

**“Obscene Odes on the Windows of the Skull”:
Deconstructing The Memory of the Howl Trial of 1957**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in American Studies from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Accepted for _____
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Williamsburg, VA
December 3, 2013

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“There has been at this point almost embarrassing amount of publicity about ‘Howl.’ I [am] afraid the poem almost too slight to support the enormous pile of bullshit over it- tho that’s probably my own fault.”

-Allen Ginsberg, September 1957

Introduction: The Poet is Holy

The experiences of memory and history are simultaneously conflated and at odds with one another. How one remembers an event is constructed as one’s own history, or is solidified in one’s mind as the event in its total actuality. But memory is not synonymous with history, as memory is personal, remaining in “permanent evolution.”¹ While History, like memory is a reconstruction, it is also legitimated by institutions and codified; it “belongs to everyone and no one, whence its claim to universal authority.”² History is claimed as the objective understanding of the past, while memory is the subjective. Memory works to bond us with the historical past, filling in the blanks with individual experience and coloring the past. But memory also has the potential to serve an ideological agenda, as memory “only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic... particular or symbolic.”³ When one creates a memory of a historical event, the remembrance is shaped and molded by the ideology it wishes to support, simultaneously suppressing the facts that do not fit that ideology. In this construction, some details are magnified while some are dropped and forgotten. Thus the process of remembering a historical event includes forgetting.

Societies are always creating and revising memories, but cherish them more when an external force threatens the values embedded in that memory. Pierre Nora states, “we buttress

¹ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations* no. 26 (1989): 8.

² *Ibid.*, 9.

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

our identities upon such bastions, but if what they defended were not threatened, there would be no need to build them,” thus claiming that privileged memory is constructed in order to support an ideology that is under attack.⁴ A cultural memory reasserts a cultural value challenged by current or past events. Recently, Americans have seen their fundamental right of privacy made vulnerable. The current scandal over National Security Association leaks admitting the organization’s constant surveillance of what is considered private speech has motivated a discussion over what is private and what is public information. The fear that the American people’s secret speech could be made public information threatens and censors speech. Freedom of speech, or how free one is to speak, is left cracked and vulnerable, and so Americans look for a memory to reassert the ideal as an infallible tradition.

The social memory of the *Howl* trial of 1957 is important to contemporary thought because it constructs a story where free speech triumphs against the oppressive force of the government, with Allen Ginsberg and *Howl* being the heroic victors. But this memory also creates a troubling myth. This new memory and narration of Ginsberg’s involvement contradicts the known documentation of the event. Yet this memory has seeped into the American cultural consciousness and solidified itself as “fact,” resulting in the production and reproduction of the idea that the *Howl* trial was a site of political protest.

On March 25, 1957, U.S. Customs official Chester McPhee confiscated five hundred copies of *Howl and Other Poems* by Allen Ginsberg, which were then seized by U.S. customs on grounds of obscenity.⁵ Publisher City Lights Books had been publishing the books in London through Villiers Press and then mailing them back to the San Francisco based store.⁶ The U.S.

⁴ Nora, 12.

⁵ Bill Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 236.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 226.

Attorney in San Francisco refused to take the book to court knowing McPhee's case was weak. But not even three months later on June 3, two undercover police visited City Lights Books and bought copies of *Howl and Other Poems* and a magazine, *Miscellaneous Man*. Later that day, the police returned and arrested manager, Shigeyoshi Murao, who was the only person working that evening, and issued an arrest warrant for owner, Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Both Ferlinghetti and Murao faced charges for distributing obscene material.⁷ A trial was scheduled to begin August 8th with conservative judge Clayton Horn presiding over the case. ACLU lawyers Jake Ehrlich, Lawrence Spieser, and Albert Bendich represented Ferlinghetti and Murao. Charges against Mauro were eventually dropped and *Miscellaneous Man* removed from the case, leaving only Ferlinghetti and *Howl and Other Poems* under judicial scrutiny. The trial lasted from August to October 3rd, when Judge Horn claimed the poem had "redeeming social value" as a piece of literature, and issued a not-guilty verdict.⁸ *Howl* came to be known as one of the most best selling Beat poems and remains in print today.

In August of 1955, in a small San Franciscan apartment on 1010 Montgomery Street, founding member of the Beats Allen Ginsberg began writing the first draft of what would become *Howl*.⁹ Through 1955 and 1956, Lawrence Ferlinghetti worked with Ginsberg to produce a final draft of the poem for publication and printing. Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti maintained a casual professional relationship, to the extent that, according to Ferlinghetti, "[they] never had a contract for 'Howl' not even a handshake."¹⁰ With the fate of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* in mind, Ferlinghetti contacted the American Civil Liberties Union in March of 1956

⁷ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁹ Bill Morgan and Nancy J. Peters, ed., *Howl on Trial: The Battle for Free Expression* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2006), 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xiii.

asking if the organization would be willing to protect the poem if it were ever prosecuted.¹¹ As outlined above, Ferlinghetti's actions were not presumptuous, as on June 3, 1957, he was arrested on obscenity charges for distributing *Howl*.¹² Though it was Ginsberg's words that were obscene, Ferlinghetti was the defendant for publishing and selling the obscene material. The obscenity trial surrounding *Howl* is associated with the memory of the poem not only as a minor obstacle in the poem's history, but also as an important point, even an origin, in the history of social protests.

Though Ginsberg was not present for the *Howl* trial or an active participant in its proceedings, the trial is historically remembered as the starting point of Ginsberg's involvement in political activism. Literary critic Vivian Gornick states, "In retrospect, the trial can be seen as an opening shot into a culture war destined to throw long shadows across American life... throughout the sixties, both the poem and the author were celebrated," implying that the trial was the start of the cultural conflict of the following decade.¹³ Gornick's statement asserts that the *Howl* trial is the first event in a string of leftist movements that would accelerate through the 1960s and 1970s; the reader can assume that she is calling upon Civil Rights, the feminist movement, anti-Vietnam protests, and the various other movements that fell under the definition of counterculture. Not only does this claim mark the trial as an origin for the tumult of the culture wars to erupt from, but it also infuses the trial with the activism that Ginsberg had participated in during the counterculture movements. Marking the trial as a point of origin for political protest of the 1960s inflates the trial with importance as a site of political action for Allen Ginsberg and the poem itself, thus framing the trial through an imagined lens based on

¹¹ *I Celebrate Myself*, 218: Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* had been banned from the United States twenty years prior for being too obscene for the American public.

¹² *Howl on Trial*, 61.

¹³ Vivian Gornick, "Wild at Heart," in *The Poem that Changed America* ed. Jason Schneider (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006), 9.

beliefs of its influence after the fact. Gornick's essay is taken from a larger compilation of essays celebrating *Howl*, *The Poem that Changed America*, and almost all mention the trial in relation to *Howl* and Ginsberg's cultural significance. The Jewish online magazine, *Tablet*, wrote a brief piece on the trial, titling it "'Howl' and the Obscenity Trial: Allen Ginsberg's Date with History."¹⁴ The title is striking because the piece actually never mentions Ginsberg as being part of the trial, but the title still strongly implies that the trial cemented Ginsberg on the cultural map. These instances exemplify how the notion of the trial's importance to Ginsberg's overall history as a poet activist is widely accepted and pervasive.

Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman's film *Howl* (2010) performs this inflation of the trial in a visual medium. The film was commissioned by Ginsberg's estate after his death and took directors and producers over eight years to produce.¹⁵ The fact that Ginsberg's estate gave the rights to a film revolving around *Howl*, the poem, to Epstein and Friedman establishes this film as an official portrayal of the poem's history. The film strives to capture the atmosphere surrounding the creation, popularization, and criminalization of *Howl* using transcripts and testimonials by Ginsberg during the trial and from the trial itself. In the interview scenes throughout the movie, the viewer sees James Franco, playing Allen Ginsberg, sitting on a couch in a San Franciscan apartment answering questions from an interviewer who sits just off screen. In the second interview scene, the interviewer asks why Ginsberg was not present for the trial, and Ginsberg responds, "cause the trial is not about me, as much as I have to thank them completely for my fame, it was the publisher, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who was busted for selling obscene material." Epstein and Friedman's use of Ginsberg's recorded statement immediately confirms Ginsberg's dissociation from the trial. However, the subsequent reenactments of the

¹⁴ Adam Chandler, "'Howl' and the Obscenity Trial: Allen Ginsberg's Date with History," *Tablet*, October 3, 2012.

¹⁵ Ruby Rich, "Ginsberg's *Howl* Resounds on Film," *The Guardian*, January 19, 2010.

trial's testimonies reconnect Ginsberg to the trial. In the final scene that takes place in the court, Judge Horn delivers a dramatic monologue handing down his verdict for *Howl* as not guilty. He says:

There are a number of words used in *Howl* that are presently considered coarse and vulgar in some circles of the community, and in other circles such words are in everyday use. The author of *Howl* has used those words because he believed his portrayal required them as being in character. The people state that such words are not necessary and that others would be more palatable, for good taste... Would there be any freedoms of press or speech if one must reduce his vocabulary to vapid, innocuous euphemisms? An author should want to be real in treating his subject and be allowed to express his thoughts and ideas in his own words... the defendant is not guilty.¹⁶

Though the monologue never includes Ginsberg's name, Horn's repetitive harking back to the agency of the author over word choice calls upon the image of Ginsberg and associates Ginsberg with the central question of obscenity. When Horn finally says, "the defendant is not guilty," the viewer almost has no choice but to imagine Ginsberg as the defendant instead of Ferlinghetti.

The cinematography of this scene reinforces the connection. When Judge Horn directs the court to "all rise," the camera cuts to Ginsberg's apartment, where he also rises and moves to the window. Throughout the monologue, the camera cuts briefly to images of Franco's Ginsberg staring out the window of his apartment during the monologue. The viewer is barely shown what Ginsberg is looking at, when the camera cuts out to the view outside the window, the shot is blurry and the scene is undeterminable. The audience is left to imagine that he too is listening to

¹⁶ State of California v. Shigeyoshi Murao and Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1957), 39. Judge Horn's verdict, as transcribed, provides a numbered list of how the court can by law deem a literary work obscene and concludes as follows: "Therefore, I conclude the book 'Howl and Other Poems' does have some redeeming social importance, and I find the book is not obscene. The defendants are found not guilty, thus making it unnecessary to rule upon the People's motion to dismiss as to defendant Murao. Defendants are discharged and bail exonerated."

the monologue waiting to hear the verdict. During Horn's speech, the scene quickly cuts to black and white clips of Ginsberg creating and reciting the poem, as if to subliminally encourage the viewer to think of Ginsberg. By the end of the scene, the viewer is left to believe that Ginsberg was actively and directly associated with the *Howl* trial.¹⁷ The movie ultimately seeks to write a history out of the memory of the trial because it is officially funded and has authoritative potential.

However, Ginsberg's actual participation in the trial was not extensive and hardly as political as Epstein, Freidman, and the estate portray. A few months prior to the trial, Ginsberg went abroad with fellow Beats to travel around the Mediterranean, and after he was alerted about the trial, did not return.¹⁸ The movie's vague implication that Ginsberg was even in San Francisco during the trial is an invention. Ginsberg's physical presence aside, his letters and writings during the trial reflect his dismissal of the trial's gravity. He even goes as far as to repudiate political activism, not just within the trial, but in general. How can historical memory assume the trial as a site of political activism when Ginsberg himself denies the poem's potential as a subject for activism? An analysis of Ginsberg's actions and thoughts during the *Howl* trial reveals the tension between the memory of the trial as a site of his political activism and what "actually" happened.¹⁹ This conflict between intention and interpretation begs the question: why is the *Howl* trial remembered as a site of political protest for Allen Ginsberg?

¹⁷ *Howl*, directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffery Friedman, (2010).

¹⁸ *I Celebrate Myself*: Ginsberg leaves New York for Casablanca on March 10th after deciding early in 1957 that he needed isolation in order to write more (232). With Peter Orlovsky in tow. Ginsberg did not return until July 1958, almost a year after the trial (275).

¹⁹ I frame the term "actually" in quotes simply because I find the term inherently problematic in relation to history. It could be impossible to understand the situation in a pure sense as any historical event is distorted or blurred by time. The actuality of the trial can only be deciphered from accounts of those involved, including Allen Ginsberg.

Layers of context, intentions, and questions of agency for both the historical figures and those remembering complicate how one can approach this issue. In the coming chapters, I intend to break apart these issues bound up within how the trial is historicized and explore the reasons for and consequences of this memory. I first observe the context of the trial itself, and argue that the culture of the 1950s limited the trial's role as political protest. I also argue that Ginsberg was unwilling to engage in much political action. However, the decade following the *Howl* trial saw both the poet and poem enjoy increasing popularity, cementing them as icons for some Americans. Ginsberg's increasing fame parallels his growing interest in political activism, cementing political activism as an inherent part of Ginsberg as a poetry icon and allowing the liberal consciousness to assume Ginsberg as a politically active figure. The poem, though, lends itself to being read as a protest subject through both periods because of its rejections of mainstream American capitalist values and Ginsberg's appropriation of African-American themes of struggle. However, Ginsberg did not acknowledge his own appropriation of these black themes, thus obscuring the conflict with African-American understandings of what it means to be a white ally of civil rights. Ginsberg remained among those white liberals who ignore racial difference. This ignorance led to a "whiting out" of themes of struggle and protest in the poem. The memory simultaneously works to mollify the liberal conscience for its lack of political involvement in the civil rights movements by claiming the 1950s as a moment where political activism was more possible. Examining the issues conflated in public memories of the *Howl* trial allows us to see the fragility of memory along with its omissions and suppressions.

