

# ALLEN GINSBERG, HERBERT MARCUSE, AND THE POLITICS OF EROS

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In 2006, *Howl*, that epoch-defining poem by Allen Ginsberg, turned fifty. It is one of the queerest works in the American literary canon; but a few lines are sufficient to establish its homoerotic credentials:

Who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly  
motorcyclists, and screamed with joy,  
who blew and were blown by those human seraphim,  
the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love,  
who balled in the morning in the evenings in rose  
gardens and the grass of public parks and  
cemeteries scattering their semen to  
whomever come who may.<sup>1</sup>

*Howl* offers a veritable laundry list of iconic gay tropes: anal sex, motorcycle trade boys, sailors (the ubiquitous “seafood”), promiscuity, public sex—just add the YMCA and we’d have a brand new Village People song. On the evidence of the above-quoted lines, it seems easy to call this an early and important gay poem. And yet my point will be very much the opposite: that *Howl* is not a gay poem at all, at least not as we use the term today, and that Ginsberg is not really a gay poet—homoerotic to be sure, but not gay. By this I mean to suggest he refutes our modern notion of a gay identity defined

in opposition to straightness, as well as the concomitant invocation of in-group practices or customs, and the defining ideal of sexuality as an *ur*-difference.

*Howl* instead frequently invokes a social margin deliriously unconcerned with sexual differentiation, a ragtag band united by the loosening, not tightening, of gendered and sexual differentiations. Far from modeling increasingly specified, essentialized distinctions as generative of the modern LGBT movement, works like *Howl* are important in part because they allows us to redefine our understanding of sexuality at the very emergence of what would become gay and lesbian liberation. In place of the seemingly historical dichotomy between closeted and out, *Howl* makes clear a more nuanced, but less politically useful, distinction between essentializing and universalizing visions of sexual difference—both equally “out.” The point is that the historical opposite of gay need not be either straight or closeted—it could in fact be polymorphous perversity, bohemian libertinism or even simply sex—and it’s hardly less radical politically for its refusal to engage a category of identity initially coined, to say the least, without the interests of “gay” people in mind.

Ginsberg annotates his alienation from queers in his first published poem, the 1947 *In Society* (*CP*, 3). It begins,

I walked into the cocktail party  
room and found three or four queers  
talking together in queertalk.  
I tried to be friendly but heard  
myself talking to one in hiptalk.

Immediately, Ginsberg takes pains to telegraph his difference from queers, mapping it linguistically; significantly, he sees himself as the passive agent of this difference—“found myself talking.” His hosts seem to pick up on his disdain and respond in kind, for the poem continues, “‘I’m glad to see you,’ he said and looked away. ‘Hmm,’ I mused.” Now, with their mutual hostility more out in the open, Ginsberg next insults his hosts,

The room  
was small and had a double-decker  
bed in it, and cooking apparatus:  
icebox, cabinet, toasters, stove;  
the hosts seemed to live with room  
enough only for cooking and sleeping.  
My remark on this score was under-  
stood but not appreciated.

So Ginsberg becomes awkward, self-conscious, even abject as the poem continues.

I was  
offered refreshments, which I accepted.  
I ate a sandwich of pure meat; an  
enormous sandwich of human flesh.  
I noticed, while I was chewing on it,  
it also included a dirty asshole.

Here ramifying metaphors of self-consumption, as in the clichéd “to eat oneself up”, or “put one’s foot in one’s mouth,” signify shame and self-abnegation, while the dirty asshole ensures that his alienation cannot pass for a normative heterosexual estrangement from all that signifies as queer.

Yet Ginsberg ends the poem having nicely recovered his footing through the time-honored masculinist ruse of performing a dominant masculinity over and against women. In response to a perceived slight from someone he terms a “fluffy female who looked like a princess,” Ginsberg palpably puffs his chest and retorts,

I said, “What!”  
in outrage. “Why you shit-faced fool!”  
This got everybody's attention.  
“Why you narcissistic bitch! How  
can you decide when you don't even  
know me,” I continued in a violent  
and messianic voice, inspired at  
last, dominating the whole room.

And so the poem ends as it began, a narcissistic invocation of a reified masculinity mapped over and against those who constitute its other—women and queers.

