THE POET AS ACTIVIST: SPACES OF PROTEST IN ALLEN GINSBERG'S POETRY

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Abstract: *Starting with the 1950s, American cities have undergone impactful waves of change. Certain places may facilitate activism more than others, as well as the production of subcultures and countercultures. Such events helped at building cultural layers that led toward the achievement of a more tolerant, equal and inclusive society. Whether the Beat Generation can be labeled as an activist group has been debated by literary critics, newspapers and institutions. Their prose and poetry broke the silence of an authoritative era and inspired generations of youth to militate against social discrimination. The current article demonstrates that Allen Ginsberg's poetry depicts some of the challenges that the youth of the post-war America encompassed. His poetry, lifestyle and involvement in social demonstrations can regard him as not only a poet but an activist as well. The city he describes becomes iconic for the American culture, by offering an underground perspective on people's experience in the urban space.*

Keywords: *space; place; the Beat Generation; Allen Ginsberg; activism; geocriticism; poetry; city*

Beat poetry emphasizes the pressure of the 1950s urban society on the individual, and the way in which living in a certain place has great influence on one's personal development: "What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?" (Ginsberg, "Howl" 139). Allen Ginsberg's poetry serves as a Beat anthem against capitalism and social oppression. The 1950s mark a sensitive era of tension in America, through the threats generated by McCarthyism, hazardous shock treatments to patients and a constant sense of after-war trauma and social and racial conflicts. Ginsberg's "sphinx of cement and aluminum" ("Howl" 139) can refer to the dullness of the post-war era and an increased interest in size and quantity over quality and aesthetics. It can also refer to people's loss of faith in art, traditions and the joy of experience. He also emphasizes that the sphinx "ate up their brains and imagination" ("Howl" 139), portraying a society which is governed by rules and routines and not by instinct and judgement.

By painting this image for his readers, Ginsberg presents "Howl" also as a historical documentation of the realities of the 1950s in America. Moreover, it depicts the atmosphere of big cities at the time, especially of New York and San Francisco, where the Beatniks used to meet, write and perform together. Allen Ginsberg's work reveals some challenges that the Beat generation poets faced in the big cities of the post-war era: being recognized as a poet in a capitalist world and creating a community in which people are comfortable to be themselves despite the

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restrictive and authoritarian society of the time. These challenges are portrayed in his work through places and cartographies of protest.

Space and place are often used interchangeably for one to indicate geographical locations or different perceptions of certain points located in the world. Robert T. Tally argues in *Spatiality* (2012) that "Space could now be measured, divided, quantified, bought and sold, and above all controlled by a particular individual who, in theory, could be the sovereign ruler of all he surveyed" (18). This affirmation emphasizes the role humans have in the process of transforming space into place, once experience is created in a certain location. Yi-Fu Tuan mentions in his work *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977), that while space exists, it is the creation of places within spaces that conveys that location's essence: "Place is a type of object. Places and objects define space, giving it a geometric personality" (17). In the same way that architects and designers manage to build a story out of a space and to create meaning based on the way a city looks like, in literature, writers create imagined-places through the choice of words in the description of the action. The story thus, can be seen as a space defined by the places drawn by the writer. As street dwellers may reinterpret and redefine the meaning of the places created by architects, the reader of a book may develop through the prism of their understanding, new reconfigurations of the story. Robert Tally explains that the difference between "literary cartography," which refers to the map-maker and this person's perspective of the original view of a certain place, and "literary geography," which is concerned with the map-reader, who recreates the perception of the original place, lies firstly, in the way the writer emphasizes a place and secondly, on the knowledge and background of the reader, based on which, the initial information is filtered (Tally 45).

In his chapter, "Creativity and Place," Michael Dear discusses the difference between "creativity in place", which "refers to the role that a particular location, or time-space conjunction, has in facilitating the creative process" and creativity "of place," which "refers to the ways in which space itself is an artifact in the creative practice or output" (Dear 9). In this respect, one can offer special attention to space, either as the trigger of creativity or as creativity itself. As Dear notes, "the simplest creative acts are fraught with geographies that instruct the spectator how to see, but also hide things from us" (9). Thus, the writer uses these creative acts in order to convey an image of the place as they wish to present it in their writing by adding or removing certain details. Creative places can thus refer to these "geographies" that are stylistically and strategically used to convey a built environment through the writer's own urban imagery in a unique artistic piece. The author may use "creativity in place" to produce "creativity of place" in order to obtain space as a real and imagined output through the writing process. The environment in which people live can have a considerable impact on the way they turn out. Physical and geographical elements are significant factors in building a nation's cultural identity. In this respect, places could be considered agents that have the power to transform their inhabitants in order for them to adapt and suit the conditions of the place. Space is also an important shaper of society and societal roles, according to Couldry:

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> If I ask "in what conditions did a self (like me or you) emerge?", then this is a question about society and culture. It requires a critical perspective on the cultural field, because we have to ask about the forms of experience and identity which were socially available (gender roles, expectations about sexuality, class differentiation, and so on), and their impact on the fundamental question of: 'who speaks for whom, why, how, and when?' (Couldry 122)

Such values and norms are rooted in the urban culture of a place, in the case of cities, and it is because of these unwritten rules that individual identity is formed in a certain way or another. The collective culture will always influence the emergence of the individual in the community, who might follow the mainstream or may facilitate the formation of a counterculture. Culture tends to be separated, usually by the economic status of various groups: "the working class lives in an enclave separated from the rest of the social formation and is therefore able to make up for itself its 'own' culture" (Easthope 70). The norms created by higher social classes have made it difficult for lower social classes to rise up to them. Such obstacles have caused a different turn in the production of culture, as the working class has created its own, with values and norms that can be followed by the lower classes and which meets their economic status.

Mark Twain emphasizes this idea by saying that "In Boston they ask, how much does he know? In New York, How much is he worth? In Philadelphia, Who were his parents?" (Twain, qtd. in Rybczynski 88). Thus, each place is characterized by a certain atmosphere and by a certain mindset. In Mark Twain's example, it is understood that the main characteristic of the city of Boston is the fact that it is known for being an academic center, and therefore its people are interested in education. New York has been the city of industry and economics and, thus, New Yorkers show interest in social status and wealth. People in Philadelphia are interested in one's past and family ties, since the city is known for its historical background. In the same way as cities shape people's way of thinking and interacting with one another, people may change the city in terms of cultural organization:

> The same revolutionary, countercultural age was accommodating other distinct forms of activism: the nonviolent Civil Rights movement of the African Americans, the Students for a Democratic Society, and, as the Vietnam War was becoming increasingly unpopular in the late 1960s, a strong anti-war movement. This is the context in which a more left-wing movement rose to prominence: Women's Liberation. (Vlad 238)

All these movements followed one another starting with mid-20th century and each one helped with the building of another cultural layer towards the achievement of a more tolerant, equal and inclusive society.

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The Beat Generation represents one of the first youth movements in the USA and can be considered the pioneers of activism against the 1950s' authoritarian political system. Their status as activists, along with the intentions of their work, has been debated by literary critics. In his *On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest*, Stephen Prothero points out how the Beats created a counterculture against the mainstream society:

> *Life* claimed they were at war with everything sacred in Eisenhower's America – "Mom, Dad, Politics, Marriage, the Savings Bank, Organized Religion, Literary Elegance, Law, the Ivy League Suit and Higher Education, to say nothing of the Automatic Dishwasher, the Cellophane-wrapped Soda Cracker, the Split-Level House and the clean, or peace-provoking H-bomb." (Prothero 206)

The writings of the Beat Generation, as well as their lifestyle and personal values went against the principles followed by Americans in the 1950s. Their quest to deconstruct these values of the mid-twentieth century led to the reorganization of the system of beliefs during the following decades. While most literary critics do not directly associate the Beats with the Civil Rights Movement, which was developing during the Beat writers' time, their prose and poetry were attacking the same authoritarian power institutions, which have been oppressing most social minorities. After the release of "The Source" (1999), a documentary about the Beat Generation, *The New York Times* publishes an article in August 1999 about the Beats, titled "FILM; Alienated, Spontaneous, Nonpolitical: Sounds Familiar," which states that there should not be any credit given to the Beats for the civil rights milestones of the 1950s and 1960s: "These activists shared the Beats' rebellious spirit but not their deeply felt preference for personal regeneration over political agitation" (Sterritt 9). David Sterritt, the author of the article, further notes that the Beats' scope was to preach on how people should live their lives without restrictions, rather than to involve themselves in social movements: "The idea was to revolutionize society by revolutionizing thought, not the other way around" (Sterritt 9). The author further states that there may not be a clear-cut similarity between the Beats and future youth movements:

> These generations have lacked the Beats' vast confidence in spiritual wisdom and intuitive creativity. But they have been broadly in tune with the Beats' distrust of top-down organization and conventional notions of propriety, decency and decorum. (Sterritt 9)

The newspaper article implies that the Beats did not necessarily influence the next generations, but they did share similar feelings of disdain in the power institutions.

