

Howl(-ing) at America: Foucauldian confession-as-resistance in *Howl* and *America* by Allen Ginsberg.

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-Declaration/Confession-

The material contained in this thesis is my own account of the research carried out by myself during the Honours degree program.

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Date

-Acknowledgements-

The following people have, in their own ways, greatly contributed to the commencement and completion of this thesis.

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My parents, Peter and Jill, encouraged me to think about the 'big questions' in life.

Allen Ginsberg is one of the most important poets in contemporary times.

-Abstract-

In this thesis I provide readings of the long poems *Howl* and *America* by Allen Ginsberg. Locating the poems in their social, political and cultural context, I argue that Ginsberg is oppressed for his sexuality, drug use, mental fragility, political perspectives and concern for the marginalised. By drawing on notions of power relations, confession and resistance from Foucault's *The history of sexuality, volume one: an introduction*, I outline a theoretical framework for the "confession-as-resistance" and argue that through his poetry it is possible for Ginsberg to simultaneously "confess" and "resist". From his position of below-ness in relation to the various cultural and institutional structures that dominate him, Ginsberg offers, in his writing, confessions that simultaneously articulate the "truth" about himself and those close to him, and resist the domination that he experiences as a marginalised member of his society. He is able to do so because the act of confessing – a discourse in which the confessing subject is also the subject of the confession – mobilises his agency, reasserts his subjectivity and provides opportunities to resist, to counter the subordination he experiences.

In chapter two I provide a close reading of *Howl* and suggest that Ginsberg's resistance is possible because within the confession he has the opportunity to articulate a discourse of his choosing. The resistant confession is seen in the words he chooses, the people to whom he directs his confession, the form it assumes, and the "space" in which it is delivered. Focusing on *America*, in chapter three I develop the idea that in providing a confessional discourse the confessing subject can simultaneously interrogate those who oppress it, challenging assumptions about the unity of the subject and exposing its instability. In doing so, the potential for social change in the readers' context – even beyond the poem – is realised. Reading *Howl* and *America* as instances of the confession-as-resistance produces enhanced readings of the poems that are valuable to contemporary readers because they address issues of inequality, oppression and the possibility of enacting one's agency to effect social change.

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The narrational voice is the voice of a subject recounting something, remembering an event or an historical sequence, knowing who he is, where he is, and what he is talking about. It responds to some 'police', a force of law or order ('What "exactly" are you talking about?'): the truth of equivalence. In this sense, all organized narration is 'a matter of the police', even before its genre (mystery, novel, cop story) has been determined.

Jacques Derrida (1979:104-5)

-Introduction-

Western man has become a confessing animal.

(Foucault 1978:59)

Confession has a pervasive role in the western world. Celebrities and criminals confess, presidents, lovers and CEOs confess, and students confess. One confesses on the multitude of forms and applications that govern contemporary existence; indeed the second page of this thesis contains a confession offered to those who will examine this work to assure them that it is, in fact, my own scholarship. Confessional discourses occupy a unique space in the literary canon. Whether a novel, lyric, or poem, there are several characteristics of confessional literatures that are consistent regardless of the literary form. Literatures of confession are, in a sense, “autobiographical”:¹ the subject who confesses is also the subject of the confession. Confessions are offered “from below”, in that an “other” authority is the one who hears and has the power to exonerate or forgive, punish and redeem. Confessions also give an opportunity for confessing subjects to have a creative voice, in the sense that they are actively involved in the construction of the confessing-self in the narration of their confession; and this voice resists the position of “below-ness” also experienced by the confessing subject. There is, therefore, a necessarily complex matrix of power relations, of dominance and resistance, at work in the process of confession. Certainly these are characteristics of Allen Ginsberg’s poems *Howl* and *America*.²

Drawing on Foucauldian notions of power relations, confession, and resistance, I will explore the nature and role of confession in *Howl* and *America*. I begin by situating Ginsberg in the historical context within which he composed *Howl* and *America*, and argue that this context was significant

¹ When quoting directly, I employ single quotation marks. In cases when I seek to draw attention to the suspended nature of language and meaning I use double quotation marks.

² See Appendix for full versions of *Howl* and *America*.

in inspiring these confessional poems. Having introduced the poet and the poems, I focus on highlighting the key aspects of Foucauldian theory that will inform the remainder of this thesis. Locating Foucault's conceptualization of confession and resistance within his understanding of power relations, I will demonstrate the manner in which *Howl* and *America* are instances of what I propose are "confession-as-resistance" or "resistant confession". In chapter two and chapter three I examine *Howl* and *America* respectively and, by harnessing the discussion in this introduction, demonstrate how Foucauldian theory and the confession-as-resistance give rise to readings that are as vital to contemporary western readers as the individual poems were to their original readers and listeners.

It is significant Ginsberg has chosen the poetic form to record his confession, as it embodies much of his argument in its very form. Creative, emotive, intelligent and descriptive, *Howl* and *America* demonstrate a synergy between form and function; that is to say the form of the poem, the medium through which Ginsberg conveys his confession, is consistent with the message of his communication. The poetic form is significant, as I will attempt to demonstrate, in the scope it offers Ginsberg to resist domination: to choose whom he confesses to and how the confession is realised; to challenge and rupture notions that, in other forms and contexts might otherwise be perceived as "stable"; and to embody an alternative discourse to that which is typically proffered by governments and the establishment. The poetic form is not all, however; the content of the confession is clearly important and, as I have already suggested, the space in which the confession occurs is also not without significance.

Approaching *Howl* and *America* as instances of confession-as-resistance will highlight the significance the poems have played and continue to play in the American literary arena and beyond. I propose that by drawing on Foucauldian theory to engage with *Howl* and *America*, the reader is enabled to engage in a more enhanced and richer reading that highlights, in particular, the manner in which Ginsberg, as subject, is able to enact his agency despite formidably oppressive social and political circumstances.

Engaging Ginsberg

Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) compiled *City midnight junk train*, some fourteen months before his death in April 1997, as an anthology of what he considered the most ‘honest’ and most ‘penetrant’ of his writing (Ginsberg 1996:xvii). The book includes the long poems *America* and *Howl*, which form the central textual focus of this thesis.³

The choice to use *City midnight junk train* is significant. Firstly, in this volume both *Howl* and *America* appear together. Secondly, there is a sense, at some level, in which the poet himself endorses the poems sharing a space “between the covers”. This, along with the fact that both poems were written in the San Francisco bay area in 1955, lends a continuity that extends beyond thematic content to geography and chronology. Thirdly, the version of *Howl* published in this text includes a fourth section of the poem entitled ‘Footnote to *Howl*’ that was written after the historical first reading in San Francisco in 1955. The choice to utilise a later version of the poem is reflective of the way Ginsberg appears to have thought about the poem: The footnote, then, stands as *part* of the “poem proper”. Finally, the book was the last of its kind to be commissioned and introduced by Ginsberg himself before his death. At the risk of appearing sentimental, I will venture a further qualification as to the significance of this fact. This thesis was submitted almost 50 years to the day since the first public reading of *Howl* on 7 October 1955. There is a sense of completion and symmetry in the choice to use the final anthology compiled by Ginsberg himself.

Jonah Raskin’s 2004 book *American scream* represents some of the most contemporary research into Ginsberg, the poem *Howl* and the role of both in the making of the so-called Beat Generation.⁴ Raskin’s research

³ The poems themselves are found in many collections and anthologies – both compiled in direct relation to Ginsberg and in the context of American literature in the twentieth century. The decision to use this particular anthology as a source text for this thesis was a conscious one.

⁴ Jack Kerouac coined the term “Beat Generation” in 1948. It plays on the words “beat” – meaning tired and down-and-out – and “beatific”. A generation that consisted largely of struggling writers, students and drug addicts, the beats became counter-culture heroes known for their nonconformity. Kerouac wrote three articles about the Beat Generation: ‘About the beat generation’, ‘Lamb, no lion’ and ‘Beatific: the origins of the beat generation’. See Raskin (2004:162, 204ff.)

serves well to describe a perspective of the cultural, historical and social climate that gave rise to Ginsberg's *Howl* and, indeed, the beginnings of what would later become known as the Beat Generation. Importantly, *American scream* is concerned with multiple dimensions of Ginsberg's life, including his childhood, familial context, schooling, mental health, political attachments, friendships and sexuality.⁵

Ginsberg's journals, which cover the years in which he composed *Howl* and *America*, provide some insight into his writing context and his poetic and personal preoccupations. The journals are problematic when one considers the multiplicity of subject positions and personae that may be encountered in this hybrid of personal correspondence, poetry and literary critique. There is, for example, Ginsberg-the-man who exists at a distance from the text, who has friendships and relationships and performs a variety of activities "outside the text". There is, also, Ginsberg-the-poet who writes poetry amidst the day-to-day records of another persona, Ginsberg-the-journalist. There is, again, Ginsberg-the-poetic-persona, the "I" of the poems recorded in the journals. Finally, there is Ginsberg-the-critic, who arranges and edits the poems, recorded in the journals, for publication.⁶ The journals subsequently informed further research, acting as pointers and cues for other avenues of research, avenues identified both in their presence and in their absence.

Whilst many researchers are at times justifiably suspicious of material found on the Internet, with respect to Ginsberg and research into his life and poetry it is a valuable resource.⁷ As a medium, the Internet is

⁵ Raskin's approach to *Howl*, then, is not isolated from the cultural and historical context in which the poem was composed. Raskin has sought to locate both Ginsberg and *Howl* within a specific context in time and space, and identified points of convergence and confrontation between the poem, the poet and the diverse settings in which both are found. By taking this approach *Howl* takes on a life of its own and one might almost suggest it was instrumental in fracturing Ginsberg-the-man and Ginsberg-the-poet as subject positions.

⁶ Ginsberg's journals have proven to be simultaneously problematic and invaluable. The thoughts, emotions, anecdotes and poetic fragments recorded by Ginsberg point to the context (psychological, emotional and cultural) in which he composed *Howl* and *America*. Certainly on these counts the journals have proved helpful to my research. However, to the extent that the journals suggest insight into the motivations and intentions of the poet they are problematic.

⁷ It is important to note the quantity and quality of scholarship found on the Internet that relates to *Howl* and *America*, Ginsberg and the Beat Generation. Some pertinent websites include: *The Allen Ginsberg Trust* [www.allenginsberg.org], *Shadow changes into bone* [www.ginzy.net], *The Beat Page: Allen Ginsberg*

entirely consistent with Ginsberg's approach to poetry and criticism – the Internet functions, largely, beyond “petty” censorship and is largely democratic in its operation. The *Allen Ginsberg Trust* operates a website with essays, poetry and spoken word audio files that are difficult (if not impossible) to otherwise access. Similarly, the *Literary Kicks* website is a valuable resource that chronicles the Beat Generation and its contemporary incarnation(s). It would be an oversight in a scholarly undertaking such as this one not to seriously engage with the information that is available online.

Engaging Foucault

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) was one of the most influential contemporary thinkers in the western world. His extensive work as a “social scientist” and a “historian of ideas” have been adopted in disciplines beyond those in which he chiefly operated. The Foucauldian project of locating and understanding the subject in the context of power relations is primary and lays a foundation for further discussion in this thesis. Of particular importance is the nature and role of the confession in the production of truth.

In *The history of sexuality: an introduction* Foucault continues his exploration of the construction of various subjects in and by relations of power. In this, the first of three published texts, Foucault traces a history of the construction and development of the notion of “sexuality”.⁸ He argues that the so-called “age of repression” that was said to have commenced in seventeenth century Europe (culminating in the nineteenth century) actually resulted in the proliferation of public and private discourse in matters of sexuality and the body. Rather than repressing these matters, the attempt at “silencing” discourses about sex increased them, in terms of specificity, quantity and prevalence. Foucault contends that in an attempt to silence, discipline and punish in relation to “sexuality”, explicit elaboration was

[www.rooknet.com/beatpage/writers/ginsberg.html], *Literary Kicks* [www.litkicks.com] and *Allen Ginsberg's FBI File* [www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/ginsberg-fbi.html].

⁸ Foucault published two other volumes, including *The history of sexuality, volume two: the use of pleasure* (1984) and *The history of sexuality, volume three: the care of the self* (1984). A fourth manuscript that focuses on an approach to ethics/aesthetics is rumoured to exist but, at the time of writing, has not been published.

required, which functioned to increase, develop, extend and embrace notions and practices of sexuality.

In his introductory book to the history of sexuality, Foucault situates his discussion of “sexuality” within the context of power relations. He notes that these complex interactions of forces in relationships (both individually and corporately) function to construct a notion of sexuality that is then absorbed into the political and social apparatus of society. It is within this matrix of power relations that Foucault observes the emergence of a *scientia sexualis* – a “science of sexuality” that utilises confession in the production of truth in seventeenth century Europe (Foucault 1978:51). Coupled with notions of dominance and resistance, the confession provides a unique instance for the creation of the confessing subject. The confessing subject is created in the act of confession; indeed, the confessing subject is the subject of the confession.

It is on this point that *The history of sexuality: an introduction* presents a theoretical opening that can be harnessed to engage notions of confession-as-resistance. The manner in which the confession is a function of the self-actualising subject suggests the possibility for some subjects to resist in the act of confessing. Foucault is speaking of a particular historical context; however, the comments he makes regarding confession can be employed in contexts beyond his immediate discussion, including that of engagement with Ginsberg’s poetry. *The history of sexuality: an introduction* is, then, a vital point of departure in this thesis. It functions as a point of departure in the sense that it addresses the construction of the confessing subject.

-Chapter one- Incitement to confession

Introduction

I must confess that I am not the first to consider the notion of confession. It has been a sustained theme of literary endeavour and academic pursuit. The confession is a privileged theme of autobiographical works. Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, Nietzsche's *Ecce homo: how to become what one is* and Rousseau's *The confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* are examples of the confession at work in the autobiographical genre. Scholarly inquiry has not neglected the confession either. Various "confessions" can be found in disciplines such as psychoanalysis, psychiatry, religion, literature and law, and contemporary scholarship is increasingly concerned with the subject and confession. John Arnold addresses the role of the confessing subject during times of inquisition;⁹ Jeremy Tambling approaches the notions of sexuality, sin and the subject in relation to the confession;¹⁰ and Susan Bernstein addresses the role of confessional subjects with respect to gender and power in Victorian literature and culture.¹¹ In the cases of Tambling and Bernstein, Foucault's theorising about confession is central to discussion relating to notions of sexuality and subjectivity.

In this thesis, I continue along the well-trodden path of Foucauldian confession but develop the emphasis on confession-as-resistance, which receives limited attention in other scholarly works. Drawing on Foucauldian theory, this thesis suggests one of many openings into further engagement with the poetry of Allen Ginsberg for contemporary readers. In this chapter I address Ginsberg's need to confess, establish the historical and social context in which *Howl* and *America* were composed and introduce the

⁹ John H. Arnold. *Inquisition and power: catharism and the confessing subject in medieval Languedoc*. University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 2001.

¹⁰ Jeremy Tambling. *Confession: sexuality, sin, the subject*. Manchester University Press: New York, 1990.

¹¹ Susan David Bernstein. *Confessional subjects: revelations of gender and power in Victorian literature and culture*. University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1997.

