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Echoes of *Howl*:

The Poem's Political and Cultural Legacy Through Media

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Abstract

This article examines Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) as a literary, performative, and cultural artefact that challenged post-war American conservatism while simultaneously becoming enmeshed in the media circuits of its time. Focusing on film, graphic novel adaptations, and 1950s media portrayals, it situates *Howl* within broader debates about obscenity, performance, and intermediality. Drawing upon Raskin's accounts of the poem and Grobe's insights into the embodied nature of Ginsberg's readings, the study argues that *Howl* cannot be understood solely as text but must also be considered as performance, its meaning inseparable from its vocal delivery and public reception. The discussion extends to Drooker's graphic visualisations and cinematic adaptations, which foreground the tension between authenticity and mediation. By engaging with scholarship on confessional poetics, countercultural resistance, and the power of mass media, this study demonstrates how Ginsberg positioned himself not merely as poet but as a cultural performer whose work reflected and resisted the contradictions of Cold War America. Ultimately, *Howl* emerges as a transgressive experiment in word, sound, and image, a hybrid work that embodies both the anxieties and the imaginative possibilities of its historical moment.

Keywords: Allen Ginsberg, *Howl*, Beat Generation, performance poetry, obscenity and censorship, intermediality

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Introduction

Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) is widely regarded as an influential literary work of the twentieth century and a strong contributor to the beat movement. Emerging from the Beat Generation's rejection of post-war conformity, the poem challenged mainstream cultural norms, ignited debates on censorship, and became emblematic of countercultural resistance. While much scholarly attention has been given to *Howl*'s literary significance, political themes, and obscenity trial, comparatively little focus has been placed on the ways in which media have shaped its evolving cultural and political identity. This article seeks to address this gap by examining how *Howl* has been mediated, adapted, and performed, arguing that its continued relevance is not merely a product of its literary merit but also of its reinterpretation across different media landscapes, and how he quite literally exemplified "the best minds of our generation."

There are three key areas in which furthers the study of *Howl*'s media impact. They are digital circulation and online discourse, reinterpretations in film and graphic novels, and performance history through public readings and interviews. The first area explores how the digital age has reshaped *Howl*'s accessibility and reception, examining its presence in online archives, social media discussions, and digital spoken-word performances. Secondly, we can analyse *Howl*'s adaptation into visual media, particularly the 2010 *Howl* film by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman and graphic novel reinterpretations, investigating how these mediums frame and transform the poem's meaning. Lastly within the article, we can examine *Howl* as a performative work, focusing on Ginsberg's public readings, interviews, and the poem's influence on spoken-word and performance poetry.

This research is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it expands the existing body of *Howl* scholarship by shifting the focus from purely textual analysis to the broader media ecosystem through which the poem has gained cultural significance. Secondly, by situating *Howl* within the context of contemporary media studies, it highlights how digital technologies and adaptations have contributed to the poem's sustained influence, making it accessible to new audiences and reframing its political resonance. Finally, this study contributes to wider discussions about how literary works are mediated, performed, and repurposed over time, offering insights into the relationship between literature, media, and cultural memory.

This study employs a multidisciplinary approach in which it draws on literary analysis, media studies and performance theory. It also incorporates primary sources such as Ginsberg's reading, interviews and media adaptations, alongside secondary scholarship on *Howl*, digital poetics and adaptation studies. By integrating these perspectives, it allows us to provide a more comprehensive understanding of *Howl* as both a literary text and a dynamic cultural artefact. This research aims to show how *Howl* is conventionally shown, throughout research, as a fixed literary object, when instead we can begin to position it as a text in flux, that is constantly reshaped by media in which it is disseminated. Ultimately, this study allows us to demonstrate *Howl*'s enduring power that is rooted in its radical content, but also in its ability to evolve through new platforms, performance, and interpretations, securing its place as a cultural and political touchstone for successive generations.

1: Howl's Online Presence and Its Impact on Readership

Howl emerged at a time in which dissemination of literature was constrained by print media, with limited access to readerships. However in the twenty-first century, *Howl* has found new life in the digital age, reshaped by the internet's vast networks of information and communication. *Howl's* online presence and its renewed accessibility in digital platforms has influenced its readership, reshaped its cultural significance, and facilitated new modes of engagement. The impact of this transformation, from a printed work to a digital commodity, reflects a broader shift in the way texts are consumed, understood, and reinterpreted in the context of an increasingly networked world.

