

Industrialized America: The Sunflower Within

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“History will make this poem prophetic and its awful silliness a hideous
spiritual music...
the world will be destroyed
but I will die only for poetry, that will save the world.”

-Allen Ginsberg, “Death to Van Gogh’s Ear”

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Abstract

Throughout this report, I study the works of Allen Ginsberg, a leader amongst poets of the Beat movement and creator of eco-poetic works. Ginsberg spoke out against the way American culture revolves around consumption and is ultimately bound to self-destruct. I address how his poem “Sunflower Sutra” helped to develop a more pragmatic and interdisciplinary environmentalism in his time, as well as how his works aided in shaping our current environmental movement. More specifically, I will be analyzing this piece and reflecting on themes surrounding industrial pollution in order to put Ginsberg’s work into conversation with contemporary strategies of environmental risk communication.

Defining Terms

1. Beat Movement: A literary movement started by authors who explored and influenced American culture as well as politics in the post-war. Mostly, this movement and its works were published and popularized throughout the 1950s. The bulk of the Beat movement's cultivation occurred in the West Coast, in areas like San Francisco. Soon this area became a creative hub for writers like Ginsberg. The central characteristics of Beat culture were the rejection of standard narrative values, the rejection of materialism, explicit portrayals of the human condition, experimentation with psychedelic drugs, and sexual liberation and exploration. From the minds of the Beats, a renewed perception of the world was created that lit a fire under the youth of America.
2. Ecopoetry: A twofold definition. For something to be ecopoetic, it needs not only to be environmental, but also environmentalistic. "Environmental" in this context relates to the idea that first, the poem must be about the natural, non-human world. The piece also needs to be "environmentalistic", meaning that it must motivate change through its representation of environmental damage or risk. In a broader sense, it is meant to encourage individuals to reflect on their interactions with their environment and is rhetorically unsettling as well as urgent (Shoptaw 2016).
3. Transcendentalism: A 19th century movement of writers and philosophers that believed in the essentially unity of creation, the innate goodness of humanity, and that nature serves as a form of spiritual truth.
4. Urban Pastoral: This is a common theme across literature like Ginsberg's. "Pastoral" refers to the author's desire to completely withdraw from society to a simpler existence in

accord with nature (Diggory, 2000). When put in conversation with the word “urban”, the term refers to a more specific desire to withdraw from social structures in the philosophical and ideological sense, while still physically dwelling in the urban setting of the contemporary world.

5. Environmental Communication: This is the study and practice of communication about the environment and human interactions with the environment, and is an essential aspect of the contemporary environmental movement.
6. Risk Communication: The exchange of real-time information, advice, and opinions between experts and people facing threats to their health, economics, or social well-being. When put in conversation with environmental communication, it is easy to see that it is a very useful tool. It encompasses three different concepts: precautionary advocacy, outrage management, and crisis communication.
7. Precautionary Advocacy: . This applies in situations of low hazard and high outrage. It encompasses the notion that when an activity raises threats of harm to the world, precautionary measures should be taken even if the causes and effects of said activity are not fully understood (Cox & Pezzullo, 2018). The overall goal of precautionary advocacy is to increase hazard perception and make people see risk as science sees it

Introduction

Renowned poet Allen Ginsberg was and remains known to millions throughout the world on account of his tireless work that promoted humane sociopolitical causes. His ideologies were reflective of the Beat Movement; his writing was raw, candid, and explicit in nature in order to

evoke national attention. Ginsberg stunned the minds of his generation and consequently became a leader of the Beat generation through his outrightly honest reflections on the consumptive and restrictive qualities of American society. He wrote to break boundaries for those who struggled under the societal restraints, as he witnessed the countless injustices imposed upon marginalized groups by society. He advocated for change by promoting non-conformity and freedom, as well as through his criticisms of materialism, consumerism, and industrialization.

