Howling Masculinity: Queer Social Change in Allen Ginsberg's Poetry

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Abstract

This paper examines Allen Ginsberg's (1959) *Howl* as it redefines queer spaces through performance in the city and resonates with a certain conflict between activism and queer theory. *Howl*'s characters break taboos on public representation and performance of sexuality as they violently and joyfully stake out queer territory: bursting from walls, invading subways, "ball[ing]" in parks (Ginsberg, 1959, l. 18), and "waving genitals" on roofs (l. 35). Their ecstatic performances reveal gender and sexuality as already-performed (Butler, 1993) and dependent on a silencing heteronormative privacy (Berlant and Warner, 2010), widening already-existing cracks in concepts of gender and sexuality, yet still scoring an explosive victory in identity politics. As it envisions a transformation of spaces, Ginsberg's poem suggests a bridge from the poststructuralist critique of essential gender and sexuality to the need for political solidarity, addressing concerns of some gay activists who find performative theories of identity impractical or pernicious in the current political situation.

Since Allen Ginsberg's ascent to poetry classrooms, anthologies of literature, and Hollywood, commentary on his poetry has taken a hagiographic slant. The 1986 facsimile edition of *Howl*, City Lights's 2006 *Howl On Trial*, and the recent film by Rob Epstein and Jeremy Friedman celebrate the poem's victory over obscenity laws and canonize the poet as a barrier-breaker. A recent piece by John Tytell (2010) asserts that Ginsberg "abandoned the polite timidities of writing . . . [and] wrote about then-taboo subjects, like sex, drugs, and insanity" (p. 2). Critics have often read Ginsberg's poetry as propped up by *Howl*'s censorship trial and Ginsberg's own sensational biography; they have absorbed the sexual politics of *Howl*'s "angelheaded hipsters" (1959, l. 3) and characters in other poems into a narrative of subjective disobedience. Bursting from walls, screaming on their knees in subways, balling in parks, waving genitals on roofs, and finding pleasure in the nightmare of psychiatric wards, the characters in *Howl*, according to Tytell and others, catalyzed American gay pride movements in the later twentieth century through their openness in the midst of punishing violence toward gay men.

Ginsberg criticism veers toward a simplistic politics of the subject, however, when the discussion of sexuality in his verse leaps to rebellion and liberation and avoids the postmodern destabilization of the subject, a leap that reflects a certain tension between gay and queer discourses. While queer theorists since the early 1990s have focused their attention on critiquing identity politics, the academic discussion of *Howl* and other poems have largely followed Ginsberg's (2006) own assessment of his work: as he described Howl, "it says – 'I am thus and such and so I have a right to do so, and I'm saying it out loud for all to hear" (p. 41). This essay will ask how Ginsberg's (1959, 2006) starving, hysterical, naked characters achieve social change in poems like *Howl* and "Please Master." Do Ginsberg's poems reinforce or avoid what queer theorists wo-

uld see as the problematic concept of repressed but previously existing subjects? Do they use, reject, or alter contemporary ideas about gay male identity in the 1950s? Readings of Ginsberg's poems as political comings-out remain important, but the productive complexity of Ginsberg's representations of masculinity deserves a more queer reading. In this essay I will examine existing work on Ginsberg's representations of gay masculinities to argue that his poetry offers a concrete instantiation of what Judith Butler (1993) has termed "performativity."

As Jeffrey Gray (2010) described it in his essay "Transgression, Release, and 'Moloch,'" "*Howl* burst onto [the] scene like a firebomb"; it represented "the return of the repressed—aesthetically, sexually, spiritually, and politically" (p. 39). Regina Marler's introduction to her 2004 volume *Queer Beats: How the Beats Turned America On to Sex* celebrated the beats as "rebellious, confessional, [and] ecstatic" (p. xxviii), and "sexual[ly] explicit[]" (p. xxviii). She wrote that "*Howl* . . . [was] the watershed: defiantly joyous and affirming, a Blakean thunderbolt of pride and indignation hurled at the repression of the Eisenhower era" (p. xxxii). While Marler's (2004) introduction acknowledged Ginsberg's attack on gender and sexuality norms, her writing is ensnared by beat hero-worship: she spent three full pages on the censorship trials and attributed *Howl*'s success to its legal notoriety.

