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American Beat Yogi:

An Exploration of the Hindu and Indian Cultural Themes in Allen Ginsberg

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## **Preface**

I am grateful for the opportunity to have been able to live in Banaras for researching and writing this paper. It has provided me an invaluable look at the living India that Ginsberg writes about, and enabled me to see many facets that would otherwise have been impossible to discover. In the spirit of research and my deep passion for the subject, I braved temperatures nearing 50° Celsius. Not weather particularly conducive to thesis-writing, but what I was able to discover and experience empowers me to do it again in a heartbeat. Since the first draft, I contracted a mosquito-borne tropical illness called Dengue Fever, for which there is no vaccine. I left India for a season to recover, and returned to complete this study.

The universe guided me to some amazing mentors, including Anand Prabhu Barat at the literature department of Banaras Hindu University, who specializes in the Eastern spiritual themes of the Beat Generation. She and Ginsberg had corresponded, and he sent her several works including *Allen Ginsberg: Collected Works, 1947 – 1980*. I had the fortune of being able to borrow this signed copy, indirectly making Allen Ginsberg himself a living link in this study. I had contact with the Bengali poet Malay Roychoudhury, who Ginsberg became close with during his time in India. Om Prakash Sharma at the Swedish Study Center in Assi has been infinitely helpful in explaining the nuances of Indian culture. Eva Haettner-Aurelius at the Center of Languages and Literature at Lund University has been an outstanding advisor, willing to work cross-continently and wisely guiding me throughout the writing process. To these mentors, to Allen Ginsberg and to all the yogis, teachers, and other members of the community who have shared their time and experience, I am ever grateful.

Certain events in my own life correspond with those in Ginsberg's, such as having attended the University of California at Berkeley and lived in Banaras, and I feel a close kinship and special fondness for this writer. I hope the reader will get the same sense of passion and discovery from reading this study as I had in writing it.

### **A Note on the Mechanics of Writing**

For the reader's ease and fluency, I have excluded the diacritical notations for the Hindi or Sanskrit terms I use, since their linguistic value is not pertinent to this study. There are alternate ways of transliterating Hindi and Sanskrit terms and names, and the spelling throughout this study varies in keeping with the originals. For example, Ginsberg sometimes spells "Banaras" as "Benares," and also refers to the city by names from other periods in time: Kashi and Varanasi. The same applies for Calcutta/Kolkata, and Bombay/Mumbai. The other changes are minor, such as spelling the name of the goddess Sita as "Cita." Especially in his journals, but also in completed poems, Ginsberg frequently uses shorthand and abbreviation, and occasionally misspells words. He blends poetry and prose, and places particular attention to line breaks and spacing. In addition, there are discrepancies in spelling and punctuation among the sources, such as critics who do not capitalize "Beat." Due to the numerous occurrences of irregularities in capitalization and spelling, this note documents that this study stays as true to the original works as much as possible, instead of repeating the MLA indication, "[sic]." Additional comments are indicated in those instances that warrant further clarification, such as "emphasis added" or "original emphasis." With these exceptions, this study adheres to the guidelines of the Modern Language Association.

## Introduction

Allen Ginsberg was a leading figure of the Beat Generation, which was the weighty title of the small group of poets writing in 1950's America. Although they were few in number, they had a great impact on future generations. Against the backdrop of the "square" mainstream, critics initially cast the Beats as vicious countercultural revolutionaries, and subsequent scholars have redefined them as enthusiastic poets of the spiritual avant-garde. Early commentators entirely dismissed and even negated the Beat-spirituality that current critics see as a prominent note. Criticism on the Beat Generation has come a long way. However, the early reputation of the Beats as rebels still remains, and fixed notions shroud a full view of their spiritual syncretism. Numerous scholars have begun to investigate Buddhist themes and other Eastern influences in the literature of the Beats, but the surface has just been scratched. Up to now, no one has yet conducted a comprehensive critical study on the Indian themes in the Beat Generation. Tridib Mitra and his wife Alo, who number themselves among the group of Bengali poets known as the Hungryalists, are the editors of two Hungryalist magazines and collections of letters written to Hungryalists. In a recent article they write, "The books and web pages we have read so far on Allen Ginsberg, the American poet of the Beat Generation, have one thing in common. They do not bother to examine the impact India had on his inner self and identity...despite the fact that Allen Ginsberg's longest span outside USA was spent in Kolkata and Benaras" (Mitra). Ginsberg, with his contemporary Kerouac who coined the term "beat," wrote extensively on their respective pilgrimages. Ginsberg spent a critical part of his life in India, and of all the Beats, his artistic vision most reflects the various shades of Hindu themes.

This paper is an analytical study of the Indian cultural elements in Ginsberg's life and work, focusing on *Indian Journals: March 1962 - May 1963*. The aim is twofold: firstly the study explores close-readings of poetry and prose from *Indian Journals*.<sup>1</sup> The study also focuses on his poetic aesthetics and specific themes in *Indian Journals* and relates them to incidents of his personal life in a larger Indian context, including the literary, cultural, and religious spheres.

The purpose is to reveal that it was in India where Ginsberg experienced the most dramatic changes of his life. Hinduism is a way of living, inseparable from Indian culture. It is the world's most ancient extant spiritual tradition, much more than just a religion, and spirituality extends far beyond the confines of temple wall.<sup>2</sup> This study presents Indian culture and Hinduism as seen through Ginsberg's eyes.

*Indian Journals* records his travels and also outlines the trajectory of his literary and spiritual impasse to his eventual breakthrough. Ginsberg documents the ups and downs of his creative process and offers a vast analytic potential with his keen self-awareness and reflection. The present study includes passages from his most influential poems, including "America," "Footnote to Howl," "Howl," "Kaddish," "The Change," and "Wichita Vortex Sutra" to substantiate the idea. Ginsberg's very large poetic oeuvre expresses a wide variety and *Indian Journals: March 1962 - May 1963* is only a minor work, but very important as it exposes a microcosm of his spirituality.

The methodology adopted for research is text analysis of the primary text, *Indian Journals*. The study supports the argument with secondary texts of Indian culture and literature among various other topics to which Ginsberg both directly and indirectly refers in *Indian Journals*. The study is interdisciplinary in nature, as it supports the corresponding religious and cultural aspects of India and Ginsberg's personal life. The research adheres to a chronological disposition, following the trajectory of his life from his childhood and initial poetic vision, through the challenges he faced in defining and expressing that vision, how in India he was able to overcome his spiritual and poetic crisis, and his subsequent developments after returning to the United States. It would not be an exaggeration to comment that the Hindu sensibility he came across was already present in his mind when he was in America, and that it was reawakened when he came to India. After leaving India, he permanently adopted various Hindu practices in his personal life.