Foucauldian ideas of confession, resistance and domination within the context of power relations. I conclude the chapter by articulating the “confession-as-resistance” which informs my engagement with *Howl* and *America* in chapters two and three respectively.

Incitement to confession

By locating *Howl* and *America* in their historical and cultural contexts, we are closer to understanding the oppressive nature of the 1950s American social climate for Ginsberg and other marginalised US citizens. Foucauldian theory provides a constructive means of engaging with Ginsberg’s poems. The Foucauldian notions of power relations, confession, resistance and domination are of particular significance, since they make possible a reading of the poems as “resistant confession”.

To this point, I have been working from the assumption that Ginsberg does, indeed, need to confess. This contention is central to my undertaking and requires some further elucidation: (Why) does Ginsberg need to confess? Are these poems, in fact, confessions? In what manner do they function as such? Confessions may be offered or they may be extracted by violence, coercion and force. The historical and cultural context inhabited by Ginsberg was such that he experienced significant personal pain for his lifestyle and worldview. His homosexuality, communist political outlook, flagrant drug use, fragile mental health, and his contempt for the establishment put him at odds with the dominant culture. Clearly, Ginsberg was “below” (or marginalised) with respect to the dominant mainstream culture he inhabited, and both *Howl* and *America* are offered with an awareness of a formidable agency of domination looming “above”. In his poems, Ginsberg confesses of his own volition; it is a confession “offered” rather than extracted, though one might argue that the dominant mainstream cultural context of the period enacted a long-term violence, a torture of sorts in its oppression of those who challenged or resisted its rei(g)n.

Introducing Ginsberg, *Howl* and *America*

Allen Ginsberg (1920-1997) was a poet, activist, political and social commentator. A student at New York's Columbia University, Ginsberg burst onto the American poetry scene in October 1955 with a reading of his poem *Howl* at the Six Gallery in San Francisco.¹² *Howl* was subsequently published by City Lights Press in 1955 and remains the most widely known of his poems.¹³ Ginsberg has been called a 'crucial figure in the in the revival of American poetry in the 1950s and 1960s' (Riggs 1996:387) and was a key figure in what became known as the Beat Generation.

Both *Howl* and *America* played a significant role in the social, political and cultural landscape of 1950s America. I propose that the poems demonstrate instances of confession and resistance, and give a voice to marginalized and disenfranchised subjects, placing important social and political issues on the public agenda. The continuing appeal of the poems can be attributed to Ginsberg's willingness to frankly address issues of humanity, creativity, politics, sexuality, madness and spirituality. These issues are often sources of contention, oppression and struggle. Subjects who challenge or transgress the establishment norms are relegated to the periphery and, typically, treated as "other". Significantly, Ginsberg spoke against the dominant social and political landscape of 1950s America with a boldness and frankness that articulated the sentiments of many others and ushered in a new era in American culture. As Don Byrd writes:

Ginsberg's strategy is to call both the private and the public crisis into the critical space of the poem. The uncertainties and ambiguities of sexual identity, the possibilities for consciousness opened by drugs, the sense that religious and visionary experience is at most fleeting, and the overt obvious dangers of political life are brought to bear on the immediate occasion of speech and perception.

(Riggs 1996:387-8)

¹² There are many references to this first reading of *Howl* at the Six Gallery in San Francisco. See the Literary Kicks website for one example [www.litkicks.com/BeatPages/page.jsp?what=Howl].

¹³ See [www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_/ginsberg/howl.htm] for several academic critiques from 1956 until 1991 that highlight the importance of *Howl* within Ginsberg's canon and, which describe the role the poem played in the American literary scene. See also Don Byrd's article 'Allen Ginsberg' (Byrd 1996).

Ginsberg demonstrates his versatility in calling ‘both the private and the public crisis into the critical space of the poem’ (Riggs 1996) across his poetic corpus.¹⁴ Whilst *Howl* is, perhaps, Ginsberg’s most well known work, by harnessing Foucauldian theory *America* too can be read to further illustrate distinct emphases of confession-as-resistance.

I have highlighted the importance of *Howl* and *America* to Ginsberg’s historical context and alluded to the continuing significance of the poems to contemporary readers (a point that will be developed throughout chapters two and three). I now turn my attention to locating Ginsberg within the social, cultural, and political context within which he composed the poems. My purpose in doing so is twofold: I intend to set the scene for the thematic concerns Ginsberg expresses in his poems; and I begin to acknowledge issues of power relations, dominance and resistance that will provide further background for my discussion of the Foucauldian understanding of these notions in the second half of this chapter.

Ginsberg’s social, cultural and political context

In many ways, the America¹⁵ of the 1950s projected an idyllic appearance to the world. The country was experiencing rapid economic growth on the back of the second world war; the population was growing and the suburban sprawl was underway as a growing middle-class sought to own land and pursue their personal American Dream.¹⁶ The conservative values of a postwar middle class dominated domestic politics, and America was forging its “national interests” on the international landscape.

¹⁴ Whilst this thesis relies primarily on the published poems, it is important to acknowledge Ginsberg’s oral live performances and readings. Where necessary I will make mention of notable public readings and sundry issues; however, my predominant concern is with the published poems.

¹⁵ It is problematic to speak of the USA as a single entity. In fact, as Don Byrd highlights in the preceding quote, Ginsberg challenges many attempts to synthesize the nation into a singular entity by giving voice to the marginalised and often overlooked constituents. In this instance I am highlighting broad shifts, historical and political descriptors of the nation in the 1950s.

¹⁶ See (Moss 1993) and (Ludwig and Nault 1986) for further evidence of the social and cultural climate in 1950s America.

Underneath the veneer of productivity, economic growth and the pursuit of the American Dream lurked another reality. McCarthyism¹⁷ hung like a grey spectre over the activities of any dissenting voices; prison populations were growing faster than they had since the 1920s depression.¹⁸ At the time of the publication of *Howl*, America was emerging from McCarthyism, which had for so long sought to crush any citizens or migrants with any (real or imagined) connections or affiliations with communism. David Caute writes that McCarthyism was

notable for its crude, below-the-belt, eye-gouging, bare-knuckled partisan exploitation of anti-Communism, usually on the basis of half-truths, warmed-over “revelations,” and plain lies.

(Caute 1978:47)

Caute goes on to note the sense of frustration in the American politics of the time, a time where ‘fortress America could no longer prosper oblivious to the outside world’ (1978:50). The political climate was desperate for many: migrants were being deported, not because of their communist party membership, but for having attended party meetings;¹⁹ and various states started introducing penalties, in some cases including the death penalty, for writing or speaking so-called subversive texts.²⁰ Those in positions of governmental authority went so far as to label certain citizens “security risks” – not disloyal, per se, but ... [individuals] whose character, habits and associations make him or her potentially liable to disclose classified

¹⁷ David Caute writes of the sense of frustration that perpetrated the era known as ‘McCarthyism’. He argues that the rapid domestic economic growth experienced by the United States could not be maintained without further global interaction. America had to engage with the wide world in way it had never before in order to sustain and grow at a similar rate to which it had become accustomed. Caute contends this contributed to the vigour with which McCarthyism grew in US government (1978:50).

¹⁸ See [www.cjcj.org/pubs/punishing/punishing.html] for incarceration statistics in the United States organised by decade.

¹⁹ Caute refers to the case of Giacom Quattrone, a 65-year American resident who was deported to Italy for having attended party meetings (1978:241).

²⁰ Caute details the change in Connecticut’s sedition laws (1978:71), Michigan’s introduction of life imprisonment, Tennessee’s movement towards the death penalty and the moves by the Texas Governor for the death penalty (1978:72). In the case of Connecticut, ‘subversive’ texts included ‘scurrilous or abusive matter, concerning the form of government in the United States, its military forces, flag or uniforms...’

information, or vulnerable to blackmail. Homosexuals were regarded in this light' (Caute 1978:273).

McCarthyism shaped and defined the American political and social landscape vis-à-vis the authoritarian power of the government to survey, judge, punish and exonerate the citizens it represented. Ginsberg raises these issues in *Howl* and *America*; however, McCarthyism is also significant to the poems in that it resonates with Foucauldian notions of a technique of domination – acting on a population to direct them towards a desired end. McCarthyism, as one particular instance of governmental authority, informed Ginsberg's context, which in turn shaped the poetry he composed, his experience of domination and his perceived need to confess.

America in the 1950s was a tumultuous time and place for someone such as Ginsberg to live. His mother was active in attending Communist Party meetings and had taken him along as a child.²¹ Communist sympathies are present in *America*.²² He wrestled with his sexuality, or more precisely his homosexuality, and sought counsel on several occasions. Having visited one psychiatrist he resolved to get married and find a "normal" job. He spent some time living with a woman named Helen Parker and found a job as a marketing researcher.²³ In 1954 Ginsberg visited another psychiatrist. He recalls his answer when the doctor inquired what he would like to do with his life:

"Doctor," as Ginsberg recalls his answer, "I don't think you're going to find this very healthy and clear," but I really would like to stop working forever--never work again, never do anything like the kind of work I'm doing now--and do nothing but write poetry and have leisure to spend the day outdoors and go to museums and see friends. And I'd like to keep living with someone -- maybe even a man -- and explore relationships that way. And cultivate my perceptions, cultivate the visionary thing in me. Just a literary and quiet city-hermit existence. Then *he* said "Well, why don't you?" I asked him what the American Psychoanalytic Association would say about *that*, and he said . .

²¹ Ginsberg's mother, Naomi, was a radical. Ginsberg refers to the communist meetings he attended as a younger man in his poem *America*. See also [www.beatmuseum.org/ginsberg/allenginsberg.html].

²² Ginsberg writes: 'America I used to be a communist when I was a kid I'm not sorry' (Ginsberg 1996:62).

²³ See [www.beatmuseum.org/ginsberg/allenginsberg.html].

. if that is what you really feel would please you, what in the world is stopping you from doing it?

(Burner 1996:np)

The social conventions deployed in the construction of sexuality in the 1950s demonstrate the techniques of discipline and surveillance that are symptomatic of power relations; and as one challenging the social norms, Ginsberg experienced these techniques as oppression. Not only does Ginsberg experience oppression with respect to his sexuality; his political sentiments and even his ideas about work were also under observation²⁴ and, in some cases, punishment. For example, the FBI maintained an extensive dossier on Ginsberg;²⁵ he campaigned against censorship, was the subject of an obscenity hearing, and testified in court on behalf of other writers.

Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* is as much a howl of confession as it is a howl of attack against forces of oppression. Ginsberg address issues such as homosexuality, mental illness, drug use, politics, spirituality and mysticism, and a world obsessed with production, capitalism and consumption, which he seeks to resist. Ginsberg speaks with energy, imagination, compassion and courage, confessing, of his own volition, the reality of his life and the lives of his friends, to himself, to others and, through publication and distribution, to the poetry reading public. (In chapters two and three I will examine in depth the nature of his confession along with the various 'audiences' to whom Ginsberg confesses.)

Locating Ginsberg in his social, historical and political context offers some indication of the thematic concerns that occupy his poetry, but it is

²⁴ Foucault traces ideas about "normal" sexualities ("natural") and peripheral sexualities ("un-natural") and the manner in which they were constructed and 'recorded on separate registers' (Foucault 1978:39). This forms part of a larger discourse that constructed dominant ideas about sexuality, which became part of the agency of domination directed through social conventions that act on Ginsberg.

²⁵ A summary of Ginsberg's FBI file is readily available on the Internet. See [<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/ginsberg-fbi.html>] and [http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/g_l/ginsberg/fbi.htm]. The Reagan administration deemed Ginsberg unsuitable as a government paid speaker abroad. A photo of Ginsberg was placed in the Federal Narcotics file in 1967. In 1965 Ginsberg was cited as an 'Internal Security – Cuba' case by the FBI and labelled as 'potentially dangerous' and a 'subverive' with 'evidence of emotional instability (including unstable residence and employment record) or irrational or suicidal behavior,' as having made 'expressions of strong or violent anti U.S. sentiment,' and as having 'a propensity for violence toward good order and government,' See Herbert Mitgang's *Dangerous dossiers* (1988) for more information.

problematic to refer – as I have up to this point – simply to “Ginsberg” or “Allen Ginsberg” when referring to the poet, the respective poetic personas and Ginsberg-the-man. In the interests of clarity I proceed by addressing a Foucauldian conception of the man-poet who so significantly occupies the focus of this thesis.

The problem of the “Poet”

At some level it is misleading for me to refer simply to “Ginsberg”. Am I referring to the poetic-persona, the “I” of the respective poems? Perhaps I am referring to Ginsberg-the-man? The poet? The photographer? The journalist? The editor? The critic? There are many subject positions that are available to “Ginsberg”. I have sought to resolve this “problem of the poet” by referring, via shorthand, to “Ginsberg”. Further investigation into the nature of the subject, “Ginsberg”, is necessary, and will illuminate and clarify dimensions of the discussion I provide on the respective poems in chapters two and three. A Foucauldian approach to the problem of the poet requires the interrogation of both the writing and reading subjects, exploring how they are at work in the various poems, acknowledging their instability, and considering the subsequent implications for readings of the poems. At this juncture, Foucault’s ‘author function’ will inform my examination of the poet-subject, and delimit interpretation of the poems.

A Foucauldian approach to the problem of the poet acknowledges the multiple subject positions available to readers in the act of reading and rejects attempts to suppress the instability of the writing subject. For example, with respect to the poems drawn on in this thesis, there are several subject positions that readers may consider Ginsberg occupies at various times, including: “the poetic persona”, “Ginsberg-the-man”, “Ginsberg-the-poet” and “Ginsberg-the-autobiographical-subject”.²⁶ The first-person poetic persona in *Howl* and *America* is not Ginsberg-the-poet; it is, rather, the “voice” of the poetic persona, which operates at a distance from Ginsberg-

²⁶ I am privileging these subject positions as I consider them central to the argument of this inquiry. I have excluded and suppressed other subject positions (Ginsberg-the-photographer, Ginsberg-the-market researcher etc.) with this in mind.

the-poet.²⁷ Similarly, Ginsberg-the-man is not the same as Ginsberg-the-poet; there is, again, a distance between the two subject positions.²⁸ Further, Ginsberg-the-autobiographical subject (whose experiences are referred to in both poems, but particularly in *Howl*) is another constructed subject – distinguishable from Ginsberg-the-man, Ginsberg-the-poet and the various poetic personae. The “distance” between these various subject positions is the space in which the Foucauldian notion of the author function operates.

Foucault observes that traditionally the “author” has been conceived as being the ‘genial creator of a work in which he deposits ... an inexhaustible world of significations’, who is ‘so transcendent with regard to all languages that, as soon as he speaks, meaning begins to proliferate’ (Foucault 1984:118). But this traditional conception is one that Foucault rejects, arguing instead that the term “author” is a functional construct used by readers to homogenise the diversity obtained in the writing process.²⁹ He writes:

the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction.

(Foucault 1984: 118-9)

Foucault asserts that the meaning attributed to a written discourse is delimited by the author function. In doing so acknowledges that while an infinite number of “recompositions” of a work are available to the reader, the reader delimits these recomposition by utilising the author function. In practical terms, the reader uses the author function to limit and contain the work. The author function acts as a figure outside of the text that ‘allows a

²⁷ That is to say that the “I” of the poems is not the same as the subject who composed the poems.