Ginsberg's works represented outcries of rage and frustration against an abusive society, and can be seen as prophetic in today's world. He predicted much of the self-destruction and the countless downfalls that humanity has experienced on account of our selfish and destructive attitudes towards the world around us, our environment, and nature as a whole. He believed that Beat poets like himself were "opening up another area of consciousness, a planetary ecological consciousness..." (Behdad et al., 2014). His poetry proves this idea truthful, as he effectively raised public awareness about climate crisis and encouraged environmental activism. This theme of his poetry is something that commonly goes unaddressed, mostly on account of how the countercultural Beat movement's effects on early environmentalism often are not recognized. For this reason, it was of particular interest to me to shed light onto the characteristics of Ginsberg's poetry that has reached across the minds and hearts of generations through its controversial criticisms regarding climate issues.

For the purpose of this research report, I will specifically be focusing on Ginsberg's works that are related to industrial pollution. His poem "Sunflower Sutra" is an exemplary piece that touched on this theme. The overarching message of this poem is how careless and selfish industrialization of America had destroyed and devastated the environment. It addressed the

damage that industrial pollution had caused, ranging from the West to the East Coasts, and motivated awareness throughout the public sphere about how the country was guaranteeing its own self-destruction. I will expand upon what strategies Ginsberg used that provoked such a monumental change in public perception of environmental hazards in relation to pollution.

The ultimate goal of this research is to prove how the theme of and warnings about industrial pollution throughout Ginsberg's poetry is relatable to contemporary methods and concepts encompassed by environmental risk communication, such as precautionary advocacy, hazard perception, and outrage management. These analyses are essential to make the relationship between his poetry and environmental risk communication clear.

Leading Questions

1. How did Ginsberg—by way of his poem “Sunflower Sutra” —make the shift into the mainstream possible for an environmental consciousness surrounding industrial pollution?
2. Where do we see similar countercultural thought to environmental issues in today's society and where is it absent?
3. How are Ginsberg's strategies reflective of contemporary methods of communicating about climate crisis and environmental issues like industrial pollution?
4. Where does this research fit in the environmental conversation of 21st century environmentalism?

Background: About Ginsberg

According to Jonah Raskin in his book *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation*, “Perhaps no major twentieth-century poet had a more

conspiratorial frame of mind than Ginsberg did; and arguably his sense of conspiracy inspired him to write some of his best poetry” (Raskin, 2004). On account of his controversial beliefs and ideologies, Ginsberg’s poetry was capable of shaking up and collapsing cultural boundaries, sparking rebellion, and raising awareness regarding the destructive nature of American society. Some of his most powerful poetry was written at the height of the Cold War, which had a profound effect on its impact across the nation. The poem “Sunflower Sutra” is reflective of this characteristic, and it comes as no surprise that Ginsberg’s criticisms of the corruption of American democracy, consumerism, and consumption within this piece became so critically acclaimed.

All of these things played into paranoia that ran rampant throughout the United States during the 1950s in relation to war, bombs, and a world that was becoming rapidly mechanized. As he addressed this paranoia throughout his poems, he linked it to themes of pollution by explicitly referencing the effects that bombs have on our environment as well as how American factories are toxic. In contrast to Raskin’s emphasis on how war culture influenced Ginsberg’s poetry, scholar R. L. Phillips argues that much of his works represented something much deeper: a strong desire to reconnect with nature. Phillips called attention to Ginsberg’s roots ranging from his life in New Jersey and New York City to his education at Columbia where he took special interest in transcendental literature, namely of Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau.

At Columbia University, Ginsberg bonded with like-minded individuals that were also key figures in the Beat and ecopoetic movement, the most notable of which being Jack Kerouac. His focus on his personal experiences and observations regarding the toxic nature of American industrialization throughout his poetry marked a turn for the Beat movement that no other poet

had been capable of accomplishing. His work was more nature-centered than many of his contemporaries, and the controversiality of his works sparked public conversation about the dangers of industrialized America that was necessary to launch the Beat movement. All of the sudden, poetry was useful in communicating about environmental issues (Phillips, 1996).