The Beats came into the public sphere with a bang, and critics have collectively penned vast volumes on reactions to the Beat Generation ever since. They have had an enormous and lasting impact in literary, religious, and political arenas. Their turbulent critical past from “nihilist...naysayers” and “Nazis” (Prothero 206) to “holy fools” (Prothero 210) led up to the current respect for the Beats as “Spirit Guides” of a unique and authentic spirituality (Edington). Especially for Ginsberg, the literature is inseparable from spirituality. Spirituality forms the core of his poetic aesthetics as his primary concern was to express his divine vision, and by this he intended to enlighten others. The more recent trend of criticism takes Beat spirituality into account.

Spiritual diversity marks Ginsberg’s personal life. Born into a Jewish family, he began to study religion and philosophy at an early age and was interested in alternative beliefs. Ginsberg followed a similar path in India, visiting monasteries, mosques, temples, and the sacred cremation grounds to talk to just about every holy person he could meet. Ginsberg went to India in search of a “guru he could love,” but got guidance from a multitude of sources, to whom he dedicates *Indian Journals* (Baker 43). His interaction with the writers of the 1960s Bengali Literary Movement known as the Hungryalists significantly influenced Ginsberg. There are many shades of Hinduism, from the serenely meditative *Raj Yoga* of Swami Shivananda to the Tantric path of excess of Shambu Bharti Baba, who both dramatically influenced Ginsberg. The goddess Kali encompasses these two sides, showing that is more than one way to worship, and Ginsberg’s faith was a blend of various divinities and faiths.

I call Ginsberg a yogi. It is an expansive title that allows an appropriately broad description of his philosophy and spiritual practice. The term has its origins in the Sanskrit verb *yuj*, which means union, and yoga designates a person’s close communion with Divinity. Ginsberg’s driving belief was to bring people together and to unite with what he called “Supreme Reality” (“Art of Poetry” 26). He is a yogi because he consistently maintained his

spiritual connection to a Supreme Reality, practiced and lead various types of yoga, included yogic elements in his poems, and described his own poetry as a form of yoga.

In terms of critical perspective, the Beat Generation remains a relatively recent phenomenon within the space of less than a century. Even forty years after their zenith, Prothero commented, “Now scholars are *starting* to analyze the literature and legacy of the Beat writers” (emphasis added, Prothero 205). The critical U-turn from the initial commentaries that Prothero mentions can be applied today towards a more comprehensive perspective of the Beats’ spirituality. For Ginsberg, criticism has generally found itself split between those who applaud his synergy and exploration of controversial topics, and others who deem his extravagance threatening and offensive, though the majority of critics acknowledge his role in popularizing and legitimizing experimental poetry on a wide scale. Critical trends also address Ginsberg’s position in literary and cultural history, along with his contribution to the Beat Movement and its impact on American Literature. The *Poetry Foundation’s* website summarizes the critical trends and lists Ginsberg’s merits,

Ginsberg lived a kind of literary "rags to riches"—from his early days as the feared, criticized, and "dirty" poet to his later position within what Richard Kostelanetz called "the pantheon of American literature." He was one of the most influential poets of his generation and, in the words of James F. Mersmann, "a great figure in the history of poetry." According to *Times Literary Supplement* contributor James Campbell, "No one has made his poetry speak for the whole man, without inhibition of any kind, more than Ginsberg." Because of his rise to influence and his staying power as a figure in American art and culture, Ginsberg's work continued to remain the object of much scholarly attention throughout his lifetime. A documentary directed by Jerry Aronson, *The Life and Times of Allen Ginsberg*, was released in 1994. The same year, Stanford University paid Ginsberg a reported one million dollars for his personal archives. New poems and collections of Ginsberg's previous works continued to be published regularly. And his letters, journals, and even his photographs of fellow Beats provided critics and scholars new insights into the life and work of this poet.  
(*Poetry Foundation*)

The current study presents an overview of Ginsberg criticism, highlighting those who wrote about Ginsberg’s spirituality. It includes the following sources: the neoconservative theorist Norman Podhoretz and his article “The Know-Nothing Bohemians,” 1958, representing the opinion of Ginsberg and the Beats as vulgar in the flurry of criticism spawned by the publication of “Howl” in 1956, the Beat critical renaissance and the reassessment of Beat spirituality from such writers as Paul Portugés in “The Poetics of Vision,” 1978 and “Allen

Ginsberg's Paul Cezanne and the Pater Omnipotens Aeterna," 1980, Carl Jackson in "The Counterculture looks East: Beat Writers and Asian Religion," 1988, Stephen Prothero, "On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest," 1991, and Justin Quinn's "Coteries, Landscape and the Sublime in Allen Ginsberg," 2003. The focus on Buddhism was a part of this trend, such as Tony Trigilio represents in *Allen Ginsberg's Buddhist Poetics*, 2007. The more recent voices of Amy Hungerford, "Postmodern Supernaturalism: Ginsberg and the Search for a Supernatural Language," 2005, Stephen Edington *The Beat Face of God: The Beat Generation as Spirit Guides*, 2006, and Deborah Baker in her *A Blue Hand: The Beats in India*, 2008 further comment on the Beats' significance as spiritual leaders in a more general sense, and Baker's study follows the trend of bringing the female Beat voices to public awareness. Edington's and Baker's works are not formal critical assessments, yet they are worth mentioning as their subject matter points to the direction that Beat criticism is headed, as well as the unpublished dissertation of Craig Allen Svonkin, "Manischewitz and Sake, the Kaddish and Sutras: Allen Ginsberg's Spiritual 'Self-Othering,'" 2009, that discusses Ginsberg's eclectic and synergistic spiritual identity. Swati Banerjee's dissertation "Hungryalist Movement and Anti-Establishment" touches upon Ginsberg's interaction with the group of Bengali poets.<sup>3</sup> During the final editing of the present study in late August 2010, *The Economist* published a review of Syman's *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America*, placing Ginsberg under the heading of "Beatnik Yogi."