²⁸ These voices are distinguishable in how and where they are encountered. The author function can be used to classify certain works as being attributable to “Ginsberg-the-poet”. A shopping list penned by Ginsberg would be distinguishable from *Howl* or *America* in this way – and may, instead, be attributable to “Ginsberg-the-man” or another of the multiple subject positions available (homemaker / tenant etc.)

²⁹ This diversity has already been described through the multiple subject positions occupied by “Ginsberg”. Further, this diversity also suggests a proliferation of textual meanings available to readers.

limitation of the cancerous and dangerous proliferation of significations' (Foucault 1984:118). The reading subject, then, is involved in the process of constructing meaning – but the meaning constructed is limited by the reader's harnessing of the author function. In the case of *Howl* and *America* the poems are subject to the limitations applied by the authorial function of "Ginsberg". That is to say that the name "Ginsberg" serves a classificatory function that informs a particular framework for reading. The term "Ginsberg" and that name's prevalent use in studies relating to Ginsberg's poetry and its place in American literature, demonstrates its acceptance as a classificatory term, and illustrates one dimension of the Foucauldian author function in operation. On this level, the classificatory term "Ginsberg" serves to organise, limit and inform interpretations of the poet's work.

The 'autobiographical' nature of *Howl* and *America* suggest there is a subject position of "Ginsberg-the-autobiographical-subject". Similarly, the position of "Ginsberg-the-poetic-persona" is present in readings of the poems, as is "Ginsberg-the-man", who exists "beyond" the poems. Significantly, "Ginsberg-the-poet" is also present. The term "poet" is a problematic and unstable notion that informs the manner in which a poem is approached and interpreted beyond the 'spontaneous attribution of a discourse to its producer' (Foucault 1984:113). Foucault's 'author function' highlights the manner in which writing causes a proliferation and limitation of subject positions. The reader is actively involved in harnessing the multiple "writing subjects" created to limit interpretations in the process of meaning-making, to enact a classificatory function, and to acknowledge the dialogic posture of meaning construction in the act of reading and writing. That is to say, the construction of meaning is a negotiation between the reading subject, the text and the author function used to classify and delimit interpretations.

In the interests of brevity and coherence, I will be referring to this constructed entity simply as "Ginsberg" throughout the remainder of this thesis. I do so with an awareness of the complexity of the matter, and will depart from this designation only to make specific comments that address particular subject positions as the need arises. In chapter three I return to

examine this idea of the “author function” in further depth, illustrating its role in *America*.

Having introduced Ginsberg and discussed the problem of the poet, I now turn my attention to Foucault, and in the remainder of this chapter address the theoretical arguments that will inform the readings of *Howl* in chapter two and *America* in chapter three. I propose that the theoretical framework that follows will highlight the manner in which Ginsberg’s poems may be read productively as instances of Foucauldian confession-as-resistance.

Foucault on power relations, resistance/dominance and confession

Of course Foucauldian theory has been useful already in addressing the volatile construction of the poet, but its significance in this thesis is explained in the remainder of this chapter. I propose that the key Foucauldian notions of power relations, resistance and domination can be harnessed to create a framework through which *Howl* and *America* may be productively read as instances of confession-as-resistance.

Firstly, I address the Foucauldian project of locating the subject in the context of power relations. After addressing notions of power relations and their relevance to this inquiry, I turn my attention to Foucauldian conceptions of domination and resistance. Drawing primarily on Foucault’s *History of sexuality, volume one: an introduction*,³⁰ I concentrate on a Foucauldian understanding of confession and its role in the production of truth. With these central notions foregrounded, I argue for the possibility of a resistant confession: a confession that acknowledges dominating power relations and simultaneously resists such domination through techniques of resistance. Finally, I conclude this chapter by bringing Ginsberg back into the picture, and I address the question: In what manner are *Howl* and *America* confessions?

The work of Foucault provides a useful framework within which to read *Howl* and *America* as instances of resistant confessions. Firstly, a Foucauldian conception of power relations informs an understanding of

³⁰ See footnote 6.

domination and, subsequently, notions of resistance. Secondly, by concentrating on Foucauldian power relations, the relevance, necessity and role of the confession gains a sense of immediacy, urgency and gravity. Thirdly, by drawing on these Foucauldian notions, a theoretical framework for exploring and interpreting the confession-as-resistance is made possible. Finally, by harnessing the confession-as-resistance framework, the ensuing readings of *Howl* and *America* are enriched in a manner that offers present-day readers some sense of the significance and importance of these poems to marginalised people both in 1950s America and everywhere today.

It is notable that Foucault does not conceive of power as something to be seized, shared or acquired; rather, he argues that ‘power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations’ (Foucault 1978:93). Power, according to Foucault, must be understood as a multiplicity of force relations. These power relations are not exterior with respect to other relationships; rather the relationships are immersed in, and penetrated by, power relations (Foucault 1978:93, 95). Power relations are present in multiple forms, serving diverse functions and always having a series of aims and objectives. For Foucault, there is no possibility of “disinterested” power.

Power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix - no such duality extending from the top down and reacting on more and more limited groups to the very depths of the social body.
(Foucault 1978:94)

Foucault argues that, historically, the terminal forms that power takes can be seen in the manner in which it becomes embedded in the juridical systems of government and law (1978:92). This has resulted in an ordering of activities into regulatory binaries such as legal and illegal as well as licit and illicit (Foucault 1978:83). Such an ordering of activities allows power to mask its mechanisms (Foucault 1978:86) ensuring its ability to remain largely undetected, though its effects are experienced by those subjected to

the forces of power relations.³¹ An agent in a relation of inequality may rule others by ordering, labelling, prohibiting, censoring, punishing, surveying and organising them. These are techniques deployed to motivate, manipulate, coerce and force others to a desired end.

The nature of power relations as agencies of domination and resistance are significant to a discussion of *Howl* and *America*, as they establish the hierarchy of the confessor and the confessing subject, the agency of domination and the resisting subject. For Ginsberg, in *Howl*, this agency of domination is characterised by his use of the Moloch motif³² found in the second part of the poem. Ginsberg's "Moloch" is a concentration, a synthesis, of the multiple power relations that function as an agency of domination in 1950s American society. On this level, Ginsberg's Moloch motif can be understood through the lens of Foucauldian theory as a poetic representation of an agency of domination. It is Moloch that Ginsberg resists through his confession, and it is Moloch that causes his pain, and Moloch who affords the opportunity for pleasure through Ginsberg's resistance to it. Similarly, in *America* the hierarchy of confessor and confessing subject is in operation as well. The unstable notion of "America" is the impetus for Ginsberg's confession and resistance. Foucauldian theory, then, provides a productive approach to understanding representations of power and domination, and the subsequent hierarchy of confession in *Howl* and *America*.

The political climate, the dominant social conventions and the historical place America began to occupy in the global economic landscape are all relevant to a closer examination of *Howl* and *America*; each highlights the manner in which power relations are recognised in instances of various inequalities (Ginsberg's sexuality, political opinions and drug use for example), not simply in a manner of prohibition or accompaniment, but in a manner of production (Foucault 1978:93). For example, in *Howl*

³¹ I have already illustrated how Ginsberg experienced these binaries of "legal" and "illegal", and the manner in which the production of marginalisation is a characteristic of power relations embedded in the apparatuses of the state. See footnotes 24 and 25.

³² The "Moloch motif" is a significant dimension of the discussion of *Howl* in chapter two. See pages 35ff for further elaboration on the development of the term and its significance to this thesis.

Ginsberg refers to those who ‘shrieked with delight in policecars for / committing no crime but their own wild cooking pederasty and / intoxication’ (Ginsberg 1996:51). Here Ginsberg articulates his experience as one of subordination in his “deviant” views of sexuality and intoxication.³³ But it is important to note Foucault’s assertion that ‘where there is power there is also resistance’ (1978:95).

The resistance of which Foucault writes does not occur in exteriority in relation to power. Relations of power depend on multiple points of resistance, with resistance playing roles such as adversary, target, support, or handle. Points of resistance, then, are everywhere in the power network. Hence:

[t]here is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case...
(Foucault 1978:95-6)

By definition, resistance can only exist in power relations. While Foucault concedes that occasionally there are ‘radical ruptures’ and ‘massive binary divisions’ (of resistance), he asserts that ‘the points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities’ that are ‘mobile and transitory’ and produce ‘cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remoulding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their minds and bodies’ (Foucault 1978:96). The necessity and inevitability of resistance in relations of power provides an important means of engaging with Ginsberg’s poems and their significance within the historical and social context of the 1950s in the United States – and to the diverse contexts in which the poems are read today.

In his book *The history of sexuality, volume one: an introduction* Foucault’s interest in the confession resides in the role it played in the development of the notion of “sexuality”. From the seventeenth century practice of Christian penance until the late twentieth century when he

³³ Ginsberg sees these “deviant” activities as no different from the domestic activity of cooking.

published his research, Foucault argues that sex was placed in an ‘unrelenting system of confession’ which served to transform ‘sex into discourse’ (Foucault 1978:61). Foucault suggests that the confession is the means by which truth and sex are joined ‘through the obligatory and exhaustive expression of an individual secret’ (Foucault 1978:61).

Confession has so established itself in the Western world that Foucault refers to Western humankind as a ‘confessing animal’ (Foucault 1978:59). Humankind must confess by internal imperative, or is forced to confess by violence or threat. ‘The most defenceless tenderness and the bloodiest of powers have a similar need of confession’ (Foucault 1978:59). He links confession with the science (knowledge-power) of sex in his *scientia sexualis*. Foucault argues that the confession is used as a technique for producing truth (Foucault 1978:59). To that end, the confession is found across the spectrum of life – playing a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, romantic relationships – in both the ordinary affairs of everyday life and in the most solemn rites.³⁴ Confession occupies a privileged position precisely because it is used to produce truth. Foucault articulates the centrality of the confession succinctly: ‘the confession became one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth’ (Foucault 1978:59).

By locating confession within the matrix of power relations, and by emphasizing the role confession plays in the production of truth, the significance of confession in the process of the construction of the confessing subject is apparent. The pronunciation of a “discourse of truth” is the function that actualises the self, and uniquely so in the case of confession. The confessional discourse is unique in that the subject who confesses is also the active subject of the statement; at the same time, the subject who confesses is constructed in the act of confession. The very act of confession, the expression of a discourse of truth, produces ‘intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it’ (Foucault 1978:62). The

³⁴ For example, confession is part of “solemn” rites, including marriage ceremonies, citizenship and legal rites. A confession of sorts exists in applications for bank accounts, credit cards and loans, rental agreements and, in the scholastic arena, in applying for courses and submitting honours theses. The confession is seen increasingly in contemporary “news” media, and within the business arena in the many inquiries that are conducted.

confession is in part a narration, an active autobiography of a subject in the making.

In the activity of confession, the agency of domination³⁵ does not reside with the speaker but with the confessor who typically listens and says nothing, questions and is not supposed to know the answer in advance. The confession functions as a means of authenticating the confessing subject by ‘the discourse of truth he was able or obliged to pronounce concerning himself’ (Foucault 1978:58). That the confessing subject needs authentication is an effect of the hierarchy of power relations at work.

The significance of confession in the production of truth is present in the ability of an agency of domination to use the truthful confession as a means of exerting control over the confessing subject. The truth produced in confession may then be treated as a science, a knowledge-power,³⁶ and the confessing subject subjected to the consequences of the truth produced, where those consequences are decided by the agency of domination. That is to say that the agency of domination extracts truth from the confessing subject, and this “truth” serves to position the subject in relation to the pre-determined end desired by the agency of domination. Foucault observes the effects of the subsequent discourse of truth as it takes place ‘not in the one who receives it, but in the one from whom it is wrested’ (Foucault 1978:62). The act of confession, a confession wrested from the confessing subject, is cause for pain: pain both in the act of confessing, and in the impending punishment for being opposed to the desired end of the agency of domination. The hermeneutical function of the agency of domination cannot be ignored either. To this end Foucault discusses the pervasiveness of confession in the production of the nineteenth century discourse about the truth of sexuality, noting that:

If one had to confess, this was not merely because the person to whom one confessed had the power to forgive, console, and direct, but because the work of producing the truth was obliged to pass through this relationship... The truth did not reside

³⁵ See Foucault (1978:62) where he refers to the ‘agency of domination’ that hears the confession.

³⁶ For example, the binaries of legal and illegal, licit and illicit are the results of an ordering of truth according to the desired ends of various power relations.

solely in the subject, who, by confessing, would reveal it wholly formed.

(Foucault 1978:66)

Foucault notes the “blindness” of the confessing subject who speaks the truth in an incomplete manner. The nineteenth century approach to confession assumed a scientific orientation complete with the need to assimilate, record, verify and interpret what was said. Foucault continues:

The one who listened was not simply the forgiving master, the judge who condemned or acquitted; he was the master of the truth.

(Foucault 1978:66-7)

As the ‘master of truth’, the confessor is able to manipulate, coerce, condemn and judge the confessing subject.³⁷ Clearly there is a complex of power relations at work in the confession.

Following Foucault, however, insofar as the truthful confession is a procedure of individualisation by power, the truthful confession affords the possibility of resistance on the part of the confessing subject. In offering a confession, as does Ginsberg in *Howl*, the confessing subject has the opportunity to exercise a power of resistance and subvert the hierarchy of confession. The opportunities for resistance abound. Some significant questions are raised at this point: How will the confessing subject confess? What exactly will the confessing subject ‘bring to light’ or keep hidden? And where will this confession take place? The answers to these crucial questions are found in the construction of the confessing subject, the context of the confession and, quite specifically, the form and content of the confession.

“Confession-as-resistance”

Confession, as we have seen, takes place within a hierarchy of power relations, and the confessing subject is “below” the confessor who hears the

³⁷ See (Foucault 1978:70) for a discussion of the manner in which the truth produced by the Christian and juridical confession is used in tactics of power immanent in the discourse specifically related to confessions about sex.

confession. How then is it possible for the confession to become an act of resistance? I would like to draw attention to four significant dimensions of the confession-as-resistance that are present in both *Howl* and *America*.³⁸ In doing so, I hope to articulate a theoretical framework for the confession-as-resistance that extends the Foucauldian notions already established.

Firstly, and as I have shown, the subject-who-confesses is also the subject of the confession. That is to say that the confessing subject does not exist until the act of confession. Accordingly, there is (to a greater or lesser extent) scope for the confessing subject to construct himself or herself as they desire. This is particularly significant when the confessing subject seeks to resist the agency of domination that seeks their confession. Alternatively, the confessing subject may offer their confession and assume a proactive posture in resisting the confessor. This dimension of the confession-as-resistance is evident in both *Howl* and *America*.

Secondly, the subject-who-confesses may have the opportunity to determine where the confession will take place, what form the confession will assume, and what precisely will be revealed and what will remain concealed. The confessing-subject thus has numerous techniques of resistance at their disposal in the act of confession. By altering the location of the confession, the form it assumes and by concealing specific facts in the act of confession, the confessing subject can resist even while *being seen* to comply.