One of the most significant shifts in the distribution of literary works over the last two decades is the rise of digital platforms. *Howl* is no longer confined to its original 1956 publication, but is readily accessible in a variety of online formats, from e-books and PDFs to audio and video recordings. As texts are increasingly distributed via digital means, their accessibility to a global audience is significantly enhanced. Whereas Ginsberg's work initially reached readers who could access printed copies or attend his public readings, today, *Howl* can be read by anyone with internet access, free from geographical or economic limitations. This democratisation aligns with Ginsberg's ethos of poetic accessibility and resistance to the institutional capitalisation of art, described as his desire to "free the society from the evil grip of the 'demon of money and power'; integrating people for the cause of liberty and sensibility" (Biswas and Sukanta 59).

The digital format has also opened the door to various interpretations of *Howl*, allowing it to be presented in ways that are not possible with printed texts. The online availability of Ginsberg's original readings, for instance, transforms the act of reading into a hybrid experience that combines textual and oral tradition. As Mahran argues, Ginsberg's performances were more than recitations, they were "the essence of poetry, without which it falls prey to the familiar, direct, and superficial." (Mahran 6), evoking a participatory ritual that online recordings now help preserve and replicate. These audio recordings, video clips, and even digital manuscripts make it possible for readers to experience the rhythm, tone, and cadence of Ginsberg's voice, an element central to the poem's original impact, but absent from the page. They allow contemporary readers to experience *Howl* as it was intended, a performance piece, charged with breath, rhythm, and vocal affect. Grobe similarly observes that the physical delivery of *Howl*, the "bass-line hum" and repetition, enacts a poetic function that cannot be captured on the page alone (Grobe 221).

By integrating these multimedia elements, the digital age has transformed *Howl* from a static text to an evolving, dynamic artifact that can be re-contextualised in ways that speak to diverse global audiences. The internet, with its vast, participatory nature, has created virtual spaces where individuals can engage with *Howl* in ways that were previously impossible. Websites such as Reddit, Twitter, and Facebook have facilitated the formation of online communities around *Howl*, where users share interpretations, analyses, and personal reflections on the poem. Through these digital spaces, *Howl* has evolved into a collaborative and ever-expanding text, with interpretations and insights continually shaped by new voices. In this way,

Howl continues to function as “authentic shows of ritualistic extraction” even as it moves through new technological forms (Rogoveanu 465).

In these forums, *Howl* is no longer a single, authoritative text, but rather a subject of ongoing dialogue. Online readers often engage in what could be termed “collective reading”, a process in which the poem is continuously discussed, debated, and reimagined. This practice echoes that when poetry is communicated in this manner “communities can unite and motivate,” each other in a supportive environment, as well as “the poet to keep developing his craft.” (Mahran 6) Now that it is extended into digital terrain, it allows new generations of readers to connect with the poem, often in relation to contemporary political or social issues. For instance, online discussions often relate *Howl* to contemporary issues of freedom of expression, mental health, and social justice, thus creating a bridge between the poem’s 1950s context and the concerns of the modern world.

A key example of this can be seen in the numerous *Howl* threads on Reddit, where readers not only discuss their personal impressions of the poem but also actively debate its meaning and significance. An example of this where a Reddit user states, “Allen resents authority and modernisation; and struggles with some degree of homosexuality and mental illness” (Winhelm) which reflects modern day YouTube comparisons of the same topics. These online discussions, in their collective and often democratic nature, reflect the shift in how literary texts are engaged with in the digital era. This digital engagement echoes Grobe’s insight that confessional poetry such as *Howl* invites “grand coming-out” moments, not only of sexual identity, but of political dissent and artistic rebellion (Grobe 219). *Howl*, as a result, is not just read but experienced as part of an ongoing, online conversation that transcends the limitations of print culture.

Another significant aspect of *Howl*'s online presence is its integration into digital archives and repositories. Websites such as the Allen Ginsberg Project, a comprehensive archive of Ginsberg’s work, offer digital copies of the poem, providing access not only to the poem itself but also to scholarly articles, analyses, and critical commentaries. These archives have allowed *Howl* to be preserved in a way that surpasses traditional printed media.

