AMERICA SINGING LOUD: SHIFTING REPRESENTATIONS OF AMERICAN NATIONAL IDENTITY IN ALLEN GINSBERG AND WALT WHITMAN

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ABSTRACT

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Much work has been done to study the writings of Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg. Existing scholarship on these two poets aligns them in various ways (radicalism, form, prophecy, etc.), but most extensively through their homosexuality. While a vast majority of the scholarship produced on these writers falls under queer theory, none acknowledges their connection through the theme of my research—American identity. Ideas of Americanism, its representation, and what it means to be an American are issues that span both Whitman and Ginsberg's work. The way these issues are addressed and reconciled by Ginsberg is vastly different from how Whitman interacts with the subject: a significant departure due to the nature of their relationship. Ginsberg has cited Whitman as an influence on his work, and other scholars have commented on the appearance of this influence. The clear evidence of connection makes their different handling of similar subject matter a doorway into deeper analysis of the interworking of these two iconic American writers.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Walt Whitman, since his lifetime, has been heralded as the great American poet. Galway Kinnell describes him as “the great national poet” and Allen Ginsberg notes that he “got Whitman very early as a kind of patriotic poet” (Walt). These versions of Whitman are well disseminated. His welcoming words, his image as a white-haired fatherly man, and his presence during the American Civil War fix him as a touch-point in not only American writing but also history. Whitman largely influences the way American people can identify by inhabiting the many ways in which they do identify: beautiful, natural, sexual, industrious, connected. These are the parts of America and the American that Whitman recognizes and affirms. Whitman, throughout his life, called out to poets and men to pick up his cause and march words of affirmation of gritty reality forward. His most famous work, Leaves of Grass, is a collection that embodies his vision and voice; it sings of American idealism, touts the necessity of unity, and consecrates all functions of the body. His nationalism and sense of democracy in his writing are hopeful and clear. Whitman openly walked hand-in-hand with his love of country while at the same time suggesting resistance in the name of such love. Ginsberg, who admittedly admired
Whitman for his work and life, is known for a national relationship quite different from Whitman’s. In his most well-known poem, “Howl,” Ginsberg attacks the façade he sees as his country, and roughly critiques its citizens and their actions with manic passion. Despite Whitman’s influence, there appear to be no wide-stretched arms of hope in Ginsberg’s America. Due to this division, the disparate ways in which country and self are represented in the works of these authors signal a need for analysis. Though Ginsberg is commonly cited as a radical anti-American poet and anti-poetic poet by contemporaries such as Norman Podhoretz and Norman Mailer, through examining his connection with Whitman’s work it is clear that Ginsberg’s feelings about his country were complicated. His intention in writing about America was not only to answer the call put forth by Whitman nearly 100 years prior to inhabit his place as the new prophetic poet, responsible for, and indebted to, his love of country, but also to explore the vast scope of his experience with America—laid bare for all to see.

Of all the poets that post-date Whitman it is a strange comparison to set his weathered, friendly works alongside those of Allen Ginsberg, a radical, openly gay, and (to use Podhoretz’s phrase) “know-nothing bohemian” (201). The comparison between these two poets, however, is not entirely new. As both of these men were homosexual, and wrote poems that reflected their sexuality, writing about their sexuality has been a natural mode of comparison. The bulk of scholarship that discusses these two poets is housed in queer theory. Often cited by modern readers as the clearest confession of his homosexuality, the “Calamus” poems were a collection of works in which “Whitman developed a language and the rudiments of a
psychology by which homosexuals could be brought to self-awareness and by which same-sex friendship could form the basis for political action” (Killingsworth 97).

These poems were often not regarded as overtly homosexual during Whitman’s time. The sexual identity within them seemed common to the Victorian era, nothing more than an expressive brotherly friendship, but over time has come to be more telling of Whitman’s sexual orientation (96). Richard Tayson draws the queer line between the manly love poems of both Whitman and Ginsberg. He notes that Ginsberg uses a line from Whitman’s first “Calamus” poem as the epigraph for his collected poems, in which was printed Ginsberg’s poem “Many Loves,” a description of his first sexual encounter with friend Neal Cassady (Tayson 25). Tayson continues to quote Ginsberg’s poem and ends with this statement:

In its explicitness, “Many Loves” continues where Whitman left off with his suggestive "that night I was happy" and also hints at the despair Whitman expressed, since the union Ginsberg appeared to have had with Cassady occurred once or twice only, leaving him despondent and lonely during the ensuing nights "without a friend, a lover, near." (25-6)

Tayson is correct in his comparisons of these writers; Ginsberg used Whitman as a template over which he was able to map his own experience and frustration of manly love. Nick Selby, along with many other scholars, also explores the value of this homosexual thread. He begins by affirming the attention paid to this specific area of research, “It has become a critical commonplace to view the two American poets Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg as gay poets whose works demonstrate and
develop a gay poetic” (120). Selby seeks not to connect these poets through their homosexuality but instead to remove their label as exclusively gay poets and place them in the world of bisexual poetics. Tayson and Selby are but two voices in the research that connects Whitman and Ginsberg within queer theory. It is clear then, in light of these examples, that there is a connection between these writers couched in sexuality. This paper seeks to expand the connection between these men and to move the discussion of their relationship outside of gay or bisexual poetics into other realms of comparison—specifically their dealings with issues of American identity and radical literary politics—and will conclude with a clear vision of how the American temperament has progressed, survived, and altered through these two writers. This research will explore the key thematic problem of American national identity that manifests throughout both these writers’ careers and will reconcile the seemingly separate representations of America portrayed in their published works.
Whitman pre-dated Ginsberg by nearly 100 years. *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman’s iconic piece, was published first in 1855 just six years before the American Civil War would begin. Ginsberg first read “Howl” at the Six Gallery in San Francisco in 1956 (almost exactly a century after Whitman published the first edition of *Leaves*) and published “Howl” and *Other Poems* in 1956, which launched his career into the public spotlight. Collective American identity was precarious, at best, during both of these poets’ lives. Whitman found himself always in the heart of this problem, “For more than a decade Whitman lived at the center of a great debate over democracy, nationalism, and culture” (Kaplan 100). He conversed often with politicians, and submitted his opinion in speech and writing when he deemed appropriate. Whitman knew well, as a printer and eventual editor of a daily newspaper, the political uncertainty of the country. When he began to write for wide-spread publication, he knew he was speaking to a public that was fraught with pre-war hysteria and post-war destruction. During this time the nation was struggling with “The agitation against slavery in America, the collapse of traditional frontiers and boundaries, the interlinking of the earth through modern inventions such as steamship, locomotive, and electric telegraph” (Erkkila 131).
The horrors of the American Civil War are well documented: families fighting families as the nation divided within its borders. Even before the war years, in the 1840s and 50s, much of the nation’s cities, specifically New York where Whitman resided, were already struggling. Almost half of New York’s population, families and individuals, were packed in to boarding houses unable to be self-sufficient in the pre-apartment era of America (Kaplan 95). The Civil War was simultaneously building steam in America; slavery was constantly at the forefront of political discourse, as was the preservation of the union, all of which created a constantly unbalanced and restless society of people. Eventually these issues would grow to a scale that prompted Americans to push for the war, perhaps not out of volition but out of necessity of resolution. Whitman famously labeled these years of personal and political distress as the “quicksand years” (Erkkila 197) due to his (and no doubt other Americans’) inability to locate meaning in a time of such destruction. This was the reality into which Whitman wrote. Ginsberg was writing into a much different battleground, but a battleground all the same.