A Moment in Moloch

The Cold War painted the decade of the 1950s as anxious and fearful. Fear of Soviet political subversion caused the American government to create an overwhelming number of protective bureaucracies such as: the National Intelligence Authority (1946), the CIA (1947), the Intelligence Advisory Committee (1950), the National Security Agency (1952), and the Hoover Commission Task Force on Intelligence (1955). The Defense Intelligence Agency would come later, in 1961, but was a continuation of the previous decade's politic. Their duty was to monitor and protect the fragile domestic health of the United States through "loyalty oaths, Congressional hearings, blacklists, surveillance technology, executive orders union busting legislation, Immigration and Naturalization Service restrictions, and general harassment."²⁰ The increased levels of surveillance and censorship performed by these agencies perpetuated a heightened level of cultural anxiety, which shaped and defined American culture during the 1950s. Americans felt frustration at the thought of relinquishing rights to the American government, but political activism and dissent could only be expressed indirectly and with limited action for fear of persecution. This culture of censorship of the 1950s shaped how Ginsberg and the Beats understood and expressed political dissent in *Howl* and during the *Howl* trial.

Unlike contemporary assumptions that Ginsberg was an enraged victim of the *Howl* trial, his letters during the trial portray his sentiment as muddled, vague, and even neutral. Writing to Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg states, "I hope they do not find you guilty," and it is this emphasis on

²⁰Michael Davidson, "From Margin to Mainstream: Postwar Poetry and the Politics of Containment," *American Literary History* 10, no. 2 (1998): 271.

“you” instead of “us” that serves as the first indicator to Ginsberg’s mental detachment from the trial.²¹ A month later, Ginsberg’s next letter includes the following paragraph:

Haven’t heard from you since your letter describing arrest – that’s over a month ago – have you been in jail? Am eager to hear what’s happened. Please write fast aerogram and say what’s up – and I read of recent advertise – type Supreme Court decisions about obscene. I wrote Jarrelle [sic] asking him give you official help but no reply has he gotten in touch with you? What’s happening?²²

Though Ginsberg reads as frantic to know what the happenings of the trial, this paragraph only flashes up briefly within the context of a larger conversation over publishing details.

Immediately after expressing concern over the trial, Ginsberg discusses at length the weather and climate of Venice. Ginsberg’s quick transition from concern to relaxation leaves the reader confused, or even convinced Ginsberg was in denial. In a letter to Jack Kerouac, Ginsberg writes, “no news on the Trial, I guess it’s over.” This letter was sent on October 9th, six days after Judge Horn handed down the verdict, indicating no one had informed him quickly.²³ Ginsberg’s uncertainty over when the verdict is to be given contrasts with Epstein’s image of Ginsberg anxiously waiting at the windowsill. While the letters show Ginsberg’s concern for the trial, his interest seems modest in comparison to how one would expect a proponent of free expression to respond. The insistence on free expression in the Beat movement encourages readers to believe the author would be up in arms over the trial. This belief is what the Epstein film is founded on, but it is not true to Ginsberg’s actual behavior during the trial.

²¹ Allen Ginsberg, Tangier, to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, San Francisco, 10 June 1957. The letters that I cite throughout are the individual letters that I observed, which are archived in the University of California, Berkeley’s Bancroft Library under the City Lights Books Records collection.

²² Allen Ginsberg, Venice, Italy, to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, San Francisco, 10 July 1957.

²³ Allen Ginsberg, Amsterdam, to Jack Kerouac, New York, 9 October 1957.

Ginsberg's letters show a self-dissociation from the trial that fed into his larger disinterest in political activism. In his first letter to Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg says, "I'm really sorry I'm not there to take part in the latest development. I never thought I'd want to read *Howl* again but it would be a pleasure under these circumstances. It might give it a reality as 'social protest.'"²⁴ Ginsberg's response regards another request to read the poem to an audience, but also suggests that now that the poem is on trial there is the potential for readers and listeners to construe the poem as a subject of protest against the government. The statement takes on a cynical tone, as Ginsberg had grown to loath the public interest in *Howl* and his readings, but performed them to pay rent; his claim that he would derive pleasure from another reading seems insincere. The quotations around "social protest" continue to color the statement as mocking and cynical. Ginsberg is not keen that *Howl* serves as protest, and moreover casts doubt on social protest in general. Whether the poet thinks social protest is inefficient or useless cannot be determined, but the reader is left to conclude that Ginsberg did not consider poetry as a means for political protest in this moment. The prior sentences only amplified Ginsberg's callousness, especially when he jokingly refers to the trial as the "latest development." After Ginsberg's tongue in cheek comment on the trial, one can derive that he was not then vehement about social activism.

The ambiguity of Ginsberg's feelings toward the trial and political activism in the letters resonated with the atmosphere of censorship and persecution that existed during the 1950s. Starting in 1947, the House Committee on Un-American activities, a committee originally designed to keep fascism out of the country during the early stages of World War II, organized investigations to locate and remove leftist subversives in Hollywood.²⁵ While the hearings were established under the guise of weeding communists out of the film industry, they resulted in the

²⁴ Ginsberg to Ferlinghetti, 10 June 1957.

²⁵ Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History With Documents* (New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2002), 17.

“Hollywood blacklist,” which kept workers with leftist associations out of the business of making films for years.²⁶ The 1950s also witnessed the rise of Senator Joseph McCarthy and McCarthyism. McCarthy announced on February 9, 1950 that he had a list of communist agents in the State Department, a list that constantly changed in length over the course his political peak.²⁷ The White House created a subcommittee in response to McCarthy to look into his claims, and by 1953 McCarthy had garnered enough electoral and party support to take over the Permanent Investigating Subcommittee of the Government Operation Committee.²⁸ McCarthy manufactured investigations into the federal government, media, and Army as he attempted to weed out communist subversives.²⁹ By 1954, the proliferation of congressional investigations had come to an end, but the public fear and anxiety that they had fostered was still present and pervasive.³⁰ The investigations of HUAC and McCarthyism had condemned outward dissent and helped to perpetuate a culture of conformity. Despite the fact that McCarthy was out of power by 1956, that fear informed *Howl* even as Ginsberg refrained from outwardly speaking out against the government in the letters or through active participation in the trial.

Prevailing cultural censorship during the Cold War also influenced how the Beats constructed their correspondence. Oliver Harris argues, “the early Cold War years were marked by an unprecedented politicization of culture and by the conscription of private life in the name of national security. The key to political containment abroad was, then, personal self-containment at home, and the Cold War penetration of the private by the public was as much a

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

matter of patriotic self-policing and voluntary self-censorship as of state surveillance.”³¹ For dissidents in the 1950s, self-censorship had to be applied to even the most private of correspondence. As a medium, letters invited scrutiny as tangible objects that can be held as evidence, like a physical transcript of one’s personal beliefs. Correspondence as a whole “is vulnerable to incriminating interception and authoritarian state censorship” simply because the postal system is a government run bureaucracy.³² Thus, Beats engaged in heavy self-censorship of their letters, which were their primary mode of communication, out of fear of persecution. Ginsberg was especially aware of how his correspondence could be used for public fodder, as most of his poems before and following *Howl* were written without regard for the public, writing for his “own soul’s ear and a few other golden ears.”³³ He therefore constantly saw his public and private work as connected, and understood that his letters could be grouped with his published works. Thus Ginsberg’s ambiguity and veiled language in his letters to Ferlinghetti resulted from his realization that there was no clear distinction between public and private information.

Ginsberg’s absence from the *Howl* trial was due to his concern over what would potentially happen to him if he were to return to the United States. Ginsberg had left the states in March of 1957, Ferlinghetti’s arrest, the first seizure, and the trial so his original reason for leaving was not of fear of persecution. Once the arrest of *Howl* set the trial in motion, Ginsberg was unsure as to whether he wanted to return to help defend the poem, especially since he was not legally obligated to do so. Ginsberg clearly pitied Ferlinghetti, and even felt guilty that he was not present when he wrote, “I wish I were there, we could really have a ball, and win out in

³¹ Oliver Harris, “Cold War Correspondents: Ginsberg, Kerouac, Cassady, and the Political Economy of Beat Letters,” *Twentieth-Century Literature* 46, no. 2 (2000): 172.

³² *Ibid.*, 174.

³³ *Ibid.*, 181.

the end inevitably.”³⁴ Ginsberg still makes light of the trial and arrest, suggesting that it is simply a roadblock that they must overcome. Despite Ginsberg’s own casual attitude regarding the trial, his concern over his own safety upon returning to the states shows when he asked Ferlinghetti, “what would happen if I came back?” While he remains unspecific, clearly Ginsberg feared for his own legal safety, suggesting that Ginsberg was not as blasé about returning as his language implies. Bill Morgan argues, “Allen was relieved to hear that the ACLU attorneys thought his appearance would not help Lawrence’s case, since the charges were against the publisher of the book and not the author.”³⁵ Ginsberg’s sense of relief instead of neutrality reinforces the idea he feared the possibility of persecution upon returning to the states.

While the Cold War culture of censorship shaped Ginsberg’s response to the *Howl* trial, his stance of political apathy also resonated with the Beat attitude of indifference to politics. The Beat movement started as a movement that sought to combat the cultural conformity that had plagued the United States in the post war years. Vivian Gornick describes the start of the Beat movement as, “the complicated aftermath of the Second World War, characterized by anxiety about the atomic bomb, a manipulated terror of godless Communism, the strange pathos of The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit [sic], and the subterranean currents of romanticized lawlessness into which the men and women ultimately known as the Beats would funnel an old American devotion to the idea of revolutionary individualism.”³⁶ While the Beat movement was a conscious dissociation from American political constructions, such as conformity, explicit anti-communism, and rampant capitalist consumption, the movement itself was never political. Beat resistance to hegemonic American values functioned as a “reflex of larger forces they could not

³⁴ Ginsberg to Ferlinghetti, 10 June 1957.

³⁵ *I Celebrate Myself*, 243.

³⁶ Gornick, 6.

control.”³⁷ Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs simply sought an experience separate from the normative American life, through experimenting with writing and drugs. The primary actors in the Beat movement could not be unified under a particular political ideology because of their disparate backgrounds and beliefs. Ginsberg had been raised in a socialist household, while Kerouac was raised by his Catholic, conservative mother; the two held dissenting views on how the government should operate leading to numerous heated political debates.³⁸ Ginsberg and Kerouac in particular stood at opposing sides of the political spectrum; Kerouac was a firm supporter of Joseph McCarthy while Ginsberg reviled him.³⁹ The Beat movement can be considered leftist because it worked against mainstream ideals, but since the Beats could not unify under a political belief or cause, the movement is not one of inherent political dissent. Besides the inability to coalesce under a political belief, few Beats individually engaged with American politics in the postwar years. Thus, Ginsberg did not have a history of political activism motivating him to become active in the *Howl* trial.

The era of cultural censorship not only affected how Ginsberg and the Beats communicated and behaved, but also shaped the sort of attention given to the trial by local and national media. The trial received national attention from *Life* magazine in the months during the trial. Henry Luce, a firm believer in American exceptionalism and commerce, founded and ran *Time* and *Life* magazines. Both magazines assumed white middle class heteronormative readers, and emphasized issues of import for that demographic. A civil liberties case in San Francisco involving a small bookstore and publishing company and a socialist Beat poet unsurprisingly received minimal attention. However, the issue of censorship put the trial on both magazines’

³⁷ Davidson, 267.

³⁸ *I Celebrate Myself*, 262-263.

³⁹ Jonah Raskin, *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’ and the Making of the Beat Generation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 162.

radars, as censorship was a major issue for all publications during the 1950s and artistic license was the focus, not political dissent. *Time* contacted Ginsberg while he was abroad for an interview on the trial, and even offered to pay full expense to fly Ginsberg to Rome for the interview.⁴⁰ The article never ran, but this instance shows the magazine's interest in the trial.⁴¹ The *Life* article only mentions Ginsberg twice, once as the author of the disputed poem, and once in a group of photographs of San Franciscan poets; no mention was made of Ginsberg's beliefs.⁴² The coverage minimized his importance as author of a subversive work. Eschewing the political, the article "called wide attention to San Francisco's burgeoning poetry revival... Their work has gained respectful hearing from local and even national critics, though some of them look on San Francisco's group as a sort of 'James Dean' school of poetry."⁴³ *Life* did not view the trial as an origin of political activism, but as a spark for a poetic, creative literary movement without political motivation. In fact, the article's mention that the literature of these poets was considered of a "'James Dean' school of poetry," suggested that the literature in this poetic movement was juvenile, of little import, and, most of all, should not be taken seriously. Thus, the artistry of the Beats was noteworthy, but their beliefs were not.