Furthermore, the open nature of digital archives facilitates new ways in which readers and scholars interact with the text. For example, websites such as Google Books provide access to different editions of *Howl*, allowing readers to compare textual variations or explore the poem’s evolution over time. In the case of *Howl*, which has often been subject to censorship and editing, digital archives give us a more transparent view of its textual history and its ongoing negotiation between public and private spheres. As Rogoveanu notes, the poem has always existed in tension between “collective and individual, the public and the private” (Rogoveanu 464), and digital transparency now makes this tension visible. These online academic spaces also cultivate collaborative learning. Forums allow students to interpret, debate, and co-construct meaning, echoing the communal ethos of the Beat Generation.

In considering how online platforms affect reader engagement with *Howl*, it is important to understand the ways in which digital media change how readers interact with literature. The

shift from print to digital formats has altered the traditional reading experience, transforming it from a linear and isolated activity to a more fragmented and multi-modal one. Digital texts often include multimedia elements, and interactive features that engage readers in ways that traditional print does not. Beaulieu highlights this in his study of Cold War media, he observes that Ginsberg's voice often functioned in direct opposition to the "power of mass media to favor or undermine specific ideas and discourses" (28). Ironically, in the digital age, mass media now amplifies his message.

For *Howl*, this means that readers can now access a variety of supplementary materials that enhance their understanding of the poem. A simple search on Google will yield results that lead to scholarly articles, podcasts, and even entire websites dedicated to *Howl* and Allen Ginsberg. These digital tools provide readers with instant access to interpretive guides and contextual background, which enriches their reading experience. In this sense, the digital environment transforms *Howl* from a stationary poem into a dynamic, multifaceted experience that can be continuously explored, discussed, and reinterpreted.

The online presence of *Howl* has undeniably broadened its readership and transformed its cultural relevance. From digital archives and social media platforms to online education, the poem has found new ways to speak to contemporary audiences. We have shown that the digital environment facilitates new forms of engagement with *Howl*, enhancing its accessibility and enabling readers to engage with the poem in ways that transcend traditional print media. The digital age has ensured that *Howl* remains a living text, continuously evolving and adapting to new technological and cultural contexts. In the following sections, we will explore how *Howl's* presence in other media, such as film and public performances, further contributes to its enduring legacy as a cultural and political touchstone.

2: Film, Graphic Novels, and 1950s Media Portrayal of *Howl*

The adaptation of *Howl* into different media forms has been central to the poem's cultural persistence and transformation, allowing it to resonate with new audiences and remain a touchstone for contemporary countercultural movements. While the 1950s media portrayal of *Howl* established its subversive image, the subsequent film adaptation and graphic novel interpretations have served to further amplify its relevance, shifting its identity in response to changing political and cultural landscapes. This section explores the film and graphic novel adaptations of *Howl* and the ways in which the 1950s media coverage framed the poem as both a revolutionary work and a symbol of resistance.

Epstein and Friedman's 2010 film adaptation of *Howl* marks a significant moment in the poem's evolution. The film is a hybridised reimagining that combines historical footage, animated sequences, and a fictionalised retelling of Ginsberg's life, creating a multi-dimensional portrayal of the poet and his work. The choice to represent *Howl* in this cinematic format speaks to the ongoing vitality of Ginsberg's poem as a tool for social resistance and artistic freedom.

The film adaptation approaches *Howl* with a distinct visual style, utilising animation and documentary-style interviews to create an engaging narrative structure that invites audiences to engage with the text in a new and dynamic way. The film is framed by a courtroom drama that centres on the 1957 obscenity trial, juxtaposed with scenes of Ginsberg, played by James Franco, reading *Howl* and reflecting on his personal and poetic journey. This structure allows the film to highlight the tension between *Howl* as a disruptive force in the literary world and Ginsberg's personal history as an outsider and artist.