Thirdly, as we have seen in the section on Foucauldian confession, there is a hermeneutical function in the confession and the production of truth from the confession. The confession is not revealed “wholly formed”; indeed the confessor enacts a hermeneutical function to interpret the confession. The confessing-subject may address the confession to a sympathetic audience who will provide a similarly resistant and sympathetic interpretation of the confession.

Finally, the subject-who-confesses may resist by interrogating the agency of domination. In this instance, the confessing subject poses, and possibly answers, questions of the dominating power. The confessing subject

³⁸ The first three of these Foucauldian dimensions of confession-as-resistance are discussed in particular detail in chapter two with reference to *Howl*.

is able to call the agency of domination to account, and what may have been a “personal” and private matter may become one of larger and more public significance.

These dimensions of the confession-as-resistance are shared by *Howl* and *America* and provide a useful entry point into further discussion. The discussion of *America* in chapter three focuses primarily on the final dimension, the “interrogative confession”. However, this discussion is possible in that it extends the exploration of the three preceding dimensions which provide a framework for the engagement with *Howl* provided in chapter two. It is to these poems that I now turn my attention to examine the context-specific instance of resistant confession.

-Chapter two- Ginsberg's *Howl*-ing confession

Introduction

As Foucauldian theory suggests, *Howl* can be read in a manner that demonstrates how confession can function as a means of self-actualisation, a technique of resistance, for the confessing subject. In *Howl*, Ginsberg is the confessing subject who is also the subject of the confession. Ginsberg as the “subject-who-confesses” is constructed in the very act of confession. The confession provides the opportunity for Ginsberg to determine what kind of story is told, and subsequently what will constitute this “subject-who-confesses”. In the act of confessing, Ginsberg, given a voice, also has the opportunity to resist Moloch, the agency of domination – even though he does so from “below”. Ginsberg avails himself of both of these opportunities, constructing a subject-who-confesses but who simultaneously acts against the dominating Moloch. This, in turn, provides him with pleasure – the pleasure of a self-actualising subject, able to resist. In this chapter I will demonstrate the way Foucauldian theory can be drawn on to produce a reading of *Howl* that illustrates the notion of confession-as-resistance. I begin by examining Ginsberg’s need to confess by establishing the agency of domination to which he confesses. I then turn my attention to the poetic devices, form and content used by Ginsberg to articulate his confession; and, finally, consider the way that Ginsberg conceals in the act of confession.

Howl presents a dark vision of fragmented lives, and yet the poem moves to a tentative resolution within a dissonant world: from futility to ecstasy, from paranoia to inner peace and from a sense of terror to a sense of holiness. The sense of madness and terror so pervades the poem that William Carlos Williams, in the introduction to the City Lights edition of *Howl and*

other poems, wrote: ‘Hold back the edges of your gowns, Ladies, we are going through hell.’³⁹

Ginsberg first performed *Howl* in 1955 at the now infamous Six Gallery Reading in San Francisco. Since then, the poem has undergone various revisions.⁴⁰ The initial public performance of *Howl* and its subsequent publication in 1956 by City Lights Press captured the imagination of the “subterranean” scene, but the poem was launched into national notoriety when the publisher, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, was charged with obscenity for publishing and distributing the poem. The ensuing hearings ensured *Howl* was well-publicised and guaranteed widespread distribution for a poem that might have otherwise remained on the periphery of the arts community. Nevertheless, the obscenity trial increased Ginsberg’s public profile, establishing him as a voice for marginalised groups in 1950s America. The publicity that followed Ginsberg and *Howl* made certain that this work would be scrutinised and critiqued by the literary establishment – including academics – and by Ginsberg’s contemporaries alike.

Howl’s focus is local and mythological: Ginsberg chronicles events from his own life and the experiences of his friends, and many of these take on a legendary significance. Fifty years since the first performance of the poem, *Howl* continues to resonate with western readers. The references to historical events in Ginsberg’s life inform the reader’s interpretation of the poem, and its mythic nature bridges cultural idiosyncrasies and continues to have significance many years later. One particular myth related in *Howl* relates to Ginsberg’s use of the “Moloch motif”.⁴¹

³⁹ This foreword was included with the 1956 publication of *Howl and other poems* by City Lights Press.

⁴⁰ At the time of writing City Lights Press announced that in April 2006 a new edition of *Howl* will be released with facsimile annotations, various versions of the poems and commentary from Ginsberg’s contemporaries, including, among others, Jack Kerouac and Lionel Trilling.

⁴¹ Whilst high on peyote in San Francisco, Ginsberg saw a building across the street that took on a sinister appearance. He wrote in his journal: ‘Found suddenly the gothic eyes of the skull tower glaring out... with horrible cross check Dollar sign skull protrusion of lipless jailbarred inhuman long-tooth spectral deathhead... This phantom building robot was smoking in inaction as if it had been stuck there in eternity’ (Raskin 2004:131).

Ginsberg's "Moloch motif"

Overwhelming and dominating forces, in the form of social conventions that "police" dimensions of sexuality, politics, drug use and "madness" are part of Ginsberg's experience in *Howl*. Whilst the historical and social context within which Ginsberg writes is oppressive to him, it is not specifically the government, military or industry that incite him to resistance. The agency of domination in *Howl* is ultimately portrayed as a concentration of force-relationships that undermine, consume and destroy essential elements of the human experience: relationships, creativity and free thought. Ginsberg names this dominating concentration of power relations Moloch.

Moloch the incomprehensible prison... Moloch whose mind is
pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running / money...
Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo... Moloch whose
love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity /
and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the spectre of genius!
(Ginsberg 1996:54)⁴²

The consensus amongst biblical⁴³ scholars is that Moloch⁴⁴ is the name of a god – a sun god of the Canaanites in old Palestine; and sometimes associated with the Sumerian Baal. Moloch, however, was entirely malevolent.⁴⁵ In the 6th and 7th centuries BCE, first-born children were sacrificed to him by the Israelites.⁴⁶ Moloch also appears in medieval demonology as a Prince of Hell, who finds particular pleasure in making mothers weep as he specialises in stealing their children - a motif consistent with the traditional understanding the sacrifices of babies to Moloch.

Moloch was associated with the Carthaginian religion, and also appeared in Gustave Flaubert's *Salammbô* (1888). This rendering of the Carthaginian religion saw Moloch represented as the god to which the

⁴² I have chosen to quote Ginsberg in this manner because the length of the lines he writes makes it difficult to faithfully replicate in this format. A more accurate representation of the poems can be found in the appendix to this thesis.

⁴³ Moloch appears several times in the Bible, including 1 Kings 11:7, 2 Kings 23:10 and Jeremiah 7:30-32.

⁴⁴ The name Moloch is used interchangeably with Molech, and occasionally Melech.

⁴⁵ See the following websites for scholarship about Moloch/Molech:

[www.newadvent.org/cathen/10443b.htm] [www.pantheon.org/articles/m/moloch.html]

⁴⁶ See 'Moloch/Melech' entries in *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (1996) and *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (1902).

Carthaginians sacrificed their children.⁴⁷ The idol Moloch that devours its followers' children appears in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). The film's hero, Freder, after labouring in the bowels of the city, has a delusion where the enormous machines of the city become anthropomorphic, with flaming mouths. The workers carry their children to the machines and cast them in, and Freder calls 'Moloch!' recognizing the ancient god.⁴⁸ Moloch is an uncompassionate idol that makes its worshippers weep and that destroys "innocent" future generations.

Ginsberg's use of the Moloch motif in *Howl* takes on a deeper and more powerful significance in light of its combined historical and contemporary usage. Moloch may be read as a metaphorical concentration of Foucault's agency of domination – one that watches, listens, overhearing Ginsberg's confession. Ultimately it is Moloch that functions as an agency of domination in *Howl* and it is Moloch that provides the impetus for Ginsberg's resisting confession.

Ginsberg's *Howl(-ing)* confession

I now turn my attention to the content of Ginsberg's confession in *Howl*. In this section I will demonstrate the functional dimension of the confession-as-resistance at work in my reading of *Howl*, with particular emphasis on the content of the confession. Having established the presence of Moloch as an agency of domination, I will demonstrate the aspects of Ginsberg's confession that work to resist and subvert the aims of Moloch as characterised by Ginsberg. Of particular interest is the way Ginsberg enacts his agency as the confessing subject to position himself in opposition to Moloch by relating his oppressed position with that of other marginalised subjects, such as Ginsberg's friend Carl Solomon. I propose that a close reading of *Howl* as a confessional discourse, in light of the domination of Moloch, will reveal the depth of Ginsberg's confession and resistance, as well as highlight some of his difficulties in enacting such a resistant confession.

⁴⁷ See [<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moloch>] for commentary on forms and grammar as well as a survey of the use of Moloch in biblical, medieval and modern art.

⁴⁸ See [<http://www.deliriumsrealm.com/delirium/mythology/moloch.asp>].

Ginsberg's confession begins with his framing of the social and political context in which he wrote. It is important to note that Ginsberg begins his process of self-actualisation by expounding a social commentary, articulating a version of individual and social history, from a marginalised viewpoint. The images from the first part of *Howl* are desperate and ragged, a "truthful" confession of the reality of Ginsberg's life and the lives of his friends. They are the ones who used drugs,⁴⁹ pursued spiritual enlightenment and mystical experiences despite the law and a political climate informed by a Judeo-Christian worldview;⁵⁰ they are the ones who travelled across the countryside seemingly oblivious to the need for stable employment, seeking "indiscriminate" sexual encounters with men and women,⁵¹ protesting the 'narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism' (Ginsberg 1996:50). Indeed the first part of *Howl* is dense with autobiographical images of mental institutions, sexual encounters, drug use, incarcerations, mystical visions, political commentary and lawbreaking.⁵²

Ginsberg confesses to himself, to his friends and, at another level, to the world at large. He confesses the reality of his and his friends' existence. Taking an enormous risk, Ginsberg acknowledges their activities, their lawbreaking, their political persuasions, their sexual orientations, their desires, their frustrations and fears in the process of purging, a confession of their below-ness, their subjection to a dominating power. This confession is also a radical declaration of their creative humanity. In resisting domination, Ginsberg simultaneously constructs a confessing subject, confesses on

⁴⁹ Ginsberg makes specific reference to Benzedrine, peyote, junk-withdrawal and opium. In 1956 the US government passed legislation that was particularly pointed at narcotics users. Some policy commentators compare the fervour with which the government and police pursued casual drug users with their anti-communist purging. See [www.druglibrary.org/schaffer/library/studies/vlr/vlr5.htm], in particular the discussion of the Federal Narcotic Control Act of 1956.

⁵⁰ The 1950s saw the addition of 'one nation under God' to the United States' pledge of allegiance [www.homeofheroes.com/hallofheroes/1st_floor/flag/1bfc_pledge.html]. Any detraction from such a statement was sure to catch the attention of the watching government and in some cases was regarded as tantamount to communist affiliation.

⁵¹ Ginsberg writes of those 'who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclist and later who sweetened the snatches of a million girls' (1996:51). The scope of this thesis does not allow me to explore the misogynistic elements of Ginsberg's poetry. Refer to Raskin (2004:61-2, 148-9, 227) for a discussion of these matters, particularly in relation to Ginsberg's attempts to become a "masculine American male".

⁵² Ginsberg writes of those 'who went out whoring through Colorado in myriad stolen night-cars' (1996:51).

behalf of himself and his friends, and designates a sympathetic audience to whom he primarily confesses. This audience are the “best minds” of his generation (Ginsberg 1996:49), who are in no way programmed machines: they continue to energetically cross the country despite the suffering they experience, they are still ‘angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo’ (Ginsberg 1996:49) amidst their drug addictions, their criminal records, and their status as outsiders. This confession of the reality of his existence and the existence of others is the beginning of Ginsberg’s self-actualisation, and provides a foundation from which he characterises the agency of domination in his use of the Moloch motif. The concluding phrase of the first part of *Howl* sums up Ginsberg’s confession and the confession he makes on behalf of those whose stories he shares; they are the ones ‘with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years’ (1996:54).

Ginsberg’s confession is not typical in the sense that he simply acknowledges his “being outside the law”, his subversiveness, or his need to repent and return to the code from which he has deviated. Rather, Ginsberg reframes what needs to be confessed and what he sees as essentially at stake. For Ginsberg, what is central to his confession is the poetry of life, the creative-humanity that Moloch relentlessly seeks to destroy through its production of a mechanised society obsessed with consumption.⁵³ It is to this end that Ginsberg articulates a history that differs from the desired end of Moloch.

⁵³ On this point I am mindful of Foucault’s refusal of any “core” or “authentic” experience. I will argue that that Ginsberg is not referring to a particular “essential” experience; rather, he is resisting the control and coercion exerted by Moloch and acknowledging, instead, the ‘holiness’ of everything. This holiness is not an “authentic” or truthful experience (we see Ginsberg include ‘skyscrapers’ in his list of holy objects), but refers to the ethical domain. It is a matter of life lived in relationship – to people and objects – without destructive domination. In this way Ginsberg is not calling on a “hierarchy of truth” (as a religious code might institute), but is entirely consistent with Foucault who argues that the self can become an object that may be addressed as a ‘work of art’ (Foucault 1994:261). Paul Rabinow follows Foucault in addressing comments made with respect to homosexuality, saying that: ‘The search should not be for the secret of one’s identity but for how to invent new modes of relationship and a new way of life.’ (Rabinow in Foucault 1997:xxxvi). With these thoughts in mind we can see how Ginsberg is concerned with ethics rather than with morality – a way of life that invented ‘instruments for polymorphic, varied and individually modulated relationships’ (Foucault 1997:139) to borrow, again, from Foucault.

This “different” history, this “otherness”, functions as a confession in that Ginsberg offers it with an awareness of his “below-ness” with respect to Moloch. It is, after all, Moloch who is the ‘heavy judger of men’ (Ginsberg 1996:54). And it is Moloch who entered his soul early, frightening him out of his natural ecstasy (Ginsberg 1996:55). And it is Moloch whose domination is seen by Ginsberg to have butchered the ‘heart of the poem of life’ (Ginsberg 1996:54) out of him and those on whose behalf he confesses.

By reframing his confession, Ginsberg answers Moloch’s need for a confession, but constructs a different history; he re-draws the parameters of the confession and in doing so resists Moloch: Moloch becomes subject to Ginsberg’s discourse on the matter and, in a sense, the hunter becomes the hunted. Having echoed the words of Jesus on the cross crying out to his Father *eli eli lamma lamma sabachthani*⁵⁴ (Ginsberg 1996:54), Ginsberg articulates the sense of loneliness, frustration, pain and wonder at the ominous and dominating power relations concentrated in the Moloch metaphor. The second part of *Howl* goes on to characterise the activity of Moloch, a ‘sphinx of concrete and aluminium that bashed open’ the best minds of the poet’s generation’s ‘skulls and ate up their brains and imagination’ (Ginsberg 1996:54). Ginsberg was high on peyote when he wrote this second part of the poem.⁵⁵ Using a prohibited hallucinogenic drug he is able to “see” the invisible workings of a variety of power relations, a veritable matrix of forces at work including the “machinations” of government, the military, capitalism, religion and even architecture that all work to produce the destruction of humanity. Ginsberg is, in effect, confessing what he has seen: the immensity, the pervasiveness and the reality that Moloch has penetrated all of life, even Ginsberg’s life:

Moloch who entered my soul early! Moloch in whom I am a
consciousness / without a body!

