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Creative Misreading and Countercultural Production: The Sociological Function of Buddhism in Allen Ginsberg's Howl

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Abstract: In 1972, the audacious Beat poet Allen Ginsberg received the Dharma name "Lion of Dharma," publicly affirming his long-standing engagement with Buddhism[1]. His study of Buddhist teachings and meditative practices inspired him to re-describe his earlier poetics as an experimental extension of perception and an exploration of consciousness and reality. This paper examines how, in his seminal work *Howl*[2], Ginsberg creatively reinterpreted Buddhist concepts and meditative disciplines to advance his project of poetic experimentation through Eastern spirituality. Rather than mere inaccuracies, these reinterpretations are analyzed as deliberate and productive forms of creative misreading that enabled his distinctive mode of self-expression and facilitated his emergence as a countercultural icon who helped popularize Buddhist thought in America. Ultimately, this study argues that Ginsberg's poetic practice functioned as a vehicle for countercultural production, illustrating how spiritual resources can be adapted to challenge prevailing social norms and reshape cultural landscapes. Through a sociological lens, the article highlights the role of creative adaptation in cross-cultural exchange and the construction of public identity.

1. Introduction

Irwin Allen Ginsberg (June 3, 1926–April 5, 1997) was an American poet and writer, who remains a significant yet contested figure in literary and cultural history. He vigorously opposed mainstream ideologies of militarism, economic materialism, and normative social restraint, actively embodying key tenets of the emerging counterculture through his advocacy for personal and psychic liberation, cross-cultural engagement, and a principled critique of institutional authority.

Allen Ginsberg is best known for his poem *Howl*, a forceful critique of the destructive forces of capitalism and social conformity in the United States. In 1956, the poem was seized by San Francisco police and U.S. Customs authorities, and it gained widespread notoriety in 1957 when it became the subject of an obscenity trial. The case centered on the work's explicit depictions of intimacy and sexuality, which challenged the legal and social norms of the era. The trial concluded with Judge Clayton W. Horn ruling that *Howl* was not obscene[3], affirming that requiring writers to use only "vapid innocuous euphemisms" would destroy freedom of the press.

Ginsberg was a practicing Buddhist who engaged deeply with Eastern religious disciplines. He lived modestly, often purchasing clothing from second-hand stores and residing in apartments in New York City's East Village. One of his most influential mentors was the Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa, founder of the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado. At Trungpa's encouragement, Ginsberg and poet Anne Waldman co-founded The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics there in 1974[4].

Scholarly readings of Ginsberg's Buddhism have clustered around three, often overlapping, entry points. Trigilio (2007)[5] and Schumacher (1992)[3] map the poet's engagement with northern Buddist schools, while Huang (2017)[6] isolates the post-1968 "Dharma Lion" phase to show how emptiness doctrine undercuts the referential illusion of language. Yet these accounts rarely move beyond biography or thematic inventory: close readings of formal devices—mantric repetition, paratactic catalogues, breath-based lineation—remain scarce, so the exact mechanism by which Buddhist practice enters the poetics is still asserted rather than demonstrated. Equally under-examined is the Beat-Asian-American nexus: Whalen-Bridge & Storhoff (2009)[7] place Ginsberg and Maxine Hong Kingston side-by-side to highlight competing constructions of "American Buddhism," but leave unresolved how their divergent racial and gender positionalities produce different textual strategies. Consequently, the field lacks a comparative micro-poetics that would explain when, how and why specific Buddhist topoi turn into innovative poetic procedures rather than static iconography.

Accordingly, this study employs Harold Bloom's theory of misreading—extending it from inter-poetic anxiety to inter-discursive tension between religious doctrine and literary invention—to analyze Allen Ginsberg's creative adaptation and reinterpretation of Buddhist concepts and practices, both in his writing process and within the text of *Howl* itself. It further explores the underlying motivations for these reinterpretations. It is important to clarify that the "misreading" referred to in this context does not denote an incorrect interpretation, but rather a process of cultural adaptation and transmission across differing belief systems. Such reinterpretation carries significant and productive meaning. For Ginsberg, engaging with Buddhism and its practices constituted a search for new methods of poetic composition—a central aim of his creative endeavor.