Commies, queers, junkies, Jews, mystics, and madmen, in Gray's (2010) and Marler's (2004) interpretations, erupted into public view from the pages of *Howl's* slim volume to assert their right to exist. The passage that attracted most attention from censors appears to justify this reading of joyful, transgressive liberation:

> who bit detectives in the neck and shrieked with delight in policecars for
> committing no crime but their own wild cooking pederasty and intoxication,
>
> who howled on their knees in the subway and were dragged off the roof
> waving genitals and manuscripts,
>
> who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and
> screamed with joy,
>
> who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of
> Atlantic and Caribbean love,

who balled in the morning in the evenings in rosegardens and the grass of
public parks and cemeteries scattering their semen freely to whomever come who may. (Ginsberg, 1959, l. 34-38)

Raymond-Jean Frontain (1999) read these lines as an exposure of the truth about gay subjects. Ginsberg's refusal to censor words like "pederasty," "genitals," and "balled" in his opinion constituted "a liberating assault by truth on a restrictive stereotype" (p. 87) of 1950s culture. Frontain's (1999) article, "'Sweet Boy, Gimme Yr Ass': Allen Ginsberg and the Open Body of the Beat Revolution," focused on anal eroticism as Ginsberg's highest form of celebration, emancipation, and release, especially in "Please Master" and "Sweet Boy, Gimme Yr Ass." Although many critics have not associated Ginsberg with American gay liberation, Frontain (1999) situated *Howl* at the head of the movement, citing Ginsberg's frequent disrobing at poetry readings and his opening of poetry to a new range of subject matter. Frontain (1999) interpreted the "saintly motorcyclist" lines from *Howl* in terms of "rebellion" and "liberation" (p. 84). Anne Hartman (2005), in her article "Confessional Counterpublics in Frank O'Hara and Allen Ginsberg," similarly argued that Ginsberg "[spoke] the . . . secret" (p. 52) of homosexuality in his verse; she made the case that *Howl* confesses the poet's sexuality and effectively "restyl[ed] confession as coming out" (p. 52). Sexuality as an identity, then, appears as an interior fullness that the poet sings through the artifice of craft.

These critics likely followed Ginsberg (1972) himself, who described his sexual ideology as a kind of revelation or expression, despite the simplicity of such a theory in contemporary gender theory. In a 1972 interview with *Gay Sunshine*, Ginsberg distanced himself from the liberation rhetoric of the day because of its clutching at cliché (p. 7). According to Ginsberg (1972), the movement's espousal of "camp" (p. 7) made the movement in the 1970s hostile to a plurality of genders and intimacies. Ginsberg (1972) posited instead a universal male desire that would lead the way out of macho misogyny in its inclusiveness and openness: "I think there's a genuine eros between men" (p. 8), he argues, "a universal experience . . . completely common, completely shared" (p. 10). In describing this "genuine eros," however, Ginsberg replaced the effeminate "fairy" masculinity with a virile Whitmanian one, a universalism that does not necessarily allow for diverse genders and sexualities any more than the campy gay identity he criticizes. Ginsberg's personal theories of gender, sexuality, and identity, then, might not provide the most useful compass for new interpretations of his verse.

We can distance criticism from Ginsberg's own frankly self-promoting annotations and interpretations, which tend toward naturalistic universalism, if we assume the critical position that Ginsberg's poetry is more than just confession, more than a biography that transcribes or hints at actual details from his life. Jason Arthur (2010), for example, condemned the frequent overemphasis on biographical detail in Ginsberg criticism that treats the poet's letters and journals as "the notes and props of autobiography" rather than carefully curated texts in themselves (p. 228). Arthur (2010) blamed Ginsberg himself for this biocentric ethic, because he cultivated biographical readings of his own work in interviews and in the editing of his papers (p. 232). According to Arthur (2010), Ginsberg produced his own poetry as honest, explicit, and life-centered, in a "simultaneous promise and retraction of a titillating secret . . . [a] career-long hide-and-seek game with readers whom he coaxes to seek out the 'unpublishable private literature'" (p. 233). The idea that Ginsberg's poetry is honest, transparent confession, in other words, may have resulted from the poet's own lifelong critical gloss of his work.