Another issue of *The New York Times*, from September 1999, written by a different author, comes as a critique against Sterritt's affirmations: "I object to David Sterritt's unwillingness to acknowledge the connections between the Beats and the

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activists of the 60's and 70's" (Herz 4). Michael Herz, the author of the second article, "THE BEAT GENERATION; Rebels With Causes," argues that it is the Beats' influence over the following young generations that led to a more inclusive and freer society: "Movement or not, the Beats helped shatter the silence of the 50's and amplify the rhetoric that followed" (Herz 4). Michael Herz supports the idea of the Beat Generation as a movement and of their work as a protest against the inequalities of the Golden Age America:

> Mr. Sterritt says the Beats were never a movement. But the values they espoused – nonconformity, personal regeneration, spiritual wisdom and intuitive creativity – resurfaced in the hippies who joined us silent ones to end the Vietnam war and to promote the social and environmental activism of the 70's. (Herz 4)

Ginsberg's "Howl" is designed as a hymn of youth culture: "Ginsberg made it seem as though it was cool to be a teen and that teens, not adults, knew what was cool" (Raskin xi). The beats empowered youth by giving them something to believe in, that is a community which is alternative, different from the mainstream thought. In his book, *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's* "Howl" *and the Making of the Beat Generation,* Jonah Raskin further states that "Howl" served as the basis of a new youth identity:

> It bound us together and gave us a sense of identity as members of a new generation that had come of age in the wake of World War II and the atomic bomb, a generation that lived in the shadow of nuclear apocalypse. There was something wonderfully subversive about "Howl", something the poet had hidden in the body of the poem because it was too dangerous to say openly, something we had to uncover and decode. (Raskin xi)

"Howl" provided the state of mind that the young generation of the 1950s needed in order for them to understand the world they lived in and the eventful years that they have witnessed. The poem becomes iconic for this period, mostly because it manages to express the past, the present and the future in a way that resonated with the youth and thus it became emblematic for the philosophy of the Beats which supported the idea that people need to be accepted, to receive approval and to express themselves freely and unrestrained by norms or authoritative powers.

The poem is iconic for the post-war era by mirroring its social, economic and psychological dimensions through form and meaning. Ginsberg makes associations between the bombing of World War II and the beginning of postmodernity by using the atomic bomb symbolically in his work:

> 'Nineteen forty-eight was the crucial postwar year,' Ginsberg explained. 'It was the turning point. Of course the atom bomb had already gone off in 1945, and Kerouac and Burroughs and I had talked about it, but the psychological

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> fallout from the bomb—the consciousness—didn't really hit until 1948. There was the splitting of the atom, and the splitting of the old structures in society and also a sense of the inner world splitting up and coming apart.' Like many other writers around the world, Ginsberg turned the atom bomb into an all-inclusive metaphor. Everywhere he looked he saw apocalypse and atomization. (Raskin xv)

The confusion and distress caused by the war had a powerful impact on people. The fact that the bomb split the world apart and destroyed old structures of power is a reality that the poet included in his work and used the "splitting" and the "atom" as postmodernist motifs in order to portray the status of the society of the time. The image of an apocalyptic world, "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked" (134) is iconic for the post-war period. Through his first line, Ginsberg makes an allusion to all those artists, poets and activists that faced barriers and did not manage to reach freedom and recognition in the mainstream society. The poem continues, affirming that they were "dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix" (134) which gives the reader an insight about the segregation that was the reality of the 1950s and may hint to the hostile condition of the African American neighborhoods.