While the *Howl* trial only made one national appearance, the local *San Francisco Chronicle* performed more frequent and in-depth analysis and critiques of the trial. From March when the poem was first confiscated to its June arrest at City Lights to when the trial ended in October, writers of the *San Francisco Chronicle* published several scathing criticisms of the trial. These criticisms never focused on, or sometimes even mentioned, Ginsberg or *Howl*. Instead, the

⁴⁰ *I Celebrate Myself*, 249.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁴² "Big Day for Bards at Bay," *Life*, September 9, 1957, 105-106.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 105.

reports chided the bureaucratic systems that originally embargoed and arrested the poem. Abe Mellinkoff responded to the first seizure of the poem in March writing:

COLLECTOR OF CUSTOMS Chester MacPhee [sic]... knows no more about modern poetry than I do. What I mean [is that] he is ignorant of the subject. That's why I think he has a lot of nerve in confiscating 520 copies of a book by an unknown poet named Allen Ginsberg... The thing was printed in England and picked up on the local docks as being too dirty for Americans to read... I am happy to report that I have not read 'Howl' or any of the 'Other Poems.' Mr. MacPhee [sic] has but I am not sure that gives him any advantage over me... the collector has no duty to protect my children. I sometimes wish he had. If he is going to pick up everything that is a menace to them, he would be confiscating night and day. This would include... lethal instruments such as knives, high speed can openers, and, of course, guns of all kinds... if a literary iron curtain is to be erected along the Embarcadero, let's put some professors of literature down there to patrol it.⁴⁴

Mellinkoff's critique of the first arrest of *Howl* pokes fun at the idea that Americans are too childish to read the poem, asserting that American institutions have no right to attempt to protect his children, or himself, from literature. But he never assumed that *Howl* embodies a revolt against these institutions. William Hogan later wrote an opinion piece criticizing the arrest of *Howl* from City Lights in June stating, "the point is that cops are raiding the bookstores and presumably... the literary patrol can march into any bookstore in town and arrest the personnel at will. Not for selling 'Howl and Other Poems,' but for selling anything the members of this Orwellian 'Big Brother' agency doesn't like."⁴⁵ Hogan asserted that the issue is not the poem *Howl*, but that police have too much power to censor and govern literature. Hogan cited other

⁴⁴ Abe Mellinkoff, "Morning Report: Iron Curtain on the Embarcadero," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 28, 1957.

⁴⁵ William Hogan, "Orwell's 'Big Brother' Is Watching Over Us," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 6, 1957.

works that were tried on similar grounds, such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* and John O'Hara's *Ten North Frederick*, redirecting his emphasis to institutions that have consistently persecuted literature. Both articles use language associated with the Cold War and censorship, Mellinkoff invoking the "iron curtain" metaphor, and Hogan referencing the omnipresent "Big Brother" of George Orwell's *1984*. Therefore, instead of asserting that *Howl* and Ginsberg are subjects of political protest, writers of the *San Francisco Chronicle* use the trial as a vehicle to express Cold War frustration and criticism, without assuming political action.

The cultural censorship of the 1950s shaped perceptions of the poet and the trial, but *Howl* still maintained the aura of protest in its rejection of postwar norms and ideals. Ginsberg effectively took aim at conformity and capitalism in the poem. Instead of focusing on normative and capitalist subjects, *Howl* focuses on those described as being "expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes," those who have been marginalized and rejected by mainstream institutions.⁴⁶ *Howl* is dedicated to Carl Solomon, a friend Ginsberg had met while institutionalized in a psychiatric facility, and so the poem explicitly targeted society's pariahs.⁴⁷ American systems reject Ginsberg's subjects, but this rejection is mutual as these subjects are also inherently suspicious of that system. Ginsberg describes his subjects as those who "reappeared on the West Coast investigating the F.B.I in beards and shorts."⁴⁸ Instead of the F.B.I performing the investigation, Ginsberg inverts the dynamic. *Howl* distanced itself from mainstream American desires through its rejection of capitalism. Ginsberg characterizes his hipsters as "burning their money in wastebaskets" and, more explicitly, "protesting the narcotic

⁴⁶ Allen Ginsberg, "Howl for Carl Solomon," *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1959), 9.

⁴⁷ *I Celebrate Myself*, 117.

⁴⁸ *Howl.*, 12.

tobacco haze of Capitalism,” where Ginsberg parallels prurient gain with substance addiction.⁴⁹ Since capitalism was the American ideal during the Cold War fight against Communism, Ginsberg’s interest in those who reject capitalism shows his own rejection of mainstream ideals. The people that Ginsberg was interested in “were burned alive in their innocent flannel suits on Madison Avenue,” a reference *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* and a claim that the subjects could not survive in that mold.⁵⁰ The rejection of capitalist society in *Howl* positioned the poem as one of defiance and protest against mainstream American society.

Though *Howl* becomes a protest subject through its language and themes, Ginsberg did not intend for the poem to carry this weight of activism. During the trial, Ginsberg wrote to Ferlinghetti, “I’m really sorry I am not there to take part in this latest development.... It might give [the poem] reality as ‘social protest’ I always feared was lacking without armed bands of outraged Gestapo. Real solid prophetic lines about being dragged off stage waving genitals and mss., biting detectives in the neck, etc.”⁵¹ Ginsberg saw the trial as infusing the poem with protest potential of which he had not thought the poem was capable. He even pokes fun at a few lines in the poem as if he is suspicious as to whether the poem can really be considered an activist manifesto based on the absurdity of those lines. In a letter to Jack Hirschman, Ginsberg admits, “there has been at this point almost embarrassing amount of publicity about ‘Howl.’ I [am] afraid the poem almost too slight to support the enormous pile of bullshit piled over it – tho that’s probably my own fault.”⁵² In this statement, Ginsberg continued to suggest that *Howl* does not have the depth and foundation to support the activism that the reaction to the poem and the trial assumed or evoked. Ginsberg recognized that it is his particular use of language and themes

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 10, 13.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵¹ Ginsberg to Ferlinghetti, 10 June 1957. Ginsberg was referencing several lines from *Howl*.

⁵² Allen Ginsberg, Italy, to Jack Hirschman, San Francisco, September 1957.

of struggle that situate the poem as a protest subject. Though *Howl* can be read as a work of protest, Ginsberg never truly intended for it to be taken as a motivator for protest. Ginsberg's lack of interest in creating a work of protest simultaneously prevents Ginsberg and the poem from being claimed as protest subjects during the *Howl* trial.

Ginsberg's intentional separation of himself from the perceived protest in *Howl* is emphasized by the tradition of poetry released during the 1950s that shied away from direct political protest. Ginsberg's rejection of capitalism throughout *Howl* claims the poem as an "Abomunist" poem, which Amiri Baraka argues is code for "Communist" during the 1950s. *Howl* identifies itself as a communist poem not only through its rejection of capitalism, but also by advocating for communism by associating with those "who distributed Supercommunist pamphlets." "Abomunist" poems were a disruption to the poetry of the Popular Front of the 1930s and 1940s, which was anchored in increased political activism through Modern Aesthetics.⁵³ Instead of motivating political action, "Abomunist" poems "practice a sort of ideological distancing from a specific radical engagement while maintaining a radical stance... These poems proclaim their militancy through their refusal to answer questions, through their refusal to define themselves positively."⁵⁴ Though *Howl* engages with struggle, Ginsberg does not stick to one clear issue and does not attempt to solve any problem in particular. The poem instead narrates the experiences of those who struggle in society, but it never addresses a specific social issue by which they are affected. By not focusing on a particular problem, Ginsberg is able to distance himself ideologically while still conveying a feeling of general struggle. Ginsberg was not engaging with the act of protest, and "what one sees here is a politics and poetics of engaged evasion that is more than a question of personal career and personal expression, but a

⁵³ James Smethurst, "'Remembering When Indians Were Red': Bob Kaufman, the Popular Front, and the Black Arts Movement," *Callaloo* 25 (2002), 149.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

strategy for maintaining a continuity with past struggle and past practice in a moment of state repression.”⁵⁵ Ginsberg’s avoidance of a particular issue and lack of active participation in the *Howl* trial itself is a conscious evasion of political engagement that still asserted his dissatisfaction as molded by the culture of censorship. The poem’s role as an “Abomunist” poem resists the conflation of Ginsberg and the poem as subjects of protest as the memory of the *Howl* trial constructs.

Despite the present’s close associations between Ginsberg, the trial, and a sense of political activism, the experiences of Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti during the 1950s were dissociative and vague. Ginsberg’s physical absence from the trial contrasts Epstein and Friedman’s image in *Howl* (2010) of Ginsberg anxiously waiting by the windowsill. Ginsberg’s physical absence aside, correspondences between Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti during the trial paint Ginsberg’s interest in the trial as dodgy and ambiguous. But this ambiguity in the correspondence resulted from self-censorship of Cold War culture, where the lines between what is public and private information were blurred. In order to avoid persecution, the Beats edited their correspondences for fear that the government would take hold of the letters and use them as legal evidence. The Beats themselves had already established a history of disparate political views amongst themselves and apathy towards political protest, which Ginsberg expressed in his letters. The news media coverage of the *Howl* trial during the 1950s also never made the connection between Ginsberg and political activism during the trial, but instead focused on the issues of the rampant institutional censorship. Ginsberg’s correspondence also reveals that he had never intended for *Howl* to be a politically weighty poem, thus reinforcing the assumption that *Howl* is political as a cultural construction. Ginsberg’s distancing of *Howl* from political action or a specific political stance resulted from the movement away from political poetry

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

during the 1950s. The experiences and literature surrounding Ginsberg and *Howl* at the time of the trial were shaped by 1950s culture of conformity and censorship, and thus prevent Ginsberg or *Howl* from assuming the politically active stance that contemporary remembrances of the trial construct.

Distributing Supercommunist Pamphlets

Though the confines of 1950s Cold War and post World War II culture prevented Ginsberg, and subsequently *Howl*, from actively engaging in political protest during the trial, in the 1960s Ginsberg flourished as a full blown dissenter. Ginsberg took greater interest in political issues almost immediately following the trial and into the early 1960s. By the mid 60s, Ginsberg asserted himself as a political activist as he focused on issues that occupied the emerging student movement. His activism focused predominantly on opposition to the Vietnam War, the legalization of Marijuana, and free speech. Simultaneously, his public persona as a signifier of the Beat movement informed those politics. Through the decade, he also achieved a greater public presence as a symbol of homosexuality and so-called deviance buoyed by poetic genius. Ginsberg was frequently photographed, interviewed, and recorded by the American media, thus solidifying his status as a significant and dissenting figure. Ginsberg's increased activism along with his new mainstream celebrity during the 1960s altered the common prescription of the Beat poet in the 1960s and afterward.

Prior to the *Howl* trial, no one was sure as to how well *Howl* would sell or whether it would gain popularity. *Howl* was first read publicly at the Six Gallery poetry reading on October 7, 1955, and was greeted by a rapturous audience and an alleged telegram from Ferlinghetti stating, "I greet you at the beginning of a great career – when do I get the manuscript of

Howl?”⁵⁶ Much of *Howl*’s critical acclaim, and Ginsberg’s reputation, centered in San Francisco among fellow poets and Beats. The avant-garde poetry scene that took root in San Francisco received national attention, but was not yet considered an enduring literary movement. Richard Eberhart of *The New York Times Book Review* was the first to publicize the Beat poets in his article, “West Coast Rhythms,” on September 2, 1956. The article nationally marked *Howl* as one of the preeminent poems of the movement. However, Eberhart warned, “the young group is marked naturally by volatility. It seems to be a group today, but nobody knows whether it will survive as a group and make a mark on the national poetic consciousness,” emphasizing how the Beats were considered a transient youth movement, without proven ability to gain a permanent audience.⁵⁷ Despite such rhetoric and his popularity within the Beat poetry circles, both Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg were unsure how well the poem would do once it finally arrived at City Lights on November 1, 1956.⁵⁸ As more and more copies of *Howl and Other Poems* were printed, Ginsberg wrote to Ferlinghetti, “the reprint of 1500 Howls is safe? Grove Press... asked for reprint of *Howl* too, but I’ll give them other material. Maybe later on if there’s more of a demand, In a year or so, I don’t know. Why 1500 copies? Can you sell them?” expressing his own uncertainty of the demand for the book. He continued, “there are a number in the 8th st. bookshop, nobody I know in the Village has seen or bought it,” underscoring the poem’s limited fame within the west coast literary circle.⁵⁹ By the year’s end, Ginsberg started executing his own publicity campaign outside of San Francisco, writing, “went to the NY Times and bearded them for a review, got interviewed by Harvey Breit, and will, I think, get *Howl* reviewed

⁵⁶ *I Celebrate Myself*, 208-209.

⁵⁷ Richard Eberhart, “West Coast Rhythms,” *The New York Times Book Review*, September 2, 1956, 18.

⁵⁸ *I Celebrate Myself*, 226.

⁵⁹ Allen Ginsberg, New York, to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, San Francisco, 7 December 1956.

there.”⁶⁰ Even though *Howl* had become a popular Beat text before the trial, no one considered it the canonical avant-garde poem that it eventually became.

The trial served as a marketing campaign for *Howl* and Ginsberg, both intentionally and accidentally. During the trial, Ginsberg suggested to Ferlinghetti, “if you can mimeograph a letter & get some kind of statement from [William Carlos Williams, Bogan, and Eberhart] & send it around to magazines [we] might get some publicity that way. Also let Harvey Breit at NY Times [know] for sure definitely – he’d probably run a story maybe,” thus initiating a defense of the poem and a publicity campaign through the trial.⁶¹ Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti both saw the trial as an opportunity to get publicity, not for political protest. Shortly following that letter, *Time* magazine contacted Ginsberg “because of the media interest in the upcoming trial,” and offered to fly Ginsberg from Tangiers to Rome for an interview.⁶² Though the interview never actually ran in *Time*, intense media interest in Ginsberg reflects how the trial shoved him and *Howl* into the national limelight. As previously noted, articles in *Life* and *The San Francisco Chronicle* publicized the trial, and inadvertently advertised *Howl* and the poet. Towards the end of the trial, critic John G. Fuller wrote, “McPhee’s error lies in the fact that the trial has boomeranged completely at this point, and the poem is receiving many times the attention it would have received.”⁶³ Ginsberg biographer Bill Morgan argues, “what had been transpiring in San Francisco was to become one of the most important events in his life, one that would define his entire career,” propelling the man and the poem into the national forefront.⁶⁴

Despite the publicity, Ginsberg remained unsure as to how well he would be able to sell *Howl*, writing, “you [Ferlinghetti] now have 5000 copies – 2500 distributed – will you be able to

⁶⁰ Allen Ginsberg, New York, to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, San Francisco, 20 December 1956.