This study draws on the following interviews: the "Art of Poetry No. 8: Allen Ginsberg," 1966, "Playboy Interview with Allen Ginsberg," 1969, "Craft Interview with Allen Ginsberg," 1974, "Online Interviews; Allen Ginsberg: Interview with Peter Barry Chowka," 1976, and "Allen Ginsberg in India: An Interview," 1993.<sup>4</sup>

The Beat Generation first manifested when three writers met in New York in 1944. Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg subsequently zoomed to icon status and piloted the West Coast poetic renaissance in the following decade. These three stars were

respectively “a working class French-Canadian Catholic from Lowell, Massachusetts...an upper-class Anglo-American Protestant from St. Louis,” “and a middle-class Russian American Jew from Paterson, New Jersey” (Prothero 208). A key event in the movement’s short history is the Six Gallery reading in San Francisco when six poets performed their work in March of 1955, including Ginsberg’s poem “Howl.”

Ginsberg became a very public figure, accruing both great notoriety and celebrity.

Stephenson comments,

Resistance to Allen Ginsberg has a long history. His provocative style shocked the country, challenged the ethics of the Cold War consensus, and spurned a long and ugly battle over censorship in the courts of San Francisco. However, Ginsberg’s connection to the pulse of mid- to late twentieth century culture cannot be denied. (Stephenson 49)

Early critics and fans cast him into several stereotypes. Countercultural rebel, political activist, drug proponent, madman, and prophet are roles that foreground his position as a spiritual leader. The chapter briefly outlines these critical trends before focusing on contemporary perspectives.

Ginsberg was extremely self-aware of his view in the public eye, as well as of his own emotions. He typically exercises a humorous distance, as in his 1956 poem “America” Ginsberg comments, “My psychoanalyst thinks I’m perfectly right” (“America” 147). In the “square” 1950’s, it was hard *not* to go against something, within such an intricate framework of social proprieties and norms. Ginsberg felt “the entire society was decadent, that bourgeois ‘normalcy’ was diseased” (Weinreich 88). The Beats played with their public image and had a tendency to go over the top, as many other artists of the times similarly went to extremes to shock or surprise. For Ginsberg, this habit was secondary to his work, as his main intention was to awaken his audience to a path of higher consciousness, and not simply shock alone.

Ginsberg’s sexual preference made him a criminal in the eyes of the contemporaneous American law, and it prompted his expulsion from Columbia University (Hadda 232). He was openly homosexual, as he declares in “America:” “America I’m putting my queer shoulder to the wheel” (“America” 148). Ginsberg developed an extremely complex relationship with the nation he lived in. He frequently personifies America, often as a maternal figure, paralleling India’s

nickname of “Mother India.” Early in *Indian Journals*, Ginsberg declares in the first line of “H\*Y\*M\*N\* T\*O\* U\*S\*”, “O Mother U.S.” (*Indian Journals* 16). He also both sexualizes and deifies the country.

American critics place Ginsberg in various stereotypes, but his poetry cannot be measured within these boundaries. One of the shades of his personality was that he was a political activist, but it would be unfair to judge Ginsberg strictly within the boundaries of political or gay-rights activist. “For him, the political was the spiritual,” comments Hungerford (Hungerford 271). In order to feel the real pulse of his poetry one must go beyond and delve deeply into his poetic vision.

The Beat Generation also has had a reputation for being dirty on a physical and mental plane, as both unkempt and amoral. With the counterculture’s rampant drug use, the public eye saw the Beats as reckless and impetuous addicts. Some might have fit this description, but Ginsberg supported drug use as a path to enlightenment, declaring psychedelics as “a variant of yoga and [the] exploration of consciousness” (qtd. in “Allen Ginsberg”). He experienced numerous hallucinations in a sober state, which were what made him certain of the possibility of reaching higher states of consciousness (Portugés “Cézanne” 152). Both naturally occurring and induced hallucinations were equally spiritual to Ginsberg, though many critics comment that Ginsberg’s spirituality increased when he rejected drugs, and pit the two against each other. This view oversimplifies Ginsberg’s multifaceted relationship to drugs. He followed in the footsteps of Aldous Huxley, whose *The Doors of Perception* details the use of drugs as a medium to access a higher consciousness. The title comes from the British poet William Blake, who Ginsberg regarded as his muse.

Psychology was a rapidly developing science in the middle of the twentieth century, but early diagnostic criteria could harm just as much as it helped. There was a colossal fear associated with being different. More spiritually tolerant societies might see an individual who experienced visions as a prophet or a saint, but the burgeoning team of American psychologists

was more likely to impound the person in an asylum. Deep-seated fears associated with hallucinators and visionaries still persisted decades later. The 1982 article “Madness as Religious Experience: The Case of Allen Ginsberg” comments,

According to Anton Boisen, who was both a theologian and a psychiatric patient, the concern of the process of madness frequently is in line with Wieman’s definition of religion: “Man’s acute awareness of the realm of unattained possibility and the behavior which results from this awareness.” Therefore, for Boisen, it was appropriate to view this kind of concern as characteristic of a religious, as opposed to pathological, experience. Boisen is not alone in this belief. Other writers such as James, Bateson, Jung, Laing, Perry Bowers, and Grant have also offered evidence to support the contention that madness can be a religious experience. Unfortunately, most mental health practitioners have closed their eyes to this insight.

(Wasserman 145)

The situation has not changed significantly in the past thirty years, and American culture can still inaccurately judge spiritual experiences as madness.

The forthcoming pages explore the following points: the first chapter examines previous criticism and misconceptions formed against the Beats including Ginsberg, and outlines Ginsberg’s childhood and his poetic vision inspired by spiritual forefathers Milton and Blake. Chapter two details his pilgrimage to India and his sense of belonging there. It outlines Ginsberg’s deep involvement with Indian culture, literature, and religion, with a special focus on the city of Banaras where he spent six vital months of his life, and also his interaction with the Hungryalist poets. In chapter three follows his ensuing change in India, and how he overcame his spiritual and literary impasse. Chapter four delineates this change, elaborating upon his adoption of Hindu tradition in various forms of yogic practices upon his return to the United States. The conclusion sums up these points and explores why critics have previously overlooked and undermined Ginsberg’s Hindu and Indian cultural themes.

## Introduction: Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In the following pages, the study shortens *Indian Journals: March 1962-May 1963* to *Indian Journals* for readability.

<sup>2</sup> Hinduism's expansiveness is similar to that of Islam and its corresponding geography. For a comprehensive survey of Hinduism, see Benjamin Walker's *Hindu World: An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism* or Ainslee T. Embree and William Theodore de Bary's *The Hindu Tradition: Reading in Oriental Thought*.