Ginsberg's poetry did serve as a manifest against the mid-century America, opposing the Vietnam War among other causes, such as consumerism, racism, discrimination and pollution. Philip Metres points out that poetry is not only an instrument of protest through the process of reading books, but also can serve as "material signage" (108) at demonstrations:

> Take Ginsberg's poem-placard, which he composed for his first demonstration in 1963, outside a speech by Madame Nhu:
>
> Name hypnosis and fear is
> Enemy!–Satan go home!
> I accept America and Red China
> To the human race.
> Madame
> Nhu and Mao-Tse Tung
> Are in the same boat of meat. (qtd. in Metres 108)

Ginsberg's message opposes the Vietnam War and Madame Nhu's spiteful attitude toward spirituality and freedom. However, he continues with a message of peace and unity, calling a truce for humanity. Ginsberg's messages of protest have been attacked by the authoritative society and power institutions, in an attempt to ban his work. The "obscenity" of "Howl" was dismissed by Judge Clayton W. Horn, who insisted that it is a matter of one's right to express freely and live an authentic life:

> Life is not encased in one formula whereby everyone acts the same or conforms to a particular pattern. No two persons think alike. We are all made

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> from the same mould, but in different patterns. Would there be any freedom of press or speech if one must reduce his vocabulary to vapid innocuous euphemism? An author should be real in treating his subject and be allowed to express his thoughts and ideas in his words. (qtd. in Cargas 66)

The importance of poetry, among other artistic ways of expression, which breaks the lines of conformity, lies in its impact on adapting social rules to current times. The uncensored version of the text offers an authentic image of the Golden Age America. Such aspects of the American city included drug abuse, which some theorists labeled as youth delinquency and others described as a consequence of the war and a constant state of change in America at the time. "Howl" portrays this from the beginning of the poem: "angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection" (134), emphasizing the spiritual use of drugs but also its social and habitual aspect. Further on, "hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz" (134) reflects the fact that drugs were a way to escape reality by trying to have a spiritual experience through their effects or by using them as a leisure activity. Moreover, the mentioning of "jazz" music hints at the Beats as a group, as it was their chosen genre of music and it had an important role in the form and rhythm of Beat poetry. The word "who" is being repeated, starting with the fourth line, which alludes to biblical writings and controls the breaths of the reader.

The poem begins by contouring both the culture of New York and the cartography of the city, mentioning the "El," abbreviation for Elevated railway of the New York subway, "Paradise Alley" from New York, where many writers and artists lived, the "roaring winter dusks of Brooklyn," the "subways for the endless ride from Battery to holy Bronx on benzedrine," "the Zoo," the "Bickford's" food chain and the walks "from park to pad to bar to Bellevue to museum to the Brooklyn Bridge, the "windowsills off Empire State," the "Synagogue" (134-135). "Howl" offers the reader an iconic image of New York in the 1950s from the perspective of the Beats', which may hide opposing perspectives, influencing the reader to sympathize with the point of view induced by the poem. New York serves as a space of inspiration for Ginsberg and as the environment of the artistic process: "who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes on the windows of the skull" (Ginsberg 134). New York is where he creates, but also where he faces obstacles and rejection. Moreover, it is the events happening in the city that trigger the creative process: "yacketayakking screaming vomiting whispering facts and memories and anecdotes and eyeball kicks and shocks of hospitals and jails and wars" (Ginsberg 135). While the city is the context in which everything happens and both sorrowful and happy memories influence the poet into writing, New York also becomes an artifact in "Howl." Ginsberg transforms New York both into a creative product and a state of mind: "who coughed on the sixth floor of Harlem crowned with flame under the tubercular sky surrounded by orange crates of theology" (Ginsberg 137). The city became the Beats' lifestyle and thus an artistic concept in itself, consuming drugs and alcohol, getting involved in intimate relations, writing

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and fighting for their cause: "who howled on their knees in the subway and were dragged off the roof waving genitals and manuscripts" (Ginsberg 136). It is New York's social rules and environment that determine the events in the city. Just like a piece of art, the city triggers emotion and reaction from the poem's first-person poetic voice, just as it triggers reactions from the readers that experience the literary geography of the poem, influenced by the writer's literary cartography.

The poem builds New York as both a source of inspiration and as an artifact, by presenting the city as a "creative place" (Dear 9). While the writer is the map-maker, carefully designing the "literary cartography" of the place, the "literary geography" (Tally 45) is concerned with the map-reader, and thus it is up to the map-maker to decide how to convey these "creative places" and what details to add or remove, in order to influence the literary geography of the place. In the case of Howl, Ginsberg writes about politics, sex, drugs, alcohol, travel and people from a perspective that was far from being accepted at the time of its publication: "Ginsberg's city is a modern inferno, a place where, the more the people try to escape, the deeper they go into suffering and despair" (Ciugureanu 174). The city presented in "Howl" depicts an image of urban decay. Ginsberg also describes San Francisco through "creative places" (Dear 9), one of which is the island prison in San Francisco Bay: "who sang sweet blues to Alcatraz" (138), emphasizing the fact that speaking out your mind at that time was as much of a crime as those committed by the prisoners that were kept in Alcatraz.