The use of animation, especially in the sequences depicting Ginsberg's psychedelic imagery, is particularly significant. *Howl* itself is a deeply visual poem, filled with vivid and often surreal imagery that challenges the constraints of language and form. By translating these images into animation, Epstein and Friedman enhance the viewer's understanding of the poem's aesthetic impact. The film's animation serves as a metaphor for the 'free-flowing spirit of the beat generation' (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 352) and boundary-pushing nature of *Howl*, emphasizing the poem's radical reimagining of societal norms and the expressive freedom it embodies. Moreover, the courtroom scenes, recreating the obscenity trial in which *Howl* was judged, are central to the film's narrative. This trial is a pivotal moment in the poem's cultural history, as it established *Howl* as a symbol of artistic defiance against censorship. The film's portrayal of the trial allows for an exploration of the poem's significance within the context of free speech, art, and the fight against oppressive societal structures. "The media-mixture is salient in both the film representation of the poem *Howl* and the representation of the author Ginsberg; a blurring of the difference between fiction and documentary." (Bruhn and Gjelsvik 350) The courtroom drama itself becomes an allegory for the broader struggle for individual expression and political resistance, a theme that runs throughout *Howl*'s enduring legacy.

The critical reception of the *Howl* film was generally positive, with particular praise for James Franco's performance as Ginsberg. As Bruhn described, "Like most critics, we appreciate the way *Howl* differs from the mainstream 'biopic' through the complex layering of different media" (350) Moreover, Critics appreciated the film's nuanced portrayal of Ginsberg's life and the film's ability to balance a historical retelling of the obscenity trial with the personal and poetic history behind *Howl*. However, some detractors felt that the film's style could be inaccessible to those unfamiliar with Ginsberg's work, and that its artistic flourishes at times overshadowed the substance of the poem itself (Bruhn & Gjelsvik 349). Nonetheless, the film played an important role in revitalising public interest in *Howl* and introducing the poem to younger generations who might not have encountered it through traditional academic channels.

The adaptation of *Howl* into graphic novels further exemplifies the poem's versatility and the expanding ways in which it can be consumed and appreciated. A notable graphic novel adaptation is *Howl: A Graphic Novel* by Eric Drooker, which was published in 2010 and offers a striking visual reimagining of Ginsberg's poem. Drooker's graphic novel reinterprets *Howl* in a manner that blends the poem's literary essence with powerful visual representation. The graphic novel format allows Drooker to enhance the vivid imagery in Ginsberg's writing by providing a literal, visual interpretation of the poem's surreal landscapes and social critiques. Prince argues that "[T]he poem *Howl* functions as a cultural artifact and a juncture between artistic production

and audience reception of an aesthetic product” and this juxtaposition of text and illustration amplifies the rebellious, anarchistic spirit of the poem, creating a harmony between Ginsberg’s words and Drooker’s visual language.

In particular, the graphic novel’s portrayal of the poem’s most iconic moment, such as the depiction of the “best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,” uses stark, often haunting illustrations to capture the anguish and fragmentation that Ginsberg articulates in the poem. The graphic novel’s visual style is at once a faithful representation of Ginsberg’s themes and a bold re-imagining that allows for a more immediate, visceral engagement with the poem. The media mixture in the graphic novel allows readers to experience *Howl* in a fresh way, highlighting how “the combination of image and text exerts a mutual tension shared by this volume and the ‘graphic novel.’” (Prince) Moreover, the use of graphic novels as a medium for conveying the poem’s message makes *Howl* more accessible to younger readers, who may be more familiar with visual storytelling than traditional print literature. The graphic novel offers a bridge between literary and visual culture, and in doing so proves to show “a barrier had been broken” (Raskin 22), a cultural one at that. Through this medium, *Howl* has the potential to reach diverse audiences.

The visual nature of the graphic novel offers immediate emotional resonance. Drooker’s artwork portrays the personal turmoil and societal alienation described in *Howl*, making the poem’s emotional impact more accessible to readers. Drooker shows how “Ginsberg has the power of sound and a sense of words,” (Mahran 10) that translates directly into a text that represents “cult of spontaneity; but also generates some of the real strengths of his writing” (Prince).

The media portrayal of *Howl* in the 1950s is a crucial component in understanding the poem’s evolution as both a work of literature and a symbol of protest. When *Howl* was first published in 1956, it was considered by many to be a radical and subversive text. It contained explicit language, challenged the norms of sexuality, and criticised the political and social order of post-war America. These qualities made it the target of censorship and legal action, particularly following its publication by City Lights Books.