Going into more depth about what inspired Ginsberg's focus on environmental issues, El-Sherif's dissertation offers an interesting insight into how Ginsberg's own homosexuality served as a catalyst for self-exploration, as it alienated him and prompted him to become deeply introspective from an early age. This examination of himself opened his eyes to the environment, and why everybody is different. "Environment" in this sense is not literally in relation to pollution, but rather the ideological environment in which he lived. As he was set apart from the rest of society on account of his homosexuality, he felt radicalized because he could see the world in a broader sense than others as he lived outside of the mainstream American life. This kind of consciousness was not respected by the majority of Americans in his time period, but that did not stop Ginsberg from speaking out against the injustice this lack of consciousness poses in society. He used his poetry to expose the madness, environmental catastrophe, predatory capitalism, and overall ugliness of American civilization (El-Sharif, 1983). Through these themes, Ginsberg teaches us the importance of having an ecological consciousness.

Ultimately, each of these scholars brought attention to how Ginsberg refused to close his eyes in the face of the environmental crisis like many Americans did, and still do. It is through literature like his that our eyes, hearts, and minds can open up and fully comprehend the threat that crisis poses. When putting his works in conversation with contemporary environmental

issues, it is no surprise that his influence is just as strong and effective today as it was in his generation.

“Sunflower Sutra”

Within the following section, I will be analyzing Ginsberg’s “Sunflower Sutra”. I plan to take special consideration of themes relating to industrial pollution throughout this piece, as well as how these themes relate to environmental risk communication in modern American society. I will also address criticisms of this poem to highlight the way the public perceived his works as well as the extent to which his works motivated change and hazard awareness in the face of rapid industrialization.

Literary Analysis

Ginsberg’s “Sunflower Sutra” was written in 1955 during his stay in Berkley, California. This poem exemplifies common themes that he addressed within most of his poetry, and represents the power he was capable of harnessing with his words. From the title itself, we find a reference towards a Buddhist form of literature called “sutra”. Sutras are pieces written in strings of witty or satirical aphorisms--short, pithy statements-- that reveal a deeper truth than initially meets the eye. The title plays into the notion of a “sutra”, as Ginsberg implies that the derived meaning of the piece is much simpler and laid out for the reader to interpret than it actually is. In reality, it is extremely complex and loaded with a variety of information to interpret.

At the beginning of the poem, we find Ginsberg lamenting over the growth of modern industry and consumerism that resulted in the loss of appreciation for the wilderness and natural beauty of America. He is not alone “under the/ huge shade of a Southern Pacific locomotive”, as

he stated that Jack Kerouac was there with him to share his sadness (Ginsberg, 1955, p. 60). In a figurative sense, they spiritually took a seat together and reflected on the blight of industrialization. Ginsberg stated that they were surrounded by the “gnarled steel roots of trees of machinery,” using an image of raw nature and twisting it to show that it was not truly a tree’s roots that they saw, but rather a mess of rusted machinery (Ginsberg, 1955, p. 60). This elicits a feeling of awe and disappointment simultaneously, as the imagery of natural beauty is satisfying on the surface until we realize he is ultimately expressing that because of industrialization, nature is no longer as beautiful as it should be.

Ginsberg continued on with this image of industrial waste as he reflected on a river covered with a thick film of oil that is now inhabitable for fish to live in. He also noted how the mountains overlooking San Francisco could no longer support a hermit who wished to live off the land, which is a clear reference towards Thoreau’s book *Walden*, which was a project inspired by the transcendental philosophy of simple living and self-sufficiency. Interrupting Ginsberg’s train of thought, Kerouac told him to “Look at the Sunflower”, which is where the poem really launches into the horrors inflicted upon nature by industrial pollution (Ginsberg, 1955, p. 60). Certainly, this object seems out of place in contrast to the beaten down landscape that he previously described. This is meant to jolt the reader, but as he began explaining his observations of the flower, the connection is clearly presented.