<sup>3</sup> Mitra and Mitra reference Banerjee's dissertation in their article, but the dissertation was not easily accessible, and time constraints prevented retrieval of the material. Professor Swati Banerjee's *Hungryalist Movement and Anti-Establishment* from Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata (2007) warrants further study.

<sup>4</sup> This study refers to these five interviews by the year in which they were conducted.

## Chapter 1: Early Life, Poetic Vision and Critical Perspectives

Irwin Allen Ginsberg was born in 1926 and grew up in Paterson, New Jersey, son to Naomi Levy Ginsberg, a teacher and political activist, and Louis Ginsberg, a teacher and poet. Poignant childhood memories revisited him throughout his life, and they had a great impact on his poetry.

### Early Life

From a very young age Ginsberg felt alternately repelled and attracted to madness. At just eleven years old, he writes in an unpublished manuscript of his childhood diary, “Either I’m a genius, I’m egocentric, or I’m slightly schitsophrenic [sic], probably the first two” (qtd. in Hadda 237). His mother suffered from schizophrenia, which had a disastrous impact on the family unity and on his sense of security. Written upon the death of his mother, “Kaddish” illustrates the enormous responsibility Ginsberg adopted in the reversed roles of caretaker and caregiver, “By long nites as a child in Paterson apartment, watching over your nervousness — ...your next move” (“Kaddish” 213). Ginsberg harbored an immense guilt that he had failed his duty, which is typical of parentified children. He was not able to turn to his father for support, who Hadda describes as “far from being a strong and able father who could protect his son and provide him with stability” (Hadda 238).

The subject of his mother’s paranoid delusions repeatedly surfaces in Ginsberg’s poems,

who demanded sanity trials accusing the radio of hyp-  
notism & were left with their insanity

(“Howl” 130)<sup>1</sup>

From the same unpublished manuscript of Ginsberg’s childhood diary, Hadda quotes: “Her sickness is only mentally. However and she has no chance of dying” (qtd. in Hadda 238). His problem was most likely neurosis of an extremely sensitive and artistic mind, fueled by unhealed childhood traumas that were only exacerbated by society’s judgments. Of the three modes of existence, the physical, mental, and spiritual, the West gives much more credibility to the visible and the tangible. Ginsberg’s comment that his mother’s illness is “only mentally” and not physical, reflects this belief.

In “Kaddish,” Ginsberg outlines both a hope and a fear of the poem’s central theme of madness. On one hand, to be as mad as his mother unites them: “(mad as you) — (sanity a trick of agreement) —” (“Kaddish” 345). Ginsberg knew that the majority of the world could not relate to the private realm he shared with his mother, which later prompted his immersion in the communion of the Beat poets and also in Indian culture. The flip side of his hope to be “mad as you” reveals a fear in trusting his own mental stability, if her madness were hereditary or somehow contagious. Ginsberg doubted his own sanity early in his life, and “close friends like Burroughs worried about his future ability to function in the world” (Weinreich 79).

Beneath Ginsberg’s fears lay an underlying strength and clarity. Those who qualify for a psychiatric diagnosis of insanity do not typically doubt their faulty thinking and instead assert that their paranoia or other perceptions are undeniably real, typified by Naomi’s insistence about the “mystical assassin from Newark” (qtd. in Quinn 199). Ginsberg reached out for help from both friends and professionals, and he had faith that he could heal. After a series of traumatic episodes, when things were near their worst, Ginsberg remained hopeful. At the psychiatric institute in 1949, he writes,

I am about to put an end to my life, only now there is no worry as to how I will do it, as last summer after the vision. In the hospital I hope to be cured. My images tell me that the hours of truth are at hand. I am not going to die, I am going to live anew. My thought has been peaceful all week. (qtd. in Hadda 241)

Encouraged that Blake had kept his ears shut to critics, Ginsberg also channeled his energies towards more positive endeavors. In a poem from the same year he writes a lyrical, humorous poem seeing his unstable mental condition as a blessing,

I’m a pot and God’s a potter,  
And my head’s a piece of putty  
.....  
I’m so lucky to be nutty. (*Collected Poems* 42)

His self-distance empowered him to weather life’s nadirs, and he later embraced his unique perception as a divine gift. Hyde comments, “The vein of humor in Mr. Ginsberg’s work bespeaks the value he places on community; he is out to make a connection.” In “Footnote to Howl” Ginsberg deems madness as sacrosanct: “the madman is holy as you my soul are holy!”

(“Footnote to Howl” 134). This quotation also reaffirms his own self, independent of the condition of his mind. The turbulence caused by his mother’s psychological disorder in Ginsberg’s childhood was an impetus for him to seek a spiritual connection, which he attempted through writing, drugs, travel, and to ultimately develop a harmonious connection to a god of his understanding through yoga and meditation.

Critics have commented upon the recurring themes in Ginsberg’s life and work, and how his oeuvre can be read as a running biography (Barat Interview: March). He stays true to his earliest beliefs, constantly and continuously seeking out guides and teachers to help him refine his vision. He holds a firm faith in the universe as a positive place and in the existence of Supreme Reality. He also is confident that he is blessed with the capacity and potential to express Supreme Reality, for the primary purpose of teaching and serving others (Farrell 79).

### **Poetic Vision**

To a large degree, Ginsberg really is his own teacher. He has an ability to learn from his experiences and assimilate them in his life, fielding information from both his external and internal worlds. An interviewer had asked Kerouac, “This beat generation [sic] has been described as a ‘seeking’ generation. What are you looking for?”. Kerouac promptly responded: “God. I want God to show me His face” (qtd. in Jackson 55). The much more spiritually confident Ginsberg already knew God existed, and just needed someone to help steer him along his path. A central guiding force is his strong sense of being alive and his insistence on honoring and celebrating all parts of life. It motivated him to boldly seek the new, to venture outside the familiar despite negative critics and other challenges. Baker describes that Ginsberg “had a faith that no matter how unwashed, a poet would be welcomed” (Baker 7). This faith, that he was entitled to a space within the cosmos, is what later manifested in his acceptance of himself including his internal universe.