Criticism of Ginsberg has often failed to move beyond the joyful innocence and transparence advocated by the poet himself. His erotic poetry, which often exceeds a naturalistic reading, yields the trace of a much more complex take on gender and sexuality in its portrayals of queer sexual encounters of many kinds. While Ginsberg himself often presented his poems as a stripping-away of excess around a suppressed, pure core of essential human nature, we can see in his lyrics the sketches of more sophisticated—and queer—concepts of social and identity change for non-normative masculinities.

Jason Arthur's (2010) criticism of biocentric readings of Ginsberg (1959) provides an opportunity to trouble the idea of the "saintly motorcyclists" (l. 35) passage from *Howl* as a validating announcement of the poet's identity, and to note instead the destabilized genders and sexualities that peek from the surface of the poem. Jeffrey Falla (2002) took a step in this direction in his article "Disembodying the Body: Allen Ginsberg's Passional Subversion of Identity" as he pointed out echoes of Judith Butler's gender theory in Ginsberg's use of subversive repetition. Using the 1973 *Gay Sunshine* interview, in which Ginsberg referred to himself humorously as a "'Jewish Communist fag,'" Falla (2002) argued that Ginsberg destabilized the binary production of identities through parody. In other words, by making a comedy of the seriousness and naturalness of gender, Ginsberg opened identities for new signification, for Falla (2002); he "expos[ed] the

nonmateriality" of sex and gender (p. 54), thus implying that gender is relatively voluntary, if not essential. According to Falla (2002), this strategy of denaturalization allowed Ginsberg to then joyfully declare his sexuality in *Howl* and "enable a sexual liberation by resituating the body transgressively in terms of the signifying practices constructing identity" (p. 59).

Falla's (2002) reading of denaturalization, however, strayed from Judith Butler's theory of performativity even as he cited it. Butler famously theorized that gender and sex are not inner essences but things that only exist in our actions, dress, bodily comportment, and mannerisms. Gender and sexuality must constantly be re-performed, for Butler; they are performative, not fixed, as Ginsberg's essentialist reading of expression and revelation implied. So far, Falla was right—yet in *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (1993) cautioned that the same strategy of denaturalization that he espoused may be insufficient, arguing that it ignored the constitutive constraints on performative gender to describe gender as relatively voluntary (p. 93). She repeatedly rejected the idea of an individual prior to her gender who might choose or subjectively and purposively enact her gender (p. 115): performat*ive* gender is not the same as perform*ed* gender. A man in the 1950s could not necessarily exchange a fairyish gender for a Whitmanian virile one at will, for example. Here Butler pointed out the limits of the academic constructivism that gripped scholarly discussions well into the 2000s and, in her 1993 book, tried to shift the terms of the essentialist-constructivist impasse to a more complex investigation of citationality and constraint (p. 94). At stake in this important qualification and clarification of her 1990 *Gender Trouble* was the idea that the shaming that enforces norms will not simply disappear because gender is not biological or essential: even if gender and sex are constructed, there is still stigma attached to disobeying the punishing imperatives of normativity.

In this sense, Falla's (2002) analysis in "Disembodying the Body" saw only perform*ed*, not perform*ative*, gender in Ginsberg's work and so missed the astonishing complexity of poems like *Howl*. In my opinion, Falla (2002) failed to reconcile Butler with what he saw as Ginsberg's end goal to liberate the individual, of celebrating identity in the face of a repressive society. The text of the poem itself exceeds Ginsberg's stated philosophies: for example, gender in *Howl* causes untold pain and suffering in the lives of the angelheaded hipsters who have to navigate the morass of gender normativity in their everyday lives (1959). The poem does not always take an idyllic flight into libratory bliss but instead compels characters to dance on "broken wineglasses" (Ginsberg, 1959, l. 59).

Like many recent gender discussions, I will argue that *Howl* focuses on a middle ground between naturalist essentialism and the free choice implied by performance that accounts for the painful nuances of gender normativity. Specifically, Ginsberg's (1959) representation of the angelheaded hipsters brings to mind Butler's (1993) suggestion that we cannot simply wake up from sexual repression and decide to perform differently, changing gender like we change a shirt. As she argued, "sexuality cannot be summarily made or unmade, and it would be a mistake to associate 'constructivism' with 'the freedom of a subject to choose his/her sexuality as s/he pleases.' A construction is, after all, not the same as an artifice" (Butler, 1993, p. 94). Gender cannot be altered just by deciding to perform differently: it is neither voluntary nor artificial, "neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation" (p. 95), in Butler's (1993) words. This middle ground relies on repetition because, according to the theory of performativity, gender is enacted when we reiterate gender norms that "precede, constrain, and exceed [us]" (Butler, 1993, p. 234).