The 1957 obscenity trial marked a defining moment in the poem’s history. The trial gained widespread media attention, framing *Howl* as both a symbol of artistic freedom and a threat to moral values. The media’s portrayal of *Howl* during this period was heavily influenced by the cultural climate of the time, which was shaped by Cold War anxieties, the rise of suburban conservatism, and growing concerns about the erosion of traditional American values (Raskin). Newspapers and magazines sensationalized the trial, focusing on the “obscene” nature of the poem’s language and imagery. (Rehlaender 10) Headlines such as “The Cops Don’t Allow No Renaissance Here” (San Francisco Chronicle) emphasized the ‘sexualised’ aspects of *Howl*, particularly its depictions of drug use, sexuality, and mental illness. This portrayal contributed to the construction of *Howl* as a radical text that pushed the boundaries of social propriety.

However, this media sensationalism ultimately played a significant role in the poem’s success, as the trial became a rallying point for defenders of free speech and artistic expression.

Ferlinghetti, in the San Francisco Chronicle article, emphasised that officials were merely trying to censor a reflection of their own society by censoring *Howl*: “The great obscene wastes of *Howl* are the sad wastes of the mechanized world, lost among atom bombs and insane nationalisms, billboards and TV antennae “(Rehlaender 6). While the media portrayed *Howl* as a controversial and subversive text, this very portrayal cemented its place in American cultural history. The trial and its media coverage helped establish *Howl* as a key cultural artifact of the Beat Generation and a cornerstone of post-war literary rebellion. As framed by Rehlaender, “Allen Ginsberg’s work was never intended to be a *Howl* of demoralization, but a *Howl* of human suffering, exposing itself to a suppressed society.” (Rehlaender 12) The legal victory in the trial was a significant moment in the broader fight for artistic freedom in America.

Moreover, the media coverage of the trial contributed to the enduring image of Ginsberg as a cultural icon. The trial elevated *Howl* from an obscure literary work to a symbol of artistic defiance and individual freedom, it “represented a fight against classic literary oppression.” (Rehlaender 18) Over time, the poem’s status as a radical and revolutionary text became central to its identity, both in the public imagination and in academic circles. Through film adaptations, graphic novels, and shifting media narratives, *Howl* has maintained its cultural and political relevance.

3. *Howl* as Performance: Readings, Interviews, and Ginsberg’s Persona

The poem *Howl* is perhaps one of the most performed works of the 20th century, and its life has extended far beyond the printed page, thanks to Allen Ginsberg’s vocal and passionate performances. The poem’s impact was not solely determined by the words on the page but also by how Ginsberg brought it to life through readings, interviews, and public appearances. This section delves into how the performance aspect of *Howl* shaped its reception, how Ginsberg's live readings influenced the trajectory of spoken word, and how his interviews and self-mythologisation in the media constructed *Howl*'s political and cultural identity.

One of the most important moments in the early reception of *Howl* came in 1955, when Ginsberg first read the poem publicly at the Six Gallery reading in San Francisco. The event, which has become legendary in literary circles, was not only a pivotal moment in the Beat Generation’s rise to prominence but also an essential moment in the life of *Howl* as a text. The energy and emotion with which Ginsberg delivered the poem added an immediate intensity to its content, giving it a visceral power that could not have been replicated in a silent reading of the text. Mahran describes this power perfectly stating, “Ginsberg by his poems wants to be a speaker not a poet; (he) illuminates social and literary nuances that cannot be understood alone.” It was in the performance of *Howl* that the poem’s revolutionary spirit truly came alive, and its message of defiance, struggle, and liberation reached its audience in ways that the printed text alone could not. Paul Goodman observes this by stating that “Beat style ... trie[d] to be an action, not a reflection or comment.” (Mahran 3) *Howl* was read for the first time in public at this gallery event, and it was a moment that marked the poem’s entry into the cultural revolution.