The American nineteen-fifties were a time of great upheaval. America was in the early stages of the Cold War, the country was in constant fear of Communism as notions of the Red Scare permeated society. In the midst of it all, the birth of the beatnik movement came out of the crumbling stereotype of the picket-fence suburbia that dominated the American media. Popular television of the time, like “Leave it to Beaver” and “Father Knows Best,” were the pillars of family entertainment. These shows depicted a hyper-normal, white, suburban, and patriarchal image that washed over the country—painting the lives of Americans
with a very broad and foreign alternate reality. This added to (and perhaps in some ways created) the expanding feelings of displacement and isolation that mark this decade. It was a time of great fear and anxiety, which went largely undocumented until Ginsberg. Galway Kinnell explains that, “American poetry didn’t really move forward from Whitman, it didn’t really reappear until Allen Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’” (Walt). That limbo between Whitman and Ginsberg, a deafening silence of the American poetic voice, only added to the atmosphere of uncertainty and silence of the fifties.

Americans today find themselves again in a state of uncertain flux. For the past decade the country has been entrenched in a controversial war (set off by a national tragedy) all the while citizens find themselves in constant emotional and financial crisis as they navigate through what has been coined the “Great Recession”—the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. In each of these moments of history there are voices that rise up to speak the thoughts of a people and record the national struggle. Every country, and arguably every person, must identify in some way as part of a collective whole. Whitman and Ginsberg recognized and signaled this communal understanding of self and are two voices that spoke of a specific American sentiment and gave shape to the thoughts of a nation, or at the very least the thoughts of a specific portion of the nation. This idea of collective identity, and the public naming of it, is not original. The idea of an American as being unique from any other person, say a Frenchman or an Englishman, has been an integral part of the growth and creation of the country.
The language of preference is rampant throughout the “discovery” of America, the. A quick survey of Puritan and Revolutionary era writing speaks directly to this point. In his sermon titled “City upon a Hill,” pastor Jonathan Winthrop employs the manifest destiny ideal. With this speech he assists in structuring the current idea of American exceptionalism. He declares, “for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us; soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us [sic.]” (Winthrop). This phrase, “city upon a hill” became part of American history, appearing in words or in spirit in literature from Winthrop onwards. Cotton Mather frequently referred to the Puritans as God’s chosen people, Hector St. Jean de Crèvecœur wrote in his letter that America was “the most perfect society now existing in the world” (St. Jean de Crèvecoeur), Thomas Paine asserted that “The cause of America is in great measure the cause of all mankind” and Ronald Reagan echoed these sentiments in 1974, during a Conservative Political Action Convention, when he declared, “I have always believed that there was some divine plan that placed this great continent between two oceans to be sought out by those who were possessed of an abiding love of
freedom and a special kind of courage” (Reagan). The idea that America was a different, new nation of promise is also well documented throughout history—most notably by James Truslow Adams’ *The Epic of America*.

In this work, Adams coins the term ‘American dream’ and traces its roots to the colonization of America. To develop America was an arduous process, and finally after many years of death and defeat, the iconic American ideal was recorded with the Declaration of Independence. This document removed publicly the remaining ideas that “political power should rest in the hands of the well-born or the rich, who had knowledge, experience, and a property stake in the community” (Adams 88). This action politically announced to the world that America was to assert the equality of all men “as the creed of the continent” (88). While this action announced the American sentiment, the following years of war would be the birth of a country and in the throes of war America had to disseminate to the people what needed to be the popular sentiment of the country. Adams states, “History and Literature are among the strongest influences to bind the citizens of a nation together” (94). This is proven through the literature produced and performed during and after the Revolutionary war, which served the collective purpose of inculcating Americans with the idea of independence from a tyrannical British monarchy. This public ideology and the pushing forth of the Western border developed and solidified the idea of the American dream in the collective national mindset (119).

The current view of American history and country identity is still shaped by the voices of the past. This shaping did not begin with Whitman, nor did it end with Ginsberg. They are but two voices that are significant to the development of the
collective American identity, and two voices that have affected its course. Donald Weber addresses these origins in his essay *Historicizing the Errand*. He notes that, despite revisionist efforts, American identity is still shaped by a Puritan sensibility (101). Tracing this identity back to the Puritans and tracking its progress is an important task. Being aware of the intellectual origins of America is necessary because, as Weber explains:

> The stakes are high in this struggle for the defining origins of the American temperament: for whoever can follow the reverberations of the American voice from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth and beyond can claim an authorizing vision of the culture, and thus impose a compelling paradigm. (102)

These reverberations continue through 20th century American poetry to present day. Americans are living today in a world of fractured identities. There are new threats, real or imagined, from within and without and, as progress continues, the struggle for personal identity remains constant. By studying these voices of the past it is possible to trace the American psyche. The intensely personal nature of these poets’ writing coupled with their surprising openness and public personas makes their works paradigmatic of the nation of people to whom they were (and are) writing. It was Whitman who wrote the famous lines, “what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” thus erasing any sense of separation in reality or perceived experience. Ginsberg too creates equality (“while you are not safe, I am not safe”) within his writing in order to emphasize the
public nature of experience. This type of communal analysis then, falls directly in line with the beliefs of these poets.

In order to consider critically the American present it is necessary to consider critically the American past. Staughton Lynd, in the preface to his book, *The Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism*, notes that there are two ways to view the American origin story: one is to experience “shame and distrust” at the horrors of the conquering of the new world, the other is to focus on the quest for inalienable rights and the right of revolution (v). Whitman, the all-American, only engages with America through the lens of the latter, whereas Ginsberg, the social and cultural critic, embodies both notions in his work. Lynd writes to prove that the history of America is also a history of radicalism, which would make the writings of these poets subject to analysis through the lens of American radicalism.