(Ginsberg 1996:55)

⁵⁴ This Aramaic phrase appears in the gospel narratives of Jesus’ death (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34) and translates: ‘My God, My God why have you forsaken me?’

⁵⁵ Ginsberg has said: ‘Part II of *Howl* was written under the influence of peyote, composed during peyote vision’ (Dick 1972:287).

Moloch is in a state of constant surveillance: always watching and always seeing, ready first to demand its subjects to comply, and then to punish and judge those who dare resist. Moloch can mobilize and penetrate all of humankind and draw each life into its intentions and directions. Even Ginsberg is not free from the pervasive and far-reaching effects of Moloch, which has entered Ginsberg's body and enables him to enact a self-surveillance characterised by Moloch's intentions.⁵⁶ Without conscious resistance, the tide of Moloch sweeps individuals away and, with it all creativity and imagination⁵⁷ is swallowed in an orgy of consumption and the "meaningless" production of destruction.

Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone
soulless jailhouse / and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose
buildings are / judgement! Moloch the vast stone war... They
broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven...

(Ginsberg 1996:54-5)

Ginsberg subverts the hierarchy of confession by exercising his own capacity to record and interpret information regarding the nature of Moloch.⁵⁸ Precisely in articulating the nature of Moloch, those to whom Ginsberg confesses are provided with the opportunity to establish an opposition to Moloch. Thus Ginsberg's confession not only functions in a self-actualising capacity, but as a technique of resistance for him, and for others as well.

Ginsberg continues this resistance in the third part of *Howl* offering up a different story to the earlier story constructed and articulated in his history of Moloch. The third movement is a vast contrast to the mechanical, pseudo-apocalyptic destruction exercised by Moloch.

⁵⁶ The reality of Ginsberg's self-surveillance as a tool of Moloch's can be seen in his visits to psychiatrists in order to "cure" him of his homosexuality and his "work ethic" as my discussion on pages 20 and 21 of this thesis suggests.

⁵⁷ I am not suggesting that "creativity" and "imagination" are pre-existing or original aspects of the human mind. Rather, they are possibilities afforded by the human experience – and, in *Howl*, experiences that are not afforded by Moloch's domination.

⁵⁸ See page 30 of this thesis for my discussion regarding the hermeneutical function of the confessor.

Ginsberg writes to Carl Solomon, a friend he made whilst a patient at a mental health institution called Rockland,⁵⁹ using the motif ‘Carl Solomon! I’m with you in Rockland...’ (1996:55-6) This creates a sense of intimacy, compassion, tenderness and humanity, which stands in stark contrast to the “relationship” between Ginsberg and Moloch.⁶⁰ Ginsberg resists the destructive machinations of Moloch by being concerned about the individual, the “madman”, Carl Solomon, his friend. Another facet of Ginsberg’s resistance at this point of the poem is the sense in which he is confessing to Carl Solomon. Ginsberg has again subverted the hierarchy of confession by confessing of his own imperative and confessing, not only to Moloch, but also to an understanding audience in Carl Solomon and similarly marginalised subjects. It is possible, then, for this “friendly” audience to interpret Ginsberg’s confession sympathetically. By interpreting Ginsberg’s confession, including his analysis and description of Moloch, the reader and listener may resist Moloch and its surveillance with a resistant “gaze” of their own. But Ginsberg’s concern for the marginalised Carl Solomon, whom he addresses personally, offers another level of resistance – precisely in the way it offers an alternative to Moloch’s method.

Carl Solomon! I’m with you in Rockland / where you’re madder
 than I am. I’m with you in Rockland / where you must feel very
 strange... I’m with you in Rockland / where you laugh at this
 invisible humour... I’m with you in Rockland / where fifty more
 shocks will never return your soul to its body again / from its
 pilgrimage to a cross in the void...

(Ginsberg 1996:56)

By addressing Carl Solomon directly, Ginsberg is again calling both the private and the public crisis into the critical space of the poem (Riggs 1996:387-8). In this manner Ginsberg resists by reframing a worldview that Moloch cannot comprehend nor concede to without losing the very end for which it mobilises its techniques of control, coercion, manipulation,

⁵⁹ Ginsberg met Carl Solomon in the waiting room of a psychiatric hospital. See [www.heureka.clara.net/art/ginsberg.htm] and [www.beatmuseum.org/ginsberg/allenginsberg.html].

⁶⁰ The contrast between Ginsberg’s relationship with Solomon (sympathetic) and Moloch (antagonistic) further consolidates the resistant posture assumed towards the oppressive Moloch.

surveillance and punishment to attain. The marginalised individual is necessarily outside the mainstream and dominant culture. Ginsberg resists Moloch by championing the cause of the marginalised individual.⁶¹ For Moloch to acknowledge the marginalised individual, the Carl Solomons of the world, Moloch must concede something of itself and its own view: a view that suggests individuals are commodities useful only to garner military might and economic advancement; that individuals are valuable insofar as they are productive in Moloch's eyes; and, that the concerns (indeed the very lives) of individuals are a trivial nuisance and of no value or consequence beyond Moloch's agenda. By calling the plight of the individual into the critical space of the poem, Ginsberg's confession takes on a resistant posture. He poses a problem that his readers and listeners can all relate to – the plight of the specific individual, who has a name and can be crushed by Moloch's obsession with industrial production, currency, global trade and military might. The fleshly human – capable of feeling pleasure, of creating poetry, thinking and extending friendship – appears in dramatic contrast to the gnashing cogs of the Moloch-machine of metal and numbers. For Moloch to respond to Ginsberg's interrogative confession, it must be willing to examine its own posture. To do so is to run the risk of "defeat" and to acknowledge the resistance enacted by Ginsberg in his confession.

Ginsberg's confession, however, is not without its problems. There are dimensions of his personal reality that he leaves out of *Howl* and others that he chooses to articulate in a way that paints him more favourably. This is true not only for his homosexuality, but for his internment in a mental institution as well.

In 1949 Ginsberg spent nearly eight months at the New York State Psychiatric Institute.⁶² During this period he became friends with the poet Carl Solomon.⁶³ Carl Solomon is the object of Ginsberg's touching tribute in the third movement of *Howl*. It is a fitting tribute, but not entirely accurate. Ginsberg asserts that Solomon, the man, was in Rockland, another mental

⁶¹ I am mindful of Foucault's resistance to binary oppositions on this point. In *Howl*, Moloch has entered Ginsberg's soul suggesting that part of what he resists is in actuality part of his conflicted and contradictory self.

⁶² Raskin 2004:92

⁶³ Raskin 2004:92

institution, whereas Solomon was interned at Pilgrim State.⁶⁴ Clearly, Ginsberg is exercising some poetic licence here. Rockland serves his needs more effectively, sounding hard and colder, certainly not a place for pilgrims. But Ginsberg goes further, concealing his own internment, even going so far as to posit himself as Solomon's doctor when he writes: 'I'm with you in Rockland / Where you're madder than I am' (Ginsberg 1996:55).

In confessing Solomon's internment and establishing Solomon as patient and himself as doctor, Ginsberg is able to conceal his own internment and mental "instability". By volunteering this confession to Moloch, Ginsberg simultaneously bares the initial brunt of anger, but is able to divert attention away from himself – much like someone who leaks "inside knowledge". But we must be careful to see what Ginsberg is doing in this simultaneous confession and concealment. Is it that Ginsberg is simply afraid of the dominating power-relations of Moloch? Or does he have an ulterior, resistant, purpose?

Carl Solomon is a fitting recipient of Ginsberg's tribute. Firstly, Ginsberg is able to combat Moloch's industrial, production/consumption fixation with reference to a person – a named, marginalised person at that. And secondly, the allusions to the biblical figure of King Solomon, the wisest man to ever live,⁶⁵ are significant for *Howl*. The significance of Carl Solomon's internment in a mental institution is not lost, suggesting the "Solomons" of America are, in fact, in the madhouses. The madness inflicted by Moloch is such that it would be insanity *not* to have been interned. One might go so far as to say that to not have been interned is a sure sign of complicity with Moloch and, in fact, to already be dead or on the path to destruction-by-madness. To be complicit with Moloch is to sacrifice creative-humanity at the altar of industrial-practicality. Kierkegaard rendered a similar observation: 'the crowd is untruth.'⁶⁶

Ginsberg introduces a hero to the poem, a hero that is not the narrator. By simultaneously confessing and concealing, the narrator is able

⁶⁴ See (Raskin 2004:155).

⁶⁵ Solomon was a wise and learned man; it is stated that his wisdom was greater than that of the wise men of the East and Egypt.

⁶⁶ See [<http://www.ccel.org/k/kierkegaard/untruth/untruth.htm>].

to take a more observational position, which allows the “madman” to take centre stage. Ginsberg’s narrator is positioned as the observer from the outset when he comments: ‘I saw the best minds of my generation’ (Ginsberg, 1996:49), and this changes with the introduction of Carl Solomon. The madman is, indeed, the hero of the poem.

The madman is the antithesis to rational practicality, production and consumption – to Moloch. Against the cold grey steel of factories, railroads and office buildings, Ginsberg introduces an archetype who, by his very being, is in resistance to such domination, though subject at some levels to its controls.⁶⁷ For Ginsberg, Solomon is the wise man, untethered from the post of production and consumption, oblivious to the preoccupations of Moloch even amidst his internment. Such is the power of the madman to resist.

The focus on Solomon is significant, but to do so without accounting for the shift in the narrative voice would be detrimental to fully understanding Ginsberg’s role. The observational tone of most of *Howl* changes at this point. The “he” of the narrator becomes a “we” in addressing Carl Solomon.⁶⁸

This change in narrative voice results in the narrator becoming less detached and more involved, more implicated, in the confession. Whilst Ginsberg positions Solomon as the madman-hero, he connects (or incriminates) himself more fully by aligning himself with Solomon. Indeed it is Ginsberg who resists by celebrating Solomon as the antithesis of Moloch; and it is Ginsberg who draws himself closer to the “hero” by moving from a somewhat detached perspective to a fully immersed and involved viewpoint, writing ‘I’m with you in Rockland’.⁶⁹

The final section of *Howl* can be read as a confessional in the manner of a religious creed – a creedal confession. In it, Ginsberg extols a sense of relationship through the holiness of everything. He writes:

⁶⁷ One might argue that Solomon was still subject to the controls of Moloch in a physical sense because he was interned in a mental institution. He does successfully resist Moloch despite this. It is, after all, an issue of the mind.

⁶⁸ Compare: ‘I saw’ with ‘I’m with you’ (Ginsberg 1996:49, 55).

⁶⁹ Ginsberg uses the phrase ‘I’m with you in Rockland’ 18 times in Part III of *Howl*.

The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! The nose
 is holy! The / tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy! /
 Everything is holy! Everybody's holy! Everywhere is holy!
 Everyday is in / eternity! Everyman's an angel!

And concludes:

Holy forgiveness! Mercy! Charity! Faith! Holy! Ours! Bodies!
 Suffering! / Magnanimity! / Holy the supernatural extra brilliant
 intelligent kindness of the soul!

(Ginsberg 1996:57)

Where Ginsberg has previously acknowledged his below-ness when referring to Moloch he now resists Moloch by elevating the “holiness of everything” above any motive or intention that Moloch might supremely value. Whether it is commerce, military might, control over citizens and populations, alternative sexualities, drugs, politics, Ginsberg prescribes the holiness of everything above all these. In doing so Ginsberg undermines Moloch’s capacity to impose a homogenising conception of the “truth” of human existence that disregards difference and relegates humankind into a constrictive mould cast by what Ginsberg considers to be greedy capitalism and a Judeo-Christian worldview. For Ginsberg, Moloch’s conception of the “truth” of human experience leaves no room for madness, homosexuality, drug use and political difference.

Howl can thus be read productively as an instance of confession-as-resistance that engages with Foucauldian theory at a number of levels. A close reading of *Howl* illustrates the confession-as-resistance at work in the content of the confession. Ginsberg’s resistance, however, is not limited to the content of the confession alone. The form of the confession and the poetic devices employed are also significant to a productive reading of *Howl* as a resistant confession. I continue this discussion with a closer examination of the form, imagery and poetic devices used in the poem to examine the multiple levels at which the confession-as-resistance is functioning in a Foucauldian reading of *Howl*.

Form, poetic devices and imagery in *Howl*

That *Howl* can be read productively as an instance of confession-as-resistance is supported by an examination of the content of his confession and the cultural and historical context in which he composed the poem – as I have sought to highlight in the sections above. Yet to neglect the form, poetic devices and imagery employed by Ginsberg in *Howl* would be to fail to see the extent to which the confession-as-resistance may be seen in the poem: the multiple levels on which Ginsberg resists Moloch, and the unique space the poem occupies in contemporary American poetry as a result of Ginsberg's choice of images and poetic devices. A lengthy analysis of the specificities of all the poetic devices employed by Ginsberg is beyond the realms of this inquiry. Of more significance is the manner in which the poetic form, devices – such as the use of obscene language, the poetic structure and imagery are brought into play by Ginsberg to further enhance his resistant confession.

Howl is written in free verse in lines of varying length, with no regular meter or rhyme. The poem is characterised by long lines and ragged rhythms, and was composed with performance in mind. Ginsberg uses these long lines, arranged in rhythmic breaths, to lend a pent-up energy to the poem. As Raskin observes:

There is a uniquely American adolescent energy about *Howl*.
There's a boyish delight in obscenity and a prankish joy in
provoking and poking fun at authority figures.

(Raskin 2004:225)

The lack of rhyming couplets, absence of punctuated breaks and the rhythms of Ginsberg's long lines create a sense of velocity. The use of alliteration infuses the poem with a maddened energy. *Howl* staggers forth, manic, out-of-control and on its last legs but moving forward nonetheless. For example, Ginsberg speaks of those:

who chained themselves to subways for the endless ride from
Battery to / holy Bronx on Bensedrine until the noise of wheels
and children / brought them down shuddering mouth-wracked

and battered / bleak of brain all drained of brilliance in the drear
light of Zoo

(Ginsberg 1996:49)

These rhythms are a far cry from the orderly production lines of Moloch, or from the bars that imprison the marginalised, among them Ginsberg himself. The use of long lines, and the manic forward movement created by the ragged rhythms of the words used by Ginsberg, suggest a confession that is resisting confines and “breaking free”, illustrating the complementarity of form and content.

The following examination of form, poetic devices and imagery in *Howl* is undertaken with an awareness of Moloch’s ominous presence: Ginsberg’s concern with confession and resistance are of fundamental concern, and I propose to examine these in a manner that engages productively with the outlined Foucauldian theory to illustrate the extent of Ginsberg’s resistance and the importance of the poem to both its original readers and contemporary readers alike. The structural and linguistic choices made by Ginsberg in *Howl* raise important questions in my examination of the confession-as-resistance; however, a more appropriate place to begin is with the questions: Why does Ginsberg choose the poetic form to express his resistant confession? What kind of poetry does he employ? The answers to these questions will highlight the manner in which the *form* of the confession complements its *content*. And it is to these questions that I now turn my attention.