While the first part of the poem portrays the tragic fate of "the great minds" in the city, the second part reveals the cause of their fate, which is the American society, named in the poem "Moloch," originally a mythological god. However, in "Howl" it stands for the "sphinx of cement and aluminum" that "bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination" (139). The third part is an homage to a tragic hero, Ginsberg's friend, Carl Solomon. In contrast, *Footnote to Howl*, which serves as the fourth part of the poem, talks about salvation and hope and portrays the Beats as the saviors of the society. "Howl" draws the details of the maps of cities, especially of New York, and creates an image of the mid-century big city, from the perspective of the built environment, by describing the streets, the cafés, the subway and certain buildings and neighborhoods that the beats used to habituate.

By leading the reader through his journey in the city, the poetic voice also builds a "soft city" (Dear 6), in which it is his personal experiences in these places that describe the actual city space. This spatial dimension is constructed by the following choice of words: "desolate Fugazzi's," "drank turpentine in Paradise Alley, death, or purgatoried their torsos night after night," "who chained themselves to subways for the endless ride from Battery to holy Bronx on Benzedrine," "the drear light of Zoo," "jumping down the stoops off fire escapes off windowsills off Empire State," "meat for the Synagogue cast on the pavement", "woke on a sudden Manhattan, and picked themselves up out of basements hung-over with heartless Tokay and horrors of Third Avenue iron dreams & stumbled to unemployment offices", "unknown and forgotten into the ghostly daze of Chinatown" (125-128).

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The city portrayed by Ginsberg is represented through hostility and struggle and it emphasizes one's continuous quest for a sense of belonging.

Representations of New York are also depicted by Ginsberg in his poem, "Waking in New York," which offers the reader a detailed cartographic presentation of the city:

> And here I am on the sixth floor cold
> March 5th Street old building plaster
> apartments in ruin. (Ginsberg 347)

The Beats' sense of self-revulsion is emphasized in their writings, and thus offers the reader a taste of the Beat lifestyle. Self-isolation from the mainstream standards and ideas of decent and happy life is a current motif in the writings of the Beat Generation. Staying in "ruin" apartments and living a life that is driven more by instincts and spontaneous creative urges was their way of protesting against those societal norms and principles. The Beats' style of writing is influenced by the realities of postmodernity. Such events, involving war and oppression, can compel people to react against the norms, through creative means. Most of Ginsberg's poetry involves a cathartic kind of experience on behalf of the poet: "the metaphoric killing off of the poet's white, male, heteronormative 'self'—promised much-needed creative and psychological space" (Svonkin 170). Ginsberg's poetry can be viewed as a twofold experience, one that conveys the time-space of the after-war era, by thoroughly depicting the atrocities created by an authoritarian system, and another one that looks at Ginsberg's own world and his separation from the mainstream society. The Beats' self-isolation may also be connected to the racial tensions of the time:

> The white male poet whose 'white guilt' made it necessary for him to look elsewhere for spirituality and identity in order to escape the Puritanism, uniculturalism, and stifling claustrophobia of the bourgeois, capitalist, patriarchal America of the 1950s. (Svonkin 171)

While the majority of the Beat group was represented by white, male individuals, the philosophy behind the group was mainly based on African and Asian beliefs and traditions. Their self-exclusion from the city's mainstream life, granted them the status of outcasts. The poem "Waking in New York" portrays the way the city was, from the perspective of a social underdog:

> To my fellows in this shape that building
> Brooklyn Bridge or Albany name—
> Salute to the self-gods on
> Pennsylvania Avenue! (Ginsberg 347)

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Spiritual and mythological apparitions are common in Ginsberg's work, especially as a way to portray the tragic fate of the Beat poets. While they do receive god-like descriptions, the reader understands that their powers are only recognized among their own circle and are invoked only through their own poetry:

> Empire State dotted with tiny windows
> lit, across the blocks
> of spire, steeple, golden topped utility
> building roofs—far like
> pyramids lit in jagged
> desert rocks—
> The giant the giant city awake (Ginsberg 347)