In an interview discussing the gay scene at Columbia when he was a student, at exactly the same period in which he wrote *In Society*, Ginsberg said, “Well, there were a lot of gay people around at Columbia. There was one guy who was very much out of the closet... And he was quite a noble and dignified, accepted member of our gang except that he also ran with a gang of gay people or queens or fairies. People who were queer in those days at Columbia... They weren't big men on campus. They were a group on their own, sort of.”<sup>2</sup> With his “they” and “their,” his references to queers and fairies, Ginsberg is again marking out gayness as external to his conception of self—and this in 1989, twenty years after the advent of the modern gay liberation movement.

Almost reflexively, we assume such refusal of self-identification to be rooted in the closet, to be an aspect of concealment or self-loathing, but clearly this can't be the case for Ginsberg. He was, after all, the man who concluded his poem *America* (*CP*, 148) with, "America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel"—writing that line in 1956, amidst the so-called "Lavender Scare" when same-sex sexuality was illegal and still subject to massive witch hunts and stiff penalties. So if his dismissive refusal of queens or gays or fairies isn't self-loathing, what is it?

In fact, Ginsberg's refusal of a demarcated sexual identity is hardly idiosyncratic, but part and parcel of a larger cultural discourse gaining strength throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s—though it has largely escaped subsequent critical notice as such, in part because of its vast difference from the common understanding of sexuality, much less same-sex sexuality, today. Few continued this discourse into the post-Stonewall period, but with remarkable consistency, Ginsberg did. As a kind of shorthand, I'll be labeling this historical attitude "Eros," after the usage of the term by perhaps its most famous exponent, Herbert Marcuse, in his groundbreaking book *Eros and Civilization*. Importantly, there is no women's Eros, nor men's Eros in Marcuse's demonstration; it's neither gay nor lesbian nor heterosexual Eros; it's never so specified or made coterminous with an identity—rather it's always simply Eros, and proclaimed a universal human capacity. We tend to understand universals, rightly I think, as inherently oppressive constructs meant to shore the status quo, to keep power in the hands of those who already wield it; but importantly this one understood itself as both dissident and liberating. It's hard to wrap our heads around this vision of Eros because it flies in the face of so much of what we

assume to be true: that it is difference and not commonality that constitutes the ground of our identity, that rights are pursued and won on a basis of a minoritizing, not universalizing discourse.

After all, since the publication of *Howl*, the human subject has become increasingly particularized, concentrated into a specific body, the materialized node of multiple social differences in gender, race, sexuality, social class, and now, increasingly, in subsidiary differences such as size, geography, ability, and even religion. Being now accrues meaning largely through difference, and the body's social situatedness condenses our increasingly complex three-dimensional array of divergent social trajectories into what we now understand as our identity. It is identity that constitutes the root of our being, the gravitational pull of our notion of community; it is both the sum of our interiority and the outer membrane that we assume segregates us from all that is non self-identical.

The intellectual and discursive development of an identity rooted in difference has been of inestimable importance towards decentering the presumptively singular, universal subject of old, a universality that, it just so happened, mimicked rather astonishingly well the particular social situatedness of its creators—overwhelmingly white, male, heterosexual, Euro-American, etc. We know all this like a catechism. And it is precisely the power of this catechism to evacuate the Cartesian male subject of any claims to universality, to pinpoint precisely its social and political investments that have made it so useful.

But the very discursive success of an identity model has obscured other, competing paradigms of dissidence not premised on the articulation of difference. My point here is to recover in Ginsberg a very particular universalizing vision of

Eros as a mechanism of comprehensive social dissent and activist engagement. The term Eros, as defined by Marcuse, suggests a society that no longer represses the pleasure principle, a society no longer organized around the denial of libidinal relationships, but that celebrates the libido in everyone as an end in itself. The payoff—and this is worth underscoring even in advance of the historical argument—is that it was precisely this particular and still understudied notion of a universal Eros that helped make visible the body as potentially dissident and deeply politicized, the first step towards its subsequent establishment in race-, gender- and sexuality-based social movements as the ground for contestation.