Ginsberg saw the sunflower as an abnormality of nature, referring to it as “a dead gray shadow against the/ sky, big as a man” (Ginsberg, 1955, p. 60). He then proceeded to reflect on one of the biggest turning points in his artistic career as he was living in Harlem, New York, during which he experienced an auditory hallucination of hearing William Blake reading poetry.

From this reflection, he started to reference Blake's poem, titled "Ah, Sunflower", in which he wrote of how mankind strives after the beauty and blissful ignorance of youthfulness. Ginsberg used this literary allusion to contrast how extreme pollution has become, and how not even youth can experience such bliss in the modern world. Even further, he reflected on the state of the environment in New York at the time. It was not a beautiful scene that he described there either, as the natural surroundings essentially mirrored the pollution and environmental destruction that he found in the West Coast. Ginsberg briefly described that New York had been filled to the brim with industry, and that the culmination of industry as a whole had made the city foul and disgusting.

From this point onwards, he elaborated even more on his vision of the sunflower and how it can be used as a metaphor for the condition of humanity in American society. Ginsberg stated that the sunflower was "poised against the sunset, crackly bleak and dusty/ with the smut and smog and smoke of olden locomotives..." (Ginsberg, 1955, p. 60) The sunflower is something that Ginsberg found difficult to interpret, as it stood as an object that once represented beauty, but had come to take on the image of pollution of the environment it lived in. He stated:

The grime was no man's grime but death and human locomotives,/ all that dress
of dust, that veil of darkened railroad skin, that smog of cheek,/ that eyelid of
black mis'ry.../ worse-than-dirt--industrial--modern--all/ that civilization spotting
on your crazy golden crown...(60)

In this quote, we can observe that Ginsberg put a play on the word "locomotive" in comparison to his initial use of it in the poem. He used it in the beginning to refer to the industrial revolution and how it paved a literal and figurative path of devastation for America,

namely through the creation of the railroad system. In this instance, however, Ginsberg subtly changed the meaning to refer to himself, Kerouac, and by default all other Beat poets. They, as humans, had taken on the characteristics of the locomotive: they were always in motion, extremely powerful, and most importantly, they were dominant within their own artistic landscape. He continued on to describe the desolate landscape he and Kerouac found themselves in, and this time called attention to the plight of the human “locomotives” in America that were responsible-- through participation or complacency --for the damage industrialization had inflicted upon the environment. As he often did within his writing, Ginsberg used lewd and explicit language to paint an imprintable picture of the way he viewed America in the minds of his readers: oppressive, abusive, and selfish.

To contrast this disturbing imagery, he returned to the image of the sunflower, calling it the “perfect beauty” that was a “sweet natural eye to the new hip moon” (Ginsberg, 1955, p. 60). Ginsberg seemed to be referring to the Romantic era here, which was at its peak throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, 1800-1850. Prominent figures and works of that period prophesied the destruction that industrialism would cause, and they spoke a lot about how the very existence of industrialism contrasted with the natural order and beauty of the world. This quote can essentially be interpreted as Ginsberg’s shout-out to his predecessors, and by proving their points true through his poem about the state of contemporary America, he simultaneously gave himself credibility as his piece served to follow in their footsteps. His ultimate message with this portion of the poem was to encourage America to take a “hip” new direction by considering what implications their beliefs in industrialization have on the very environment they dwell in.