Yet these reiterations in Butler (1993) and Ginsberg are not totally new, unrelated to the previous ones we found so repressive: this would reinforce identity as a function of the subject, rather than vice versa. The unthought-of possibility of "joy" that opens the "saintly motorcyclists" (Ginsberg, 1959, l. 35) passage to play repeats existing gay masculinity of the time in a subversive way that manages to initiate social change. The joyful gender citation does not *escape* the regulatory power of the prior one, but "refigure[s], redistribute[s], and resignif[ies]" it, to borrow Butler's (1993) phrasing (p. 109). When Ginsberg (1959) wrote *Howl*, sodomy was not a brand-new idea: what hadn't been thought of before in poetry was its accidental interpretation as "joy[ful]" (l. 35). To be more precise, there is no gendered subject without or prior to these reperformances of gender: the theory that gender depends on reiteration, according to Butler, does not just make performed gender impossible, but forms the possibility of the subject's existence in the first place. This is why a voluntary theory of constructed gender misses the mark, for Butler (1993); as she clarified in *Bodies That Matter*:

> performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the sub ject. This iterability implies that "performance" is not a singular "act" or event, but a ritual-

ized production, a ritual reiterated under and through *constraint* . . . (p. 95, emphasis mine)

In this sense, *Howl*'s repetitions of gender renavigate the old genders without assuming the characters have simply rejected them or that they could entirely reject them in the first place, as if the characters were not formed precisely through these reiterations of gender themselves (Butler, 1993, p. 95), as if there was not always already constraint.

I would like to suggest that Ginsberg's (1959) poetry exceeds the operation of simple performance or expression that so many critics see in *Howl*. The poet Mark Doty (2006) observed that the famous "saintly motorcyclist" passage's "oddly camp tone" turns it into "less a cry of liberation or a celebration of eros than something more complex than either of those things" (p. 14). By taking delight in what was at that time a disgusting, painful, and punishable sex act, this line twists and reinterprets the gay male identities available at the time, including the campy fairy and the demonized pervert. "Be[ing] fucked in the ass" (Ginsberg, 1959, l. 35) was read culturally as perverse, pathological, and violent in the 1940s and 50s; Ginsberg (1986) himself described this attitude in his annotations (p. 126). But when the characters shriek, scream, and howl with *pleasure* in police cars, subways, and rooftops, they reiterate a perverse image of gay masculinity in a way that is no longer painful and perverse but can provide delight. They queer homophobic constructions of gay identity through refiguring the painful and perverse as an instance of pleasure. If men can find pleasure in anal sex, then the normative claims of the "old" masculinity lose their grip and gender can change; committing "pederasty" can unexpectedly produce shrieks of ecstatic "delight" (Ginsberg, 1959) as is seen, for example, in line 34.

In *Howl*, the scene set in the psychiatric hospital doesn't specifically mention queers, but its creative citations of psychiatric patients refer to contemporary gay male identity, if we take into account that, in the 1950s, insane connoted homosexual and vice versa (Rubin, 1993, p. 12). A postwar cultural witch hunt boxed gay men into the loony bin with other assorted deviants, according to Gayle Rubin (1993) and others. Therefore, although the hospital was intended as a place of discipline and stigma, it becomes a positive and erotic place in *Howl*:

who demanded sanity trials accusing the radio of hypnotism & were left with
their insanity & their hands & a hung jury,

who threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism and subsequently
presented themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse with shaven heads and
harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy,

and who were given instead the concrete void of insulin Metrazol electricity
hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational therapy pingpong & amnesia,

who in humorless protest overturned only one symbolic pingpong table,
resting briefly in catatonia,

. . .