⁶¹ Allen Ginsberg, Tangiers, to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, San Francisco, 3 April 1957.

⁶² *I Celebrate Myself*, 249.

⁶³ John G. Fuller, “Trade Winds,” *The Saturday Review*, October 5, 1957.

⁶⁴ *I Celebrate Myself*, 250.

unload the rest or is it going to be a white elephant?”⁶⁵ However, immediately following the trial, Ferlinghetti ordered five thousand copies of *Howl and Other Poems* in the fourth printing, almost doubling the total number of copies that had previously been printed, in order to meet popular demand.⁶⁶ Following the trial, the poem’s popularity soared past Ginsberg’s expectations as books flew off of bookstore shelves.

Immediately following the trial, those in literary circles noticed *Howl*’s burgeoning celebrity, but still refused its merit as a serious poem, or even as part of serious movement. University of Texas English professor Frederick Eckman wrote to Ferlinghetti, “HOWL is going big with the shaggier segment of the literary undergraduate body down here. The bookseller who carries your list reports that he’s sold a number of copies, and several of my students have begun to make enthusiastic noises.”⁶⁷ Eckman’s statement was not an insult to the poem, but he still implied the poem’s juvenility because youth audiences primarily consumed it. Early in 1960, John Ciardi wrote in *The Saturday Review*, an “epitaph” for the Beats, dismissing the Beat movement and emphasizing again its transience. He wrote, “let it be said of the Beats that there was a time when they might almost have been taken as an intellectual uprising... but if the Beats had any sort of rebellion going once, there seems to be little enough left of it now beyond a fad of hip-talk and blare-jazz in crumby dives,” and repeatedly referred to the movement as “adolescent rebellion.”⁶⁸ Even as Ginsberg and *Howl* gained notoriety, their fame within youth circles discredited them to the keepers of the literary canon.

By the early 1960s, however, *Howl* had entered that canon. Richard Eberhart announced in a letter to Ferlinghetti, “by [Karl] Shapiro’s putting *Howl* in a textbook it is now literally in

⁶⁵ Allen Ginsberg to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, 10 June 1957, 2.

⁶⁶ *Howl on Trial*, 3.

⁶⁷ Frederick Eckman, Austin, Texas, to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, San Francisco, 14 April 1958.

⁶⁸ John Ciardi, “Epitaph for the Dead Beats,” *The Saturday Review*, February 6, 1960, 11, 42.

the academy, to be read alongside old conservatives like Robinson and Frost,” asserting that *Howl* is moving into the literary canon.⁶⁹ Karl Shapiro and Allen Ginsberg stood on opposite ends of the poetry spectrum, as Ginsberg considered Shapiro to be more of an “advertising executive” than a poet, and so Shapiro’s incorporation of *Howl* into a textbook normalized the poem further.⁷⁰ Beginning in December of 1961, negotiations began between Ferlinghetti and Richard Newnham, an editor at Penguin Books, to include Ginsberg in their ongoing series of modern poetry, *Penguin Modern Poets III*. Newnham promised that Ginsberg would be allowed thirty pages in the collection for his writing, but Ginsberg refused the offer because he did not think his poetry would be shown effectively against square poets.⁷¹ Ginsberg eventually consented to be part of *Penguin Modern Poets V* after Newnham agreed to include Ferlinghetti and Corso in the collection. But Newnham had criticized Ginsberg’s decision to waive the third volume in an exasperated letter to Ferlinghetti, writing, “hasn’t [Ginsberg] ever heard of infiltration as a course of strategy?”⁷² Ginsberg was thus reluctant to bridge the gap between his avant-garde literary circles and the canon. Nonetheless, editors and publishers were clamoring to get their hands on Ginsberg’s work, and effectively shoved him into the English canon.

Howl’s elevation paralleled Ginsberg’s own move into popular culture. The Beat movement had remained on the periphery of mainstream society through the 1950s, but during the 1960s, Ginsberg entered the public eye. Though the Beat movement unofficially ended by the 60s Ginsberg continued to be seen as unconventional, and popular culture of the 1960s absorbed and revered him as such. As Ginsberg became a recognizable poet, his countenance became equally recognizable and his “bearded image began to appear regularly on the pages of

⁶⁹ Richard Eberhart, Hanover, New Hampshire, to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, San Francisco, 19 January 1962.

⁷⁰ *I Celebrate Myself*, 217.

⁷¹ Richard Newnham, Harmondsworth, to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, San Francisco, 27 December 1961.

⁷² Richard Newnham, Harmondsworth, to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, San Francisco, 18 May 1962.

magazines and newspapers.” Experimental filmmakers in New York’s East Village featured Ginsberg in several works, and he met popular artists such as Jonas Mekas and Andy Warhol. In 1964, high fashion photographer Richard Avedon photographed a series of black and white nude portraits of Ginsberg and his lover, Peter Orvlosky.⁷³ Avedon was known for portraits of such period celebrities as Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor, and his interest in the poet suggested Ginsberg was as famous as these glamorous stars. This comparison was reinforced by Avedon’s including one of Ginsberg’s portraits in his 1964 portfolio, *Nothing Person*, which was a collection of dramatized portraits of iconic figures. One photograph appeared in a subway advertisement for the new underground literary magazine, *The Evergreen Review*. The ad was controversial because it depicted two grown men embracing one another in the nude, giving Ginsberg even more press and literally making him a poster child of the early 1960s subculture.⁷⁴ Producers and consumers were thus sensationalizing Ginsberg, but Ginsberg used this spectacle to engage with and propel forward his political agenda.

Ginsberg’s role as subculture icon did not stop short of the ideals and goals of the new generation. Though he had been performing public reading since before *Howl*’s publication, it was not until 1958 that Ginsberg agreed to an all-consuming reading schedule, starting with Yale, Hunter College, and NYU, and continuing almost uninterrupted for the next forty years of his life.⁷⁵ These public readings, especially his college campus appearances, garnered Ginsberg a youth following. As Ginsberg’s fame increased and he became an icon for youth subculture, he also grew more politically cognizant and active. Following the *Howl* trial, Ginsberg became more interested in American politics and international relations. In the midst of a political argument with Kerouac, Ginsberg posited, “if poetry can be made of ashcans, why not

⁷³ *I Celebrate Myself*, 388.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 389.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 284-285.

newspaper headlines and politics?” While Kerouac and the rest of the original Beats kept to their ashcans, Ginsberg incorporated politics into his artistic expression. In 1958, Ginsberg began “a monstrous and golden political or historical poem about the fall of America,” which was to become the poem, “America.”⁷⁶ His realization that his growing fame in the states meant his “arguments might carry some weight politically,” only accelerated his political engagement.⁷⁷ This revelation along with Ginsberg’s desire to write something bigger than *Howl* prompted him to tackle intentionally political poetry, instead of the externally imposed activism on *Howl*.

From *Howl* to *America*, Ginsberg’s writing shifts from youthful abandon with vague themes of struggle, to a more focused and direct hailing of American politics. *Howl* references activism in the description, “in beards and shorts with big pacifist eyes sexy in their dark skin passing out incomprehensible leaflets.” But he never specifies what his subjects are protesting, the description of “pacifist eyes,” suggest a war, but it is never explicitly clear which or what kind of conflict. The poem only vaguely hints at overt political activism, and most of the poem follows the “angel headed hipsters” as they travel seeking out experience. *America* dives head first into political issues and serves as forthright commentary. Ginsberg expresses his stance on the Cold War, proclaiming, “go fuck yourself with your atomic bomb,” immediately hailing the politics of the period into the poem in not so diplomatic words.⁷⁸ Cold War politics and tensions are drawn out further as he writes, “them Russians them Russians and them Chinamen. And them Russians. The Russia she wants to eat us alive,” addressing the three main powers in the Cold War.⁷⁹ Ginsberg is directly addressing the economic stakes of the war and how Capitalism

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁷⁸ Allen Ginsberg, “America,” *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1959), 39.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

was bound into politics with the claim, “[Russia] wants our auto plants in Siberia.”⁸⁰ The connection between the poem and politics is strengthened by how Ginsberg situates himself in relation to the subject of the poem. Through the first two stanzas of the poem, Ginsberg is addressing America directly, stating his cultural qualms, such as: “your machinery is too much for me” and “I won’t say the Lord’s Prayer.”⁸¹ The subject-object relationship shifts after Ginsberg writes, “It occurs to me that I am America / I am talking to myself again,” and then the third stanza begins with Ginsberg’s voice standing in as America.⁸² Ginsberg continues to blur the distinction between who is speaking throughout the third stanza, switching between addressing “I” and “America” so that the reader is unsure if this is Ginsberg’s voice or America’s. This blurring of the subject binds Ginsberg within the political discourse of the poem, making himself a political subject as well. The political themes in *America* are more specific and overarching than in *Howl*, reflecting Ginsberg’s transition from a vaguely political position to activism in the years following the trial.

By the mid 1960s, the possibility for more overt political protest opened. American society had been in a pressure cooker since the end of the world war and by the early 1960s, the pot was ready to burst. Social movements had started to organize and pick up speed, and student activism in particular began take root in universities across the United States. In the spring of 1960, thousands of college students demonstrated outside of chain businesses in an act of solidarity with southern civil rights groups. By 1962, student support for civil rights increased further, leading to the founding of the Students for a Democratic Society based at the University of Michigan. Students at the University of California at Berkeley had concurrently developed as

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 39, 40.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 41.

a core group of experienced activists in the free speech movement.⁸³ As the Vietnam War escalated under President Johnson, these student organizations became more active in public protest through demonstrations that attracted heavy media attention. During his travels through Southeast Asia in 1963, Ginsberg had seen the U.S. military build up in South Vietnam, and wrote how the scene gave him “butterflies in his stomach the whole time he was [there].”⁸⁴ Upon returning to the States, Ginsberg saw that “younger people were hard at work transforming the introspective ideas of the writers of the 1950s into the political activism of the next generation.”⁸⁵ On October 30th, 1963, Ginsberg “made his own picket sign,” and attended his first demonstration to protest the U.S. backed regime in Vietnam.⁸⁶ With the increase in overt political activism during the 1960s, Ginsberg not only began engaging with politics in his poetry, but also incorporated political protest into his lifestyle.

Ginsberg used his fame and “massive address book to connect scholars and researchers, activists, and journalist,” and to organize political demonstrations.⁸⁷ In 1964, Ginsberg pulled fellow poets together to create the Committee On Poetry, which they ironically shortened to COP. The group sought to organize benefit readings as “defense strategies against the new wave of censorship.”⁸⁸ When the Le Metro Café in New York City, a popular place for poets and poetry readings, was accused of operating without proper licenses, Ginsberg rallied this group of poets together for their first protest against the law.⁸⁹ These poets were familiar with the conflicts between young artists and New York laws, as “the government’s reaction... was the same as it

⁸³ Van Gosse, “Introduction: A Moment of Movements,” *The Movements of the New Left 1950-1970* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2005), 12.

⁸⁴ *I Celebrate Myself*, 374.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 385.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 380.

⁸⁷ Barry Miles, *Ginsberg: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 373.

⁸⁸ *I Celebrate Myself*, 387.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 386.

had been nearly a decade earlier in San Francisco.”⁹⁰ However, now instead of avoiding conflict with the government, Ginsberg confronted these issues head on and worked to organize other writers. Having survived scrutiny and avoided persecution once, he felt emboldened.

While Ginsberg used his influence to organize local poetry readings, he also extended his involvement and organization skills to demonstrations across the country in the name of first amendment rights, ending the Vietnam War, and the legalization of marijuana and other drugs. Ginsberg organized a demonstration with fellow poet, Ed Sanders, to be held on December 27, 1964, close to the Department of Welfare building on the Lower East Side to protest anti-drug legislation. Though the demonstration only attracted nineteen people, little resistance, and zero press coverage, the demonstration exemplifies his budding political activism.⁹¹ Ginsberg also participated in an Anti-Vietnam march organized by the Vietnam Day Committee in Berkley, California on October 15th and 16th in 1965. While Ginsberg did not organize the event, he was still an active participant and led a chant to relieve tension between the Hell’s Angels and those participating in the march.⁹² Later in 1965, Ginsberg attended a University of California sit-in to protest sentences meted out against free speech protesters the previous year, where he “[Beat] a pair of small silver cymbals, he stood on a table and intoned a Tibetan montra – a kind of lullaby,” commenting, “I’m aiming it at the judge.”⁹³ Ginsberg seriously researched his political interests to supplement his demonstration work. He wrote to Ferlinghetti, “reading up on Military Industrial Complex: it’s the largest business in the US... & trying to work w/ Underground Press liberation news service to get a sort of mandala-map-poster-centerfold

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 385.

⁹¹ Miles, 340.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 377-378.

⁹³ Don Wegers, “UC Rallies Protest Sit-In Sentences,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, July 30, 1965.

articulation of the whole set up.”⁹⁴ Ginsberg’s research and increasing participation demonstrate his burgeoning passion for political activism.

Though Ginsberg’s protest methods were unconventional, he took them seriously. The most spectacular example of Ginsberg’s activism took place at the 1968 National Democratic Convention in Chicago, where 3,000 students encircled the convention center in a massive Anti-Vietnam protest. The protest was met by thousands of national guardsmen and troops, sparking violence between protestors and police. Ginsberg chanted in an effort to calm police forces, but was ultimately unsuccessful.⁹⁵ The brutality captured on live TV reached a wide audience, shocking and terrifying the American public. Fright and fascination over what escalated into a riot made it a highly publicized event, cementing it in American protest history. While Ginsberg’s contribution to the protest was superficial, he is still constantly noted as being one of the celebrities involved in the riot. Ginsberg’s heavy involvement in Anti-Vietnam and drug rights demonstrations inextricably tied him to the movements and the ideologies surrounding the movements.