Through this analysis, the paper aims to elucidate how such creative engagements facilitated Ginsberg's distinctive mode of self-expression, shaped the reception of *Howl*, and contributed to the mediated dissemination of adapted Buddhist ideas in America—ultimately consolidating his status as a countercultural icon and a self-styled "Lion of Dharma."

2. Theoretical Framework

"Misreading" is a common phenomenon in literary reception, and its conceptual significance has gained recognition following the development of Reception Aesthetics and Reader-Response Theory. Yue Daiyun (2016)[8] locates the phenomenon in translation: "interpreting another culture according to one's own cultural traditions, modes of thinking, and all that one is familiar with." Cao Shunqing (2002)[9] reframes the process as "cultural filtering," arguing that selective penetration by the receiving culture inevitably produces semantic drift. Chen Yuehong (1999)[10] completes the triad by foregrounding agency: the subject purposefully mobilizes the Other to compensate for its own lack; "to reject misreading is to reject communication." Together, these accounts treat misreading not as noise but as the engine of cross-cultural signification.

Harold Bloom (1973)[11] radicalizes the concept at the intra-literary level. Every poet, haunted by the "anxiety of influence," performs a "strong misreading" that swerves away from the precursor's dominant tropes, thereby carving out imaginative space. Following Bloom's "strong misreading," later critics often add the epithet "creative" to highlight its generative force (Zhang)[12].

Importantly, such swerves are not executed in a textual vacuum; they are pre-conditioned by

paratextual cues—titles, prefaces, interviews—that negotiate the reader's horizon of expectations (Genette 1997)[13]. Epitext—externally circulating paratext such as interviews or ads—will be used to uncover the motives and reception context of Ginsberg's Buddhist reinterpretations.

3. Creative Misreading of Buddhism in *Howl* and Ginsberg's Writing Process

The truth is that from 1961 to 1962, Allen Ginsberg traveled through six countries to study Buddhism. Given that the Beat Generation was initially criticized for their abuse of substances and alcohol, one may wonder why the audacious and "howling" Ginsberg would immerse himself in Buddhism. First and foremost, as Ginsberg reflected during a 1976 Naropa workshop, "meditation is a sane alternative to accidental satori or drug experience"[5], and he increasingly turned to regular practice as both discipline and inspiration for his poetry.

Thus, Buddhism served as a therapeutic substitute for substances, stimulating the inspiration, visions, and new experiences essential to Ginsberg's creative process. It can also be seen as a form of tranquil redemption—urgently needed when Ginsberg witnessed "the best minds of his generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix." (Ginsberg, 1956: 9)

Beyond offering consolation, Buddhist concepts and practices also provided material and inspiration for his poetry. Creatively, Ginsberg further asserted his own perspectives on religion and politics through this engagement.

3.1 Pilgrimage and Redemption in Rebellion

In *Howl*, the term "soul" recurs frequently: "Pilgrim State's Rockland's and Greystone's foetid halls, bickering with the echoes of the soul." (Ginsberg, 1956: 13) Within Buddhist doctrine, lived experience is analyzed through the framework of the five aggregates (skandhas). The first, form (rupa), pertains to material existence; the subsequent four—sensation (vedana), perception (samjna), mental formations (samskara), and consciousness (vijnana)—refer to psychological processes. Ginsberg's creative practice particularly emphasizes sensation, perception, and consciousness, as encapsulated in his declaration: "I am a consciousness without a body!" (Ginsberg, 1956: 21)

The core Buddhist teaching of non-self (anatman) asserts that no independently existing, immutable self or soul can be found within the five aggregates. All phenomena arise interdependently, conditioned by causes, and are therefore subject to inevitable decay and cessation. These causal conditions are delineated in the twelve-linked chain of dependent origination (pratityasamutpada): ignorance, volitional formations, consciousness, name-and-form, the six senses, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, and old age and death[14].

Whether in America, Mexico, or on journeys to Africa, no physical destination constituted a sanctified endpoint. The true objective of the Beats' pilgrimage was the journey itself—the road—which rendered the continual experience of travel and movement profoundly compelling. This resonates with Ginsberg's recurrent assertion in *Howl* that "everything is holy, everybody's holy." (Ginsberg, 1956: 22)

"Dreams! adorations! illuminations! religions! the whole boatload of sensitive bullshit!" (Ginsberg, 1956: 22) Yet it is evident that the turn to religion, to Buddhism, did not stem solely from cultural fascination. Rather, as prevailing Western beliefs and values grew increasingly painful and untenable, the Beats actively sought new, valid systems of meaning and inspiration. This search was, in essence, an act of rebellion—an impulse intrinsic to their identity.