Ginsberg saw himself as a prophet, and at seventeen years of age he declared he was as a “Poet-prophet-friend on the side of love & the Wild Good. That’s the karma I wanted—to be a

Saint” (qtd. in Weinreich 79). He uses the Hindu term *karma*, commonly translated as “action,” to describe his idea. The Hindu definition of *dharma*, or “duty,” is closely related to the concept of karma, and he felt his spiritual obligation was to be spokesman of the divine, having made a vow at fourteen years of age to “work hard on the salvation of mankind” (qtd. in Waldman 431). The majority of scholars would most likely question the validity of a claim that Ginsberg was a prophet, and dismiss it as balderdash. Whether someone is divinely inspired goes beyond the scope of the current study, and it is up to the reader to decide whether they believe or not. Nevertheless, Ginsberg felt that he was a prophet, and events in his life including spontaneous writing and accurate predictions support his viewpoint. In his childhood diary, he predicted, “If some future historian or biographer wants to know what the genius thought and did in his tender years, here it is. I’ll be a genius of some kind or other, probably in literature” (qtd. in Hadda 237). Barat asserts that it is impossible to dismiss that Ginsberg truly was divinely inspired, commenting, “without divine inspiration, one cannot be a poet” (Barat Interview: May).

Ever since his youth, Ginsberg had prophetic tendencies. Like his poetic godfather Milton, Ginsberg had a similar assurance of his destiny to become a poet. Blake had seen visions of Milton similar to the visions Ginsberg had experienced of Blake. Ginsberg regarded his Blake-visions as life-changing, and they were fundamental in his adoption of the role as a prophetic poet. While he was a student at Columbia University in 1949, he experienced a series of hallucinations. They surface with great frequency in both his journals and his poetry.

Ginsberg describes his visions in the 1966 interview,

So that I began noticing in every corner where I looked evidences of a living hand, even in the bricks, in the arrangement of each brick. Some hand had placed them there—that some hand had placed the whole universe in front of me. That some hand had placed the sky. No, that’s exaggerating—not that some hand had placed the sky but that the sky was the living blue hand itself. Or that God was in front of my eyes—existence itself was God. (“Art of Poetry” 27-28)

Baker quotes one biographer’s account, “From that moment, Irvin Allen Ginsberg became a diving rod in the headlong and holy pursuit of God” (qtd. in Baker 15).

It is notable that throughout his vigorous pursuit of the spiritual, the body of Ginsberg's work does not reveal very dramatic changes. It is an affirmation of his innate spiritual sensitivity, rather than the hallmark of a stagnant search. He wrote his signature collection *Howl and Other Poems* fairly early in his poetic career, which were published in 1956. His poetic style fluctuates as his attitude changes, but there is something very recognizably "Ginsberg" in all of his work. This is due to his nature as a spiritual poet, as he draws upon the vast, eternal resource of divine inspiration. Jackson writes,

Asian thought has also exerted a powerful influence on Ginsberg's literary career. Indeed, his very conception of poetry reveals the indebtedness. In 1971, he spoke of the "function of poetry" as "a catalyst to visionary states of being"; he further remarked that he looked upon writing "as a form of meditation or introspective yoga. (Jackson 63)

In his later years, Ginsberg practiced various types of yoga such as singing devotional songs known as *kirtan* and *bhajan*, meditation, breathing exercises, and also making breath and *mantra*, the repetition of a sacred word, sound, or chant, an integral part of his poetry.

Ginsberg's personal spiritual philosophy is a diverse mosaic blending elements of several faiths. Born Jewish, he studied various religions from an early age. In 1945, he enrolled in Mysticism, World Philosophy, and Modern Art courses at Columbia University, with his fellow Beat classmates Kerouac and Burroughs, to pursue his interest in spirituality (Portugés "Cézanne" 143). Nearly twenty years later, Allen Ginsberg embarked upon his Indian adventure in search of a guru "who he could love," an individual to guide him along his spiritual path (Baker 43). In the 1976 interview, Ginsberg remarked that he visited "all of the holy men I could find" ("Online Interviews"). He did not find one single guru as he had anticipated, but he blossomed under the tutelage of the spirited community and left India a changed man. He continued the practices he had learned in India after arriving to the United States, which he continuously enlarged upon. The dedication to *Indian Journals*' acknowledges those whose guidance that rang most true to Ginsberg, that chapter two discusses in further detail.

### **Critical Perspectives on Beat Spirituality**

It was not until about a quarter century after the Beat phenomenon that various articles started to illuminate the spiritual side of the Beats. Jackson comments,

The Beats may be considered the vanguard in a significant shift in post-World War II American religious consciousness, marked by rejection of institutional religion, a questioning of Christian values, and an affirmation of the possibility of new religious meaning to be found through mystical experience, hallucinogenic drugs and Asian religions. (Jackson 52)

Exploring Beat spirituality became increasingly the trend, as Prothero's article confirms,

Few interpreters now ignore entirely the obvious spiritual concerns of the beats' work. But the tendency among literary scholars is to see those [spiritual] concerns as tangential rather than constitutive. Surprisingly, historians of American religion have demonstrated even less interest in beat spirituality. (Prothero 207)

Prothero draws the parallel between the Transcendentalists and the Beats. He recounts how critics initially viewed the Transcendentalists as belonging to the literary realm, and how the significance of their role as "religious demonstrat[ors]" later gave them a place in religious history. Beat spirituality offers a vast potential for interdisciplinary exploration.

Ginsberg fostered very personal relations to Hinduism and Indian culture. He conflates Hindu goddesses with his mother and America, and Jackson has commented on "the way the Beats utilized and distorted Asian conceptions" (Jackson 53). "Distortion" implies a negative connotation, and the Beats synergy is better described as a fusion of their preexisting beliefs with new ones. It is up to the beholder to judge: where some see distortion, other witness development. It is similar to Ezra Pound's unique style of creative translations, especially the Japanese poetic form of the haiku, and what could be described as a verbal equivalent of what Warhol did to Campbell's Soup cans. Pound had sifted among Eastern religions to shape his own blend of spirituality, with a heavy focus on both yoga and Buddhism. Hyde comments,

Buddhism heavily influenced Ginsberg, as well as Kerouac and Snyder. Each found his own particular niche within the practice, what one critic calls a "home-cooked Buddhism." (Hyde 331)