After Ginsberg’s success with COP, he began receiving requests from around the country to help in the struggle against censorship. Ginsberg testified in defense of Jonas Mekas who had screened *Flaming Creatures* and *Chant d’Amour* and been arrested on obscenity charges.⁹⁶ In January of 1965, Ginsberg had testified in the defense of *Naked Lunch* by fellow Beat, William S. Burroughs.⁹⁷ Both trials were remarkably similar to the *Howl* trial of 1957; the state charged the author with obscenity, and the authors could only be acquitted if the works were found to have literary merit. Ginsberg testified in Burroughs’s trial, praising his ear for common language

⁹⁴ Allen Ginsberg, New York, to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, San Francisco, 24 January 1968.

⁹⁵ Miles, 415.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 336.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 340.

while he pointed out what he considered to be moral messages in the work. In 1967, a decade after the *Howl* trial, *Howl* was put on trial for obscenity in Italy. Unlike his response to the San Francisco *Howl* trial, Ginsberg responded to the charge with, “I’ll be there myself. I’m going to fight it all the way through.”⁹⁸ Ginsberg’s increased confidence in political activism motivated his participation in the Italian trial, but also was a way of ameliorating his lack of involvement in the San Francisco trial. Ginsberg also testified in the 1969 “Chicago Seven” trial, which charged Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, David Dellinger, Tom Hayden, Rennie Davis, John Froines, and Lee Weiner for inciting the riot at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. While the “Chicago Seven” trial did not deal with obscenity, it negotiated the first amendment right of protest. Ginsberg’s testimony for the trial was deemed so “genius,” it was transcribed and published by City Lights in 1975.⁹⁹ Ginsberg’s shifting involvement in conflicts similar to what took place during the *Howl* trial reaffirms the change in Ginsberg’s stance on political activism.

While Ginsberg’s letters to Ferlinghetti were politically vague during the trial, his letters become much more direct regarding his political intentions during the 1960s. When Ginsberg first began his heavy involvement with COP in 1964, he writes, “I’ve been hustling all month... arranging congress cult freedom circulate petition for Olympia... rounding up coffeeshop info for new law here, helped bounce the local DA for bugging mekas [sic] & Bruce... got huncke [sic] outa jail, saw American Civil Lib Union for Ray Bremser, wrote my congressman complaining about everything.”¹⁰⁰ Ginsberg kept Ferlinghetti informed of all of his protest happenings, showing a more open and forward political ideology than he had held in the 1950s. Ginsberg even warns Ferlinghetti at one point, “filed but didn’t pay taxes for ’67 (re war

⁹⁸ Piero Sanavio, “Breakfast with the Buddha of the Beats,” *International Herald Tribune*, September 6, 1967, 14.

⁹⁹ Allen Ginsberg. *Chicago Trial Testimony* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1975).

¹⁰⁰ Allen Ginsberg, New York, to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, San Francisco, 12 August 1964.

protest)... so they may come around the store to seize 1882.71 doll,” openly writing about his own form of protest, and unabashedly admitting to tax fraud.¹⁰¹ Ginsberg expressed his political frustration to Ferlinghetti after a group of Indian poets are arrested, writing, “urgent letters from Calcutta, it seems the entire Hungry Generation has been arrested for Obscenity – Malay Roy Choudhury, his brother Samir, a boy named Debi Roy, and two young kids named Ghose. All for Hungry Gen Pamphlet manifestos I think. I’m waiting to hear more from them before firing off letters of protest in every direction, brapppp.”¹⁰² Unlike the letters sent to Ferlinghetti during the *Howl* trial, Ginsberg’s letters now directly address his sentiments toward activism and the intentions of his involvement. His writings even take on an aggressive tone with the “brapppp” onomatopoeia to mirror the sound of machine gun fire. Ginsberg is not only open about his political protest now, but passionately invested.

Ginsberg’s involvement in political protest almost began outweighing his involvement in his own poetry. During 1964, “Allen became so involved in the struggle that he began to feel more like a politician than a poet,” so much so that he outsourced writing the *India Journals*. Friends also found he was often too busy with his committee work to spend much time with them.¹⁰³ Ginsberg wrote Ferlinghetti, “I’m up to my ears in work appointments telephonings politics get no writing done, maybe another month of this.”¹⁰⁴ Despite Ginsberg’s premonition, his involvement lasted much longer than another month. Ginsberg was drawn to “the role of elder spokesman for the new avant-garde, and he was both flattered and distressed by the

¹⁰¹ Allen Ginsberg, Milan, to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, San Francisco, 25 September 1967.

¹⁰² Allen Ginsberg, New York, to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, San Francisco, 30 September 1964.

¹⁰³ *I Celebrate Myself*, 387.

¹⁰⁴ Allen Ginsberg, New York, to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, San Francisco, 14 March 1963.

prospect,” as he feared he would not be able to balance his political activism with his writing, and yet he chose to remain politically active.¹⁰⁵

His disproportionate investment in his political activism over his writing established Ginsberg as the figurehead of the youth movements. He had already become the founder of the Beats, and now a decade older, he was considered a figurehead of political dissent, as he had already worked against mainstream society through the Beat movement. Ginsberg’s dissent transitioned from rebellious displays without political directive, to active and goal oriented protest. Ginsberg, though already recognizable as a poet through his increased fame after the *Howl* trial, was also realized as Ginsberg the political activist. M. L. Rosenthal of the *New York Times Book Review* wrote, “[Ginsberg] has an international following based on as much on his dramatic personality as on his works.”¹⁰⁶ Ginsberg’s formation into the famous poet and the politically active poet happened simultaneously, constructing Ginsberg as the politically active poetic icon for the American public during the 1960s.

Ginsberg’s emergence as the politically active icon in the 1960s shaped the memory of him in subsequent years and time to come. When one looks back at the *Howl* trial, their memory is imbued with the concept of Ginsberg as a politically active figure because that is an inherent part of his constructed identity. Memory of Ginsberg is not a memory of the man and his particular actions during any given time, but a memory of a cultural icon. As Raskin puts it, “he was the paragon of the protean poet. In the moment of creation, he was everyone and he was everywhere, from Alcatraz to Madison Avenue,” meaning that Ginsberg in the American consciousness no longer functions as a man, but as an overarching idea.¹⁰⁷ The American consciousness then always views Ginsberg as politically active through this construction, even

¹⁰⁵ *I Celebrate Myself*, 388.

¹⁰⁶ M.L. Rosenthal, “Poet and Public Figure,” *The New York Times Book Review*, August 14, 1966, 4.

¹⁰⁷ Raskin, 191.

when he was not. When Americans remember the *Howl* trial, they assume that he was politically active in that moment because his general construction points to his ability and history of political activism. American cultural memory is always looking back at the trial through the lens of Ginsberg's political activism, constructing Ginsberg as a subject of political protest during the *Howl* trial of 1957.

Contemplating and Appropriating Jazz

By viewing the *Howl* trial, *Howl*, and Ginsberg in their historical contexts of the 1950s and 1960s, one can determine how historical lenses shape memory. But can we determine a connection between *Howl* and political protest during the *Howl* trial? What are the consequences of reading political activism in *Howl*? Although we cannot see the trial as a protest, the poem lends itself to such a reading, which critics and fans have done since its publication. What makes *Howl* a subject of protest is its refusal of mainstream values, such as capitalism, which I have explained in the first section. *Howl* incorporates aspects of African-American language and culture, which were denied in the inherently white English poetic canon of Ginsberg's education, thus distancing itself further from mainstream American culture. *Howl* continuously foregrounds struggle and resistance; claiming qualities of struggle from African-American culture, *Howl* can be read as protest. Through the later association of *Howl* and political protest, we have historically remembered Allen Ginsberg as the hero poet. This in effect has altered the memory of Ginsberg, *Howl*, and the *Howl* trial.

Black Nationalist and fellow Beat poet, Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), strengthens the connection between *Howl* and social protest through his commentary on the poem. Baraka wrote of how the poem appealed to him in his statement, "So HOWL- the language. The stance. The

sense of someone being in the same world, the defiance.”¹⁰⁸ Baraka assumes *Howl*, the poem itself, is an active work of protest through its language and themes. Baraka’s sense that Ginsberg is in “the same world,” is due to his notion that their poetry subverted the normative white poetic canon. But Baraka continues, “Allen was a font of ideas, and publicity for the new word, new generation, American and intros to the whole united front against dead people,” stating how Ginsberg became the figurehead for the counter culture. However, Baraka also claims that Ginsberg is a sort of publicity, a mask for this struggle that could be more easily digestible for mainstream American society. Baraka thus implied that Ginsberg served as a white vessel to make the themes of struggle that Baraka could relate to, his black struggle, more palatable for a wider, white audience.

The poem focuses on the experiences of marginal groups agitated by white middle class life, allowing Baraka to identify with the themes and language of *Howl*. The poem pulls influence from works within the African American literary canon, which is most generally defined as works “embodying a shared theme of struggle” through “strokes of freedom.”¹⁰⁹ *Howl* is Ginsberg’s “stroke of freedom” that paints a portrait of struggle faced by marginal groups in American society. Ginsberg’s description of “angel headed hipsters... dragging themselves through the angry negro streets” illustrates this struggle with the physical act of dragging. Ginsberg’s placement of the struggle in the “negro streets” associates the poem with the African American struggle more specifically.¹¹⁰ Ginsberg’s description of “negro streets” is not accidental either; he is drawing upon the association between blackness and struggle, and wants

¹⁰⁸ Amiri Baraka, “‘Howl’ and Hail,” in *The Poem that Changed America*. ed. Jason Schneider (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 21.

¹⁰⁹ Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Selection from Loose Canons” Notes on the Culture Wars,” in *The American Intellectual Tradition Volume II: 1865 to the Present*, ed. David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 578.

¹¹⁰ *Howl*, 9.

to insert the poem into a marginalized setting and context. Amiri Baraka forms his own separatist black canon as, “defined both by formal innovations and by themes: formally, individual selections tend to aspire to the vernacular or to black music.”¹¹¹ Ginsberg and the rest of the Beats were already heavily influenced by jazz music, and Ginsberg’s readings of *Howl* themselves can be compared to a Jazz performance. Baraka continues to define the black canon as one with an “up-against-the-wall subtext,” marked by desperation and struggle, and it is this sense of being pinned down in *Howl* that resonated with the disillusioned youths of the early Cold War years. Ginsberg did not specifically address the trials of African Americans and cannot occupy space within the African American canon, but he borrowed or cited characteristics of African American literature that allow *Howl* to be read as a subject of protest.

The Beat movement in general appropriated African-American culture. Beats congregated on the periphery of mainstream society, in what Andrew Jamison calls “a love of literature and a taste for life on the social margins.” They sought pockets that linked art and lifestyle, which were often traditionally impoverished African-American neighborhoods. The geographic location of Columbia, the home of the original Beats, was in the middle of ethnic neighborhoods and near Harlem, exposing the Beats to the cultural center of black America.¹¹² The Beats thus associated themselves with African-American culture in order to resist mainstream American life, which is inherently white, while still being privileged by their own whiteness.

One of the most common connections between Beat and African-American culture came through jazz music; the Beats consistently incorporated qualities of jazz in their literary works. Columbia’s proximity to Harlem put the Beats up close to jazz clubs and in the company of jazz

¹¹¹ Gates, 578.

¹¹² Andrew Jamison and Ron Eyrman, *Seeds of the Sixties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 154.

musicians. From the 1920s, white fans viewed jazz as an escape from mainstream culture, even though it was already a central piece of African-American life, and the Beats of the late 1940s and 1950s were no different.¹¹³ Jazz embodied rebellion from traditional musical theory and societal norms, making it attractive to the Beats, and eventually leading them to “claim jazz as something of social protest, almost by mythic proportions.”¹¹⁴ Pete Winslow states, “with jazz came the speech of the hipster. White people were socially accepting blacks for the first time reacted with something like awe upon discovering the meaning of being cool.”¹¹⁵ The Beats perceived black culture as a means of becoming cool or hip instead of acknowledging the oppression that birthed jazz.

Jazz thus became a common motif in Beat literature. John Clellon Holmes’s novel *The Horn* tells the story of a fictional jazz saxophonist, Edgar Pool, who stands in for famous jazz musicians of the time, such as Charlie Parker. The chapters of the novel are divided between two forms, the “chorus” and the “riff,” mimicking jazz formulas.¹¹⁶ Several critics compared Ginsberg’s readings of *Howl* to jazz performances. Each line of the poem is read with one long breath similar to the breathing pattern required for playing jazz saxophone runs, and Ginsberg would sweat and sway to the Beat like a jazz performer. Ginsberg has even stated that “writing [*Howl*] was like the experience of a jazz musician improvising,” briefly appropriating the role of jazz musician and, thus, the black body.¹¹⁷ The angel headed hipsters that Ginsberg follows in the poem are even said to be “contemplating jazz,” an act that involves not just listening, but meditating on the music, thus showing how the Beats desired to appreciate jazz on multiple

¹¹³ Lorenzo Thomas, “‘Communicating by Horns’: Jazz and Redemption in the Poetry of the Beats and the Black Arts Movement,” *African American Review* 26, no. 2, (1992): 291.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 292.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 293.

¹¹⁶ Kurt Hemmer, *Encyclopedia of Beat Literature* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2007), 132.

¹¹⁷ Jack Foley, “Beat,” *Discourse* 20, no. 1/2, (1998), 182-197, 189.

levels.¹¹⁸ The appropriation of jazz in *Howl* reflects how African-American culture was borrowed and clung to by the Beats, but because of their whiteness, jazz was only an ephemeral entity that could easily be shrugged.

