesian confluence of self and world where inner subjectivity forms throughout the process of its interrelation to the environment and language. This poetic motion is also a creative materialization, (joining life and poetry, experience and language) of their intellectual and aesthetic ambivalence towards the theories of poetry of their Modernist and Beat groups. Their feminist avant-garde poetics develops from an assertive motional positionality within their bohemian loci (i.e. physical and conceptual) that transferred into their creative vital and poetic projects.

We may argue that Modernist and Beat poetics relied both on linguistic experiment and on the expression of experience through the constructing potential of language, but philosophically and aesthetically each movement valued them differently as ideological and aesthetic answers towards the socio-historical moment they were reacting to. From a post-Cartesian perspective and following material feminist theories, we understand experience as a process in which the world incorporates within us via the interrelation between subject, others, and the environment. It requires an outward motional force on the part of the subject, an opening up in order to receive, but also a tendency towards containment, reflection or inner stasis. In order for this experience to go back into the world we need expression, a letting go that chooses media such as language or other artistic materials. Experimental poetics focus on language as active participant in the expression of experience, but the way we express our experience poetically (e.g. openly, hermetically, intimately, collectively, aurally or visually) depends on the role and material quality we assign to poetic language: from fluid, letting subject and body speak towards others; to a closed system, which contains subject and

body within language fragmenting experience and interfering expression. These are crucial elements at work in any philosophy and practice of poetry. My view is that women poets may approach them in particular ways due to their gendered identity and condition of ambivalent relation to public space, authorial voice, to being and not being simultaneously as political and creative subjects, and to their connection with the world through embodied knowledge.

Modernist experiment, signaling language as opaque texture that prevented outward motion toward expressivism and others, and Beat's over-emphasis on an expression that authentically represented experience, pouring it through a performative presence, can be interpreted as practices that assume a Cartesian prior subjectivity that observes and reacts to experience, and that chooses the qualities of language guided by ideological and aesthetic parameters to let that experience reach others. The specificities I see in Loy and di Prima's early work is that neither experience nor expression through linguistic experiment are totally disembodied or independent from experiential material conditions of spatial, physical and conceptual simultaneous inclusiveness and exclusiveness. Their poetic speakers do not perceive the experience of the world in a way that permits the subject to open itself up without a sense of the complex materiality of limits, location, and interrelation with others. On the other hand, experimental poetic language becomes in their poetry an imbricated constituent of experience (the matter through which this experience is achieved), in direct contact with the social environment where these poets ambivalently become female subjects.

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Poetry for these women avant-gardists reflects a motional force between openness and closedness, outward reach and containment; a duplication of the sensorial and spatial ambiguities their female bodies and subjects experienced in public space and bohemian enclaves, remaining dynamic and permanently negotiating the poetic and linguistic breach between what they want to say and what they can say (Hejinian 1998: 628). Loy and di Prima's early poems present knowledge of the complementariness of experiment and experience through material crashes in language, positioning and moving their voices on alternate planes in the continuum of trying reality and language through fluxes of tone and expression. They let the world in and out through internal rhythms of connection in a poetic motional dance that reflects their understanding of the dynamic interrelation between their female contingencies in art and life.

The material feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz, who has recently studied the way art relates to the physical world, encourages feminist thinkers and critics to focus on the implications of the body as biological entity and the material forces between corporeal beings and incorporeal events (such as language) at work in creative processes:

Artworks could be understood as experimentations with the real, with the material forces found in the world, rather than representations of the real [...] Cultural analysis, theories of art, theories of representation could be understood in terms of primarily material forces, the forces they cohere and the forces they enable to be unleashed in the world. (Grosz in Kontturi and Tiainen's interview, 2007: 247)

Grosz's early philosophical work evidenced women's embodied perception of fluid corporeal limits and relation between the inside and outside on spatial, cognitive and symbolic levels (1994). She also argues that life, language (as event and matter) and art share "the material forces that enable and surround every living thing, [vibrating] through the ways in which they must constitute on their inside the forces of materiality that exist outside" (Grosz 2011: 22). Following Grosz's material feminist philosophy we can interpret how women poets or writers' embodied positionality and experience of life, body and their environment, transfer creatively motional forces found in bodily life and language. Living bodies and artworks share, according to Grosz, a tendency towards motional contraction: "the condition of contemplation or self-survey" that organizes the human mind and life systems; and towards motional expansion: the potential of "the opening up of matter to the emergence of life" in permanent contact with others and the world (Grosz 2011: 17, 23).⁹