Pilgrim State's Rockland's and Greystone's foetid halls, bickering with the
echoes of the soul, rocking and rolling in the midnight solitude-bench dolmen-
realms of love, dream of life a nightmare, bodies turned to stone as heavy as the
moon . . . (Ginsberg, 1959, l. 65-71)

Far from simply a vision of Naomi Ginsberg's hospitalizations, within the walls of the courtroom, lecture hall, and psychiatric ward, the characters who throw potato salad and give "harlequin speeches of suicide" (Ginsberg, 1959, l. 66) make a cartoon of the popular concept that queers were criminally insane. Jeffrey Gray (2010) argued that "humor and self-parody" in these lines "helped to deflate the repressive power against which 'Howl' was especially directed" (p. 38). "Potato salad," "pingpong," and "rocking and rolling" here render ridiculous the popular idea that deviancy is dangerous. Locked into its prison walls, the patients find solace in "rocking and rolling in the midnight solitude-bench dolmen-realms of love" (Ginsberg, 1959, l. 70), finding joy in the queer sexualities for which they are being punished.

The penultimate line of Part III of *Howl* dreams the realization of these performative subversions from Part I. Its apocalyptic imagery conjures a messianic future outside the current constraints, a future that will not necessarily arrive, objectively and finally, but which orients present pain and struggle within the ever-present constraint and stigma:

> 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 . . .
> (Ginsberg, 1959, l. 112)

While this line at first looks like an escape from the hospital and its constraints, Ginsberg's imperative "run outside" assumes that the "outside" of a pathological homosexuality *has not yet happened* and might not ever arrive. The injunction "forget your underwear" acknowledges that the shedding of underwear and repression is still to come. The walls are "imaginary," not solid, constraints—real walls presuppose willful subjects stuck inside them who could cast off the slings and arrows of gender normativity. The line's framing in an "eternal war" connotes continuing difficulties: the line sends a tremor through the hospital walls limiting intimacy between men simply by envisioning this future. Far from a liberation into paradise, when the walls collapse and the hospital illuminates itself, the inmates will run outside to find yet more travails and constraints, rather than a state of voluntary gender and the freedom of subjective choice.

The public, urban setting for many of the angelheaded hipsters' adventures in the poem show the depth and breadth of Ginsberg's (1959) concept of what "queer" meant in the 1950s: his gay masculinities involve public, not just same-sex, encounters. When the characters of the poem fail to contain sex within its designated domestic space, they depart from the heterosexual injunction of privacy that abases them through isolation. *Howl*'s reinterpreted masculinity is visible all over the city: gay, promiscuous, and solitary sex in the poem spills not only into police cars, subways, and roofs in the "saintly motorcyclist" passage (Ginsberg, 1959, l. 36), but also into gardens, parks, graveyards, hallways, diners, empty lots, and movie theaters. When the characters "ball[] . . . in rosegardens and the grass of public parks and cemeteries" (Ginsberg, 1959, l. 38), and as their sex exceeds heteronormative silence, they transform the city around them into a more livable, queer space. Visibility is necessary to the social change envisioned in the poem because heteronormativity maintains itself through a silencing privacy, as Berlant and Warner (2010) have argued (p. 2610); sex is supposed to be private.

Ginsberg's (2006) later poem "Please Master" complicates contemporary ideas about sadomasochism between men by making the encounter prayerful, desirable, and intimate.

Where the audience would expect a cry of pain, the speaker repeatedly asks "please master" (Ginsberg, 2006), more. Similarly to the "saintly motorcyclists" (Ginsberg, 1959, l. 35) passage, "Please Master" refigures dominant/submissive roleplay between men as "delight[ful]" (Ginsberg, 2006):

> . . . Give me your dog fuck faster
> please master make me go moan on the table
> Go moan O please master do fuck me like that
>
> . . .
>
> till I loosen my asshole a dog on the table yelping with terror delight to be loved . . . (l. 47-51)

When the most violent connotations coincide with the most tender expressions of affection, the speaker locates pleasure in precisely the place the public would expect to see the most debasement. As the images conjured by "dog," "beast," "violent," and "palms round my skull" (Ginsberg, 2006, l. 52-57) bud into the penultimate line, "I . . . love you" (l. 56), Ginsberg rejects views of sadomasochism between men as unpleasantly cruel or violent and posits the acts as moments of loving intimacy instead.