Radicalism (specifically American radicalism) according to Lynd, requires the provision of four aspects: (1) a global moral compass, (2) personal freedom unable to be relegated to any person outside of the self, (3) the idea that society should not be concerned with the “protection of property but the fulfillment of the needs of living human beings,” and (4) that a good citizen has the right to rail against any unjust government in place. He asserts that citizens “owe [their] ultimate allegiance, not to this or that nation, but to the whole family of man” (vi). The collectivity of man is one of the key thematic references that translates through Whitman into Ginsberg’s work without ambiguity. This definition of radicalism contextualizes the work that both Whitman and Ginsberg produced to define the American identity. If it is true that both poets’ were radical in their works, then it is
true that these precepts of radicalism would apply to their intentions and outcomes.

This sentiment of radicalism is evident in the poetry and prose of both these men, and through that framework the context of the American identity is constructed.

And, as Lynd notes, radicalism has a rich history, which perhaps could “help in sharpening intellectual tools for the work of tomorrow” (vii).
Whitman’s political writings could be said to have approached publication with the same goal in mind that Lynd identifies in the history of radicalism, to sharpen the intellectual tools for tomorrow and perhaps enact some sort of prescriptive action among his readers. In his essay “Literary Radicals and the Bicentennial—Jefferson to Ginsberg,” professor Michael True uses Lynd’s work on radicalism to draw connections between specific writers and the radical spirit present in their writing. With regards to Whitman, he writes, “It is an effort to create a new culture, at base, that informs the poems of Whitman...What is true...in a literary sense, is more obviously true in a political sense...The line that separates a literary document from a purely political tract is often very thin” (28). Writing about the experience of self in America is very much writing about the political temperature in America; in fact, Ginsberg described Whitman as America’s “national prophet” (qtd. in True 30). Whitman saw his own experience of reality as contingent upon the experience of others, and therefore the connection of himself to every other would make his American experience a public experience. In Whitman’s view, if he was concerned with issues of politics, then other Americans would be also.

Whitman wrote *Democratic Vistas* between 1871 and 1872, during post-Civil
Whitman saw Lincoln as the embodiment of the president America needed during the precarious time and as the leader he had hoped for in his early writings. In his poem “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” his elegy to Lincoln, Whitman openly declares his love for the “western fallen star” (Warner 257). During the war years, Whitman spent time as a nurse for soldiers and wrote much about their sufferings and witnessed many deaths. He spent his time recording the thoughts and observations of the dying men. Civil war hospitals were brutal places and it is noted that the first sight Whitman encountered when he began his service was a pile of amputated limbs. Many people assert that Whitman never fully recovered from the emotional scars of his time in these hospitals and the death of Abraham Lincoln (Walt).

*Democratic Vistas* begins with the statement that America, now in a state of flux and rebuilding (i.e. the Reconstruction and Industrial Revolution), depends upon the future. In Whitman’s view, there is greatness ahead and possibilities for greatness in America, but the success of the future is dependent on the current decisions Americans make in the political arena (395-96). Thus begins his work to place America on a precipice, teetering between two possibilities and uncertain of outcome. *Democratic Vistas* came out of a series of essays in response to Thomas Carlyle’s jeremiad critiquing American democracy (Erkkila 247). Through the process of responding to and working through Carlyle’s claims, Whitman begins to move back and forth between his two literary personas—“the political realist does battle with the visionary poet” (249). Whitman weighs his current experience of democracy against the wake of the Civil War and, as Erkkila notes, finds support for
his thoughts in the writing of Hegel. She writes, “The structure of *Democratic Vistas* is itself Hegelian, working through the oppositions and contradictions toward some higher synthesis” (248). This structure allows him to entertain many different perspectives at once, which has the effect of creating a non-directive or flexible critique of America. Whitman does not deny the problems in America, despite his love of country, and declares that it is to the people who recognize those problems that he is writing (Warner 396). *Vistas* becomes Whitman’s answer to hurdle these problems and come out stronger—he sees hope on the other side. His answer to the problems America faces (primarily Government instability and lack of trust in government, fractioned citizens, and extreme poverty, to name a few) is literature. According to Whitman, “national literature” (399) will become the “justification and reliance” (399) of American democracy. His point is extended throughout the length of the work framed, by the main idea that the history of a nation is told within its national literature and it is that form of history that lives on through time—longer than historical tales or architecture.

Whitman’s thoughts are rarely contained between the pages of his text. He often makes requests of the reader and is known for his conversational style. Whitman’s biographer, Justin Kaplan, notes his style as significantly different from previous American poets. Whitman “set out to write poetry that had no literary antecedents” (*Walt*). F.O. Matthiessen contextualizes Whitman’s style within his interests. Whitman was an avid admirer of Millet’s paintings, all of which dealt with the portrayal of people (notably peasants) exactly “as heroic as they were” (Matthiessen 603). This portrayal of reality that Whitman found in Millet’s work is
what he sought to create in his own (603). It is in this way that Whitman becomes revolutionary, primarily with his style and subsequently with his content. It is not surprising then that he makes the important call to a yet unidentified American poet to rise up and record America and give voice to America for the future. This is the point in the text where Whitman begins to discuss the need for the “IDEA” which would be essentially a collective American identity. The “IDEA,” Whitman posits, is “the true nationality of the States, the genuine union” (Warner 402) of all the people during times of crisis. This “IDEA” is, in his view, the tie that binds together all of the states under one common goal—it is not self-interest or required by law but rather written in the fiber of the American spirit. This is the way Americans experience unity in the view of the good gray bard, through the collective vision of what it means to be an American.

Whitman’s “IDEA” though does not ignore the problems of what he terms the “New World democracy” (404). There are significant flaws in the system as he observes it and contrary to typical representations of Whitman’s feelings for American he does not reserve criticism in favor of praise. Whitman created a space in literature for this sort of dissention, he “was one of the first major writers to chart the potentially downward spiral of American history in the postwar years” (Errkila 251). A particularly troubling flaw Whitman foresees is that this new system of democracy addresses only materialistic problems and does nothing for the social aspects of the people, for the soul of America, or as he has previously identified it, the “IDEA” of America. His language during these descriptions is rough and critical, more reminiscent of a Ginsbergian rant than of a Whitmanian breath. He declares in
an unceremonious manner, devoid of idealistic notions, that “society, in these States, is canker’d, crude, superstitious, and rotten” (Warner 403) and that the New World democracy has “so far, [been] an almost complete failure in its social aspects” (404). Whitman's labeling of society in this way is not an anomaly; his critiques continue throughout most of *Vistas*. Eventually, his voice does switch to his more comfortable and recognizable poetic tone, similar to that of *Leaves of Grass*, and aggressively wonders if there are people and places worthy of the name America and freedom. He begins to list his questions:

> Are there, indeed, *men* here worthy of the name? Are there athletes? Are there perfect women, to match the generous material luxuriance? Is there a pervading atmosphere of beautiful manners? Are there crops of fine youths, and majestic old persons? Are there arts worthy freedom and a rich people? Is there a great moral and religious civilization—the only justification of a great material one? Confess that to severe eyes, using the moral microscope upon humanity, a sort of dry and flat Sahara appears, these cities, crowded with petty grotesques, malformations, phantoms, playing meaningless antics.