Howl Ginsberg’s use of poetry as a medium for communicating his resistant confession complements the content of the confession. The poetic form serves the resistant confession in several ways. The individuality of Ginsberg-the-man stands in contrast to the domination of the individual exercised by Moloch. The act of exercising one’s individuality, even in confession, is an assertion of one’s agency. With this agency, as with all relations of power, lies the possibility (indeed, necessity and inevitability) of resistance. The poetic form reinvigorates the role of the reader in so far as in the popular imagination poetry requires more “work” to reveal the “truth” of

the poem. Ginsberg calls the reader into play by using the poetic form. This creates the possibility of multiple and diverse readings.

Ginsberg-the-man, who is subject to the rules of law and the constraints of the dominant culture, is also a poet. For Ginsberg, to not “be” the poet is to suffer the strictures imposed on him by Moloch, to acquiesce and comply with the forces that imprison and bash the brains out of creative minds. In Foucauldian terms one might suggest that to comply with Moloch is for Ginsberg to deny the multiple subject positions available to him, to limit the multiplicity and diversity that he is, in fact, arguing for in the content of his confession. But this is not a route that Ginsberg pursues. Instead, he takes on the subject position of Ginsberg-the-poet, resisting Moloch’s domination of the marginalised individual by articulating his confession in the genre of poetry, a form that celebrates at one level the writing-subject⁷⁰ and allows freedoms to express in ways that are metaphorical and more “elusive” than forms of writing such as journalism. In choosing the poetic form to express his confession, Ginsberg simultaneously resists the prohibitions of legal authority and distances himself from the dominant culture. Ginsberg uses the traditional conceptions relating to *how* poetry is to be read to his advantage and in doing so “leverages” the poetic form to continue his resistant confession. Within the popular imagination it is widely accepted that poetry requires active involvement on behalf of the reader in the process of interpretation and meaning-making.⁷¹ That is to say, reading poetry affords the opportunity to more directly consider the hermeneutical function of the reader in “negotiating” and constructing meaning with a text, of revealing the “truth” contained in poetry that remains hidden until the reader becomes an active participant. Ginsberg’s choice of the poem as the medium for his confession can be considered an invitation to the reader to interpret – to exercise their own creative impulse, to grant the reader the creative possibility of multiple

⁷⁰ This can be seen in readers’ use of the author function to attribute a particular discourse to a specific writing subject. The reader constructs the writing subject differently according to the genre of writing. In this manner poetry differs from writing a brochure or legal legislation.

⁷¹ I am generalising in regard to the “popular imagination” and contrasting the role of the reader, who approaches a poetic text with that of a reader considering the “popular” novel form.

and diverse understandings – this resistant confession. The meaning of the confession is in some real sense unstable, a reality that frustrates the Molochian impulse to control. Ginsberg, however, grants the reader a kind of “grace” in validating the personal and subjective understanding of the poem. Following the Foucauldian “hermeneutical function” that suggests truth is not revealed “fully formed” but requires interpretation, one can contend that there is space within the poetic form to inhabit, and reject, what Ginsberg has presented. Ginsberg reinvigorates the role of the reader in articulating his confession in poetic form, demonstrating in a practical sense the “argument” of the content of his confession.⁷²

Ginsberg’s colourful lexical palate is a device used to confess and resist. I contend that the use of “obscenity” in *Howl* is a poetic device that draws on symbols seen as offensive by the dominant culture, but entirely representative of Ginsberg’s place on the margins of society. At the margins, activity is often forced to be furtive, secretive, forbidden, taboo and considered by the dominant culture as obscene. This is clear in Ginsberg’s deliberate use of words such as “fuck”, “cock”, “gyzym”, “ass”, “snatch” and “semen” for rhetorical effect. Needless to say, the publication of *Howl* infuriated the authorities. During the obscenity trial, one well-documented anecdote arose during an exchange between the prosecution and a key witness for the defence, a private elocution teacher, who had the following to say about the poem:

You feel like you are going through the gutter when you have to read that stuff. I didn’t linger on it too long, I assure you.
(<http://www.litkicks.com/Poems/Howl.html>)

It appears that, despite being unwilling to “linger”, the elocution teacher understood the world as experienced by Ginsberg and those close to him. Although the case was ruled in favour of Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti, Catholic poet William Everson argued that *Howl* was, in fact, obscene – but that its obscenity was the mark of genius.

⁷² I have already demonstrated the significance of the hermeneutical function earlier in Ginsberg’s choice to confess to Carl Solomon.

It was Ginsberg's insight into the operative power of the
obscene that gave him the leverage to effect a revolution in
American poetry [and] precipitate a new concept of the poem.
(Everson in Raskin 2004:215)

Ginsberg used the so-called symbols of "obscenity" of 1950s puritannical America to resist Moloch's attempts to control, coerce, manipulate and punish. Ginsberg had broken down barriers, 'he made the private public – put the naked mind and body in the open' (Raskin 2006:215). Such a public exposure of the private domain, and in poetic form at that, made "Moloch" nervous. The United States Government were not the only ones to react to the publication of *Howl*.

The academic world was on the receiving end of Ginsberg's resistant confession as well. Ginsberg refers to those 'who threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism' and 'who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Ar- / kansas and Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war' (Ginsberg 1996:53, 49). The form-shattering⁷³ approach of *Howl* resists elitist attempts to control poetry.⁷⁴ *Howl* signifies a radical departure from the poetry of the academy and from the established poets of the era. Although Ginsberg was acquainted with the rhetoric of the academic establishment,⁷⁵ he avoids elitism by writing for the marginalised people, much like the folk singers of his era.⁷⁶ Raskin argues strongly that in *Howl* Ginsberg continues a hermetic tradition, unveiling secrets that lie between the lines, which are intuitively understood by certain sections of society.⁷⁷

⁷³ T.S. Eliot, the famed avant-garde poet of the 1920s, articulated the concern held by many about the direction poetry was headed in the late 1940s, which Ginsberg subsequently "stretched" in the 1950s. In New York, Eliot wrote: 'We cannot, in literature, any more than in the rest of life, live in a perpetual state of revolution. If every generation of poets made it their task to bring poetic diction up to date with the spoken language, poetry would fail in one of its most important obligations' (Eliot in Raskin 2004:85).

⁷⁴ Significantly, the original reading of *Howl* in San Francisco was largely organised by Ginsberg, and none of the San Francisco 'establishment' poets would appear. It was a meeting of the misfits and marginalised (Raskin 2004:14ff). In an interview with NPR's 'All Things Considered' radio program in celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the first reading of *Howl*. Gary Snyder (who also read that evening with Ginsberg) discusses Ginsberg's use of colourful, funny and accessible vernacular in contrast to the academic poetry popular at that time. See [http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4950578].

⁷⁵ Raskin 2004:77-80.

⁷⁶ For example, Woodie Guthrie and Phil Ochs who were instrumental in the cause of labour unions and Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, among others.

⁷⁷ Raskin 2004:73-80.

Indeed the use of colloquialisms⁷⁸ seems deliberately oriented to the marginalised.

Ginsberg, in *Howl*, draws on the many antithetical literary traditions that influenced him, including those of John Donne, William Blake, T.S. Eliot, Walt Whitman, Arthur Rimbaud, William Carlos Williams, the Old Testament Prophets and Herman Melville.⁷⁹ And yet, with Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs also strongly influencing his work,⁸⁰ Ginsberg augments and twists the “poetic tradition” forging a “new voice” for American poetry and poets. In doing so he resists the poetry of the establishment and articulates a new poetry, a new voice, consistent with his confession.

The poetic form is used effectively by Ginsberg on several levels: the poetic form serves as a medium for his confession that is entirely consistent with the content of the confession; it is a tool for resisting Moloch in a legal sense; and, it reinvigorates the role of the individual subject as reader, a practical demonstration of the “argument” of his confession. These dimensions of the poetic form complement the content of the confession. However, Ginsberg’s use of imagery extends the effectiveness of the resistant nature of his confession.

Conclusion

The Foucauldian notions of power relations, confession and resistance can be harnessed to explore the role and nature of confession in Ginsberg’s *Howl*. Establishing the Foucauldian concepts of confession and resistance in the framework of power relations specifically highlights Ginsberg’s incitement to a confessional discourse and demonstrates the manner in which the confession can function as a technique of resistance. The Foucauldian notion of an agency of domination can be read in Ginsberg’s use of the Moloch motif; and it is this agency of domination that Ginsberg resists by enacting his own agency through confession. The name *Howl* is an

⁷⁸ For example Ginsberg refers to “gyzym” a colloquial expression for semen (Ginsberg 1996:51).

⁷⁹ Raskin provides a comprehensive list of Ginsberg’s literary influences (2004:45-53).

⁸⁰ Ginsberg was enthralled with what he called ‘madmen and artists’. Kerouac and Burroughs were among these madmen and provided a drastic counterpoint to Ginsberg’s education at Columbia. These writers, in their own ways, strongly influenced each other (Raskin 2004:51-3).

apt title for Ginsberg's work; it is a poem, a lamenting confession and a vigorous scream of resistance against oppression that seeks to destroy creative and compassionate humanity dramatically represented by Moloch. Reading *Howl* in light of Foucault's conceptualisation of confession leaves no doubt about Ginsberg's concern for the 'extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul' (Ginsberg 1996:57) and its embodiment in *Howl*. Raskin's concluding comment about *Howl* is appropriate:

With passion and precision – and from a sense of anomie and terror – Allen Ginsberg told the truth, as best he could, about himself, the world, and the cosmos.

(Raskin 2004:230)

Ginsberg clearly confesses, of his own volition – to himself, his friends and later to the reading world at large – the reality of his life, a history of Moloch that has shaped his life; his concern for Carl Solomon – an individual who represents many marginalised subjects; and, finally, the holiness of everything, culminating in the 'extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul' (1996:57). In confessing, Ginsberg as the subject-who-confesses is active in the construction of himself as subject. His confession also reveals a perspective on the agencies of domination concentrated in the metaphor of Moloch. These, in turn, provide opportunities for the agency of resistance in the content of Ginsberg's confession, the space in which he confesses, the manner of his confession and the creative form the confession assumes.

-Chapter three- Resisting an unstable ‘America’

Introduction

In chapter one I sought to provide an overview of the ways in which Foucauldian theory might be used to read Ginsberg’s poetry as instances of confession-as-resistance. Having established a theoretical foundation for the confession-as-resistance, in chapter two I sought to demonstrate how this notion could be used to provide a reading of *Howl* that illuminated the agency of the confessing subject (and within this the potential for resistance) and some specific techniques of resisting in the act of confession. To this end, notions of the subject and the nature and role of the confession as suggested by Foucault in *The history of sexuality* have informed much of my argument.

As I turn to Ginsberg’s *America* in this third chapter, however, I seek both to broaden and concentrate my argument. I broaden it by addressing the potential for the reader to affect social change beyond the act of reading. I propose that reading *America* through the lens of the confession-as-resistance draws the reader’s attention to the instability of the subject. Thus, the subjects “America”, “Ginsberg” (as poetic personae) and the “reader”, for example, can be understood as catalysts for social change. This chapter, then, extends and enhances the foundation of the confession-as-resistance developed in chapter one. Whilst chapter two illustrated the way in which the notion of confession-as-resistance might be applied to engage productively with Ginsberg’s poetry, in this third chapter I undertake to show in more specific detail how this particular poem can be read as an interrogative confession, which exposes the instability of the subject and provides opportunities for social change – even in the context of contemporary readers. To that end, this chapter argues that the Foucauldian

notion of confession-as-resistance is a productive way for contemporary readers to engage with Ginsberg's poems.

I begin by introducing *America* and establishing, within this new context, the need for the poetic persona to confess. Having laid this foundation I turn my attention to two key dimensions of the confession-as-resistance that form the thrust of this chapter. I follow Foucault in arguing for the instability of the subject and apply this to the poetic persona and to "America" in the poem. The instability of the subject provides opportunities for the confessing subject, the poetic persona, to enact a resistant confession – a discourse that discloses that which the dominating forces "require" it to disclose and that simultaneously resists that domination. I continue by suggesting that *America* illustrates a particular type of resistant confession, namely an interrogative confession. This type of confession is instrumental in enacting the agency of the confessing subject in resistance to a dominating force – a force that seeks to oppress the confessing subject by disregarding its legitimacy and self-determinacy, relegating it to the margins and continuing an agenda of war and control to the detriment of the people it represents. Ginsberg calls this dominating force "America".

Introducing *America*

America was written by Ginsberg in 1955 and first published by City Lights Press in a book of Ginsberg's poetry titled *Howl and other poems* in 1956.⁸¹ An early version of *America* that appeared in Ginsberg's personal journal is much shorter and differs in focus.⁸² As with *Howl*, I am here using a version of *America* that appears in an anthology of Ginsberg's poetry, selected by Ginsberg himself. I am doing so because both poems appear together in versions that were chosen by Ginsberg to represent his poetry.

America follows *Howl* chronologically and, some commentators argue, thematically. Raskin suggests that *America* best answers the question posed to Ginsberg by Burroughs after reading *Howl* in March 1956 – 'I am wondering where you will go from here.'⁸³ The poem does highlight a

⁸¹ Ginsberg 1956:39

⁸² Ginsberg 1995:207

⁸³ Raskin 2004:182

progression for the poet, who uses humour and irony to great effect. Whilst the poet's levels of self-disclosure remain as direct as in *Howl*, he does exude a level of comedic exertion in *America* that is absent in the earlier poem:

It occurs to me that I am America... Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb... When can I go into a supermarket and buy what I want with my good looks?

(Ginsberg 1996:62-3)

In *America* Ginsberg presents a scathing commentary on American values. He addresses a variety of culturally contentious issues, including anti-war sentiments,⁸⁴ a rejection of control the media has over people,⁸⁵ drug use,⁸⁶ homosexuality,⁸⁷ communist sympathies,⁸⁸ the cycle of manufacture and consumption in a capitalist democracy,⁸⁹ nuclear weapons,⁹⁰ the neglect of the underprivileged and marginalised⁹¹ and even the role religion plays in politics.⁹² All of these issues combine to create a Moloch-like character, "America", that incites Ginsberg's confession. But Ginsberg also confesses that he has contributed to the construction of the very "America" that he seeks to resist. It has subsumed his individuality and the gravity of the situation is laughable: in effect, it is so serious that Ginsberg has to laugh.

Are you being sinister or is this some form of practical joke?

(Ginsberg 1996:62)

This line, addressed to "America", is a telling example of Ginsberg's thematic preoccupations in the poem. It is in the form of a question, a direct

⁸⁴ 'America you don't really want to go to war' (Ginsberg 1996:63).

⁸⁵ 'Are you going to let your emotional life be run by Time Magazine?' and 'America this is the impression I get from looking in the television set' (Ginsberg 1996:63-4).

⁸⁶ 'I smoke marijuana every chance I get' (Ginsberg 1996:62).