Of course, as *In Society* underscores, Ginsberg can easily seem the poet of difference par excellence: his repeated announcements of his same sex activities, his aggressively first-person poetry, his (at best) inattention (and, at worst, hostility) to entire populations such as women—these are hardly universalizing constructs. Yet, while Ginsberg adopts a largely normative, masculine voice in *In Society*, his very next published poem, *The Bricklayer's Lunch Hour*, is a prose poem with an unmistakably homoerotic theme, evoking a vision of a “yellow hair[ed],” “young subordinate bricklayer,” “bare above the waist” (*CP*, 4). Rather than naming a singular, delimited erotic, Ginsberg, Whitman-like, repeatedly casts himself as lover to the world, his poetry often (though by no means always) suffused with an Eros unconcerned with gender or sexual difference. Here, in the last two stanzas of *The Shrouded Stranger* (1949-51) (*CP*, 26), the poet's first-person voice makes no distinction between “Maid or dowd or athlete proud”:

Who'll go out whoring into the night  
 On the eyeless road in the skinny moonlight  
 Maid or dowd or athlete proud  
 May wanton with me in the shroud

Who'll come lie down in the dark with me  
 Belly to belly and knee to knee  
 Who'll look into my hooded eye  
 Who'll lie down under my darkened thigh?

Indeed, an even earlier poem, this one from 1949, *Fie my Fum* (*CP*, 23), seeks to evade gender difference entirely through substituting non-specific analogs for the inevitably gendered terminology of the body,

Pull my daisy,  
 Tip my cup,  
 Cut my thoughts for coconuts,  
 ...  
 Ark my darkness,  
 Rack my lacks,  
 Bleak my lurking,  
 Lark my looks,  
 ...

This period of the early- to mid-fifties—the height of the Cold War—was an historical moment of enormous consequence. Widely misread as the zenith of the grey-flannel suit and suburban conformity, it was in fact a moment in which these signs of traditionalism and orthodoxy were discursively mobilized precisely because such old school values were increasingly under threat.<sup>3</sup> Ginsberg's works contributed towards breaching the boundaries of the

sovereign, knowable and natural body, the body as a privileged site of autonomous meaning outside of history and anterior to ideology. In defamiliarizing the body through Eros, these works disrupted the citational process through which social meaning was said to inhere naturally to bodies, to make them what they already “were.” As we’ll shortly see, Ginsberg’s poetics of the flesh were nothing if not anti-categorical, even incoherent, by the standards of the time, deeply phallogentric and yet sexually passive, calling, even begging, for penetration at the same moment they celebrated phallic mastery.<sup>4</sup> For example, *In Pull My Daisy* (CP, 24-25, 1949), coauthored with Ginsberg’s friends and occasional lovers Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady, polymorphous perversity becomes a full-throated call,

Say my opps  
 Ope my shell

Bite my naked nut  
 Role my bones  
 Ring my bell  
 Call my worm to sup  
 Pope my parts  
 Pop my pot  
 Raise my daisy up  
 Poke my pap  
 Pit my plum  
 Let my gap be shut

This newly dissident corporeality served to materialize a contemporaneous social constructionist project already under way in a raft of exceedingly influential, bestselling American sociological texts of the period like David Riesman’s 1955

*The Lonely Crowd*, and William Whyte's 1956 *The Organization Man*, both of which claimed to have discovered a fundamental shift in Cold War selfhood from autonomous—"inner directed" in Riesman's formulation—to fully relational. Reisman termed this relational self "outer directed" precisely because it seemed capable of achieving meaning only within the web of the social, and while it's certainly the case that the "inner" self is no less a product of the social than an "outer" self, and that indeed the very dichotomy is, at best, overdetermined, what matters for my purposes is the newly articulate recognition of the Cold War self as inherently relational—no longer self-sufficient but born instead of and through social intercourse. As the highly policed, aggressively consensual culture of the Cold War put mounting pressure on the traditionally sovereign subject, it enforced an increasingly anti-bourgeois conception of the self as always already penetrated—materialized in a body described by Judith Butler as "a permanently unstable site where the spatialized distinction (between the interior and the exterior of the subject) is permanently negotiated: it is this ambiguity that marks the ego as image, that is, as an identificatory relation."<sup>5</sup>

While I do not want ignore the erotic resonance of this body newly penetrated by numerous discourses that give it meaning, I don't want to make too much of it, either. The point rather is that brute flesh is always historical, belonging to the social field well before the scientific. The body here stands less a material fact than ideological screen, a battleground in the discursive production of the self-as-image. Suffice it to say that we should not be surprised to find the sedimented imago that is the body newly ascendant as perhaps *the* ground for dissent and resistance, not only in the historical moment just prior to the sexual revolution, but quite

precisely prior to second-wave feminism, and the Stonewall riots for lesbian, gay, bi and trans liberation as well.