The beats project images of themselves as the gods and pharaohs of their own city-universe where New York is the ruin of an empire. They are the outsiders that contemplate the story of a great city long gone, as they see it: "the created place, in which to make a life — a *liberty* — the hollow, fetishized, and starry place, a bit gossamer with dream, a vortex of evaporations, oh little dream, invisible city, invisible hill" (Graham quoted in Quinn 206). The city Ginsberg recreates in his poems represents a metaphorical space that unravels the Beat universe. The creative places in their work serve as monuments of their protest against the strict society, and for a manifest for freedom:

> Bridges curtained by uplit apartment walls,
> one small tower with a light
> on its shoulder below the "moody, water-loving giants" (Ginsberg 348)

The skyscrapers are represented, as "water-loving-giants," which depict the free, creative and soothing side of the city. This side is portrayed by the imagined space of Ginsberg's poem, rather than his descriptions of the built environment. The poem continues with a map-like description of the main sites in the city:

> The giant stacks burn thick gray
> smoke, Chrysler is lit with green,
> down Wall street islands of skyscraper
> black jagged in Sabbath quietness— (Ginsberg 348)

New York is also presented by Ginsberg through the use of adjectives that denominate size and immensity that overwhelm the poetic voice. Words such as "6th floor," "tiny windows," "far," "pyramids," "small tower," "giant stacks," "skyscraper," "quietness" create a cartography of "creative places" that compels the reader to imagine the city through the lens of the writer. The poetic voice observes its immensity and feels overwhelmed by its grandeur, comparing it with legendary empires.

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San Francisco is another American Beat City, as well as the place where most Beat work was published. The laid-back atmosphere of the city was a favorable factor to the development of the Beat movement. While New York is usually described in Ginsberg's work as a massive agglomeration of buildings, lights and people, "Frisco," as the poet usually calls San Francisco, is presented mostly through images of nature, hills and water:

> The oily water on the river mirrored the red sky, sun sank on top of final Frisco peaks, no fish in that stream, no hermit in those mounts, just ourselves rheumy-eyed and hung-over like old bums on the river-bank, tired and wily. (Ginsberg, "Sunflower Sutra" 146)

Even though such elements of nature usually express prosperity, peace, freedom and fertility, Ginsberg turns these elements into their opposition, which is urban decay and degradation. "The oily water" and the "red sky" are the consequences of pollution and technological development where life ceases to exist. The mountains can no longer host the hermit due to the hostile environment, or people lost appreciation for nature and its beauty. Ginsberg and Kerouac observe the waste land in disappointment, as they feel "tired and wily" (Ginsberg 146).

A closer look to "Frisco" is presented in Ginsberg's "Continuation of a Long Poem of These States"*:*

> Stage-lit streets
> Downtown Frisco whizzing past,
> buildings
> ranked by Freeway balconies
> Bright Johnnie Walker neon
> sign Christmas trees (Ginsberg 383)

The city looks like a stage, and the citizens are the performers. All the events of the city represent "the past," all the experiences of all people in the context of the urban space, characterized by the rationalization of buildings that look like "Freeway balconies." However, Ginsberg notices the development of capitalism in San Francisco as the city is filled with advertisement and commercialized traditions. The theme of the transformation of nature into machineries is portrayed in the poem as well:

> yellow-lamp horizon
> warplants move, tiny
> planes lie in Avionic fields— (Ginsberg 383)

The horizon is made out of lamps in the urban landscape, nature and peace is replaced by human hatred and "warplants," while fields have now another use, which is to

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serve for planes. In the same respect, nature and urbanization are mingled and affect one another:

> Under silver wing
> San Francisco's towers sprouting
> thru thin gas clouds,
> Tamalpais black-breasted above Pacific azure (Ginsberg 383)

Ginsberg compares the towers of San Francisco with "sprouting" towers, alluding that buildings have taken over nature, and it is cement that is alive now, and not nature.