From the get-go, the Beats' message spawned gross misinterpretation. Even the term "beat" was misconstrued as denoting "beat-down," that Kerouac later clarified as meaning "beatitude," a state of inner peace and bliss. Jackson comments, "[the term] Beat Generation has been badly misused. Rather than a generation, it might be better applied to a small group of

poets and writers” (Jackson 52). Their enormous influence leads to a tendency to overlook that they were just a few people. It is easy to generalize on such a small scale, with certain characteristics representing the entire lot. For example, Burroughs’ works *Naked Lunch*, *Junkie*, and his own drug use made the Beats appear as addicts to the public. Similarly, Kerouac’s life colored the rest of the Beats, as Jackson describes,

Much of the violent condemnation and unfortunate distortion that has been focused on Beat writers may be traced to the tortured personality of Jack Kerouac...The messy disorder of his life has made it easy for unsympathetic critics not only to ignore his obvious talent, but also to dismiss the Beats generally. (Jackson 55)

Another quarter century after the renaissance of Beat criticism, Hungerford wrote in 2005, “this point [that Ginsberg must be understood as a spiritual and religious poet] has been made by others and comes as little surprise to anyone who has read Ginsberg’s poetry” (Hungerford 269). Commenting on the initial reactions to the Beat Generation, Prothero explains, “[w]hat bothered the critics most about the beats was their negativity, who labeled them as “naysayers,” “nihilists,” and categorized them with Nazis and Hell’s Angels (Prothero 206). The voice of the latter critic belongs to Norman Podhoretz, who writes in “The Know-Nothing Bohemians” in 1958,

The Bohemianism of the 1950s is hostile to civilization; it worships primitivism, instinct, energy, “blood.” This is a revolt of the spiritually underprivileged and the crippled of soul. (qtd. in Prothero 206)

Prothero neutralizes these dark perceptions of the Beats, arguing that theirs were actions of protest rather than revolt. Subsequent critics have further illuminated the positivism and hope of the Beat writers, pointing towards the spiritual nature of their path.

The Beats responded to the critical barrage by reiterating that “beat” represented “beatific,” and not “beat down” (Prothero 206). It was particularly Ginsberg who took up the beatific spirituality, and repeatedly clarified that his poetry was both divinely inspired and written for God, with the ultimate purpose to be of service to others. Prothero makes a distinction between the common perception of the Beats as rebels and a more accurate perspective of seeing them in the more positive light as protesters. When critics called

Ginsberg's poem "Howl" "a howl against civilization," Ginsberg elucidated that it was not a negation or comment against, but rather a "pro-attestation, that is testimony in favor of Value" (*To Eberhart* 11). He further explicated this original meaning of protest in a religious sense: "'Howl' is an 'Affirmation' by individual experience of God, sex, drugs, absurdity" (*To Eberhart* 21). Prothero was writing in response to an audience who did not see very much at all in the spiritual side of the Beats, and Beats-as-protesters is true when refining their definition from rebels. Edington notes in the preface to *The Beat Face of God*,

They cultivated a spirituality, in a variety of ways, that sought an enlightened and humanistic present—as well as one that looked towards an enlightened and humanistic future—rather than one that catered to the forces of reaction. (Edington xv)

The current view that validates Beat spirituality makes even "protesters" too strong a term, as in the quotations above Ginsberg himself described their actions as the aforementioned "affirmation" and "pro-attestation." The difference lies in a reaction to the immediate cultural moment as opposed to a response to poetic predecessors. Ginsberg followed Blake and his example of avoiding negative opinions. The rigidly structured Fifties' American society perceived this kind of free expression to be so socially inappropriate that it constituted a threat, but Ginsberg saw all as equal parts of a shared human experience: "The poems are religious and I meant them to be" (*To Eberhart* 32). Two relatively recent texts come closer to a holistic view of the Beat's beliefs, the aforementioned *The Beat Face of God: The Beats as Spiritual Guides* by Edington, and Baker's *A Blue Hand: The Beats in India*, though neither offer an academic analysis of their respective subjects. Edington asks,

Has the Beat Renaissance, which began in earnest towards the latter part of the 1980s, become a flattened tube from which very little toothpaste can be extracted? I'm not convinced of that; and I'm certainly not convinced that this work of mine represents the last squeeze, as it were. (Edington xv)

A formidable challenge lies in attempting to define spiritual influences, and especially Eastern philosophies. Western rationality has a penchant for hard facts, categorizing, and defining. Eastern philosophy includes systematization, but also faith and a sense of all-inclusiveness, and a flexibility that the West lacks. Baker describes what Ginsberg considered to

be the “sawdust of reason” (Baker 36). It is a reflection of the times, of what is acceptable and familiar in Western society, and reveals the lack of perspective and vocabulary to analyze the spiritual. Commenting on the blind spots a society assumes within imposed social boundaries

Mary Douglas writes:

Whenever a strict pattern of purity is imposed on our lives it is either highly uncomfortable or it leads into contradiction if closely followed, or it leads to hypocrisy. That which is negated is not thereby removed. The rest of life, which does not tidily fit the accepted categories, is still there and demands attention. The body, as we have tried to show, provides a basic scheme for all symbolism. There is hardly any pollution which does not have some primary psychological reference. As life is in the body it cannot be rejected outright. And as life must be affirmed, the most complete philosophies [...] must find some ultimate way of affirming that which has been rejected. (Douglas 193)

She gives a probable reason why critics considered the Beats to be dirty, and outlines the conflict between what Ginsberg believed to be an honest portrayal of the body and their charges of offensive and amoral language. His poetry includes physical descriptions of all functions of the human body. The critics did not stop at thinking up new epithets for the Beats, but even went as far as attempting to ban their works. The 1957 trial for banning “Howl” for being sexually explicit and amoral attests to the deep-seated fears rife in American society at that time.

In a sense opposite from their intended meaning, some of the critic’s epithets actually do apply to the Beat Generation. One might see the Beats as “spiritually underprivileged” as members of the post-World War American society, involved in yet another war. In 1966, *Time* magazine asked “Is God Dead?” in response to the Death of God theological movement. Being “crippled of the soul” could also be a fitting term, in the sense that these writers had gone through very turbulent times, which is what inspired them to seek alternate spiritual paths. They might have suffered emotional trauma, but were not somehow inherently damaged, as Podhoretz’ commentary suggests. Eastern spirituality views darker times as potential for growth, because it is the challenges that force us to look beyond. Artists, writers and other visionaries of all ages are known for their sensitivity and their struggles, and the corresponding need to express and process their pain is what inspires many to pick up a pen. For others, like the Beats, the driving force is to praise God, “The beats sought to move beyond predictions of social

apocalypse and depictions of individual sadness to some transcendental hope” (Prothero 210). Ginsberg unites these two forces in his writing, both despair and faith, as a primarily spiritual writer who does not shy away from expressing any emotion. He sees them as the same thing: suffering is merely the lack of God, and pain is a part of the human experience, that “Howl” celebrates as divine. A great suffering for Ginsberg was speechlessness and an inability to name something. He burned to express his religious vision and was determined to find words to relate his experience to the public. When he did find a way to describe how he felt, he worked on refining it to present it in a way so that his readers could easily identify with it. He honored everything human, with his ability to see the divine presence in the mundane. Writing in itself is a positive act, and the Beats were courageous enough to make a commitment to portray the turbulent times as honestly as they could.