According to Marcuse, before things got mapped and sorted out, and human differences particularized, specified, embodied, and made over into newly politicized identities, a single, universal human capacity—the capacity to experience and engender Eros—was elevated not only to defining status, but became the privileged ground of a powerfully articulated politics of social liberation. There is a great paradox in the fact that this universalizing discourse would then engender the now specific social categories—like feminist and gay—that today obscure its formative and foundational role.



Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* was published in 1955, the same year Ginsberg began *Howl*, and like the poem, the book was a *cri de cœur*, labeled “stirring” and “cheering” by its first reviewer in the *New York Times*.<sup>6</sup> Like *Howl*, *Eros and Civilization* was concerned with those consumed and spit out by industrial capitalism—then at its literal peak. As the Cold War enforced a permanent war economy and with it receding fears of a return to depression, affluence became the watchword of American political thought. It secured, ahead of Marxism, Socialism, and of course Communism, the dream of a truly classless society that intellectuals had long nurtured. In abundance, it was thought, all finally could get what they needed. And the development of a discourse around Eros, we'll find, was keyed to this post-war economic boom.

These claims of spreading wealth were real. In 1956, the federal government issued figures that revealed that for the first time in American history more people were employed in

middle-class jobs than in the traditional wage-earning tasks associated with manufacturing.<sup>7</sup> Post-war America was now booming and the vast majority of its population had at least the hope of becoming economically enfranchised. And yet both Marcuse and Ginsberg viewed these developments with alarm. The capitalist wage-paying machinery, what Ginsberg labeled “Moloch” in *Howl* and what Marcuse meant under the term “civilization,” had quite simply crushed the prospect of resistance in America. The very affluence that promoted an American dream of a classless society had another, darker side, one dedicated to eliminating dissenters, casting aside those unable or unwilling to feed it. It had so completely taken over American life that to live outside the Cold War economy was to be labeled a communist, or to be thought mad—*Howl*’s “best minds of my generation destroyed by madness starving hysterical naked....” As Marcuse put it in *Eros and Civilization*, “the very progress of civilization leads to the release of increasingly destructive forces—destructive because economic progress thrives precisely on the control and containment of individual liberty” (*EC*, 54). *Howl* is a chronicle of the wages of these released destructive forces; it is above all a toll-taking and body count.

Both Ginsberg and Marcuse sought to craft a rallying cry, a heartfelt, moving ode in opposition to the pervasive social control of the capitalist economy—what Ginsberg in *Howl* personified through the pagan god who demanded human sacrifice, Moloch. Ginsberg wrote, “Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money!... Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone.” (Any resemblance to the present political situation is purely coincidental.) *Howl* begins with an enumeration of various embodiments of dissent—addicts, homosexuals, political

radicals, the poor, the black, etc.—then shifts its tone and subject matter in section II for the indictment of Moloch, and returns in its last section to a paean to solidarity and loving embrace, invoked in the Whitmanesque repetition of the line, “I am with you in Rockland.” I therefore once read the poem as contrapuntal music, Moloch on one hand, the human outliers on the other.

But Marcuse clarifies the deep intimacy between capitalism and the poem’s evocation and celebration of outlaw pleasures, for the means of resistance to this Moloch, for both Ginsberg and Marcuse, were to be found in the manifold pleasures of what Marcuse termed Eros. As Marcuse wrote, “The pleasure principle was dethroned not only because it militated against progress in civilization but also because it militated against a civilization whose progress perpetuates domination and toil” (*EC*, 40).

To Marcuse, the importance of Eros towards the attainment of complete human freedom could scarcely be overstated. In a society which foreclosed the prospect of individual resistance—what Marcuse would later term a “one-dimensional society” in an eponymous book for its collapsing of resistance and agency into the one dimension of our extant social order—Eros could be the motor for a new relation to the social, one which refused the productive imperative of our increasingly technological capitalism in favor of concentrating on what he understood to be genuine human needs. In a nutshell, Marcuse believed that technology had largely freed us to experience Eros, but that a capitalist imperative continued to enslave, such that the desire for freedom was sought not by working less but by working more so as to be able to purchase the automobile that, top down, signified the very freedom from work we had sought in the

first place. His book, like the conceit of Eros itself, was an attempt to understand how to move out from the Cold War's multiple repressions, how to fully understand and embrace the ostensible freedoms that were only now, two years after Senator Joe McCarthy's downfall, finally coming to the fore. But these freedoms were a Mephistophelian bargain, for freedom had been purchased at the price of an ever increasing affluence, which meant that freedom had been won only by agreeing to work more—under ever tightening degrees of social surveillance and control.