What made the performance of *Howl* at the Six Gallery reading particularly powerful was Ginsberg's delivery. "Ginsberg's readings would lure no one into believing that a "listless author" wrote his poems. They "snarl and smile" (and coax and weep), and so does he - as the recording "*Howl*" and *Other Poems* richly attests." (Grobe 221) The poem's audacious and explicit subject matter, its depictions of mental illness, sexuality, drug use, and societal alienation, was given a physicality and emotional weight when performed aloud. Unlike the written text, which could be easily dismissed or misinterpreted in the safety of a private reading, the public reading of *Howl* held the "soul and vocalic breath" (Grobe 221) of Ginsberg. Ginsberg's delivery was impassioned, his voice infused with the rhythm and cadence of the Beat movement, that transformed the poem into a political act. As Grobe contests, "Critics who fail to pay attention to the embodied practice of Ginsberg's poetry will at best underestimate the poem and at worst misjudge its function entirely" (221) For the audience, *Howl* became something far greater than just words on a page, it became a declaration of resistance, a challenge to the norms of bourgeois society, and a cry for those on the margins, "*Howl* was a push towards modernization in an America that was, perhaps unbeknownst to itself, on the verge of cultural renewal." (Van Eijzeren 12)

The performance of *Howl* in this context helped cement its reputation as a radical and controversial text. The emotional and physical impact of hearing Ginsberg read these lines gave the poem a sense of immediacy and relevance that reverberated with the audience. The personal, confessional tone of the poem, combined with its social and political critiques, was amplified by the intensity of Ginsberg's "explosive poetic energy." (Breslin 84)

The live performance of *Howl* continues to add new meaning to the text, highlighting how poetry is not a static form but one that transforms depending on the context and delivery. Ginsberg's performances brought the poem's themes of isolation, mental illness, and rebellion to the forefront in a way that encouraged the audience to reflect on their own personal experiences and social realities. Every time Ginsberg read *Howl*, the poem was a living, breathing entity, shaped by the moment and the audience's engagement. Mahran develops on this stating, "the interaction between the poet and the listener as lively, fierce, emotional, and accurate. Ginsberg asserts that when poetry communicates in this manner, communities can unite and motivate the poet to keep developing his craft." (6) Live readings allowed Ginsberg to infuse *Howl* with a layer of performative meaning that cannot be fully captured on the page. His tone, gestures, and facial expressions, as well as the energy in the room, all contributed to the interpretation of the poem. The act of reading aloud gave *Howl* a sense of temporality, each reading was a new and unique experience, drawing out different emotions and reactions from the listeners. In his book "Impersonal Personalism: The Making of a Confessional Poetic," Hoffman claims that Ginsberg ties his "own self with all self" more productively, portraying a speaker who is more eager to establish a socially and politically beneficial relationship with the reader. The live performance of *Howl* therefore became an essential part of the poem's meaning making process, pushing it from an individual reading to a collective, participatory act. (Mahran 15)

Beyond live performances, Ginsberg's public persona and the way he positioned *Howl* in interviews were crucial to shaping the poem's political and cultural identity. Ginsberg was not

merely a poet but an activist, a public intellectual, and a self-claimed revolutionary who understood the power of the media to shape public perception. His interviews, public talks, and appearances on television were instrumental in framing *Howl* as not just a literary work, but as a tool for social and political change.

In numerous interviews, Ginsberg embraced a form of self-mythologisation that positioned him as a prophetic figure for the counterculture. He emphasised on the peaceful protest and the power that it held through word and action. In an interview with Paul Geneson, he stated, “I’m interested in meditation, in exploring inner-space, in a certain political movement which would involve a sit-in in Washington, where hundreds of people would just go to Washington and sit down; That many people doing nothing would create such a pool of nothing doing that it just wouldn’t contribute to the aggression that’s going on.” (32) He often spoke about *Howl* in terms of its larger societal significance. Ginsberg presented himself as what we can call a visionary, a spokesperson for the alienated, and a defender of free speech. This positioning was crucial in shaping *Howl*’s political and cultural identity, as Ginsberg encouraged his audience to see the poem not just as art, but “a devour intellectual role to ‘serve humanity’ and to unite the suffering of human being and their moral resistance.” (McNees 3)

By positioning *Howl* as an anti-establishment manifesto, Ginsberg ensured that the poem was perceived as a symbol of resistance, “breaking the cultural blockade” (Interview, 03:19) His interviews framed the poem as a challenge to the prevailing social and political norms of the time, emphasising its critique of materialism, conformity, and institutional power. In this way, Ginsberg was able to align *Howl* with the burgeoning civil rights movement, the counterculture, and later, the 1960s anti-war protests. Beaulieu amplifies this in his exploration of the Beats within this movement, “They became ‘prophets’ of a new consciousness because they lived on the fringe of society and embraced philosophies and lifestyles that were in direct opposition to the social norms promoted by the conservative forces prevailing in 1950s America.” (20) The interviews also reflected Ginsberg’s own complex relationship with fame and his role as an icon of the Beat Generation, as we explored. He understood the performative nature of his own persona and used this to amplify the message of *Howl*.