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The importance of motional forces in the creative poetic process was also suggested by experimental poet and critic Lyn Hejinian, who considers that there are opposing desires in the birth of writing, "a conflict between a writer's desire for boundedness, for containment and coherence, and a simultaneous desire for free, unhampered access to the world, along with a corresponding open response to it" (1998: 618). Writing's essence is found in "the impasse that language creates and then cannot resolve", referring to these impulses (ibid.). Hejinian further states that "writing's forms are not merely shapes but forces, too; formal questions are about dynamics—they ask how, where, and why it moves, what are the types, directions, number, and velocities of a work's motion" (ibid.). The experimental poet and critic Rae Armantrout also reflects on these motional forces in women's poetry suggesting that avant-garde female poets usually "deal with polyphonic inner experience and an the unbounded outer world" practicing a poetic clarity that is defined as "not having to do with control but with attention, one in which the sensorium of the world can enter as it presents itself. [...] Their poems are dynamic, contrapuntal systems in which conflicting forces and voices (inner and outer) are allowed to work" (1998: 290).

My aim in this study has been to ask about these authors' early works' motions and moves regarding containment vs. expansion (poetic form vs. world experience). My conclusion is that Mina Loy in the 1910s New York bohemia, and Diane di Prima, in the post-World War II Beat bohemia, reached a common understanding

of a gendered poetics that celebrated the inevitable interrelation of experiment and experience in the experiential continuum of female subject, body, environment and language. Their lives were experiments of innovation and exploration beyond the social and cultural conventions of their time regarding femininity. Their poetry shared a motional ethics and aesthetics only possible within their bohemian countercultural loci and through their vindicating and creative willingness to move beyond them. They regarded life as experiment and approached artistic experiment as an experiential process. Their poetics and lives understood poetry and self as motional body in space.

Notes

1. Beat women poets have little or no presence in mainstream American women's poetry anthologies and, more curiously, in contemporary work on women's experimental writing such as Frost's. The European Beat Studies Network's 2016 International Conference only devoted a short panel to women writers.

2. As examples of this marginalization: the magazine *The New Freewoman* lost all political feminist message once Pound transformed it into *The Egoist* (Frost 2003; 169); the anthology *New American Poetry* by Donald Allen included only four contemporary experimental women poets (Keller and Miller 2005; 84); Beat women participated in the edition of many avant-garde magazines but were eclipsed by their male co-editors (Friedman 1998: 231).

3. Historical avant-gardes refer to "a crucial moment in the development of culture" as in Modernism, Futurism, Beats, etc.; conceptual avant-gardes are defined as ahistorical "innovative, experimental and divergent" artistic tendencies in general (Noland and Watten 2009: 2).

4. These ideas are exposed in her "Feminist Manifesto" (1914). The influence on her of first wave feminism and the way she deviated from it are studied in Du Plessis.

5. My aim, therefore, is not to study their complete poetic oeuvre, which develops throughout the following decades of the twentieth-century.

6. I reflect on this analogy in my introduction to her poems in *Breve Baedeker lunar* where Ray's portrait is included. It can also be found in the cover photo of Conover's edition.

7. According to Ronna C. Johnson, di Prima belongs to a second generation of Beat women writers (2004: 11). Due to her long career her late work overlaps with a third generation's interests and style based on a collective and visionary feminist voice.

8. Loy and di Prima share a bicultural background: the former's had a Hungarian immigrant father and British mother, the latter was second-generation Italian-American; a connection that could be further developed in another study.

9. Material feminisms, as Alaimo and Hekman's volume attests, cover scientific approaches, corporeal feminist theories and environmental ethics, debating philosophy, science and linguistics, but devoting little attention to women's literature. Grosz's and other material feminist theories can also be applied, as I suggest in this article, to the study of women's poetic.

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