Beat portrayals of jazz differed drastically from how African-American writers understood jazz, as exemplified in the poetry of Bob Kaufman. Beats considered Bebop music as an almost orgasmic expression of unbridled ecstasy. Bob Kaufman and fellow black writers knew that jazz and Bebop music were not forms of mere exaltation, but “that it was as dangerous to ordinary American illusions as every Beatnik’s mother said it was. Jazz was an overdose of reality.”¹¹⁹ In a way, both the Beats and Kaufman saw jazz as expressing what is “real,” but Kaufman’s outlook on reality is far bleaker. Kaufman’s poem, “Round About Midnight” takes the name of a Thelonius Monk song, and even though Monk was a bebopper, the tune is atmospheric and slow. The third stanza reflects this dichotomy between exaltation and sadness, reading “Stirring laughter, dying tears, / Round about Midnight,” suggesting that even in the ecstatic jazz scene there is a constant underlying sadness.¹²⁰ Unlike the white Beats, Kaufman was listening to bebop and jazz as an insider. He never needed it to feel like he was living on the outskirts of society, his skin color already ensured that. Instead, Kaufman sees himself as rooted in the jazz tradition with the music embodying part of his past. The poem “O-Jazz-O,” associates jazz with longing when Kaufman writes, “Where the string / At / Some point, / Was some umbilical jazz, / Or perhaps, / In memory, / A long lost bloody cross.”¹²¹ Here we see Kaufman connect jazz with his past, either as a maternal force or as an excruciating burden. Kaufman

¹¹⁸ *Howl*, 9.

¹¹⁹ Thomas, 295.

¹²⁰ Bob Kaufman, “Round About Midnight,” *The Portable Beat Reader*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 328.

¹²¹ Bob Kaufman, “O-Jazz-O,” in *The Portable Beat Reader*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 329.

wrote of jazz with melancholic homesickness, as something he desires and yet can barely stand. Kaufman's insider perspective on jazz contrasts drastically with how the Beats imagine jazz as outsiders. White Beats wrote about jazz can be understood as a romanticization.

The romanticization of black culture and struggle were common themes throughout Beat texts, most explicitly in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. Since *On the Road* is considered to be one of the most exemplary Beat texts, along with *Howl*, it provides the reader a glimpse of the Beat consciousness through the Kerouac's character and narrator, Sal Paradise. Paradise's cross-country adventures lead him to California where he temporarily takes on the job as cotton picker. Paradise described the work saying, "we bent down and began picking cotton. It was beautiful... There was an old Negro couple in the field with us. They picked cotton with the same God-Blessed patience of their grandfathers had practiced in ante-bellum Alabama," and upon returning home he was "sighing like an old Negro cotton-picker."¹²² Paradise's glorified perception of the couple ignores the historical context of their ancestors. He assumes their ancestors' motivation for cotton picking was a dutiful patience instead of slave labor. These slave ancestors were forced to pick cotton until they died, but for Sal it is temporary, and that is white privilege. Paradise himself feels that the experience of working as a cotton picker is beautiful. Although it is difficult work, he knows he will not have to do it for his entire life. At the end of the day, Paradise's comparison of himself to an "old Negro" further reflects his misunderstanding of black culture, as he borrows the identity of "negro" temporarily. One melancholy night, Paradise's internal monologue says, "I wish I were... anything but what I was so drearily, a 'white man' disillusioned. All my life I'd had white ambitions... wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America... Negro families sat on their front steps, talking... and just relaxing... there was excitement and the air was filled

¹²² Jack Kerouac, *On The Road* (New York: Penguin Group, 1976), 96-97.

with the vibration of really joyous life that knows nothing of disappointment and ‘white sorrows’.”¹²³ Paradise assumes that life as an African-American is utterly carefree and joyous, ignoring the rampant poverty and oppression of the African-American community. Paradise concludes with, “the old Negro man had a can of beer in his coat pocket, which he proceeded to open; and the old white man enviously eyed the can and groped in his pocket to see if *he* could buy a can too,” as a semi-objective observation of how white culture looks at black culture in jealousy and desires to be a part of it.¹²⁴ However, Paradise’s character remains an outsider to black culture even as he appropriates it, his romanticism is a belief that prevents him, and the Beats, from actually understanding black culture.

Beat romanization of black culture is most unabashedly explained and described in Norman Mailer’s “The White Negro,” first published in the summer 1957 issue of *Dissent* magazine. Mailer seeks to explain why the Beat, the hipster, sought to appropriate black culture:

“if one is to be a man, almost any kind of unconventional action often takes disproportionate courage. So it is no accident that the source of Hip is the Negro for he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for centuries... the presence of Hip as a working philosophy in the sub-worlds of American life is probably due to jazz, and its knife life entrance into culture, its subtle but so penetrating influence on an avant-garde generation of adventurers who... had absorbed the lessons of disillusionment and disgust... part of the generation was attracted to what the Negro had to offer.”¹²⁵

Mailer transforms centuries of racial oppression into a sort of muse of coolness, detachment, and alienation. He does not go into detail on what courage it takes to live as a black American under

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 180-181.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹²⁵ Norman Mailer, “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster,” *The White Negro* (San Francisco: City Lights Publishing, 1957), 4.

the constant threat of white racism, but is more intent on white interest in black culture, as if that validates the black culture itself. White racism had forcefully pushed African-Americans into the margins of society, making them noble martyrs to the Beats, who have in contrast chosen to exist in the margins. Tensions between black and white societies are not elaborated on, and are instead pushed under the rug throughout the essay. Mailer's titling of the Beats as "adventurers" further emphasizes how the Beats' involvement in black culture is a transitory, temporary, experience; they are simply tourists of a particular lifestyle. The notion that the Beats desired something that African-American culture "has to offer" also reinforces a colonized-colonizer relationship between blacks and the Beats. However, this racial hierarchy is ignored as Mailer continues, "in the wedding of the white and black it was the Negro who brought the cultural dowry... so there was a new breed of adventurers... who drifted out at night looking for action with a black man's code to fit their facts. The hipster had absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro, and for practical purposes could be considered a white Negro."¹²⁶ Mailer states that the Beats, these adventurers, had appropriated black culture as a means to an end. The conclusion that Mailer arrived to, his assumption of the existence of a "white Negro," once again appropriated the black body as a mask for the Beat where blackness can be shrugged off. The concept of a "white Negro" thus reinforced the racial hierarchy by not acknowledging the existence of one.

It is thus not surprising that black responses to the Beat movement were decidedly split between positive acclaim and outrage. Baraka himself was a Beat poet, was friends with many Beats, and obviously made the claim that Ginsberg's *Howl* reached him. However, black Beats were still marginalized despite the Beats understanding themselves as an already marginalized group. James Baldwin, however, criticized the Beat movement for its appropriation of black culture and conscious self-marginalization. Though African-American, Baldwin was considered

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

to be the “white eye” on black culture as he identified a white gaze.¹²⁷ Baldwin wrote with both white and black audiences in mind, but his interest in white audiences was to make them face the issue of racism and accept accountability for it. Baldwin’s writings then became a camera for the white viewer; they could catch a glimpse of black culture and ideology without having to directly participate in black culture or civil rights, making him accessible to white audiences. But just because Baldwin was accessible does not mean he shed a softer light on black oppression to make it easier to swallow. Instead he gave “the reader both a sense of being there with the author,” in that he was the guide, but fervently asserted that being white meant being responsible for black oppression.¹²⁸

White responsibility for black oppression, or at least acknowledgement of a white history of oppression, recurs throughout much of Baldwin’s writing. He most explicitly discusses this concept in his essay, “The White Man’s Guilt,” where he contemplates and explicates how white Americans view their racist past and how they make sense of it in their present. He writes, “they see a disastrous, continuing, present, condition which menaces them, and for which they bear an inescapable responsibility,” clearly positing that America’s slave owning past pervades current white consciousness. Baldwin states that white Americans should “stop defending themselves against [their racist pasts],” but need to confront these histories in contemporary society.¹²⁹ Baldwin suggests that white Americans, especially white liberals who do not subscribe to racist tendencies, distance themselves from blame in “those stammering, terrified dialogues which white Americans sometime entertain with that black conscience... a plea: Do not blame *me*,” but

¹²⁷ Jamison, 167.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹²⁹ James Baldwin, “The White Man’s Guilt,” in *Baldwin Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Literary Classics of the United States Inc., 1998), 722.

subsequently they remove themselves from a dialogue over civil rights.¹³⁰ Despite the white liberal's push against his past, Baldwin claims, "the white American remains proud of that history for which he does not wish to pay;" as the white man's freedom was the black man's slavery and the white liberal can still profit from white privilege while the black man cannot.¹³¹ In order for the white liberal to rectify the American past with their present he claims that the white liberal must take action, but states, "to act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case, the danger, in the minds of most white Americans, is the loss of their identity," an identity based on white supremacy.¹³² Baldwin at least desires that whites recognize their own complicity in civil rights issues if they are not to take the action he recommends. Therefore, Baldwin recognizes that it may be difficult for the white liberal to confront and then combat their racist pasts, but that it is necessary for the progression of civil rights.

Baldwin draws out his criticism and idea of redemption of the white liberal in his novel, *Another Country*. Baldwin wrote the character Vivaldo as the stereotypical white liberal. Vivaldo takes part in the appropriation of black culture in the tradition of "The White Negro" in his literal pursuit of an orgasm with black women in Harlem. During these sexual escapades, both Vivaldo and the black girl "clung to the fantasy rather than to each other," thus Vivaldo is using the achievement of an orgasm as a means of appropriation.¹³³ While Vivaldo romanticizes the black experience, he also struggles to understand race as a divisive factor. On the ride to Rufus's funeral he confesses, "They're colored and I'm white but the same things have happened, really the *same things*," to which his friend Cass responds, "but they didn't happen to you *because* you were white... what happens [uptown] happens *because* they are colored. And that makes a

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 723.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 724.

¹³² James Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook," in *Baldwin Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Literary Classics of the United States Inc., 1998), 294.

¹³³ James Baldwin, *Another Country* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 131.

difference.”¹³⁴ This exchange between Cass and Vivaldo shows his inability to recognize his own inherent white privilege, and his blind ignorance towards racial oppression, which subsequently reinforces racism. Vivaldo’s inability to confront racial division or his own white past, causes his guilt to grow; Baldwin writes, “it was painful for [Vivaldo] to despise a colored girl, it increased his self concept... however pressing may have been the load he carried uptown, he returned home with a greater one, not to be easily discharged.”¹³⁵ Baldwin believes that the only way to discharge this guilt is to confront it and take action against racial oppression, but instead Vivaldo avoids this confrontation, blindly assuming that there is no racial difference and denying the oppression he sees. Baldwin criticizes Vivaldo’s actions writing, “he had merely been taking refuge in the outward adventure in order to avoid the clash and tension of the adventure proceeding inexorably within... the liberal, even revolutionary sentiments of which he was so proud mean nothing to them.” Vivaldo’s notions of revolution were arbitrary without action or understanding.¹³⁶ Baldwin forces Vivaldo to confront his racial misgivings through his relationship with Ida, Rufus’s very dark younger sister. Ida confronts Vivaldo saying, “how can you love someone you don’t know anything about?... you don’t know what life is like for me,” and though Vivaldo says he is willing to try to understand, she retorts, “nobody’s willing to pay their dues.”¹³⁷ Ida then forces Vivaldo to confront racial difference by explaining that no matter how good of a friend he was to Rufus, he never could really know Rufus because he was black, thus disrupting how Vivaldo understood his friendship with the question of race.¹³⁸

Baldwin’s criticism of white liberals came to a head when he confronted Mailer’s “The White Negro.” His essay, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” explains his relationship to

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 113-114.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 325.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 415.

both Mailer and the text. Baldwin first asserts, “I was black and knew more about the periphery he so helplessly maligns in *the White Negro* than he could even hope to know,” which seems obvious just because Baldwin lived the life Mailer and the Beats sought after.¹³⁹ Baldwin attributes the Beat’s own ignorance towards their racial appropriation simply: “they wanted their romance.”¹⁴⁰ But he explicitly discusses Mailer’s essay stating, “I could not, with the best will in the world, make any sense out of *The White Negro* and, in fact, it was hard for me to imagine that this essay was written by the same man who wrote [*The Naked and the Dead* and *Barbary Shore*].” Instead of harshly attacking Mailer or the text Baldwin writes:

I was baffled by the passion with which Norman appeared to be imitating so many people inferior to himself, i.e. Kerouac and all the other Suzuki rhythm boys. From them, indeed, I expected nothing more than their pabulum-clogged cries of *Kicks!* and *Holy!*... [Norman] felt compelled to carry their mystique further than they had, to be more “hip,” or more “Beat,”... But why should it be necessary to borrow the Depression language of deprived Negroes, which eventually evolved into jive and bop talk, in order to justify such a grim system of delusions?¹⁴¹

Baldwin takes a jab at Beat culture as a whole marking them as immature and superficial, and views Mailer as simply following in the essay. In fact, Baldwin respects Mailer’s honest interpretation and acknowledgement of this Beat appropriation. Through Mailer’s documentation of the appropriation, he is at least confronting it and reasoning through it, which Baldwin values. Where Baldwin’s criticism lies is with the rest of the Beats, most explicitly Ginsberg, hailing to Howl with *Holy!*, and Kerouac who appropriate black culture without really thinking or evaluating their actions. To Baldwin, the real problem with Beat appropriation of black culture is

¹³⁹James Baldwin, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985*, ed. James Baldwin (New York: St. Martin’s / Marek, 1985), 290.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 292.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 296-297.

in the fact that none of the Beats, except for Mailer, confront their own appropriation. Instead, Baldwin argues that the other Beats act blindly without acknowledging that they are dressing themselves with black culture to be hip. To Baldwin, Mailer has the potential to “pay his dues” because he is honest and open about his appropriation, even though he is perpetuating racism instead of subverting it; but the rest of the Beats need to be held accountable.