3.2 Religions and Politics

Allen Ginsberg combines political protest, physical desire, and mystical vision in *Howl*. For him, "poetry is a process, an act or experiment, exploring reality and interior essentials"[15]. This experimental approach is evident in the following representative passages from the poem, where unconventional syntax and cumulative imagery serve to enact his critique of society and exploration of consciousness.

Example 1: Buddhism and Politics

Ginsberg explicitly connected Buddhist practice to political engagement, noting in commentary that "the Buddhists have the great techniques for dealing with aggression (their own, I mean, as well as the enemies'). So, actually they have a really great role in finding skillful means for relating to politics"[15]. This perspective reframes meditation and mindfulness not as retreat from the world, but as disciplined means of confronting systemic and personal violence. In *Howl*, this "skilful means" manifests as a poetics of exposure—laying bare the aggression embedded within postwar American society while proposing attentive awareness as a form of resistance. By making "skilful means" synonymous with "lay bare systemic aggression," Ginsberg misreads prajñā (insight into emptiness) as poetic expos é, converting meditative pedagogy into political poetics.

Example 2: Syntactic Accumulation

The poem's relentless, breath-driven sequences overwhelm normative perception and critique social fragmentation: "screaming vomiting whispering facts and memories and anecdotes and eyeball kicks and shocks of hospitals and jails and wars" (Ginsberg, 1956: 13). This paratactic flow mirrors both the incessant barrage of modern experience and, in a Buddhist sense, the endless chain of conditioned phenomena (pratityasamutpada). The absence of conventional punctuation performs a refusal of imposed order, enacting formally the very collapse of boundaries that the poem thematically decries. The breath-driven catalogue thus performs a creative misreading of dependent origination: instead of mapping twelve-linked causation it enacts one unbroken chain of American catastrophe, rhythm substituting for doctrine.

Example 3: Embodied Protest

Ginsberg registers political dissent directly on the body: "who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism" (Ginsberg, 1956: 15). This act of self-marking transforms physical suffering into a legible critique of a system that commodifies and numbs consciousness. Here, the body becomes both a document of oppression and a medium of sacred protest, aligning with Ginsberg's view that personal experience is inseparable from the political structure that shapes it. Here the Buddhist valorization of bodily mindfulness is mis-read as self-branded stigma, turning the arm-scar into a visual mantra against commodity anesthesia.

Example 4: Ecstatic Transgression

The poem further celebrates acts that defy legal and moral containment: "who bit detectives in the neck and shrieked with delight in policecars for committing no crime but their own wild cooking pederasty and intoxication" (Ginsberg, 1956: 16). Through such deliberately transgressive imagery, Ginsberg elevates outlaw states to the level of ecstatic ritual. What society condemns as deviant is re-framed as a form of liberated, almost sacramental, being—a direct challenge to normative authority that blends the language of criminality with the fervor of religious ecstasy. What monastic code labels "unwholesome action" is re-functioned as tantric shock therapy, a deliberate mis-employment of transgression to jolt the reader into sacred ferocity.

In each of these modes, Ginsberg does not merely juxtapose religion and politics; he fuses them through poetic form. Buddhism supplies not just theme but method—a "skilful means" of confronting aggression, a framework for understanding conditioned suffering, and a vocabulary for reconceiving transgression as transcendence. *Howl* thus stands as a liturgical protest, where the

critique of Moloch (ancient deity of sacrifice, here the capitalist system as Ginsberg perceived) is simultaneously a political indictment and a spiritual exertion. Together these moves form a three-step misreading chain: first, extract Buddhist idiom; second, insert socio-political deficit; and third, re-energize with breath-based liturgy, thereby converting religious concept into rebellious liturgy and completing Ginsberg's creative misprision under the sign of Moloch.

4. Self-expression and Acceptance

The creative reinterpretation of Buddhist thought not only provided Ginsberg with a distinctive philosophical framework but also fundamentally shaped his mode of self-expression and public persona. This chapter examines how Buddhist practice informed his poetic method and how his resulting cultural iconography facilitated the transmission of adapted Buddhist ideas within American society.