⁸⁷ 'America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel' (Ginsberg 1996:64).

⁸⁸ 'When will you be worthy of your million Trotskyites?' and 'America I used to be a communist when I was a kid I'm not sorry' (Ginsberg 1996:62).

⁸⁹ 'When can I go into the supermarket and buy what I need with my good / looks?' and 'America I will sell you strophes \$2500 apiece \$500 down on your old / strophe' (Ginsberg 1996:62-3).

⁹⁰ 'Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb' (Ginsberg 1996:62).

⁹¹ 'I say nothing about my prisons nor the millions of underprivileged who / live in my flowerpots under the light of five hundred suns' (Ginsberg 1996:63).

⁹² 'My ambition is to be President despite the fact that I'm a Catholic' (Ginsberg 1996:63).

address issued to “America” and to the reader as well. It acknowledges the conflation of humour and seriousness – the sinister reality hidden behind prank pulling and the hilarity behind what is disturbing – along with the desire to engage at a meaningful and personal level with an “other”.

Ginsberg described the poem to his father as a ‘sort of surrealist anarchist tract’ (Raskin 2004:182); it is meant to rally others, to move people to act in a manner of their choosing. *America* is about challenging, interrogating and resisting an agency of domination that Ginsberg locates in the publicly/popularly unquestioned values of 1950s “America”.

Defining “America”: a singular (id)entity?

The question: ‘What is America?’ is central to any reading of this poem. America is, after all, many things. On one hand America can be understood in terms of geography; it occupies a temporal and physical place. On the other hand, America, like Russia or China, can be conceptualised as a political entity. These are the “Americas” of popular imagination that underlie Ginsberg’s poem and it is against this backdrop that the poem asks the question again: What is America? Ginsberg suggests that America can be understood as an identity, a living body of sorts with a singular mind and voice. Ginsberg addresses “America” directly:

I’m addressing you. / Are you going to let your emotional life be
run by Time Magazine?

(Ginsberg 1996:63)

The poetic persona⁹³ anthropomorphises America; it is alive, capable of choosing and feeling. This can further be seen as the poetic persona questions America: ‘When will you take off your clothes? / When will you look at yourself through the grave? ... America when will you send your eggs to India?’ (Ginsberg 1996:62). The poetic persona is awaiting a reply to these questions from the anthropomorphised “America” – the embodied America of unified mind and voice. The unity of identity that Ginsberg

⁹³ Further to my discussion about the ‘Problem of the “Poet”’ in chapter one, I have intentionally shifted between “Ginsberg” and “the poetic persona” to illustrate the instability of the subject. A conflation occurs between “Ginsberg” and “America” (which I discuss below), but I am mindful of the difficulty of approaching the subject-who-confesses as well.

attributes to “America” is not without significance. As the reference to Time Magazine suggests, the “mind” and “voice” of “America” are dominated by the mass media. It is here that the notion of the unified mass of “America” takes shape.

Ginsberg’s representation of “America” as a nation/country/population of diverse and different individual people assembled and coerced into the illusion of a unified (id)entity functions as a catalyst for resistance and interrogation. This coercion comes in the form of the interplay between the mass media, the government, the military and the “compliant mass” that allows itself to be oppressed. In this manner Ginsberg suggests the media controls not just what people think or feel about a subject, but rather which subjects they even think about. Thus the national (id)entity is shaped. Similarly, Ginsberg likens his poetry, his ‘holy litany’ (1996:63) to Henry Ford’s production of the motorcar:

I will continue like Henry Ford my strophes are as individual as
his / automobiles more so they’re all different sexes. / America I
will sell you strophes \$2500 apiece \$500 down on your old /
strophe.

(Ginsberg 1996:63)

This ironic positioning of Ginsberg’s poem alongside the industrial production line highlights “America’s” need for cycle of production and consumption. Ford’s automobiles were mass-produced⁹⁴ and the need to have the latest-and-greatest is suggested by Ginsberg’s inclusion of a typical trade-in speech one might encounter in car yards in many industrialised cities.

There is also the more overtly political dimension to creating a nation – none, perhaps, stronger than war. Ginsberg writes: ‘America you don’t really want to go to war. / America it’s them bad Russians’ (1996:63-4). Even within the potential turmoil of war there remains a sense of solidity and national uniformity that silences the “weak”, detests difference and,

⁹⁴ Ford famously said to a reporter inspecting his mass production automobile factory: ‘You can have any colour as long as it’s black.’

necessarily, marginalizes many. It is here that the first part of an answer to the question: What is America? can be formulated.

Ironically, however, this is also the “America” of which Ginsberg is “part” – an America that he seeks to resist by exercising his voice to interrogate and expose in this humorous poem. How does he do so? I continue by arguing that Foucauldian theory enables a reading of *America* that observes the poet’s attempt to disrupt the unified subject, to expose its instability and, to reject efforts to suppress the contradictions that constitute the subject. Later, I argue that *America* can be read as an interrogative confession, a confession that simultaneously functions as a technique of resistance and a point of identification for marginalised readers, who may then exercise their agency in the practice of resistance.

This approach is a valuable and productive means for engaging with *America* as it provides contemporary readers with a way of considering their role in the construction of themselves and the communities in which they live. The instability of the subject provides opportunities for readers to enact their agency, to assume some responsibility for the way the world around them is constructed. The way of resistance modeled in *America* by the poetic persona gives the reader a framework for resistance that can operate at any number of levels of personal involvement in the creation of their “America”. However, the model of resistance in *America* does not prescribe the activity and thoughts of the reader. It is a resistance characterised by the question mark.

Instability of the subject

Foucauldian theory, as with many poststructuralist approaches, challenges and rejects suggestions that there is some “essential” or “authentic” nature or point of origin for subjects. For Foucault, subjects are a function of language. In this view one cannot exist “outside of language” or prior to language.⁹⁵ Subjects are created in the act of speaking, writing and reading and do not have fixed meanings and final significations. As such, subjects are constructed, and may be constructed in a variety of ways. This view of

⁹⁵ Foucault argues that nothing has any meaning outside of discourse, echoing Derrida’s assertion that ‘there is nothing outside the text’ (Derrida 1976:158).

the subject (and subsequent rejection of unified identity and essential authenticity) results in the possibility of a proliferation of subject positions – as I illustrated in chapter one with reference to the subject positions available to “Ginsberg”. How, then, can subjects be considered “unstable”?

Subjects are functions of language. When one uses language to narrate a fact or idea in an intransitive manner a disconnection occurs between language and the subject relating the idea or fact. In this way the “voice” loses its origin and can only be accessed as a function of language. Barthes (1977) suggests that this disconnection functions as a neutral space characterised by the absence of the subject. With the absence of the subject all identity is lost – the subject, with no “origin”, is rendered unstable. That one can refer to the subject at all is a function of language. Language becomes the means by which the subject is “created”. The semiotic nature of language and the perpetual deferral of “meaning” (as posited with Derrida’s notion of *differánc*)⁹⁶ suggests many subject positions are available; diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity replace “essence”, “fixed identity” and the like. The instability of the subject can be seen in this proliferation of subject positions and, particularly, in the capacity for a subject to hold positions that might be simultaneously contradictory. Again, these are dimensions of the instability of the subject. The subject, then, is not a unified entity, the source of meaning and action. It is not “fixed” or “stable”, nor essential; rather, the subject is continuously in the process of construction. Subjectivity is linguistically and discursively constructed and changes according to its contexts of articulation. The subject is perpetually in the process of construction and is ‘thrown into crisis by alterations in language and in the social formation, capable of change’ (Belsey 1980:65). Once an agency of domination has control over a subject, it is this capacity for change and alteration (particularly in shaping social formations) that threatens the position of the dominating force. One can read *America* as illustrating a battle for the transformation of the poetic persona’s (and the reader’s) subjectivity.

⁹⁶ See ‘*Differánc*’ in *Margins of philosophy* (Derrida 1982:3-27).

An agency of domination seeks to coerce and manipulate subjects into a single point of view – a unified perspective, a hierarchy of discourses,⁹⁷ a single position that is the place of coherence of meaning. This attempt to order existence into neatly resolved unities may be understood in terms of the need to ensure “stability” in a class society. Belsey suggests that ‘it is in the interests of the reproduction of the existing relations of production, to suppress the contradiction in the subject’ (1980:87). In the context of *America* this need is manifest in the techniques of population control and social organisation that facilitate “America” becoming a more dominant global “power”, with increased financial resources through production and consumption – and, ultimately, a more passive and controllable “mass” population. This suppression of the instability of the subject is necessary to facilitate the reproduction of the existing relations of production. In this way an agency of domination may continue to function as it has. To challenge the stability of the subject is, then, to resist the existing relations of production.

In *America* Ginsberg highlights the contradiction in the subject, playing ironically with this notion by bringing it into an imaginative collision with the dominant “America” discourse – a discourse characterised by the oppression of the marginalised, obsession with production and consumption and war and destruction. “Ginsberg” conflates the subject position of the poetic persona with that of “America”. The poetic persona also resists “America” in offering a confession that is interrogative, as I will demonstrate in the latter part of this chapter. I turn my attention now to the conflation of different subject positions in *America*.

Conflating the subject

Ginsberg conflates the poetic persona with the subject position of “America”. In doing so he seeks to rupture the supposedly resolved unity of

⁹⁷ See Bakhtin’s essay ‘From the prehistory of novelistic discourse’ in David Lodge (ed). *Modern criticism and theory: a reader*. Longman: New York, 1988, esp. p.146 for his references to the “hierarchy of discourses”. See Bakhtin’s discussion on poetry, where he argues that language in poetry operates in a closed system. Bakhtin’s comments regarding the hermetic nature of poetic language suggest a further level of resistance in Ginsberg’s confession. See *The dialogic imagination: four essays*. University of Texas Press: Austin, 1981:200.

this dominating force, exposing its instability and providing a stimulus for readers to construct themselves – and ultimately their contexts – in less “restrictive” or more “contradictory” positions.

In this section I draw attention to several key lines from *America* to illustrate the conflation between the poetic persona (the “I-subject” of *America*) and the “America” which the poetic persona is subject *of* and subject *to*. The poetic persona is a subject *of* “America” in the way that a citizen or a passport holder is subject of that particular nation – having individual identity and agency. The poetic persona is subject *to* “America” in the manner that “America” represents, governs, legislates, controls and punishes its citizens.

America I’ve given you all and now I’m nothing.

(Ginsberg 1996:62)

This first line of *America* is central to a reading of the poem as a resistant confession. The poetic persona, presumably a constituent of the country known as America (the America of popular imagination), has given entirely of himself and the result has been the loss of identity – of his very existence.⁹⁸ The irony of this statement is the fact that the “I” who is speaking is definitely “something” insofar as the reader is able to construct this subject as such. The “I” of the poem is, however, constructed in opposition to “America”. Further, the opening line establishes the poem in a confessional mode – it is offered from a “nothing” (below) to a “something” (America) – though the ironic nature of this statement also colours this confession with the brush of resistance. Within this first sentence, key thematic concerns for the rest of the poem are also established: the conflation of the “I” with “America”, the loss of identity in the mass, the confession as resistance.

Ginsberg goes on to vent his frustration with “America” and its preoccupation with production⁹⁹, politics¹⁰⁰ and the cold war fear of all

⁹⁸ This line anticipates the battle for the reader’s subjectivity I suggested earlier in the chapter.

⁹⁹ ‘Your machinery is too much for me (Ginsberg 1996:62).

¹⁰⁰ ‘America I used to be a communist when I was a kid I’m not sorry’ (Ginsberg 1996:62).

things Russia and Russian prevalent at the time.¹⁰¹ The poetic persona, exasperated, utters two lines that turn the poem on its head:

It occurs to me that I am America. / I am talking to myself
again.

(Ginsberg 1996:63)

Herein the reader is directed to see, explicitly, the link between “America” and the “I” of America. The poetic persona is a subject of America – he is part of the “America” that presumes to speak and act on his behalf. And yet, there is the sense of frustration, futility and alienation that comes from having given one’s all and become nothing, subsumed in the amorphous “mass”, a floating subject unable to enact its agency in the face of that which it detests. The two lines from America also offer an opportunity to the poetic persona: the poetic persona and the subject “America” become a site of contradiction and they are thrown into crisis by this interaction as the constructed subjectivity is exposed and not suppressed. The passages that follow see the poetic persona more explicitly conflated with the “America” subject as the following lines indicate:

Asia is rising against me. / I haven’t got a chinaman’s chance. /
I’d better consider my national resources. / My national
resources consist of two joints of marijuana millions of geni- /
tals an unpublishable private literature that jetplanes 1400 miles
an / hour and twentyfive-thousand mental institutions. / I say
nothing about my prisons nor the millions of underprivileged
who / live in my flowerpots under the light of five hundred suns.

(Ginsberg 1996:63)

The poetic persona has become “America” and yet it is separate from “America”. The lines of distinction between the personal and the political are blurred, as is the line between the public and the private. Using ambiguous language when referring to “America” and itself, the poetic persona throws the process of constructing the subject “I” and “America” into crisis – exposing the process of the subject and, subsequently, creating a

¹⁰¹ ‘America I still haven’t told you what you did to Uncle Max after he came / over from Russia’ (Ginsberg 1996:63).

possibility of transformation and change. Again the use of irony is present in the line: 'I say nothing about my prisons nor the millions of underprivileged who / live in my flowerpots under the light of five hundred suns' (63). In not saying anything (as "America" does not), the poetic persona does say something – it draws attention to the silence, to the lopsided construction of the "America" subject.

The final illustration of the conflation of subjects that I would like to comment on occurs, fittingly, in the final line of the poem. Ginsberg articulates, in a mocking tone, the fears evidenced in America's foreign policy and activity with respect to China and Russia in the era of the poem's publication in the mid-1950s. America concludes with the lines: 'It's true I don't want to join the Army or turn lathes in precision parts / factories, I'm nearsighted and psychopathic anyway. / America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel' (Ginsberg 1996:64). The poetic persona, who has become part of the national persona, is committed to "America" but demands a more representative construction of the America-subject: a construction that includes the poetic persona and those it seeks to represent in the mix as well. It challenges any notion of "America" that seeks to suppress or silence these subjects; it rejects the attempt to take from these subjects without acknowledging their agency in being "part" of "America". In short, it is the poetic persona's way of recovering from the posture it assumed in the beginning of the poem, to move from giving "America" all and becoming 'nothing' to being recognised as part of "America" and "someone". Again, the subject "America" is thrown into crisis. This confession is confronting and disarming in its honesty and irony, and the need to suppress this difference remains.

In the face of "America's" need to resolve these entities into a neat unity Ginsberg offers what appears to be a sense of conclusion, with the poetic persona offering to put his 'queer shoulder to the wheel' (Ginsberg 1996:56). It is a queer shoulder, however, not the shoulder of the heterosexual mainstream. This queer shoulder represents all of the difference suppressed by the dominating force – the drugs, homosexuality, communism, mental institutions and patients, underprivileged and poor, the

prisons and warehouses, the drunks, the religious, the migrants and the indigenous American population. In short this queer shoulder represents the neglected who, regardless of how “America” seeks to construct itself, are still subjects of and subjected to America. In these concluding lines the poet offers a conclusion – a homogenisation that offers heterogeneity as its premise, resistance as its currency and diversity of agency in its constitution.