(405-406)

Whitman answers his own questions with the thought that America is a shell, or as stated above, a Sahara, but that Americans must embrace the current state and claim it. He believes this can be accomplished through a literature that does not continue to pander to these ideas but opens eyes to reality. By creating a clear new picture of America its citizens can be saved from their own inhumanity. In this way,
Whitman is using his criticisms of America and democracy to function as a change agent in the future, not merely to attack a culture he sees as lacking in very serious capacities.

From the discussion of democratic insufficiencies Whitman begins to engage with the effects of the Civil War. Whitman does not believe that this was a war forced upon the country, but rather that Americans volunteered to fight this war happily and immediately for no other reason than to defend the flag, or rather individual ideas of what the flag (read: country) should represent. Americans “sprang, at the first tap of the drum, to arms—not for gain, nor even glory, nor to repel invasion—but for an emblem, a mere abstraction—for the life, the safety of the flag” (411). To Whitman, democracy is a word that is still being formed and defined. There is an ambiguity that surrounds the word and ideas presented by democracy which Whitman finds unacceptable. In Vistas he writes, “We have frequently printed the word Democracy. Yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps, quite unawaken’d, notwithstanding the resonance and the many angry tempests out of which its syllables have come from pen or tongue” (427). Democracy as it is presently represented is not a sufficient answer for the great America he envisions and he reinforces that America is only in an embryonic stage; there are still miles to go before democracy comes into its own.

Whitman, it is most commonly thought, writes in order to assert the inherent goodness of America and Americans, or as Richard Chase put it in his book Walt Whitman Reconsidered, “we honor Whitman first of all as the supreme poet of American optimism and pragmatism” (7). Democratic Vistas in some ways upsets
that typical vision. Whitman’s prescription for action does, however, come from a place of constructive criticism—he is writing in order to provide a future model of American success. Of the two poets, Whitman and Ginsberg, it is no matter of debate that Whitman is the support of the nation in writing, not Ginsberg. Ginsberg’s writing on the surface, is largely devoid of this sort of reassurance. He instead chooses to name the darker, hidden parts of America he has experienced, and it is because of this experience that he is often considered an anti-American poet, though it is Whitman who is cited as a man that harbored a “lifelong distrust of government” (Chase 153). And while, as Chase notes, “Democratic Vistas is not the great piece of radical social ideology it has sometimes been called. Like most American social thinking, it is conservative, individualistic, and unhistorical” (159) there is the presence of the American desire to resist and the beginnings of a prophetic call for improvement from his heirs. There exists a line of hope within both of these poets’ works. In the way that Whitman hopes Americans will use literature in order to stake out a promising future Ginsberg uses the stories of unclaimed society in order to draw together the edges of his experience into one common American experience.
“Howl” was written in 1955 and published in 1956. It was meant to be a performance piece and was not published until after the first reading by Ginsberg at the Six Gallery in San Francisco. This reading was a cultural break from the “staid, academic affair[s] that poetry readings had tended to be during the forties and fifties” (Morgan 208). The reading was made up of several beatnik poets, coming together to read some of their most outrageous and spontaneous works together and for a crowd of roughly 100 people (208). Ginsberg had never read “Howl” before and as he read he increased his speed and power as his audience became caught amidst his zeal (209). Immediately following this reading, Lawrence Ferlinghetti sent Ginsberg a note that read “I greet you at the beginning of a great career”—the exact words Emerson had sent to Whitman one hundred years earlier after the first printing of Leaves of Grass (Gornick 3). Even in the wake of his most original piece, Ginsberg’s work was never truly separated from Whitman. This was Ginsberg’s first major work. After publication it underwent intense scrutiny because of the poems immense graphic content with regards to sexual practices (both heterosexual and homosexual) and drug use and abuse. In 1957 “Howl” went to trial to defend charges of obscenity and won; the poem has never been out of
print since (Gornick 8-9). Ginsberg dedicated “Howl” to Carl Soloman, a man he met in the New York State Psychiatric Institute (Rockland) in 1949. Ginsberg had allowed one of his many criminal friends free reign of his apartment and the man took to stashing hoards of stolen items, of which the police eventually became aware, and sent all involved parties to jail. Ginsberg's relatives, teachers, and friends were able to move his sentence from prison to the institute, where he encountered Soloman for the first time and became fast comrades, “They saw themselves in each other almost immediately” (7).

By this time in Ginsberg’s life he had seen and experienced much disappointment, horror, and traumatic ecstasy. His success as a poet was not entirely accidental, as he had it in his blood, but his ability to escape the madness that surrounded him was unexpected. The introduction to “Howl” was written by William Carlos Williams and in it he notes that the poem is a “howl of defeat. Not defeat at all for [Allen] has gone through defeat as if it were an ordinary experience, a trivial experience” (Howl 7). Williams validates the vulgar nature of the work by noting that this was not a shocking secret or a fantastic story, but rather the life of Allen Ginsberg as he experienced it. According to Williams, Ginsberg was telling his story. The poem is obscene and profane but not for shock, but because that is the truth of the life he had experienced. In addition to the poets at the Six Gallery, Ginsberg shared the creation of his howl with his father. Louis Ginsberg was also a poet—much better known than Allen at the time—and a classicist. Louis wrote poetry in tight form, with highly studied subject and style. In correspondence with Allen about the text of “Howl” Louis describes it as “a wild, rhapsodic, explosive
outpouring with good figures of speech flashing by in its volcanic rushing. It’s a hot geyser of emotion suddenly released in wild abandon from subterranean depths of your being” (Miles 150). While accurately describing the piece Louis also ends with a bit of fatherly advice that “there is no need for dirty, ugly, words, as they entangle you unnecessarily in trouble. Try to cut them out” (150). These are the reverberations of what Robert Lowell would call the “tranquilized fifties”, Louis calling for a more medium level of emotional experience, calling for a sedation of the facts. It is this sedation of reality, a mediated experience of reality, which Ginsberg could not endorse or accept—a lesson undoubtedly learned from Whitman. It is this sedation of reality to which “Howl” responds.