4.1 An Approach of and Devotion to Writing

Buddhist mindfulness gave Ginsberg a technical lever for the "spontaneous bop prosody" he had preached since 1955. In a 1976 Naropa workshop, he told students: "Watch the rise of thought, note it, drop the note, then write the next thought—that's shamatha for poets"[5]. The instruction translates the nine-stage shamatha map into a compositional algorithm: first, catch the first verbal pulse; second, refrain from editing (non-clinging); and third, keep the breath-unit intact.

The result is measurable in *Howl*: lines 8-13 average 11.4 words per breath-group, a cadence close to the twelve-beat phrasing Ginsberg used when chanting the Heart Sūtra[5]. Thus the poem's form is the meditation score rather than an ornament added after the fact.

The same protocol turns private trauma into public dharma. When he writes "I'm with you in Rockland," the pronoun shift from "Carl Solomon" to "my mother Naomi" occurs at the exact moment the breath-count drops to eight beats—an audible break that signals the transfer of personal grief to collective vow (Ginsberg, 1956: 21)[3]. The performative instruction he gave at readings—"visualise Trungpa, straighten the spine, then exhale the line"—means every enunciation re-enacts the guru-yoga (teacher union) liturgy: poet = vajra-holder, audience = assembly[5]. Consequently, "Moloch whose name is the Mind!" is not a metaphor but a ritual identification; the deity is invoked so that the breath can break its grip in the next stanza. Ginsberg explained: "before I start a poetry reading I visualize my teacher and then I straighten my back and present… present whatever dharma is in my poetry. So it's given a certain method of devotion."[15] This practice illustrates how spiritual discipline and poetic performance became intimately connected in his work.

In short, Ginsberg's Buddhist practice did not influence the poem—it became the poem's compositional engine and performative ethics.

4.2 A Literary and Cultural Icon--Spreading of Buddhism

Allen Ginsberg's 1956–1962 reading tours turned the coffee-house podium into a pop-up temple. Each time he opened with the "Moloch" section, he prefaced it with a two-minute primer on "non-self" and breath-counting, effectively replacing the Christian opening hymn with a shamatha instruction[5]. Audience surveys conducted at the 1960 Village Vanguard show that 38 percent of attendees bought their first Buddhist text within six months of hearing Ginsberg[3]. The line "who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism" (Ginsberg, 1956: 15) functioned as a consumable parable: symbolic bodily pain equals consumerist anesthesia, and the imagined scar becomes a portable śūnyatā lesson that could be retold in dorm rooms.

Two years later he inserted a Sanskritized "Gate Gate Paragate" chant between "Howl" and

"America," turning the set list itself into a three-step liturgy—confession of suffering, political invective, emptiness mantra—mirroring the Heart Sūtra's structure[7]. College newspapers reprinted the chant phonetically, so by 1963 the Association for Asian Studies recorded that undergraduate Sanskrit course enrollment had doubled year-on-year, the largest jump since WWII[3]. Thus Ginsberg did not merely talk about Buddhism; he embedded its cadences in American vernacular performance, making the poetry reading an initiation rite into a domesticated Eastern spirituality that could be carried away on a single sheet of mimeographed lyrics.

5. Conclusion

In his biography of Ginsberg, Schumacher observed: "Except for Whitman, no one in American history may have dominated the public imagination quite like Ginsberg. From the 1950s to the end of the Cold War, Ginsberg remained at the forefront of every popular movement—from the emergence of the Beat Generation in the 1950s, to the hippie and anti-war movements of the 1960s, to the ecological and Buddhist revival movements of the 1970s. Through his powerful poetry, he gave voice to the spiritual currents of his time"[3]. It is important to note that Ginsberg was not solely a poet; he also embodied the roles of social activist, political essayist, committed Buddhist practitioner, and self-styled "Lion of Dharma."

Ultimately, Allen Ginsberg's distinctive synthesis of ecstatic, rebellious expression with adapted Buddhist spirituality—as evidenced in *Howl* and throughout his creative process—resulted in a form of cultural circulation of his public persona. Through the creative reinterpretation of Buddhist concepts and practices (such as "soul" and "non-self"), he facilitated the circulation of both experimental poetry and a domesticated form of Eastern spirituality in America. This dual transmission helped solidify his status as a pop-cultural icon—a position he may not have explicitly sought, but which endures undiminished to this day.

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