Eros thus, for both Marcuse and Ginsberg, became an allegory for the pursuit of a non-productive, pleasure-driven engagement in life. It was a pure pleasure, which is to say an uncommodifiable pleasure, with a use value but no exchange value—a rare instance of desire not tinged with an impulse towards accumulation. Eros, as exclusively experiential, thus actively led away from participation in capitalist spectacle, for capitalism, which sought to substitute commodity pleasure for somatic pleasure, was inimical to its goal. For Marcuse and Ginsberg, as well as other roughly contemporary advocates of Eros like Norman O. Brown, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Wilhelm Reich, it was thus a route towards a deeper kind of freedom. Moreover, unlike commodified pleasures, Eros didn't attempt to dictate in advance what the pleasure would be or feel like the predigested, packaged goal of commodity pleasure. Thus Eros was aligned with the messy, the unpredictable, the authentic, the mad, the seditious, all aspects of genuine social freedom, and all, significantly, tropes of *Howl*.

Indeed, Marcuse repeatedly bemoaned the fact that the multivalent experiential pleasures of Eros had been reduced to mere genital sexuality—a substitution he understood as yet

another form of repression. He claimed that even the act of sex itself was diminished if made entirely genital, arguing in 1964, “For example, compare love-making in a meadow and in an automobile, on a lovers’ walk outside the town walls and on a Manhattan street. In the former case, the environment partakes of and invites libidinal cathexis and tends to be eroticized. Libido transcends beyond the immediate erotogenic zones...”<sup>8</sup> For Marcuse, Eros was definitionally an activation and eroticization of the entire body and not just the genitals. He understood the focus on genital sexuality as a reduction of our erotic potential, a restriction of it to a certain part of the body, to a certain population, to a certain time of day. Indeed, Marcuse argued that the triumph of genital sexuality was being promoted as a means of containing the much more free floating, unproductive and disruptive tendencies of Eros. In Marcuse’s influential formulation, then, one aspect of human experience, the sensuous engagement of Eros, became the *ur*-human experience, capable of restoring a lost balance to the human community.

If this notion of sexuality as both a means of dissent and a genial route towards recuperation strikes a familiar cord, it’s because of the 60s. Perhaps no other cultural moment cited sexuality as so defining, and the construction and repeated citation of the “sexual revolution” in the 60s became a populist media darling, structuring the decade as surely as the Red Scare did the 50s. But for all its common law status, the counterintuitive marriage between sex and revolution is a remarkably unstudied affair. I call it counterintuitive because for the bulk of human history, sex, as that aspect of human behavior most singled out for social control, and revolution—by definition the loosening of that control—have at best

worked at cross purposes. But in the mid-50s that began to change as capital's perceived suppression of pleasure-for-profit began to reorient the understanding of sexuality from a purely privatized exchange to a public protest. Allen Ginsberg was among the first to capture this shift in sexuality's valence, though by 1967, when he led the chanting of the teeming hippy throngs at the first Human Be-In near Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, the relationship between sexuality and social liberation was common knowledge—indeed deemed common sense. But when *Howl* was published in 1956, as Barbara Ehrenreich has shown, sexuality was still not widely perceived as available for pleasure alone, but had to be made acceptable as a mechanism of the stable and productive relations of the heterosexual family unit.<sup>9</sup>

In this respect, Ginsberg's 1954 *Love Poem on Theme by Whitman* (CP 115) is instructive. It begins "I'll go into the bedroom silently and lie down between the bridegroom and the bride." Much bed play then ensues, but the poem consistently refuses to specify who does what to whom, for lines like "legs raised up crook'd to receive cock in the darkness" could as well apply to either sex. But following, as the poem continues, "moans of movement, voices, hands in the air, hands between thighs...throbbing contraction of bellies..." we get to the poetic and physical climax:

and the bride cry for forgiveness, and the groom be covered with  
tears of passion and compassion,  
and I rise up from the bed replenished with last intimate gestures  
and kisses of farewell –  
all before the mind wakes, behind shades and closed doors in a  
darkened house

where the inhabitants roam unsatisfied in the night,  
nude ghosts seeking each other out in the silence.