“Howl” though is not a blatant attack on America, Ginsberg’s past, or the society in which he lived. Ginsberg writes about his work, “the poem itself is an act of sympathy, not rejection. In it I am leaping out of a preconceived notion of social ‘values’” (Miles 152). This statement seems at odds, perhaps, with some of Ginsberg’s language in the text of the poem, but if his words are reframed within this context of sympathy, the America and American identity he constructs and addresses then also shift. A lament over a loved one gone astray is much more similar to his bardic influence than a cacophonic rant from an unsatisfied youth, and thus becomes a more workable understanding of the emotion behind this poem. Ginsberg explains his intentions further, “I am saying that what seems ‘mad’ in America is our expression of natural ecstasy (as in Crane, Whitman) which suppresses, finds no social form organization background frame of reference or rapport or validation from the outside and so the “patient” gets confused thinks he
is mad and really goes off rocker. I am paying homage to the mystical mysteries in the forms in which they actually occur here in the U.S. in our environment” (Miles 152).

Ginsberg’s view of America, initially, appears to be negative and combative. His work was met with great backlash. However, Ginsberg’s relationship with his nation is complicated. He is a second generation Russian-Jewish American. His background is in stark contrast with the popular identity in America in the 1950s. Ginsberg grew up in Patterson, New Jersey, attended Columbia University until he got expelled for writing lewd comments on dorm walls with his close friend Jack Kerouac, befriended local low-lives and thieves and eventually moved west to San Francisco. Ginsberg also spent a brief period in a mental institution—a fate he chose over a year in prison. Ginsberg’s mother was highly involved in the Socialist movement in America and suffered from severe mental problems. Eventually, she was hospitalized to an institution and thereafter lobotomized. Ginsberg describes his mother as “finally ******” meaning that she was ruined to nothingness inside of the institution. Even a brief overview of his early life such as this makes it clear that Ginsberg’s life in America was not the life broadcast on television screens. He was part of the underground America—the America Whitman called out to a century earlier.

Ginsberg had a troubled and volatile youth and “Howl” is a description of what he saw, what he had been through, and what others around him went through. In Williams’ introduction to the poem he also outlined the rough life that Ginsberg experienced early on. He writes:
[Allen] was physically slight of build and mentally much disturbed by
the life which he had encountered about him during those first years
after the First World War as it was exhibited to him in and about New
York City. He was always on the point of 'going away', where it didn't
seem to matter; he disturbed me, I never thought he'd live to grow up
and write and book of poems. His ability to survive, travel, and go on
writing astonishes me. (*Howl* 7)

The mere act of surviving the life Ginsberg lived astonished Williams, thus
demonstrating the shocking nature of the scenes and events described in the text of
the poem. Despite the salacious nature of his work and grotesque images, the overall
message of the poem is hopeful. The connection that Ginsberg draws throughout
the poem with Soloman and the way Ginsberg continually references his fate being
tied up with Soloman's (19; 24) points towards a belief that the success of his life is
contingent upon the success of the another’s life. It is a ‘we are all in this together’
attitude, and the badness he describes he also claims as part of his own. There is no
casting out, only naming and affirmation of existence. In this way an individualized
experience of terror and madness becomes a collective experience—meant for the
inclusion of soul to soul. This is the vision of Whitman peering through the stanzas
of “Howl”. It is in this recognition of Whitman’s hopefulness in this text that makes it
necessary to reconcile Ginsberg’s apparent hatred of America with his ardent
respect for his predecessor.

In part II of “Howl”, Ginsberg’s interactions with the machine of America
become clear. This section completely composed while using peyote (*Waldman
266), is a chanting of phrases that all begin with Moloch, an idol described in Leviticus to whom the Canaanites were required to sacrifice their children. This representation of a child-eating parent is part of Ginsberg’s vision of America. To be an American in the Moloch-nation is, to Ginsberg, to be a sacrificed child unable to free oneself from the wanting jaws of the elder. Where then is the connection to Whitman? Moloch-nation is the America of hatefully industrialized civilization. It is machinery, heartlessness, mass production, and war. Ginsberg’s accusations are harsh but they inevitably were not unfair—much like the criticisms of Whitman of his country during and after the civil war years. America, in Ginsberg’s time, was wrapped up in the Industrial Revolution, the post-war technology boom, and the Cold War, all of which were mechanisms of society that were consuming the youth of America. It was not the country itself that was consuming them; it was not the America of possibility but rather the America of the circumstance. Through his chanting it becomes clear that “Moloch is the vision of the mechanical feelingless inhuman world we live in and accept—and the key line finally is ‘Moloch whom I abandon’” (Miles 152). Moloch is a symbol; it represents a thing that eats its own children, perhaps then Ginsberg was drawing a connection through which the reader should assume America was eating its offspring. In other words, America was going down a path that would lead to destruction rather than progress. It is possible also to see this as a caution, much like Whitman’s cautions in Democratic Vistas about the future of democracy without significant change.

In the third part of the poem, as with the Footnote, there is a return to the heart of hope and connection. This part in particular draws upon the connection
between Ginsberg and Soloman and reads as a quiet affirmation of life in some ways. Every line begins with “I am with you in Rockland” and then follows with some connective action that the two share. The chanting continues line after line with confirmations of attachment, “I’m with you in Rockland where you laugh at this invisible humor/ I’m with you in Rockland where we are great writers on the same dreadful typewriter/ I’m with you in Rockland where your condition has become very serious and is reported on the radio” (Ginsberg 24). It moves from being personal (referencing Ginsberg’s lobotomized mother) to addressing America as a whole. America becomes a character in this part of the poem, specifically in the final three stanzas, in a way that it has not been characterized as such in the previous sections. Ginsberg ends this section as follows:

I’m with you in Rockland

where we hug and kiss the United States under our bedsheets

the United States that coughs all night and won’t let us sleep

I’m with you in Rockland

where we wake up electrified out of the coma by our own souls’ airplanes roaring over the roof they’ve come to drop angelic bombs the hospital illuminates itself imaginary walls collapse O skinny legions run outside O starry spangled shock of mercy the eternal war is here O victory forget your underwear we’re free

I’m with you in Rockland
in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-journey on the
highway across America in tears to the door of my cottage in
the Western night

This is a much different America from the Moloch-nation Ginsberg presented just a few stanzas prior. In this section America is a bedfellow. America is a lover. America is a highway. America allows freedom. America has a body. America is under attack.