Towards the conclusion of the piece, Ginsberg once again shifts the meaning of the word “locomotive”, as well as specifies his meaning of “sunflower”. At this point, it is made clear that the sunflower represents America as a whole--a once beautiful land built on the promise of progress and advancement. The locomotive, then, was a symbol of that promised progress; it became a powerful machine that revolutionized transportation, connected the coasts, and represented human ingenuity. Each of them, as noted by Ginsberg in the poem, have lost their brilliance and have, in a sense, died. This idea is shown in the quote:

Poor dead flower? When did you forget you were a flower? When did you/ look at
your skin and decide you were an impotent dirty old/ locomotive?/ ...the specter
and shade of a once powerful mad American locomotive? (Ginsberg, 1955, p. 61)

In spite of this, Ginsberg argued that America was “...never no locomotive, Sunflower, you were a sunflower!” (61). This realization of his motivated him to jump to action, and he presented a new vision of America to his audience. This new vision is an America that remembers and respects the roots it came from, and does not get lost within its selfish goals. He said we must use the sunflower as a weapon against all those who oppose his progressive ideologies, rather than for its beauty. To conclude the poem, Ginsberg stated that humanity, and America as a whole, is not composed of industrial grimes, corporate greed, or violent war. Instead, he proposed that people are “golden sunflowers inside...” (61). He ended his work on a seemingly hopeful note, which is that America can become wonderful again, and that the desolate landscape he has painted for us can be restored to a picture of beauty.

“Sunflower Sutra”: Scholarly Criticism

Ginsberg’s “Sunflower Sutra” is a poem of crisis, as well as a poem of recovery. The sunflower he repeatedly references suggests that America, and in a more literal sense, the country’s *environment* has been destroyed and tarnished by modern society’s carelessness. Even deeper, the sunflower stands as an object that once represented beauty, but has now taken on the image of pollution. In spite of its deteriorated state, however, Ginsberg admires the flower for its astonishing resilience in the face of industrial pollution. He seemed to believe that despite the damage the country has inflicted upon itself, there is a chance to recover. The poem stood in its time as a call for attention against the impending environmental crisis, and stands as a reminder today about the injustices being done against the environment in American society. It encourages individuals to ask themselves how they can revive the vibrance that has been lost, and in essence, how they can bring the sunflower back into the nation.

As stated in Chris Barrata’s dissertation on ecopoetry, Ginsberg’s work “exhibits strong suggestions of a turn toward nature in its virulent condemnation of industrial capitalism and the ills associated with the modern city” (Baratta et al., 2013). This is characteristic of many of Ginsberg’s poems, and is particularly useful in analyzing “Sunflower Sutra”. All throughout this piece, he was focused on the binary between industrialization and nature. Through this binary, Ginsberg highlighted the many dangers that industrial progress poses on the environment in the modern era. He explicitly discussed smog and water pollution in areas on the West Coast and New York. Ginsberg wrote this poem based off sights he witnessed as someone who partook in the numerous causes of industrial pollution: he himself used the train, flew on planes, used cars,

and more. So, we can see that within this poem, he strategically placed himself right in the middle of the binary, further proving that industrialization and its consequences are inescapable.

This strategy of Ginsberg's is further explored by professor and poetry scholar Terence Diggory in his essay "Allen Ginsberg's Urban Pastoral". Within this essay, Diggory connected aspects of Ginsberg's "Sunflower Sutra" to the pastoral literary tradition. He did so by relating Ginsberg's idealization of nature to a common pastoral desire: a complete "withdrawal from society to a simpler existence in accord with nature" (Diggory, 2000). Diggory noted that Ginsberg's admiration of William Blake and his belief in Buddhism strengthened his relation to what he called the "urban" pastoral. This refers to Ginsberg's desire to withdraw from social structures in the philosophical and ideological sense, while still physically dwelling in the urban setting. In this sense, "Sunflower Sutra", through its themes of industrial pollution, can be seen as ironic; Ginsberg lived in the city and participated in many of the activities that he explicitly criticized, yet he desired to turn to nature for peace, calling himself a "city-hermit".