Through his interviews and public statements, Ginsberg also redefined the role of the poet in society. Rather than being a detached observer of social issues, the poet was to be an engaged participant in political struggles. “The idea is progress.” (Mahran 8) By situating *Howl* within a broader cultural and political context, Ginsberg helped to elevate the poem beyond the personal and into the collective struggle for justice and equality.

The live readings, performances, and interviews surrounding *Howl* were integral to its cultural and political identity. Through these performative acts, Ginsberg was able to inject new meaning into the poem, allowing it to evolve with each public reading and interview. His persona as a poet-activist, his rhythmic and improvisational performance style, and his self-mythologisation helped to establish *Howl* as not just a literary work but a tool for social change. The influence of Ginsberg’s performances on spoken word poetry further underscores the enduring impact of *Howl* in the realm of performance art, ensuring its place as one of the most dynamic and influential poetic works of the 20th century.

Conclusion

Howl endures not because it has been preserved, but because it has been repeatedly reactivated. Across digital platforms, visual media, and live performance, Ginsberg's poem continues to generate meaning through circulation, adaptation, and collective engagement. This article has demonstrated that *Howl*'s cultural persistence is inseparable from the media environments through which it is encountered, and that its political force lies less in textual fixity but rather in its capacity for continual transformation.

The poem's presence in digital spaces has fundamentally reshaped its accessibility and reception. Online archives, multimedia recordings, and social platforms have expanded *Howl*'s readership beyond the material and institutional constraints of print culture, allowing it to function as a participatory text within a networked public sphere. Digital circulation preserves the poem's performative origins through audio and video recordings while enabling new forms of collective reading and reinterpretation. As online communities debate, recontextualise, and mobilise *Howl* in relation to contemporary concerns, mental health, sexuality, censorship, and social justice, the poem emerges as a living cultural document whose meanings are continually renegotiated by its audience. The evidence presented here shows that digital mediation does not neutralise *Howl*'s radicalism, but rather, it amplifies its democratic ethos and extends its countercultural reach.

Visual adaptations further demonstrate how *Howl*'s meaning is reshaped through mediation. The 2010 film by Epstein and Friedman and graphic novel reinterpretations such as Eric Drooker's do not merely translate the poem into new forms but actively reinterpret it, foregrounding its historical stakes while rendering it accessible to contemporary audiences. By revisiting the obscenity trial, employing animation, and emphasising visual immediacy, these adaptations situate *Howl* within ongoing debates about censorship, artistic freedom, and political resistance. When read alongside the infamous media coverage of the 1950s, these visual reimaginings reveal a continuity in *Howl*'s cultural framing that the poem repeatedly becomes a site where anxieties about dissent, morality, and expression are contested. The evidence suggests that *Howl*'s adaptability across visual media is central to its endurance, allowing it to remain politically resonant without becoming historically fixed.

Performance, however, remains the most vital dimension of *Howl*'s legacy. From the Six Gallery reading to Ginsberg's later public performances and media appearances, *Howl* has functioned as an embodied event rather than a purely literary object. Ginsberg's vocal delivery, rhythmic intensity, and physical presence transformed the poem into an act of resistance, collapsing the distance between poet and audience and moving towards a collective experience. The poem's influence on spoken-word traditions underscores the extent to which its legacy depends on revoicing and reenactment. Performance ensures that *Howl* remains unfinished, open to reinterpretation, and responsive to new cultural conditions.

Taken together, the evidence across digital circulation, visual adaptation, and performance demonstrates that *Howl* resists closure. Its authorship is continually dispersed, its meanings shaped through use rather than origin, and its authority sustained through participation

rather than preservation. By moving across media and embracing new forms of engagement, *Howl* exemplifies a model of literary endurance rooted in transformation. The poem's continued relevance lies not solely in its language, but in its capacity to be spoken, seen, shared, and reimagined, affirming its status as a dynamic cultural force whose political and aesthetic urgency persists well beyond its moment of composition.

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