One must consider also the role of the reader of the poem as well. The heavy irony and humour employed by Ginsberg helps to highlight the subjectivity of the reader as a source of meaning-making. Ginsberg is forthright and direct, but lacks the air of authorial omniscience that characterises the representation of “America”. It is an effective poetic device that acknowledges the perpetual process of subjectivity. In other words, the ruptures exposed and the instability championed by Ginsberg is encouraged also in the reading subject, allowing *America* to act in the reality of the reader as well: both to bring their subjectivity into crisis and to stimulate social formation of the kind of world in which they would like to live. In this way, a reading of *America* as a resistant confession drawn together by the representation and conflation of unstable subjects provides significant and productive readings of immense value to contemporary readers. Its value lies in the potential for concrete social transformation that reaches across the terrain of sexuality, politics, economics, psychology and religion.

The interrogative confession

In chapter two I drew on Foucauldian theory to argue that the confessing subject may be able to resist the dominating force(s) because its subjectivity is actualised in the act of confession. That is to say the confessing subject is also the subject of the confession. With reference to *Howl* I argued that the poetic persona was able to resist Moloch’s domination by its characterisation of Moloch – its construction of its oppressor – and, similarly, by the manner in which it constructed itself in the confession. In this chapter I have sought to focus on *America* to explore the manner in which Ginsberg has been able to resist, while confessing, in his conflation of supposedly stable and unified entities – notions like “Ginsberg” (the poetic persona) and “America” in particular. Before concluding this chapter, however, I would like to bring

together some ideas alluded to in chapter two and those of the early part of this chapter. The poetic persona enacts its agency in the act of confession. The content of the confession sees the poetic persona conflating multiple subject positions available. This conflation functions as an act of resistance in its refusal of stable entities. This resistance is furthered in the interrogative nature of the confession. Thus, the poetic persona simultaneously resists and confesses. This is the culmination of the argument I have sought to develop throughout this thesis. I turn my attention now to the nature of what I am calling the “interrogative confession” before illustrating its role in *America* and drawing the chapter together in conclusion.

The interrogative confession refuses a single point of view. The questions it raises may be answered variously. Ultimately, it invites ‘the reader to produce answers to the questions it implicitly or explicitly raises’ (Belsey 1980:91). The unresolved contradiction and collision of subject positions and points of view “embody” and dramatise the heterogeneity lacking in the political and social milieu of the time of writing. But Ginsberg refuses to articulate a hierarchy of discourses explicitly – finding instead, in his position as a confessing subject, a place and means to resist domination and model another way, that suggests, rather, a proliferation of ways. The interrogative confession asks questions of the subject demanding the confession. Secondly, the interrogative confession refuses demands for neatly resolved unities (and the traditional function of the confession in the production of “truth”) in that it is possible for questions to go unanswered – as is the case with *America*. Finally, the interrogative confession further develops and energizes the agency of the interrogating confessing-subject by engaging the subject’s “voice” and, significantly, the relationship between the poetic persona and the reader.

The interrogative confession, as its name suggests, involves a unique morphing of subject positions in the interplay of power and resistance. As I have already shown, confession requires a confessing subject and a subject demanding the confession. The interrogative confession, however, differs in that the confessing subject may be able to turn the opportunity to confess

into a question that inverts the roles of the respective subjects. The confessing subject, then, becomes one who demands a confession of the (previously) dominating subject. In a sense, the confessing subject's resistance is so "successful" that the tables are turned – the question issued by the formerly confessing subject is sufficient to resist the demand for the confession, whether the question is answered or not.

The inversion of the order of resistance (outlined in chapter one) can be applied to poetic persona in *America* at several points. For instance, the poem contains examples of the poetic persona directly interrogating "America":

America when will we end the human war? ... America why are
your libraries full of tears? ...

(Ginsberg 1996:62)

The questions asked of "America" by the poetic persona are the questions concerned with human life: it is a human war and a human history. How is "America" to respond to this question? Can "America" comprehend the humanity of war and history? Is "America" in any position to act otherwise? Is the "track record" offered by "America" a source of comfort and hope? To what end does "America" continue its clumsy and violent domination? Within the context of the poem and the historical context in which it was written these unarticulated questions represent the poem's subtext.

Elsewhere the poetic persona demands the same transparency of "America" that "America" demands of its "subjects", saying: 'America when will you be angelic? / When will you take off your clothes?' (Ginsberg 1996:62). Here the confessing subject (poetic persona) asks a question of "America" – a question that, should it be answered, would indicate that "America" has acknowledged the agency of the poetic persona, validated its very existence and, potentially, has felt a sense of responsibility towards it in answering the claims the poetic persona makes. Indeed these outcomes are entirely consistent with the democratic rhetoric of the United States of

America at that time.¹⁰² Nevertheless, these examples from *America* highlight the way the poetic persona (the “confessing subject”) is able to invert the hierarchy of confession by enacting its agency in an interrogative confession.

The interrogative confession also functions at a level of further abstraction in its capacity to refuse demands for neat unities. This capacity, whilst always available but not necessarily utilised, is consistent with Foucault’s refusal of core or essential “realities” and further expands a reading of the interrogative confession in *America*. The refusal of “neat unities” and “solid structures” can be seen in the way the poetic persona challenges, ruptures and refuses the notions of “stable identity” and homogeneity implied in the term “America”. As I illustrated earlier in this chapter, Ginsberg’s conflation of poetic persona and “America” is instrumental in this interrogation and, ultimately, in the rejection of these notions. The poetic persona is at once distinct from “America” and is simultaneously part of “America”. The separation between the “I” of *America* and the “America” represented in the poem can be attributed to the “negative” aspects (of “America”) that are presented by the poetic persona – namely, political intolerance, neglect of the marginalised and underprivileged, obsession with appearance, the control of the media over “the population” among others. These characteristics of “America” are not the wishes of the poetic persona. That the poetic persona is able to interrogate “America” also points to this separation. “America” “thinks” and “feels” differently to the poetic persona, who is a subject *of* “America”. Ginsberg points out further “instabilities” in “America”:

When will you be worthy of your million Trotskyites?
(Ginsberg 1996:62)

The dominant “America” has constituents who are in political conflict with one another. The poetic persona says: ‘America I used to be a communist

¹⁰² Indeed as I have illustrated previously the gulf between the political rhetoric of the government and the actual practice that ensued was significant. In particular the treatment of gay men in San Francisco and the tyranny of McCarthyism are testament to substantial infringements on freedom of speech and civil liberties.

when I was a kid I'm not sorry' (Ginsberg 1996:61). The suggestion that "America" is a stable entity is misguided; a notion that Ginsberg rejects, indeed mocks:

America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel.
(Ginsberg 1996:64)

As I mentioned above, this is the concluding line from *America* and it is a compelling way for the poem to end. In this line the separation and conflation between the poetic persona and "America" is realised; the instability of the subjects acknowledged and, cleverly, the ironic voice continues to resist. This continued resistance is particularly ironic in the manner that Ginsberg suggests a resolution – it appears the loose ends are to be tied and concluded – but the resolution is not consistent with the popular understanding of conclusion, it is not a homogenous "closing in" but, rather a heterogeneous "opening out". The "America" discourse, of which the poetic persona is part, must acknowledge the diversity present, the instability of its own construction and the responsibility it has to its subjects. In this way Ginsberg's *America* can be read with extraordinarily productive effects that appeal to readers and their roles in constructing the kind of society in which they would like to live – both for themselves and for others.

Finally, Ginsberg's construction of the relationship between the poetic persona and the reader demonstrates the manner in which the interrogative confession can go "beyond the text" to effect social change. Firstly, Ginsberg brings the reader into the critical space of the poem and, at one level, interrogates the reader. Secondly, the poem begins to function as what I would like to call an *ars resistance* – the poem invites the reader to also resist by encouraging them to interrogate those parts of "America" that they do not agree with or understand. In some instances throughout the poem, the poetic persona is clearly interrogating "America".¹⁰³ At other times throughout the poem, however, the poetic persona does not address "America" by name:

¹⁰³ This is evident particularly when the poetic persona addresses 'America' by name. For example: 'America when will we end the human war?' and 'America when will you be angelic?' (Ginsberg 1996:62)

When will you look at yourself through the grave? ... Are you being sinister or is this some form of practical joke? ... I'm addressing you. / Are you going to let your emotional life be run by Time Magazine? ...

(Ginsberg 1996:62-3)

In the instances where the poetic persona does not address “America” by name, one can read into the poem a conversation between the poet and the reader. The reader is questioned, interrogated, as an active subject not a passive recipient of some distanced or irrelevant discourse. Even close to fifty years after the poem was written, the questions posed by the poetic persona (to “America” and beyond) are relevant. Is the reader controlled by the “mainstream” media? Is that how they would like it to be? Is the reader happy with the world they are constructing? The way they are constructing themselves? Others? In this way Ginsberg challenges the notion that the reader is passive.

Ginsberg discourages the reader from identifying entirely with the poetic persona. By conflating the poetic persona with “America”, Ginsberg ensures that the reader cannot be entirely sure exactly “who” is speaking. Therefore, the relationship between the reader and the poetic persona is characterised by on-going questioning – a perpetual interrogation. This is important in the sense that there is not a singular dominant discourse being purported. Although, at times, the poetic persona is forceful and direct in its comments,¹⁰⁴ the overriding ironic voice of the poem suggests a playfulness – a “serious irreverence” – that discourages the reader from fully identifying with the poetic persona, who is often difficult to “pin down”. Here, again, one can see the way in which a single point of view is refused and the reader must also engage with the poem (and beyond the poem) to answer the questions raised – to play out these ambiguities in their own life.

¹⁰⁴ ‘America free Tom Mooney / America save the Spanish Loyalists / America Sacco & Vanzetti must not die / America I am the Scottsboro boys’ (Ginsberg 1996:63).

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the instability of the subject and the interrogative confession as key dimensions of the notion of confession-as-resistance developed throughout this thesis. I have shown how the confessing subject in *America* is able to resist the domination it experiences by challenging and exposing the instability of the subject “America”. With this instability exposed, the confessing subject conflates its own subjectivity with that of “America”. By bringing these subject positions into conflict, contradiction and collision, the possibility for social change is realised. The reader is drawn into the critical space of the poem by the poet’s use of questions, which invite the reader to consider the kind of society they are constructing. This interrogation of the reader, and the way Ginsberg models confession-as-resistance in *America*, creates the possibility for significant social change in the world of contemporary readers.

Harnessing Foucauldian theory enhances a reading of the poem by drawing attention to potential practical applications for contemporary readers. These applications are not explicitly prescribed but, in a manner consistent with an interrogative confession (which refuses a hierarchy of discourses), encourage the reader to actively question their world and respond as they see fit. Thus, this final chapter applies the confession-as-resistance framework established in chapter one and extends the ideas outlined in chapter two. All that now remains is for the reader to put their ‘shoulder to the wheel’ (Ginsberg 1996:64).

-Conclusion-

As I have shown, Foucault locates his discussion of confession within the matrix of power relations. In this thesis, I have drawn attention to the manner in which the poetic persona seeks to resist the oppression that it experiences. “Moloch” and “America” in *Howl* and *America* oppress Ginsberg. These entities are a conflation of the social and political forces at work in 1950s America that marginalised many and caused Ginsberg considerable personal pain. They are a concentration of the diverse forces that demand Ginsberg confess the “truth” about himself – and the forces that incite him to simultaneously confess and resist.

Ginsberg’s confessional discourses enact his own agency and subjectivity by giving him a unique voice. Further, to some extent Ginsberg is able to shape how that voice is heard because the confessing subject is the subject of the confession. In this way, Ginsberg chooses what is confessed and what is concealed, to whom he directs his confessions (and the likelihood that the hearers are sympathetic to his position), and how the oppressor in each instance is characterised. I have argued that in *Howl*, Ginsberg resists in the act of confession by using the “Moloch motif” to characterise the oppressor that seeks to destroy creative and compassionate humanity. In *America* the oppressor is characterised by Ginsberg’s representation of “America”, a concentration of cultural and institutional forces that seek to homogenise and control the marginalised individuals in that country. In both of these instances, Ginsberg is not establishing distinct binaries between himself and Moloch / “America”. In *Howl* it is Moloch who has entered his soul early, and in *America* Ginsberg is also part of the “America” that he resists. In this way, both poems can be read with a Foucauldian understanding of power relations, one that rejects distinct oppositions.

The way the poetic persona is constituted, as a subject within the matrix of power relations, is central to a Foucauldian approach to the confession-as-resistance. Ginsberg's subjectivity is evident in his capacity to choose the content of his confessions, the space in which he confesses and the creative form the confessions assume. Further, the way in which Ginsberg challenges the stability of the subject by interrogating it further attests to the agency of the confessing subject and its ability to resist in the very act of confession. This was particularly evident in chapter three, where I argued that by challenging and exposing the instability of the subject "America", the poetic persona goes on to conflate its own subjectivity with "America" – bringing the positions into conflict, contradiction and collision. The potential for social change – a crucial act of confessing and resisting – is realised within these conflicts and contradictions. Importantly, this potential for social change is made possible by drawing the reader in to enact his or her own agency. The reader is invited into the critical space of the poem by the use of questions, which invite the reader to consider the kind of life and world that they are constructing. The applications to the answers provided by this interrogation are not prescribed; rather they are left to the individual – further establishing the agency of the unstable subject.

The confession-as-resistance – informed by a Foucauldian approach to power relations, confession and resistance – can be harnessed to provide productive readings of *Howl* and *America*. Ginsberg is able to simultaneously confess and resist "within" the poems, and models a way for contemporary readers to interrogate the worlds they inhabit, to enact their agency in resisting oppression and actively cultivating the kind of world in which they would like to live. To this end *Howl* and *America* remain vitally important poems for contemporary readers.

There is significant scope for further scholarly engagement with the work of Allen Ginsberg. In particular, the themes of "Time", "Eternity", and the "mind" that pervade Ginsberg's poetry deserve further consideration. There also exists a significant opportunity to extend the work of this thesis by harnessing Foucauldian theory to consider the construction and development of notions of sexuality across Ginsberg's writing, and to

continue exploring the multiple subject positions that can be read in the various genres in which Ginsberg worked, including song, poem, essay, journal, criticism, spoken word recordings and personal correspondence. In many ways, even until his death in 1997, Ginsberg remained a writer at the margins. He was, for the most part, a champion of the “other”; keenly aware of the inequalities present in the cultural and political context in which he lived. To his credit, Ginsberg addresses these issues directly, with compassion, energy and poise. Bob Rosenthal sums up the significance of Ginsberg’s life and work: ‘Allen taught us to breathe in the poison and breathe it out as nectar’.¹⁰⁵ This is the legacy of Ginsberg’s life and poetry. In this world of pervasive poison, Ginsberg’s words inspire hope and humanity.

¹⁰⁵ See [www.allenginsberg.org].

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Note to reader:

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Ginsberg, A. *City midnight junk train: selected poems 1947-1995*. Penguin Books: New York, 1996.

Versions of both poems are readily available online for your convenience.