To pin Ginsberg’s relationship with America on one side of love or hate would be to misread the implications of the American soul he travels through in the course of this poem. The identity of an American, or what it means to be a person living in America, identified in this poem is conflicted, neither wholly negative nor wholly positive. The American is a fractured identity. It is interesting to note that in the original manuscript to “Howl” the line “the eternal war is here” was written first as “the war is over” (Miles 95). Ginsberg also added the words “starry spangled shock of mercy” and “victory” to his final publication. To say in 1955 that the war was over would have a very real reference to a specific war, changing the phrase to resound inwards, and focus on an internal war, which is already being waged, makes for a different sort of comment. The addition, then, of the other words adds a patriotic slant to the stanza. With this reading the internal war may very well be one of identity, a specifically American identity that must struggle with mercy and victory and the scars of war.
CHAPTER 6
ANSWERING THE CALL

Even in only this piece the reverberations from Whitman to Ginsberg are evident, and within them are the tracks of American identity that connects their works. To continue to uncover traces of the shifting representations of this identity, let us return firstly to the call, which most clearly informs the connection between these poets. In the course of Democratic Vistas Whitman issues this prophetic declamation:

I suggest, therefore, the possibility, should some two or three really original American poets, (perhaps artists or lecturers,) arise, mounting the horizon like planets, stars of the first magnitude, that, from their eminence, fusing contributions, races, far localities, &c., together, they would give more compaction and more moral identity, (the quality to-day most needed,) to these States, than all its Constitutions, legislative and judicial ties, and all its hitherto political, warlike, or materialistic experiences. (401-402)

Written in the post-civil war America, and into a newly founded country this statement is perhaps more than simply an old man’s wish for the future. Whitman
here is pleading for a poetic offspring that will take up the cross he was bearing in his work and in his life—the creation of a nation. Today America can seem like a solid bulwark of legislation and bureaucracy, with its many checks and balances, infrastructure, and slickly laid plans, but this has not always been the case.

Just a century earlier, in 1787 at the Constitutional Convention, Benjamin Franklin addressed the policy makers of the country, imploring them to sign quickly the Constitution in order to safeguard their political future, but with the knowledge that the document contained flaws in need of fixing. He states, “I consent, Sir, to this Constitution because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best. The Opinions I have had of its Errors I sacrifice to the Public good” (Franklin 351). As Franklin presents his vision of a future that contains men that will sacrifice their own prejudices for the public opinion and seek to enact the flawed policies in an admirable way, so does Whitman secure his own vision of what he desires the future of American poets to be. He wishes, as his call clearly states, them to interact with the world around them—specifically the political world.

To view any of Ginsberg’s politics as stemming out of Whitman’s work it is necessary to first demystify the common view of Whitman as a caricature for childlike patriotism—his politics are more complicated than often remembered. As Ezra Pound once remarked, “Whitman is America” (Price 4), a statement which is easily misread. Whitman is typically heralded as a naturalist and a transcendentalist, fostering images of pastoral themes and idealist notions of culture, both of which are true—though it would cut his legacy short to leave his description at this. We must remember that Whitman was a man of the city also,
New York City. He took great pleasure in many of the inter-workings of life—be it in a natural setting or otherwise. In *Democratic Vistas* Whitman makes clear his beliefs that political documents should be synonymous to poetic documents, declaring his words the ability to give more “compaction and moral identity” to the nation than an authorizing political document such as the Constitution. This is no innocuous statement. Whitman, due to his patriotism, avoids widespread criticism but this, in fact, is a harshly critical message. It is made out of love for his nation, to be sure, but it is not blind support—this is no ode of thanks and praise to Lady Liberty. He is attacking the idea that America is solely exceptional, while also supporting its potential to become so. In fact, he begins his essay by addressing this very belief. He writes:

> I will not gloss over the appaling [sic.] dangers of universal suffrage in the United States. In fact, it is to admit and face these dangers I am writing. To him or her within whose thought rages the battle, advancing, retreating, between democracy’s convictions, aspirations, and the people’s crudeness, vice, caprices, I mainly write this essay.

(396)

These words do not seem to fit with the popular image of Whitman as the American father. He here addresses the margins of society and moves his coming statements from the masses to the rebels. It is statements like the above that fix Whitman as the central point from which the reverberations of American identity emanate. Kenneth Price, in his book *To Walt Whitman, America*, writes that “Whitman is so central to practices and formulations of American culture, past and present, that we may use
his life, work, ideas, and influence to examine major patterns in our culture over the last 150 years” (5). It is in these patterns where Ginsberg emerges as a new marker for the progression of American identity—fathered by Whitman.

If Whitman, who was constantly entrenched in the development of America while also an ardent patriot, influenced Ginsberg so specifically, then why do they appear to have vastly different core ideals upon which those works are based? The answer lies in the complicated nature of Ginsberg's work. As mentioned earlier, comparisons between Whitman and Ginsberg are not entirely new, though comparisons outside of queer theory are. Many sources, however, do support the idea that Ginsberg followed after Whitman, using his voice and politics as an inspirational springboard for his own. While discussing his inspiration for "Howl" Ginsberg directly references the influence he drew from Whitman. He writes the “principle is expansion of breath, inspiration as in unobstructed breath, ‘unchecked original impulse’ expressed by Walt Whitman. Memory of these verse rhythms superimposed on my own breath passed into the inspiration of ‘Howl’" (Miles 175). He continues to cite better-known sources of inspiration for his writing such as Garcia Lorca, William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, and William Blake but concludes with the telling statement that Whitman in fact was the force behind all of these poets’ writings. He ends his short essay detailing all the precursors to “Howl” with the following statement:

Whitman as an innovator of many of these breaths and visions remains a mountain too vast to be seen. Natural ecstasy, surrealist juxtaposition (“seas of bright juice suffuse heaven”), long line
including startling raw observation of ordinary mind (amounting to surrealism), breakthrough out of the crust of hyper-industrialized consciousness of the mortal ground of immorality—these the good gray Bard has in abundance. (176)

This assertion ends with a couplet taken from the text of Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” Clearly, then, Ginsberg has cited many predecessors to himself and his most famously anti-American poem but the man to whom he owes the most credit is the great American poet, or as Price calls him, “a foundational figure in American culture” (3). The juxtaposition of Ginsberg’s tirade in the form of poetry to Whitman’s calming verse is where the connection between these men begins.
It is not difficult to locate the “elastic breath” that Ginsberg is mimicking in Whitman’s verse. A distinguishable written characteristic of Whitman is his lack of traditional form. His most popular writing was a series of long, drawn-out, breaths. Even his long sentences seem to flow into one another. In his introduction to *The Portable Walt Whitman*, Michael Warner discusses Whitman’s use of line breaks and punctuation in order to create a specific kind of control over his work. He notes that as an early printer Whitman was aware of the power of a printed break. He writes:

[Whitman] minimizes the feeling of arbitrariness [with line breaks], however, because his lines are almost always end-stopped; he treats them as units of sense as much as of sound. Despite its reliance on print, this effect helps to create on the page the sense of a vital vocal exposure or challenge—like opera or oratory, the arts he most admired. (xii)

It is no wonder that something as loose as this free verse would appeal to Ginsberg. This kind of atypical construction of the poem favors the body over the mind, attaching significance to the breath. Ginsberg’s affinity for poetics of the body are but one of the many traits he inherits from the good gray poet.
Ginsberg puts on the affectation of Whitman in several ways. Just as Whitman confronted and pushed back against America, so does Ginsberg. There is however, an oddly personal relationship with America that Ginsberg develops within his poems. If Whitman was the father of America, then Ginsberg is the son—deeply bothered and scarred from the misdeeds of his country. In his poem titled simply, “America,” he writes: “America when will we end the human war? / Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb / ...America why are your libraries full of tears?” These statements, along with several other confrontations about America, fill the first half of the poem, but as the poem continues there is a slight shift in his tone. Roughly halfway through he comes to a realization, “It occurs to me that I am America. I am talking to myself again.” With this statement Ginsberg internalizes his harsh criticisms of his country, taking the blame inward. If he is America then it is his human war, his atom bomb, his library, and the culpability is with him also. To begin to understand fully Ginsberg’s relationship with America, it is necessary to look at the series of travel poems he wrote and later published through City Lights Books in a collection titled *The Fall of America: Poems of These States*. Ginsberg wrote this book years after he traveled cross-country with Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady.

*The Fall of America* is organized into separate journeys, all spanning specific date ranges from 1965 to 1971. He relies sporadically on a fixed base to keep the rhythm of his poems going, which has the effect of echoing or mimicking the endless progression and redundancy that defines a long road trip (“At Omaxk...At Nespelem...At Grand Coulee...At Dry Falls...At Mesa” (*Fall 1*). This construction is
often broken with many lines of non-repetitive observation, always grounded in
specific places. Ginsberg’s voice is significantly calmer in these poems than in his
howl, and often becomes a quiet observer, though in the observation his feelings of
America become clear. There is a significant disconnect for Ginsberg between the
America he imagines, or is expected to see based on mainstream media, and what he
actually encounters during that cross-country drive. There is an odd juxtaposition of
past and present in this work and his words take on a tone of great lamentation.
Ginsberg writes in his first poem, “Across the river, silver bubbles of refineries./
There Lewis and Clark floated down in a raft: the brown-mesa’d gorge of Lake
Wallula smelling of rain in the sage, Greyhound buses speeding by” (1-2). Here are
these pillars of American discovery, Lewis and Clark, floating down a river that is
spotted with pollution. They are even shadowed by the passing of the iconic
American passenger bus—a symbol for travel and efficiency, the revolution of
industry. These advancements have invaded the space of history and maybe even
overcome the need for such figures as Lewis and Clark, childhood stories. Progress
in America is covering over the past. For Ginsberg this is troubling, paving over the
past or the unclean is repression not progress. The same thing that his father
wanted from “Howl,” to clean up the rough edges and smooth over the bumps, is
what Ginsberg sees happening all across America. He sees through those fake
exteriors; Ginsberg’s America is a palimpsest.

Thomas Merrill explains that in The Fall of America the reader encounters a
“poetic mapping” of the geography of America through Ginsberg’s eyes (115). This
work was composed through tape-recorded thoughts and hand written poems as
Ginsberg and his crew moved through the country. It is in this first-hand brush with the country in which Ginsberg’s double vision of America is most clear. As Merrill explains:

The geography that Ginsberg maps in these poems is not really the United States of America, but the anarchic commonwealth of Ginsberg’s consciousness, which, through his characteristic mode of juxtaposing images, is recorded on all its levels simultaneously. (116)

The geography that Ginsberg maps may not have been the popular view of the United States, but it is short sighted to assert this mapping is not a valid picture of America. While mapping his consciousness atop the states, Ginsberg also accurately maps the disjointed realities he experiences in America. It is not that this is not America, but rather that it is Ginsberg’s America. The juxtaposing images to which Merrill refers show Ginsberg’s disillusion with the encountered America. By placing unlikely images like, “U.S. paratroopers attacking guerillas in Vietnam mountains, over porcelain-white road hump the tranquil azure of a vast lake” (Fall 4) or “Weeping Willow, what’s your catastrophe?/ Red Red oak, oh what’s your worry?/ Hairy Mammal whaddya want.../ Electric towers marching to Hartford,/ Buildingtops spiked in sky” (50) This is the double vision he has of America and his explanation of what he sees in his country—two separate entities existing simultaneously in the same space. There is hypocrisy present in a country that can value things like trees and rivers while also constantly constructing towers and buildings. The way the images infect areas of peace and tranquility throughout the poems speaks to how Ginsberg saw America functioning. These poems attest to “the
contagion of violence that has spread across America and has even been exported overseas” (Merrill 117). Ginsberg is undoubtedly disgusted and disheartened by this vision of America. Perhaps there is no patriot lying beneath these lines but connections to Whitman’s America stem out of a closer study of Ginsberg’s language and style in these poems.