In short, the poem concludes with Eros as a dream, as an unspoken yet pervasive, polymorphously perverse longing unsatisfied by the productive and reproductive imperatives of monogamous heterosexual coupling.

For Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization*, indeed the one unco-opted pleasure, the sole bulwark against capitalist enslavement was what he called “the perversions” (EC, 49). They are deemed perversions because they exist as uninstrumentalized pleasures, pleasures that don’t serve another, socially redeeming purpose. Holding out the promise of heterosexual, missionary position sex once a week, late at night, promoted the illusion of freedom and pleasure in everyday life within conditions of total enslavement. It made capitalism tolerable. Instead, polymorphous perversity exists only for its own sake. As Marcuse wrote,

In a repressive order, which enforces the equation between normal, socially useful, and good, the manifestations of pleasure for its own sake must appear as *Fleurs du mal*. Against a society which employs sexuality as a means to a useful end, the perversions uphold sexuality as an end in itself: they place themselves outside the dominion of the performance principle... they establish libidinal relationships which society must ostracize because they threaten to reverse the process of civilization which turned the organism into an instrument of work. (EC 50)

Between *Love Poem on Theme by Whitman* and *Howl* approximately two years later, there is an important shift in Ginsberg’s evocation of Eros. No longer, in the

Whitmanesque manner presented as a dream or distant memory—and thus safely sequestered from the present, the scene of the reading—Eros is now fact, as evocatively invoked in the present as possible. Compare these lines from *Howl to Love Poem on Theme by Whitman*:

Who copulated ecstatic and insatiate with a bottle of beer  
a sweetheart a package of cigarettes a candle and fell off the  
bed, and continued along the floor and down the hall and  
ended fainting on the wall with a vision of ultimate cunt and  
come eluding the last gyzym of consciousness.

That this excerpt, like the poem itself, seems to be written from a fundamentally phallic perspective is, I think, incontestable. It largely retains what Sedgwick and others have noted as that traditional format that fundamentally depends on male transcendence on and over a range of female embodiments.<sup>10</sup> What I find compelling, nonetheless, is this vision of desire—now no longer a dream or some inchoate longing—that tries to move fluidly between cunt and come, male and female, top and bottom, gay and straight—or perhaps better said: a vision of Eros that in its ecstatic wholeness, refutes such specificities and particularities, and celebrates its Marcussian perversities. To copulate with a candle or a beer bottle is to be penetrated—to be female or queer—yet terms like sweetheart and last “gyzym” of consciousness are surely normatively phallic. In terms of our contemporary identity categories, the who in this poem is often indecidable. Granting its limitations, I still find it revolutionary—in the sense of causing things to revolve, to turn over such that the bottom would be on top and the top bottom.

Yet, the still pervasive influence of minoritizing models of identity have caused us to misread or misunderstand the political valence of poems like *Howl*. Or, to personalize it, they caused *me* to misread him, as I found to my dismay when I first interviewed Ginsberg for a Chicago gay newspaper in early 1989. My brief was to get him to talk about the relation of his poetry to the gay rights struggle, then of particularly pointed newsworthiness as we battled a homophobic city council for the passage of the local human rights ordinance guaranteeing equal rights for LGBTQ people. I was deeply involved in that struggle and his poetry had been for me a source of inspiration and courage. But every time I so much as used the word “politics” or “issue” in asking a question, he became enraged at me, saying,

No, who are you, some kind of naïve mirror... First of all, I don't like that language. It isn't an issue, it's a human matter and you make it into an inhuman thing when you use that language. I think when you use the language 'issue' that's politics. That's not human emotion. Are human emotions issues? It's kind of a buzzword,... It's what distorts everything, from any angle.<sup>11</sup>

At the time, I didn't understand what he was getting at, for *Howl* then seemed to me a chronicle of identities and personal struggles. But when I asked him about this, he said, “What about [being] engaged in play with the world instead of struggle,... If it got to be play, you might win. You want to be a loser, struggle. If you want to be a winner, play. Yeah, go on. You want to be a loser forever?” Unwilling to shake my specifically gay interpretive frame—he was after all my adolescent hero—I persisted, asking him about what I then

understood to be the prescient gay politics of poems like *Howl*, about the expression of joy at being fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists. This is what he had to say:

It may be that as soon as you begin seeing it as personal politics or politics in a liberationist vein, it becomes inauthentic as spontaneous mind. It no longer is. It may not even represent yourself, but represent what you think you should be. See the difficulty. You're just adopting instead a macho ideal, a macho front. You adopt another kind of macho front which is a political one—when all you want to do is get laid.<sup>12</sup>

In my tortured, panting adolescence, reading Ginsberg was not only eminently erotic, it seemed the right kind of eroticism, a proud, very gay eroticism, one linked to a politics of outness, of the shameless (I was so ashamed then) declaration of being gay. It has taken me years to reframe a moment in cultural history so easy to misread through the lens of our current political investments in constructions of difference.

If this sounds very 60s transcendentalist, that is precisely my point. Can we imagine an Eros that invites, as *Howl* sought to do, the interchangeability of seductive identifications and a corollary loss of subjectivity in its most intensified state—arousal, an Eros that loses the specificity of the body in and through the body's specificity? In such a state there might be nothing foreign about lesbianism or gay male desire or heterosexuality or any of countless other ways of dividing up Eros—and is that not our goal? Ginsberg told me,

I'm not sure that the stereotyping of those gestures makes them, explains them very well, but perhaps even makes them

less genuine and less authentic. What you could say is that with Whitman or with *Howl* it was just authentic, straightforward statements that were clear, unambiguous—certainly meant to encourage other people to liberate their own natures and acknowledge themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Tellingly, the artists beyond Ginsberg who made Eros the touchstone of their aesthetic are themselves such a notably heterogeneous bunch that they give credence to Eros' refusal of an identity-based particularity and its subjective correlates. In closing, I want to look at two vastly different visual artists, one a contemporary and one a near contemporary of Ginsberg, the first a heterosexual American woman, the second a British heterosexual man—both ample evidence that the art of Eros was hardly a uniquely gay construct.

Carolee Schneemann began crafting *Meat Joy* in 1960, four years after *Howl*, and first performed it in 1964. It stands as one of the earliest non-literary visualizations of Ginsberg's dream of Eros, a perverse performance in the Marcusean sense of the term. Imagine, if you will, this scene: A large group of near naked young women and men writhe on the floor of a crowded hall, the audience but a few feet away. They paint one another's bodies, playfully clamber over one another with abandon, carry and caress while playing with chicken carcasses, sausages, and fish. Waste paper and paint clings to their bodies.

Here finally was Eros not simply evoked but made spectacle. In photographs of the original performance of *Meat Joy* in New York—it had earlier been performed in Paris and London at free expression festivals—we see incarnate something unimaginable at the time *Howl* was published, yet tellingly, realized only shortly thereafter. Schneeman has

described the performance as, in her words, “flesh jubilation.” And she tells us that,

*Meat Joy* has the character of an erotic rite: excessive, indulgent, a celebration of flesh as material: raw fish, chickens, sausages, wet paint, transparent plastic, rope, brushes, paper scrap. Its propulsion is towards the ecstatic, shifting and turning between tenderness, wildness, precision, abandon—qualities that could at any moment be sensual, comic, joyous, repellent.<sup>14</sup>

Her very language emblemizes this vision of Eros—ecstatic, joyous, sensual, comic, repellent—and she could just as well be describing *Howl*.

Note, too, that, like Ginsberg’s poem, *Meat Joy* is notably untroubled by gender or sexual difference, with who’s doing the watching and who’s being watched, holding out the hope that even biological gender differences could evaporate—that male and female could become one pure body—“physical equivalences are enacted,” as she put it in her notes.

In our highly identitarian times, we no longer read in *Meat Joy* the ecstatic impulse to recover what was lost, to bind and equalize all its participants—men and women, gay and straight, audience and players—in a common restoration of a lost human community through the shared language of Eros. Here was a public expression of desire that was for a change collective, unmarked, that served to aggregate people in contradistinction to desire’s usual disaggregating impulse. In its deliberate refusal of boundaries and differences—including sexual and gender difference—in its flouting of proscriptions and customs, it pursued a loss of specificity, of particularity, of that very social situatedness of the self which today we

elevate as the chief means to combat repression. Like *Howl*, *Meat Joy* is testament to the fact that before the notion of sex became the ground for difference, Eros was the cradle of commonality. Such ecstatic refusal of difference was radical at the time, but its radical politics have been blunted by a putative sexual revolution that in fact postdated it by several years.