In "Mugging," the reader can map the same vision of New York, a city that seems to trigger both emotional significance and frustration for the poetic voice:

> Tonite I walked out of my red apartment door on East tenth street's dusk—
> Walked out of my home ten years, walked out in my honking neighborhood
> Tonite at seven walked out past garbage cans chained to concrete anchors
> Walked under black painted fire escapes, giant castiron plate covering a hole in ground
> —Crossed the street, traffic lite red, thirteen bus roaring by liquor store,
> past corner pharmacy iron grated, past Coca Cola & Mylai posters fading scraped on brick
> Past Chinese Laundry wood door'd, & broken cement stoop steps For Rent hall painted green & purple Puerto Rican style
> Along E. 10th's glass splattered pavement, kid blacks & Spanish oiled hair adolescents' crowded house fronts—
> Ah, tonite I walked out on my block NY City under humid summer sky Halloween (Ginsberg 633)

It seems that "walking out 10 years" into a "honking neighborhood" became a routine and the fact that the voice notices the noise, after all this time, may mean that it is still bothering. The phrase, "garbage cans" shows again a city of pollution and offers the reader another perspective of New York, the empire city. This underground picture of the urban space is emphasized especially through description of things and moments that are not usually taken into consideration by either passers-by or poets. Ginsberg is the underground "flâneur" who notices the imperfections of the city and offers them poetic meaning. The poem serves as a memorandum that records each step the poet takes. It almost feels as if the reader accompanies the poet on his walk or as if they see through his eyes. The "Coca Cola & Mylai posters" (633) remind the readers that the city has a strong capitalist culture, characterized by consumerism. The Beat philosophy usually disagrees with capitalism, as expressed by their literary work, and they regard corporative industries as detrimental to humanity by affecting people's creativity, identity and autonomy. Ginsberg's neighborhood is a multicultural one, one that is "Past Chinese Laundry," "Puerto Rican style" where

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"kid blacks & Spanish oiled hair adolescents" live (633). These show that Ginsberg did live in lower-class communities, as New York's richer neighborhoods were not as accessible to minorities. The poem was published in 1974, a few years after the official end of segregation in America. However, even with the Fourteenth amendment issued against racial segregation, racial tensions still existed in America and especially in New York communities. The fact that Ginsberg lived in multi-ethnic communities portrayed the Beat Generation's openness towards people irrespective of race, gender or class. The Beats resonated with the minorities' struggle for equality and social recognition. Ginsberg's neighborhood is a creative space as well, built from the use of "concrete anchors," "black painted fire escapes, giant cast iron plate," "scraped on brick," "broken cement stoop steps," "glass splattered pavement," and "humid summer sky Halloween" (633). The place that readers see is one of rigidness that does not express class or wealth. It is a degraded space, where things are scraped, splattered and broken. The only things still standing are structures made out of indestructible materials such as concrete and iron. This may reflect the society of the time, which still stands on the old structures, even though some parts of it became fragmented. Ginsberg's world is made out of pieces as well and he depicts them in his poem through the creative spaces he builds. Weather is often mentioned in Ginsberg's poems of New York, and it usually reflects rain and clouds that may hint at the poet's state of mind. While the use of the word "summer" can signify the comfort the poet feels in the city, the humid sky on Halloween (Ginsberg 633) may hint to darker feelings that he experiences. "Mugging" is a poem that describes an unfortunate event that Ginsberg faces in his own neighborhood, being mugged while citizens and police refuse to help. As Philip Lopate explains:

> The poet Allen Ginsberg (1926-97) lived most of his adult life in the Lower East Side tenement area he describes here. For Ginsberg, a practicing Buddhist, close observation of the present amounted to a spiritual discipline. In 'Mugging,' he draws on Whitman's long lines and his own deep-breathing practice to come to terms with an all-too-common experience of 1970's New York. (Lopate 926)

Ginsberg's reaction is to control his feelings through Buddhist practices, even in moments of fear and despair. He keeps chanting "Om Ah Hu?" (Ginsberg 589) through the whole event, as a way to overcome his feelings. However, the poem also emphasizes the darker side of New York, where people get mugged in their own neighborhoods and the fact that his fellow citizens do not react to what is happening to him shows that crime became a usual practice in the city.

Allen Ginsberg draws the picture of the mid-twentieth-century American city through his choice of places and descriptions. His poetry can be seen as a protest against the system and social norms. Underground subcultures, starting with the Beat Generation, have isolated themselves from the mainstream, as a manifestation against imposed values. The Beats can be considered the pioneers of the

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counterculture of the 1950s and 1960s, as their poetry becomes the instrument of their activism towards social improvement and change. Ginsberg becomes a "poet as activist," not only through the topics his writing tackles, such as environmental awareness, economic, social and cultural inequity and abuses of power in politics but also through the life he lives and immortalizes in his poetry. By living against the mainstream social roles and rules and by permanently seeking the meaning of things through travel, spirituality and learning, he devotes himself to a cause that aims at making the world around him a better place.

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