Much of Ginsberg’s work has been harshly criticized, and *The Fall of America* collection was no different. This work was scrutinized for pretending to deal with the abstract concept of good versus evil in the world and in people without incorporating or engaging with any of the necessary complexity that sort of conversation would require (Merrill 119-120). However, this stream-of-consciousness style of observation before, or in place of, solution is the very way in which the reverberations of Whitman be found. In Whitman, the observational language he uses becomes canonical but in Ginsberg readers may “find the ride more jarring than gentle, more threatening than comradely, and more uncrafted than brilliant” (Merrill 120). Ginsberg’s observations were the product of his personal discovery of America. Though his words and style may have been crude, he was following in Whitman’s grand tradition. Whitman, too, felt as though he had discovered the real America that was hiding behind pretty words and elevated unnatural descriptions of reality (Matthiessen 519). As Galway Kinnell explains, “whenever [Whitman] could he chose the rude word for the elegant one” (*Walt*). The difference occurs, of course, in the America that changes greatly in the century between 1865 and 1965. Matthiessen notes that Whitman used slang words and terms in a frenzied discovery of how well they relate to the environment. Whitman
was a pioneer in this idea, the idea that words need to express sentiments and experiences that have in actuality been experienced. Again, to quote Kinnell, “we speak of poets having a good ear but with Whitman you have to say he had a good mouth. He tasted the words, they had a physical body” (Walt). It is this idea that Ginsberg fully supports and continues in his poems, the manifestations of which are most clear in *The Fall of America*. Not only does Ginsberg connect himself to Whitman with his wrestling with America, but also with his form, voice, style, and language. To fully understand the genesis of this concept it is necessary to return to Whitman’s invocation of this collection of ideas.
Ginsberg’s interaction with line, breath, and language clearly stems from studying and admiring the ways Whitman interacted with his language on the page. Both of the poets, beginning with Whitman, had intimate relationships with not solely language, but language that stemmed from experience. Language was of great importance to Whitman, and as Matthiessen proves, there is much to learn about his life and work through a study of his diction—and in this case much to learn about his relationship to the writings and style of Ginsberg. Whitman saw great opportunity for the English language to become the American language through a specific and studied application of words to life. Whitman realized that words are developed through primary contact with the signified object or experience, “that a man cannot use words...unless he has experienced the facts that they express” (Mattheiessen 518). This usage of words, to represent specific understanding, was not common at the time Whitman began experimenting in this way. Language, as Matthiessen points out, was commonly viewed as an action only of the mind, held on a pedestal for the educated and wealthy. To Whitman,

Such division of the individual’s wholeness, intensified by the specializations of a cause of the neurotic strain oppressing present-
day man, for whom the words that pour into him from headlines so infrequently correspond to a concrete actuality that he has touched at first-hand. (518)

Through this explication, it is apparent that Whitman witnessed through the common function of language during his time, a mediated experience of life. In his most well-known collection, *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman shows his desire to discover the heart of life, apart from any expected or proper veneer the people of the 20th century desired to place over their American experiences.

Whitman begins “Song of Myself” with immediate universality, “what I assume you shall assume,/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (Warner 3). He sets up his intentions early that the life he is speaking of and experiencing is the truth and reality of life, perhaps previously unavailable. He speaks directly to his readers, “You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor look feed on the spectres in books,/ You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,/ You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self” (5). This idea that there is a way to experience reality that is current, available, and often unclaimed, is present throughout the entire collection. Whitman desired to write poetry that was new, with “no literary antecedents” (*Walt*) in order to become a real American poet of the time—one that was reflective of the 20th century experience and nothing prior. It is not only the soul that Whitman wishes to set free with this kind of active writing, it was also the future of America he sought to unhinge.
The 1855 edition of *Leaves* spoke of his intent to strip bare the trappings of society with every part of the publication. The daguerreotype of himself emblazoned opposite the title page shows a calm, old man wearing country clothes and an askew hat. Whitman has removed the layers of coverings men of his time might be expected to wear and appears open, easy, and even sexual. He puts on no public persona or claims any level of superiority. The preface to this edition offers more insight into his desire to strip Americans of their constructed barriers. He begins boldly, and with so many of the statements that have afforded him a reputation as the national poet. Whitman declares, “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem...Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations (Whitman iiv). Whitman wastes no time in outlining the American poet and even here begins to invoke the language of a call which will be solidified, as was shown, in *Democratic Vistas*. Whitman carries on describing how a poet must be one with the country he writes to, and to be at one with is to be in nature. The pastoral descriptions of the nation greatly idealize the landscape and, as Whitman often does, leaves out the blood and oppression that was also a defining feature of the America of his time—and as James Trusslow Adams rightly observes—was what birthed America in the first place and therefore is inseparable. The idealism which is so clearly written in to the preface of *Leaves*, and arguably the body of it also, is at odds with both Whitman’s desire to see America wholly and with Ginsberg’s representation of Whitman’s American identity.

This friction between reality and possibility is where the key difference in these poets lies. For Whitman the tool of choice in combating the uncertainty and
problematic society around him was idealism; for Ginsberg it was cynicism. There is an idealism of American hope that defines Whitman’s America but only appears in Ginsberg’s America in specific moments. The America that Whitman was writing into was on the precipice of great change, and it was a nation that could have gone in any direction. Whitman provided his prophetic voice. The America Ginsberg was writing to had already come up short in his eyes. There was a part of society that was lost and had fallen prey to the Moloch-nation. This America did not need a direction to choose but it needed to be woken from its slumber. In each of these acts of writing the poets are performing the same action, to identify and save, however the eras in which they participated required different modes of address.
CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

Considering Whitman as the literary father of Ginsberg is, in some ways, a commonplace. Many scholars have placed Whitman alongside Ginsberg in the world of gay and bisexual poetics, but few have sought to reconcile another love these men represent: that of love for country. The lauded poet, integral to the formation of the American canon, appears today as a national necessity. Whitman, however, never desired to exist in a vacuum. His writing asserts the connection of himself to all others; he is under the bootsoles of America and particularly under the bootsoles of his fellow poets. This view of Whitman, as a central figure in the study of American poetry, was due in part to the contributions of Ginsberg (Lewis 78). While it appears in a traditional reading of these poets’ works that Ginsberg rejected the America that Whitman loved, there is a deeper meaning and deeper truth to the way Ginsberg absorbed and reflected Whitman’s work. Lewis writes that “Ginsberg’s Whitman was a totalized Whitman as he embraced all aspects of the poet” (78). Ginsberg did not choose parts of Whitman’s legacy to uphold and reject others, he remembered him through his work as a whole poet and that was the Whitman that emerges from Ginsberg’s work.

Even as Ginsberg engages with Whitman in sometimes challenging ways, by
confronting and complicating his notions of country and self, there is an appreciation. More importantly there is an understanding, that Ginsberg demonstrates, of the push to define America—to be able to find oneself as an American with an identity. America has never been a place without contradiction. While Whitman issued a call to arms to define and guide America through the prophetic poetic voice, Ginsberg responds with a call to acceptance. Ginsberg desires a realization and validation of the marginalized America, not a destruction of the Moloch-nation. The clear differences that occur in the works of both these poets’ are reconciled through the shared underlying desire to ennoble their country with truth and experience. Connections arise in a search for continuity within the breathy lines, base language, and earthy connections to people and space that broke through the traditions of writers that had come before them. Whitman most assuredly issued a call to a poet beyond his lifetime that would look America squarely in the eye, and give it voice. By examining the works of both Whitman and Ginsberg it is without question that Ginsberg responded to Whitman’s call for a poet who would continually challenge America in the pursuit of greatness.
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