A collage by the British artist Richard Hamilton called *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* (1956) is exactly contemporaneous with *Howl*. Like *Howl*, it too turns on an evocation of Moloch, but capital now ventriloquized through the sensuous come-on of a Madison Avenue pitch. The putative first work of pop art, *Just what is it...* was made specifically for display at the groundbreaking exhibition *This is tomorrow* at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. The collage was originally reproduced in the catalog for the exhibition opposite a very strange drawing, the drawing is itself bizarrely coherent with the collage in their shared investment in the polymorphous perversities of Eros. Both images—and especially the drawing, which has never before been discussed in the literature on this defining image—are reminiscent of both *Howl* and *Meat Joy* in their highly unusual, early refusal of sexuality and gender as binary constructions. There is to be sure both gender and sex in both images. But in the drawing is black penetrating white, or white penetrating black, what's going where, what's male, what's female—is it hetero or homo, vaginal, oral, anal? And in the collage, there is a similarly curious code switching, an indecidable commingling of female and male, heterosexual and homosexual, nature and technology—binaries today generally locked into a boundaried, familiar, knowable difference. The

traditionally female-dominated interior space now scopically male, the emblematically phallic masculine icon “poppingly” queer in his self-conscious fetishistic display, the housewife endowed with an improbably long vacuum hose. There are so many oppositions contained and suspended in this small picture, neither housewife nor pin up, neither nature nor culture, neither male nor female—it’s all here, more salad than soup. Today, such a skewing of the traditional structuring binarisms of sexuality and gender could be termed queer, Hamilton’s “identity” as a white British heterosexual male notwithstanding.

From a Marcusean perspective, it’s a nightmare image, a testament to the ease with which capital can and will colonize even that which is said to oppose it, Eros in the pursuit of more market share. Yet, years later Marcuse would distance himself from the utopian aura of Eros, coining the phrase “repressive desublimation” to suggest the degree that even Eros could be coopted and corrupted by capital, the very vision prefigured in Hamilton’s prescient collage.

Let me close by simply noting that shortly after the Stonewall riots, a lesbian was asked by a reporter in the *Village Voice* what she hoped the riots would accomplish. She replied, “We’ll be queer as long as you continue to be straight, then I hope we can finally all just be people together.” Her formulation, sounding so presciently like our contemporary queer dream, was even at this, the triumphantly dawning moment of lesbian and gay liberation, already a wistful backward glance, a nostalgic look back to a time over a decade in the past when a gay man like Ginsberg could deny his gayness—but not out of shame. As Ginsberg wrote towards the end of *Howl* in one of that poem’s few

valedictory lines—“O victory, Forget your underwear, we’re free.”

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**Allen Ginsberg, Herbert Marcuse, and the Politics of Eros:**

- Ginsberg, *Collected Poems, 1947-1980* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1984), 128. All subsequent references to Ginsberg appear intertextually as *CP*.
- Ginsberg, (interview with Jonathan D. Katz), "Ectoplasmic Identity: Allen Ginsberg Speaks." *Windy City* 22 June 1989, section 2, 100, 103.
- James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), without saying that Ginsberg's polymorphous perversity, never not fundamentally phallic in character, hardly conforms to the standards of the polymorphous. But in the mid fifties, a phallic masculinity that celebrated penetration was itself at least albeit not without its troubling, and still deeply gendered, blind spots.
- Richard Butler, *Bodies That Matte: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 75-6.
- Walter Dill Scott, "A Critique On Freud." *New York Times* (27 November 1955), 346. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Psychological Inquiry Into Freud* (1955; rpt., Boston: Beacon Press, 1966). Hereafter *EC*.
- Richard D. Altman, *The Crucial Decade-and After: America 1945-60* (1956; rpt., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 298.
- Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964; rpt., Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 73.
- Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*. (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1984) especially chapters 5 & 7.
- John D. Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
- Ectoplasmic Identity: Allen Ginsberg Speaks," 100.
- 103.
- John Schneemann, *Imaging Her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 61.