Thus, Baldwin’s perception of the Beat appropriation of black culture is drastically different than Baraka’s. Baraka imagines Ginsberg, and the other Beats, as being in the same world as he, even going as far as to consider himself a Beat writer. He ultimately approves of the appropriation in so much as they bring black issues to a wider white audience. However, Ginsberg as publicity also means a masking of the blackness of the issues. So mass appeal for black issues, especially when they are not directly addressed as such, is not nearly enough for Baldwin. Instead, Baldwin takes it a step further and posits that white audiences need to not only look upon these struggles, but also face their role in perpetuating racial issues. And so while Ginsberg serves as white publicity for black struggle, he must also directly address their African-American origins so as to not white them out.

In order for Ginsberg to pay his dues, so to speak, and be accountable for his pseudo-racist white liberal behavior, he would have to act, as Baldwin puts it. This action could have manifested itself in the form of political activism within the civil rights movement. However, while Ginsberg became politically active during the crucial years of the civil rights movement, he never directly engaged with the movement. Ginsberg’s political interests lay in first Amendment issues, the end of the Vietnam War, and federal drug policy. Though Ginsberg engaged with these issues fervently and politically, his motivation was framed by his interest in spiritual self-discovery. Ginsberg recognized that he lacked a place within the Civil Rights

movement, and thus did not identify himself directly with the movement. Ginsberg was invited to attend the Dialectics of Liberation conference in London organized by R. D. Laing, a prominent and controversial drug rights activist. The conference was organized to foster discussion over drug issues, especially when it came to treating the clinically insane. The discussion was soon dominated by Stokely Carmichael, past chairman of SNCC, leader of the Black Panther Party, and prominent black separatist, who directed the conversation towards black separatism. Ginsberg though continued to focus on his topic of “Consciousness and Practical Action” by reciting quotes from Burrough’s *Nova Express* “as an example of what happens when a planet goes out of control.”¹⁴² Ginsberg never dismissed issues of civil rights, and is often considered a supporter of the civil rights movement; however, he never took action within the various sections of the civil rights movement directly. His support was known, as Ginsberg did not lack concern for the movement and its goals, but it was never something he invested in actively. Ginsberg had repeatedly called for peace during anti-Vietnam protests, especially when violence ensued at the 1968 Democratic convention, but his chants went oddly missing when the “freedom riders” were met with aggressive mobs in 1961 or in the major Detroit and Newark race riots of 1967. Ginsberg had a hard time confronting targeted racial violence, but Baldwin’s conception of paying dues could also have manifested in Ginsberg confronting his complicity with racism and privilege, but he never quite acknowledged that racial binary. Ginsberg never truly made himself accountable for his appropriation of black culture, or his white past, in the tradition of Baldwin.

Though it is hard to say that Ginsberg himself ignored the civil rights movement, his lack of engagement in civil rights activism allows the critics of *Howl* to ignore the influence the movement had on the poem. It is evident to the reader how the poem is influenced by jazz and

¹⁴² Miles, 398.

black culture; however, critics rarely mention this hailing of black culture. Instead, much of the formative credit of the poem is given to white humanist poets. Herbert Blau, a professor of English who provided testimony for the Howl Trial, wrote, “I find the work of Ginsberg... a raging humanism which appears to be endemic to an important group of young Americans... and which has been one of the dominant motifs of post World War II literature,” threading *Howl* into a series of early to mid twentieth century literature.¹⁴³ Blau automatically connected *Howl* with the English literary canon that is inherently white, without mentioning influential black forms of writing. Literary critics continued to focus their analysis of *Howl* and Ginsberg through the lens of humanist poetry, most notably Ezra Pound and Walt Whitman. M. L. Rosenthal, a critic for *The New York Times Book Review* almost portrayed Ginsberg as a reincarnation of Whitman when he wrote, “he is a Whitman of our era. If Whitman were alive, he would doubtless bring his personal life into the open as Ginsberg has done... Whitman might even speak much as Ginsberg did to that Senate sub-committee.”¹⁴⁴ Rosenthal is not just attributing Ginsberg’s style of writing to Whitman, but is comparing their ways of life to one another, particularly in the realm of political and social protest. Rosenthal seems to assume that Whitman and Ginsberg would partake in the same types of protest, rooting the protest exhibited in *Howl* to the issues Ginsberg fights for in the 1960s; however, black struggle never appears. While it is true that Ginsberg saw Whitman and Pound as principal influences, perhaps even more so than black culture, the critics ignored the back vernacular sources of *Howl*.

The qualities that make *Howl* read like a protest poem engage both Ginsberg and the poem in a complicated relationship with issues of race and civil rights. Ginsberg’s borrowing of black culture constructs the protest aspects of the poem. How Ginsberg configures *Howl* into the

¹⁴³ Herbert Blau, San Francisco, to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, San Francisco, June 1957.

¹⁴⁴ Rosenthal, 4.

African American and black literary canons is also an engagement with Mailer's concept of the "white negro." In a quest to be cool, Beats reinforce black oppression by both wearing and taking off blackness as it suits them, inadvertently reasserting white privilege. Baldwin's criticism of white liberals posits that the only way for this sort of appropriation or co-existence to not reinforce racism is by white liberals confronting and acknowledging black oppression, and then acting against it. Since Ginsberg never directly engages with the action Baldwin posits, but simply expresses indirect support, Ginsberg never fully pays his dues. Similar to his actions during the *Howl* trial, Ginsberg slips away from full accountability, unless he is in need. Ginsberg never owns his responsibility to others and his appropriation is never duly paid. While Ginsberg does not ignore black issues, he never brings them forward to his audiences, and then his audiences forget the black issues, the black struggle. When memory conflates Ginsberg, *Howl*, and the *Howl* trial as subjects of protest, it is associating the themes of struggle in *Howl* with the *Howl* trial. Remembering Ginsberg as the hero poet depends on forgetting of the black figure.

I'm With You in Rockland

The construction of the memory of the *Howl* trial results from various socio-cultural pressures, but there is still something intentionally gained from this particular memory. After observing the cultural context surrounding the *Howl* trial, one may still ask how the memory can be so constructed. Though the lens of the 1960s and the development of Ginsberg as an icon tint the liberal consciousness's memory of the trial, these factors are not wholly responsible for the process of re-remembering. Ginsberg as a politically active icon only colors how the liberal consciousness remembers, but this image does not have the power to completely form the

contemporary memory of the trial. A more intense motivation is required for the process to formulate a memory as cohesive and widely regarded as that of the *Howl* trial. Instead of being passively colored by circumstance, memory actively seeks to fulfill a need. Interpreting the *Howl* trial as an origin site for the protest politics of the 1960s reclaims the 1950s for American liberals. During the push for consensus politics, the left was fairly inactive in the issues it would radically pursue in the 1960s. By marking the *Howl* trial as a site of political activism through its conflation with protest themes of *Howl* and histories of Ginsberg, the liberal conscious is able to re-imagine itself as a politically active force during the 1950s. The memory of the *Howl* trial becomes a means for the liberal conscience to correct the left's general political silence during the 1950s.

Prior to *Howl*, Ginsberg was dealing with the residual guilt of his mother's death and his role in her mental decay. Naomi Ginsberg, Allen's mother, had been diagnosed with mild schizophrenia before his birth, and was in and out of sanitariums and hospitals for most of his early childhood. By 1932, she was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia and hyperesthesia, or abnormally heightened senses, resulting in self-isolation and a refusal to wear clothes around the house.¹⁴⁵ During the 1930s, Naomi's institutionalizations increased in frequency and duration as she received treatment in the Bloomingdale Asylum and Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital in New Jersey.¹⁴⁶ Naomi's deterioration into insanity during Allen's boyhood was formative such that craziness became just another facet of everyday life for him. Allen was often times forced to watch over his mother when she was living in the house. Naomi would make demands of Allen, and in the throes of a paranoia attack in 1940, begged him to help her escape. Allen chose to take her on a bus trip that spiraled out of control until Naomi was arrested in a drugstore. After that

¹⁴⁵ *I Celebrate Myself*, 12.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

event, Naomi only considered Allen to be her enemy and she was beyond his ability to reach her.¹⁴⁷ Afterwards, Allen felt a looming sense of failure that he could not save or help his own mother. On November of 1947, Allen received a letter from Dr. Harry Worthing asking for Allen's consent to perform a lobotomy on his mother. The doctors believed that her mental condition was now beyond regular treatment and required the signature of the closest family member to perform the operation. Allen's father wanted nothing to do with the decision and placed all of the responsibility on Allen, who signed the papers with the understanding that Naomi's condition would improve.¹⁴⁸ However, the next time Ginsberg visited her, she erupted into tears and requested he leave; Allen was unable to forgive himself for authorizing the lobotomy as he felt that he had surrendered her to the illness and the doctors.¹⁴⁹ Naomi died of a stroke on June 9, 1956, while Allen was in the final stages of publishing *Howl*, after years of limited contact.

Ginsberg felt immense guilt for his inability to help his mother out of her mental illness, which was magnified by his upbringing in the Jewish faith. Concepts of guilt and atonement are central to Jewish theology and trickle into the lives of Jewish people. Atonement is the part of the *teshuva*, a process by which Jewish peoples seek forgiveness for a transgression. An engagement with *teshuva* is usually motivated by the onset of guilt as a reaction to the transgression. As Jewish ethicist Lewis Newman articulates it, "we are dealing here with a certain primal awareness of guilt as transgressing a moral boundary. In this most basic sense, the consciousness of sin is independent of the circumstances surrounding our misdeeds- whether we transgressed intentionally or unintentionally, flagrantly or hesitantly." Whether the transgression is carried out with malicious intent or not, guilt is an expected reaction and manifests inside the

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

individual who transgressed whether it was their fault or not. Thus, even though Ginsberg did not directly cause her mental illness or death, he felt guilt due to his own perceived involvement. Forgiveness for a faultless guilt does not come simply from one's proclamation of "it is not my fault," instead, "the deed was done, and that objective fact cannot be changed... [Atonement] rests on the moral transformation of the wrongdoer, the penitent's self-awareness, remorse, acts of apology and restitution."¹⁵⁰ While the act of atonement cannot undo the transgression, it has the potential to eliminate the presence of guilt. Ginsberg ultimately sought ways of achieving atonement to relinquish his emotional guilt.

Ginsberg's guilt over the role he played in losing his mother to her mental illness becomes evident in his poetry, most particularly the poem *Kaddish*. The *kaddish* is a particular Jewish prayer for the dead recited at funerals as a denotation of mourning for those present. However, the *kaddish* could not be recited at Naomi's funeral, because there was not a *minyan* quorum in attendance.¹⁵¹ Ginsberg's guilt over signing the papers for her lobotomy haunted him and he hoped to write a great masterpiece poem to eulogize her. Ginsberg eventually realized that what he was writing would be her *kaddish* to make up for the fact that she never had one.¹⁵² The poem was overtly titled *Kaddish for Naomi Ginsberg* and finished in 1958. In the poem, Ginsberg directly addressed his guilt in the line, "and your memory in my head three years after – and read Adonais' last triumphant stanzas aloud – wept, realizing how we suffer."¹⁵³ The suffering that Ginsberg alludes to addresses both Naomi's anguish from her mental illness and his own distress due to looming guilt. Through the poem, Ginsberg relinquishes his guilt,

¹⁵⁰ Louis E. Newman, *Repentance: The Meaning & Practice of Teshuva* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010), 30.

¹⁵¹ *I Celebrate Myself*, 219. A *minyan* is the seven Jewish men that are required for the reading of the *kaddish*.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 282-283.

¹⁵³ Allen Ginsberg, "Kaddish," *Kaddish and Other Poems, 1958-1960* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1969), 7.

writing, “this is release of particulars,” which addresses the quick descriptions Ginsberg gives of his mother and dealing with her illness. He also implies his own emotional release through the descriptions of her illness and outbursts that make up the second section.¹⁵⁴ The fourth section of the poem breaks from the narrative sections before it in that it becomes a plea, reminiscent of a child begging for forgiveness, each line beginning with “O mother.” In this section, Ginsberg finally says, “o mother farewell,” as if to say goodbye to not only Naomi, but also the emotional burden her death carries. Ginsberg can be read as ridding himself of the torment in the last twenty-nine lines of the section which all begin “with your eyes,” using the image of Naomi’s eyes looming over him as a symbol of his guilt.¹⁵⁵ While *Kaddish* served as a vehicle for Ginsberg to mollify himself, it was not finished until 1959, meaning Ginsberg had fully felt this guilt for three years.

Howl serves as a sort of emotional atonement for the guilt he felt over his mother’s illness before he wrote *Kaddish*. Unlike *Kaddish*, *Howl* is written for Carl Solomon. Ginsberg met Solomon during his institutionalization in 1949, which was his first and only stay in a mental ward. Solomon, however, had been in and out of hospitals and took Ginsberg under his wing. Ginsberg and Solomon exchanged their life stories and became close friends, and Ginsberg wrote down many of their conversations in his journal.¹⁵⁶ As Ginsberg overcame his depression with treatment, and eventually left the hospital on New Years’ Eve, Solomon was admitted to more intensive treatment. In 1955, Ginsberg learned that Solomon had been admitted to Pilgrim State, where Naomi had lived out the last few years of her life.¹⁵⁷ Solomon’s own mental illness constructs him as a stand in for Naomi in *Howl*.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

¹⁵⁶ *I Celebrate Myself*, 118.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 200.