The characters of *Howl* suggest the subversive potential of art in the politics of gender and sexuality. In the penultimate line of Part I of *Howl*, Ginsberg implies that art (like *Howl*) might have a profound effect on political struggle in the way it alters readers' opinions:

> rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the goldhorn shadow of the band and blew the suffering of America's naked mind for love in to an eli eli lamma lamma sa bachtani saxophone cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio . . .
> (Ginsberg, 1959, l. 77)

The "ghostly clothes of jazz," gesturing towards many different forms of art, allow the character to "[rise] reincarnate" in his queerness, presumably to a better life of some kind. The word

"[rise]" doubles as a bodily depiction of masculine arousal and sanctifies queer sex between men. The wailed "saxophone cry" that permeates the rooftops and touches the public, literally, "shiver[s]" (or resignifies) the public's notions of social life. For Ginsberg (1959), poetry provides an outlet for pursuing the famous manifesto, "America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel" (l. 73).

Ginsberg's prioritization of constraint in his representations of queer social and identity change offers an effective counterargument to the distance between many LGBT activists and queer theorists. Activists sometimes tend to mistrust constructivist accounts of gender because they so nearly resemble ultraconservative arguments that being gay can be "fixed" (Duggan, 1994, p. 4). If *Howl* effects change by dreaming a subversive citation of gender, however, Ginsberg's texts might begin to bridge this persistent gap. His poetry shows that earlier activists and writers, like the beat writers, who opened up plenty of literary and cultural space for non-normative identities, already worked through performativity. Theories of constructed gender and sexuality do not necessarily prevent change. Activists and theorists might find a common ground for discussion in *Howl*, which might, as Lisa Duggan (1994) exhorted, forge "a political language that can take us beyond the limiting rhetorics of liberal gay rights" (p. 5) and bring queer theories to the activist table.

Howl's nuanced portraits of gender and sexuality might also make a dent in the simplistic biological definitions of gender and sexuality so frequent in American media. Our popular political discourses still cling tightly to an essentialism that supporters and opponents of gay rights alike seem to feel justifies sexualities. Congressman Barney Frank (Sheff, 2011), for example, attributed recent political progress for gays and lesbians to disclosure and exposure: he argued, in a recent interview, that "people are out. More and more people know people who are gay . . . it's not kept in the closet anywhere near as much as it used to be" (p. 2). Lady Gaga's popular song "Born This Way" marks this contemporary resurgence in essentialist rhetoric and the paucity of truly queer public discourses as she sings, "baby, you were born this way - no matter gay, straight, or bi, lesbian, [or] transgendered life" (Gaga, 2011).

Poetry's ability to reach into otherwise isolated lives makes this discussion of the performative gender in Ginsberg's (1959) lines extremely important for current gay politics, especially because

Howl has remained such a popular work through the decades. Despite the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell and scattered state laws legalizing gay marriage, popular representations of LGBT life in U.S. culture remain caricatured, normal, and safe. The world has certainly changed since the poet Mark Doty's (2006) upbringing, which he recalled with a description of poring through libraries for hints of queer community, "looking for writers or at least characters in books who might share my own secret life of desire" (p. 13). Unfortunately, TV and movie characters available to LGBT youth today often fall into Will and Grace kitsch, Ellen DeGeneris-style normality, or the occasional meteoric glitter of an Adam Lambert. While upper-middle-class teens growing up in well-educated, liberal areas might be experiencing a breath of fresh air right now, a whole arsenal of social pressures and punishments still exist for many rural and working-class teens. Narratives of gay progress in the United States also generally fail to acknowledge the irreducible differences in queer experiences across racial and ethnic lines: progress for well-to-do white kids does not necessarily mean progress for other identity groups. There is still plenty of work left to do and more than enough urgency for us today in the explosive rhythms of *Howl*.

Ginsberg's (1959) characters achieve social change in the city spaces of *Howl* by violently and joyfully staking out queer territory. Rather than simply liberating, their performativity cites gay masculinity subversively enough to do useful political work. These poetic representations of gay masculinities avoid the essentialist concept of repressed but previously existing subjects and demonstrate a useful opportunity for converging queer and gay work. By envisioning the disruptive power of repetitions of performative gender, Ginsberg's (1959) poetry queers gay masculinity of the American 1940s and 50s and prompts us to a more complex public discourse today.

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[i] I borrow this phrasing from Michael Warner (1999) in *The Trouble With Normal*: "Gay people are now desperately hoping a gay gene can be found. They think they would be more justified if they could show that they had no choice . . . . Both sides seem to agree on an insane assumption: that only immutable and genetic sexualities could be legitimate, that if being gay could be shown to be learned, chosen, or partly chosen, then it could be reasonably forbidden" (p. 9).