In summation, Ginsberg's poem fits the criteria of ecopoetry to the ultimate degree. He explicitly criticized industrial pollution while simultaneously relating to the internal conflict of everyday people living in America, and offered a space for society to feel passionately as well as discuss issues about environmental crisis. As stated by John Shoptaw in his article about the nature of ecopoetry, what Ginsberg did within "Sunflower Sutra" is the ultimate goal of an ecopoetic work. It encouraged and continues to inspire individuals to reflect on their interactions with their environment, is rhetorically unsettling, and urgent. Overall, this analysis and criticism furthers the goal of my research, as I seek to prove that literature like Ginsberg's helped to

cultivate a pragmatic and interdisciplinary environmentalism--ultimately shaping the current environmental movement.

Contemporary Applications

As stated by Ginsberg in response to the question of how he would sum up the idea of the Beat movement and his poetry as a whole, he stated that at the intellectual heart of it, there was a push to return to nature and to revolt against the machine (Lewak et al., 2014). While this statement reflects a negative view of technology on account of its ties to American's cultural obsession with consumption, Ginsberg also advocated for technology that worked against the system and *for* the revolutionaries. He advocated for individuals to seize the means of communication in the same way that poets have seized the world of literature, and believed that technology like telephone calls, television programs, radio stations, and movie sets could be manipulated for a good cause just as easily as a bad one. When we take this statement into consideration after thoroughly analyzing "Sunflower Sutra", it is easy to see the implications that this piece held over the environmental consciousness in America.

Ginsberg's environmentally-oriented poetry was reflective of his goal to seize the means of communication, and it marked the beginnings of media being used as a means to encourage individuals to be environmentally conscious, which is something we have learned about through several readings in this course. The most notable of these can be found in the work of Peter Sandman, in which he discusses using the method of entertainment as a means of fostering precautionary advocacy in situations of risk. He stated that "If you can arouse people's interest or entertain them, you'll get their attention ... Over the long haul, it's hard to make risk and safety

information interesting enough or entertaining enough. But it's always worth the effort to try" (Sandman 2012). Using the media is one such way to do this, and it is very interesting to compare how Ginsberg's work over half a century ago is reflective of this notion. As a writer of the Beat movement, he was constantly faced with the challenge of creating content that would inspire the hearts of America and instill a need for change in the midst of industrial pollution.

Furthering the idea that Allen Ginsberg motivated attention via his literature in ways that parallel with contemporary strategies of environmental risk communication, I feel that Kari Norgaard's *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life* is a crucial source to take into consideration. She referenced the concept of a socially organized denial, which is encompassed by tools of order in a society that are enforced by master narratives that often manipulate the seriousness of risk. In essence, public nonresponse to climate risk is produced through the cultural practices of everyday life. Therefore, those who live more comfortably in society often have a lower hazard perception than individuals that are faced with struggles relating to an issue like industrial pollution. This led Norgaard to pose the question of how we can overcome denial in the face of privilege and our fragmented awareness of the world. This is where studying the work of Ginsberg proves extremely useful.

Ginsberg was an individual that came from a background of privilege, although he did have his fair share of struggle as a mentally-ill homosexual in 1950s America. In contrast to his background, however, it is fascinating to study how he used his platform to bridge the gap of denial amongst members of the public that came from similar circumstances as he did, and it is heartwarming to study the hope that his words gave to those impoverished and suffering at the hands of industrial pollution. The contemporary applications that Ginsberg's poetry has within

environmental risk communication today should come as no surprise. Literature is and always has been one of the most effective mediums through which the public can gain information about environmental problems and what threats these problems pose on our lives if change is not implemented.

To conclude, from the influence of the Beat movement and eco-poetics in Ginsberg's poetry, it is easy to see how his work can be used to encourage introspection and shape the way we personally interact with and construct the environment around us. Sometimes, it is more useful to read a piece of passionate poetry that mirrors our society rather than reading cold, hard, scientific fact. It makes the truth a bit easier to swallow and gives us various perspectives on the world. Only through his poetic ability could Ginsberg influence the minds of not only his time period, but also minds within today's society in relation to effective strategies that encourage environmental communication and awareness. He encourages us all to see the sunflower within the desolate state of our industrialized world.

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