In 1962, Ginsberg packed his bags and embarked upon travels abroad with his friend and lover, poet Peter Orlovsky. Disillusioned by the negativity of America, Ginsberg’s heart longed to unite with a divine presence, and India promised rich potential for enlightenment. He was heading in the right direction, as the spiritual motherland entertains quite an impressive assemblage of gods and goddess: 330 million and counting.

## **Chapter 1: Summary**

This outlines Ginsberg's childhood, his spirituality, and other key factors central to the development of his aesthetic vision. It highlights critical views on the Beats' spirituality and the largely unexamined Hindu elements in Ginsberg's life and work.

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## Chapter 2: Ginsberg In India

Ginsberg's fellow beat Kerouac traversed America and crossed over her borders "in the search for something holy, something lasting...", which became the subject of his signature novel, *On the Road* (qtd. in Weinreich 35-6). It was well beyond the road that Ginsberg's calling to pilgrimage led him. Chapter two outlines Ginsberg's pilgrimage to India, Hindu divinity, and Ginsberg's understanding of Indian culture, especially his relationship to the goddess Kali. It describes his time at the cremation grounds, his interaction and familiarity with the Hindu sect known as *Naga Saddhus*, the Hungryalist poets, and within the larger community.

### Pilgrimage

In the 1966 interview, Ginsberg prefaces a retelling of his Blake-vision with a description of his spiritual leanings, "About 1945 I got interested in Supreme Reality with a capital S and R, and I wrote big long poems about a last voyage looking for Supreme Reality" ("Art of Poetry" 26). In turn, his Blake visions instilled a keen wanderlust within him, which he describes in a poem published in 1956,

an inner  
anterior image  
of divinity  
beckoning me out  
to pilgrimage.

O future, unimaginable God.

("Siesta in Xbalba" 106)

These lines describe an enticing prospect stemming from a space within himself as well as from somewhere beyond. Commenting upon the specifically spiritual nature of the Beats' travels, Weinreich reports,

Dorothy Van Ghent finds this quest for the holy a redeeming feature of all Beat literature. She sees the Beat myth as following authentic archaic lines. Thus the hero. The angel-headed hipster, comes of anonymous parentage, "parents whom he denies in correct mythological fashion. He has received a mysterious call—to the road...[to] the jazz dens...The hero is differentiated from the population by his angelic awareness...His myth runs along these lines toward the familiar end, some sort of transcendence." (Weinreich 36)

What she describes as a “mysterious call,” was an infrequent but very natural event, according to Ginsberg. The “Beat myth” exists not only in the symbolic as well as the factual. The Beats’ spiritual quest extended far beyond their fictional portrayals, as their own lives mirrored the characters they wrote about. Prothero describes the Beats’ pilgrimage:

From the perspective of *Religionswissenschaft*, the beats shared much with pilgrims coursing their way to the world’s sacred shrines. Like pilgrims to Lourdes or Mecca, the beats were liminal figures who expressed their cultural marginality by living spontaneously, dressing like bums, sharing their property, celebrating nakedness and sexuality, seeking mystical awareness through drugs and meditation, acting like “Zen lunatics” or holy fools, and perhaps above all stressing the chaotic sacrality of human interrelatedness or *communitas* over the pragmatic functionality of social structure. (Prothero 210-1)

He names an essential feature of the Beats’ spirituality, the *communitas*, where they experienced communion within a community, which this chapter discusses in further detail in a following section. He compares their symbolic journeying with pilgrims in the original sense of the term, that they are like those Mecca-bound or like visionary madmen. This comparison rings true with the Beat phenomenon, but is only part of the picture.

In many cases, the Beats were actual pilgrims who did much more than symbolic journeying. Their physical travels mirrored their psychological and spiritual expeditions, and Ginsberg composed many of his works while traveling on planes, trains, and in cars. A pilgrimage is defined as a journey to a holy place, undertaken for religious reasons, or a journey to a place with special significance. The Beats’ motives were spiritual. The United States is not typically listed next to pilgrimage-destinations such as Mecca or Lourdes, but the country was just as hallowed and holy to the Beats. In later criticism, Steigerwald even labelled Berkeley, California the “mecca of the Beats” (Steigerwald 132). As for Ginsberg, it was almost as if he could not speak enough about the divine nature of America.

Kerouac had dreamed of driving across the United States in one big red line. Although he was disappointed to discover that this was not possible, he persevered and traversed the country using smaller roads and highways. He finally ended up in Mexico, as did his main character, in the fictional version of his journey. Snyder moved to Japan and

spent substantial time practicing at Zen monasteries, writing of his experiences in the four chapters of “Far East,” “Far West,” “Kali,” (the chapter concerning his Indian travels) and “Back” in *The Back Country*. Burroughs lived in Tangier, but the nature of his travels seemed more an escape from America rather than embracing spiritual change. There was a range of spirituality among the Beats, and Ginsberg was at the head, “the conscience of the Beat Generation” (“Synopsis”). It was according to a divine calling that Ginsberg set his course to the spiritual motherland, with a specific intention to find a guide who could help him imagine God. Ginsberg explains his attraction to India,

By 1961, I was more interested in going beyond the traditional expatriate role or voyage, of wandering out in the East, particularly India, the most rich and exquisite and aesthetically attractive culture. (Ganguly 21-22)

In the first journal entry in *Indian Journals*, “Premonition Dream” dated “7 November, 1961 —”, Ginsberg records a prophetic dream he has several months before arriving in India,

Dream, after week of unhappiness and mood... — first dream of India — ... — I wonder what city I’m in, I’m deliriously happy, it is my promised land (I’m writing this in the promised land) — (Indian Journals 5)

He speaks of being in India with the same air of prophecy he frequently uses to describe himself as being chosen. He is one of the “Selected Arjunas” he mentions in *Indian Journals*, like the main character of the Indian sacred text, the *Bhagavad Gita*<sup>1</sup>, and knows that he is fulfilling his Destiny (*Indian Journals* 29). Upon awakening from his dream of writing in India, he records his dream “I’m wandering in India, it is like a new earth — I’m happy — I wake... — time to get up soon it is 6:45 — light to write this prophecy by” (*Indian Journals* 6).