Insanity, institutionalization, and mental health are all reoccurring themes in *Howl*. The poem begins with the famous statement, “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,” and while this claim can imply the affects that conformist culture had on disillusioned youths, it can also be taken more literally to describe the mental disintegration he saw among Solomon and his mother. We see these minds, which serve as the subject for the poem, constantly perform insane acts or exist in mental institutions throughout the poem. Ginsberg first alludes to mental wards with the line, “who broke down crying in white gymnasiums naked and trembling before the machinery of other skeletons,” the skeletons being the other patients who Ginsberg envisions as practically dead.¹⁵⁸ These subjects are also those who “presented themselves on the granite steps of the mad house with shaven heads and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy, and who were given instead the concrete void of insulin Metrazol electricity hydrotherapy,” as an overt reference to mental institutions and treatment.¹⁵⁹ Though the first part of *Howl* follows the subjects across America, from Denver to New York, Ginsberg keeps bringing the subject back to mental institutions. No matter where the poem wanders, it eventually makes its way back to these institutions. This cycle reflects both Solomon’s constant wandering and reentry into hospitals, as well as Ginsberg’s own constant thoughts of mental illness. Ginsberg’s constant conjuring of the image of a mental ward reflects his own obsessive anxiety over mental illness.

Ginsberg becomes more explicit through his mentioning Pilgrim State, where both Solomon and Naomi received treatment. Then Naomi and Solomon are hailed into the poem:

with mother finally *****, and the last fantastic book flung out of the tenement window, and the last door closed at 4 A.M. and the last telephone slammed at the

¹⁵⁸ *Howl*, 13.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

wall in reply and the last furnished room emptied down to the last piece of mental furniture, a yellow paper rose twisted on a wire hanger in the closet, and even that imaginary, nothing but a hopeful little bit of hallucination - / ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe, and now you're really in the total animal soup of time¹⁶⁰

Ginsberg first addresses his own mother, describing the fits she would throw as a reaction to her schizophrenic hallucinations. Immediately following, Ginsberg's address of Carl Solomon acts as a warning as if to tell Carl that he is vulnerable to the same fate as Naomi. He is stuck in the "animal soup of time," with the potential to leave Allen in the same manner as Naomi. Ginsberg connects Solomon to Naomi again in the second section of *Howl* with, "I'm with you in Rockland where you imitate the shade of my mother."¹⁶¹ Ginsberg is not only comparing Carl and Naomi here, but claiming that Carl is no longer himself at this point, and in that sense is like Naomi as he mimics her mental decay. Solomon's role in *Howl* constructs him as an extension of Ginsberg's mother, and by writing the poem for Solomon Ginsberg expresses a desire to reach out to Carl in a way he never could to his mother.

Howl becomes a way for Ginsberg to minimize the guilt he feels over his mother's illness not only through his attempt to reach out to Solomon, but also as a process of announcing his perceived transgression. Newman claims broadcasting of one's sins is a means of achieving *teshuva* stating, "the antidote to shame is disclosure."¹⁶² The act of confession, he asserts, "enables us to quit compartmentalizing ourselves in 'public' and 'private,' upstanding moral citizen' and 'moral failure'," and in that the breakdown of these concepts enables one to

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁶² Newman, 89.

overcome their guilt.¹⁶³ *Howl* functions as an announcement, not only through the literal “howl” it embodies, but also through Ginsberg’s confession of his anxiety over mental illness and the subsequent guilt he feels over his mother’s deterioration. The repetition of “I’m with you in Rockland,” in the third part of *Howl* emphasizes his desire to make this guilt known to the reader.¹⁶⁴ Ginsberg announces what he feels to be a transgression, and his announcement alleviates some pent up guilt. *Howl* thus becomes a vehicle for Ginsberg to come closer to achieving atonement for what he feels to be a transgression against his mother.

The break between public and private atonement also fosters connectivity between the speaker and the audience. Newman continues, “this kind of announcement is both liberating and cathartic, as well as connecting. Because anyone listening will surely discover that she, too, shares these flaws, or others no less serious.” The method of announcing one’s own transgression and guilt thus creates a common tie between the broadcaster and the audience. The audience can use this announcement to motivate their own steps toward atonement. When Ginsberg uses *Howl* to draw attention to his own anxieties over his mother’s mental illness with his constant allusion to mental wards and the comparisons drawn between Solomon and Naomi, he makes his desire for atonement evident to the reader even as he shows that America breaks people’s spirits to the point of insanity. As Ginsberg transitioned into a public figure during the early 1960s, *Howl*’s increasing popularity transformed the poem from a private act towards atonement into a public one. Audiences then have the opportunity to use *Howl* as their own form of confession, not of the same issue as Ginsberg, but over whatever festering problem one deems relevant to profess.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁶⁴ *Howl*, 24-26.

The contemporary liberal imagination readily desires to reconstruct the 1950s as a period of greater racial tolerance and progressive politics than it actually was.¹⁶⁵ The liberal politics of the 1950s – which was often resistant to civil rights - disquiet the contemporary white liberal's conscience for not participating in the civil rights movement, and so the liberal strives to rework this history. World War II and the looming threat of the Cold War scared Americans who feared the onset of another great conflict. As a way of avoiding another war, Americans adopted a “culture of consensus,” which assumed that all social problems could be cured by economic prosperity and fierce anti-Communism. The culture of conformity also broke down distinctions between liberals and conservatives in government, and while politicians of either side would still resist the other, it was mostly a “matter of emphasizing one nuance over the other.” What blanketed the American political atmosphere was a “hybrid liberal conservatism,” where both parties were drawn towards the middle. There were outliers from either party, relative extremists, but to dissociate from the axiom of consensus was to admit ignorance, and “would risk disqualifying the dissenter from being taken seriously, and indeed often from being heard at all.”¹⁶⁶ There was consequently a silencing of any politician interested in social issues that were considered radical or inflammatory for the general public, such as civil rights. By the 1950s, the Left, defined as “any broad, political force holding as principle the need for far reaching social

¹⁶⁵ Allison Graham, *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 80. Graham asserts that film representations of southern racial issues during the 1950s and 1960s tend to “rebuild the [white] character's manhood through a system of punishment and reward: his potency is imperiled when he is racist. But it is rejuvenated when he learns racial tolerance. Through his own moral conversation, he redeems the inherent goodness of the [white] race.” Graham thus claims that these cinematic distortions of race relations create a space where the white viewer can look and imagine that they would have not fallen victim to a racist past. The liberal thus desires to create these narratives where whites are benevolent to black people as a way of reclaiming their pasts.

¹⁶⁶ Godfrey Hodgson, “The Ideology of the Liberal Consensus,” *A History of Our Time: Readings on Postwar America*, ed. William H. Chafe and Harvard Sitkoff (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 76.

and institutional change and consistently upholding the interests of the disadvantaged against more powerful groups,” was virtually obsolete.¹⁶⁷ This is not to say politics was completely subsumed by the conservative party, as liberals were still part of American politics, but they, as opposed to the Left, believed that social issues could be corrected through capitalism. However, the social change needed during the post-war period by marginalized groups was major and required institutional overhaul, which capitalism could not perform. Thus marginalized groups generally lacked a voice in American politics during the 1950s and early 1960s, even through the more liberal parties, because of the development of a culture of consensus.

Leftist politics did not re-gain traction until the proliferations of social movements in the mid 1960s. While there were social movements prior to the mid 1960s, such as Students for a Democratic Society, they had remained small, gaining most of their energy from the civil rights movement, still bound politically by the culture of consensus.¹⁶⁸ The “New Left” is defined broadly as combination of the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, and the student movements, which is said to have broken away from the liberal traditions of the post-war period.¹⁶⁹ The actors of these movements sought radical change and generated their influence through public political protests. By 1965, escalation in the Vietnam War enabled the New Left, led by the civil rights movement, to fracture the liberal consensus and polarize politics.¹⁷⁰ However, the civil rights movement on its own had been active since the mid 1950s, enduring ten years of black mobilization and white violence in the southern states. Even the more liberal administrations, such as Kennedy in the early 60s, that promised more radical policies remained in the middle, and so liberal politics had been lagging far behind the civil rights movement.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁶⁸ Gosse, 12.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

When the liberal conscience looks back on the 1950s through the lens of the 1960s, there is a general desire to atone for turning a blind eye to the needs of the civil rights movement before the mid 1960s. This is not to say that white individuals did not engage with and support the civil rights movement, as many whites participated in the freedom rides and African-American voter registration, but that the American government remained legally unsupportive of the movement until 1964.¹⁷¹ This political distance from the civil rights movement is troubling to the conscience of the contemporary white liberal. To atone for its political transgression, the liberal conscience seeks to claim anything marginal or resistant that could have preceded the break of the New Left. The Beats were an obvious group to turn to, as they had become famous, or infamous, for their rejection of middle class norms. Beat dissent of mainstream culture situates their movement as a seed of the New Left.

Allen Ginsberg's notoriety as both a Beat and an icon for the New Left in the 1960s situates him as a thread between the two movements, and a reliable hero for the New Left. Since *Howl* engages with themes of struggle, particularly African-American themes of struggle, the poem can be claimed as a politically active piece during the 1950s. The poem itself can thus be upheld as a product of the beginnings of the New Left. But the liberal memory can assert further political activity during the culture of conformity by constructing the *Howl* trial as a site of political activity, converging Leftist assumptions of *Howl* and Ginsberg within the memory of the trial. By remembering the trial as a site of political activity, the liberal conscious can work against the general inaction of liberals and their dismissal of Leftist policies. Therefore, the re-

¹⁷¹ Brown v. Board of Education ruled school segregation as illegal and overturned Plessy v. Ferguson in 1954, but it took many years for the effects of the decision to be felt across the country. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the landmark piece of civil rights legislation and prohibits discrimination on grounds of race, ethnicity and gender.

remembering of the *Howl* trial as a moment of origin for New Left activism serves the liberal conscience as both a way of restructuring and rectifying its own past.

Conclusion: Holy the Groaning Saxophone

Contemporary remembrances of the *Howl* trial conflate in collective memory Allen Ginsberg, the poem, and the trial itself. The constructed image of Ginsberg the public figure ultimately eclipses Ginsberg's actions during the *Howl* trial, allowing for the memory of Ginsberg as an always politically engaged figure. Public memory assumes Ginsberg's behavior to be static when looking back at the trial, thus Ginsberg is remembered as the overtly political poet. This memory, however, ignores the confines placed on Ginsberg by 1950s culture and misconstrues the ideologies of the Beat movement, which were never political. The perceived deviance of *Howl*, especially during the time of the trial, magnifies the extent to which we perceive it as a protest poem, and simultaneously an expression of Ginsberg's political frustration. Within the context of the 1950s, culture limited the extent to which the poem or the trial could actually be politically dissenting. Ginsberg never engages with political activism through the poem or in the trial in the same way that critics and representations, such as the *Howl* (film), imagine. But the *Howl* trial becomes a site of political protest because the memory of the trial conflates the notions of Ginsberg as an icon of political activism and *Howl* as a deviant poem of struggle.

However, when Ginsberg, *Howl*, and the trial are broken apart and analyzed separately, this present memory can be understood as a construction of the liberal consciousness. The collective cultural memory is a misremembering. The contemporary viewer is looking constantly back at the trial through the lens of the 1960s, which shades how the trial is understood based on

Ginsberg's transition into a politically active icon in the decade after the trial. This shading obscures the details surrounding the trial, and these details are never reoriented in the memory even though they are available and evident. The collective liberal memory prefers to leave them out, to maintain the construction of the trial as an origin of political protest in an unyielding decade for activism and dissent. Assumed political activity is instead cemented as truth within the memory, and the liberal can look back at the point as an origin site of political activism to reclaim its apathetic past during the 1950s. The memory of the *Howl* trial is maintained because it allows for the liberal memory to reclaim the 1950s as a moment when liberals were involved with the movements of the New Left, especially civil rights.

Though the memory allows liberals to look on the 1950s and atone for past institutional racism, it simultaneously ignores the presence of black culture. Ginsberg, the Beats, and *Howl* all clung to African-American culture as an avenue for subverting the white mainstream cultures they so despised. *Howl* lends itself to being read as a protest poem because it is imbued with themes of struggle, a defining theme in literature from the African-American literary canon. But Ginsberg, nor the critics of *Howl*, take note of this appropriation in a way that is respectful to black readers, in the sense that the racial divide is ignored. When one thinks about *Howl* and how it functions as a protest poem, one never thinks immediately of its appropriation of black culture. Instead, critics remember its association with the humanist poets prior to Ginsberg and contemporary remembrances assume the protest elements are derived from its obscene language and subsequent trial. The trial as a site of protest then also imbues the poem with an air of political activism and eclipses the African-American themes of struggle entrenched in the poem. Thus the memory of the *Howl* trial as a point of political activism for the poem simultaneously obscures any mention of civil rights in relation to the poem.

Ginsberg's use of the African American and Black canons establishes the poem as a politically dissenting piece, whether Ginsberg intended it to be or not. The re-remembering of the *Howl* trial as Ginsberg's first act of political activism results from the conflation of Ginsberg and *Howl* as subjects of protest. However, Ginsberg cannot be interpreted as a subject of protest because of his lack of involvement in the *Howl* trial within the confines of 1950s cultural censorship. Ginsberg only becomes a participant in social protest in the 1960s when various social movements provided opportunity for open political activism. In the context of the 1950s, Ginsberg instead uses *Howl* to take a stance without the active political engagement that the re-remembering of the *Howl* trial assumes. The association of Ginsberg and political activism through such conflation distracts from the appropriation of African American themes that allow *Howl* to be interpreted as a work of protest. The way in which the *Howl* trial is remembered is problematic because remembering Ginsberg as the activist poet requires forgetting the black figure's influence.

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