### **Hindu Divinity and Indian Culture**

Hinduism is over six thousand years old, and there is strong evidence that it existed in pre-Vedic times, which began around 5500 BCE. It is the world’s third most popular religion, and the largest of the country widely considered to be the holiest and most spiritual of them

all. A trip to India is synonymous with soul-searching for a wanderer of any faith, as Housden affirms, “India is the motherland of the spiritual quest” (Housden 138). Expansiveness and all-inclusiveness characterize the religion, with an impressive multitude of very vibrant gods and goddesses.

The animate aspect of the Divine manifests in the very human aspects of the Hindu pantheon. The gods and goddess exhibit wildly ranging temperaments and moods, just as people do, which contrasts the serenity the Western monotheistic God idealizes. Gods in India are seen as “personifications of forces which are active both within the individual psyche, and on a collective and universal scale” (Housden 57). They possess very human qualities, which Ginsberg identified with, as he describes in the 1966 interview how he heard a personified God in his Blake vision,

the peculiar quality of the voice was something unforgettable because it was like God had a human voice with all the infinite tenderness and ancience and mortal gravity of a living Creator speaking to his son. (‘‘Art of Poetry’’ 26-27)

In *Indian Journals*, Ginsberg mentions, “arguments between Ram & Cita in Hindi voices tinnily rickochetting all the way up to my balcony from the radio —” (*Indian Journals* 131-2). Here, Ram and Cita could refer to either the quintessential, immortal pair or to a human couple, as Hindu devotees share the same names with their gods and goddesses.

The members of the Hindu pantheon are extremely active, including heroes and antiheroes and everyone in between. The sacred scriptures and vivid representations show how they inspire, bless, sing, and rescue, and also seduce, fight, scream, and sever heads left and right. The elephant god Ganesha, who features frequently in *Indian Journals*, gained his pachydermic features after his father, the god Shiva, accidentally cut his head off. Shiva demanded that his wife retrieve the first head she saw, which happened to belong to a baby elephant. In an interview in 1993, Ginsberg describes a film that he considers as

[his] real introduction to Indian mythology, to specific attitudes. Boy! It was amazing! Ganesh was so pretty and amusing and sophisticated compared to the heavy-handed, very serious Western regard for God—only one of them, watch out! (Ganguly 22)

He adds, that the film was “probably more culturally wise than anything by Disney,” and at one point in *Indian Journals* he describes Hinduism as “a huge cartoon religion with Disney gods with 3 heads & 6 arms killing buffalodemons” (*Indian Journals* 64). The deities are visually depicted in bright colors and bold, powerful poses that hold enormous appeal to the masses, just as Ginsberg’s vibrant writing captivates a wide audience. Hindu gods and goddesses are alive in the sense that they change with the times, like Kali, who has become increasingly a figure of maternal love over her fiercer side as a warrior. There are deities for specific purposes and places, and new gods and goddesses are born regularly. In the 1993 interview, Ganguly asks Ginsberg what he finds in India that he had not found in the West, and he replies,

A more intimate awareness of the relation between people and God. Just the very notion of Ganesh with a noose in one hand and a *rasgoolla* [sweet made of ricotta and syrup] in the other, and his trunk in the *rasgoolla*, riding a mouse...Such an idea of god, such a sophisticated, quixotic, paradoxical combination of the human and the divine, the metaphysical and the psychological! (Ganguly 25)

The combination of the human and the divine frequently appears in Ginsberg’s writings, especially after India.

Spirituality is something so concrete in India that it can even be quantified. The Ramapati Bank defines itself as a spiritual institution and collects the number of times customers write “Ram” on paper (Pradhan). The scriptural display of the god’s name is not merely a symbolic representation, but considered to be a literal, physical manifestation of Supreme Reality. This concept is core to *mantra*, and plays a central part in Ginsberg’s spiritual breakthrough, which this study details in chapter four.

In Ginsberg’s aesthetic vision and in Indian culture alike, God is everywhere, both in spirit and in representation. Pandit and Kumar explain the ubiquity of divine energy,

One of the fundamental themes of Indian thought and spirituality is characterized by that theophanic vision in which every particle or being is seen as the container, carrier, and manifestation of the divine. (Pandit 56)

In “Footnote to Howl,” Ginsberg expresses this belief in an exultant declaration,

Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!  
 Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!  
 The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy!

.....  
 Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is  
 holy! everyday is in eternity! Everyman's an  
 angel!

(“Footnote to Howl” 134)

The common Sanskrit and Hindi greeting “namaskar” translates as, “I salute the Divine that lives in you.” Housden notes, “[i]t is partly because the sacred is so rooted in daily relationships, rather than just an ideology of transcendence, that it continues to survive in India at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (Housden xiv). For Ginsberg, the living spirituality of India was what attracted him to go there, as he explains in the 1993 interview, “I was interested in what that older culture still had as a living transmission of spiritual and visionary energy because in the West there didn't seem to be one” (Ganguly 24).

In the “Holy City of Benares,” temples are every few feet and smaller shrines bejewel virtually every shop, stand or vegetable wagon belonging to a Hindu owner (*Indian Journals* 178). Sacred cows amble leisurely in the streets, and the culture regards it as good karma to feed them. Ginsberg notes in the 1993 interview,

The idea of an entire culture suffused with respect for that mythology, that religion and its practices, that poor people could understand its sophistication and grant things that hard-headed Westerners are still trying to kill each other over. That was a revelation: how deeply the sense of a spiritual existence could penetrate everyday relations, the streets and street signs.

(Ganguly 25)

Though Banaras has certainly undergone changes since Ginsberg was there in the early Sixties, spirituality still imbues everyday life just as he describes of his visit there nearly forty years ago. Currently in Assi, a quieter neighborhood in Banaras where Ginsberg visited, there is an iron fence with Devanagari letters spelling the god’s name *Ram*, welded between every two posts. Holiness materializes even in consumer goods, such as in the vibrant, colorful god- and goddess-stickers adorning the windows of yellow and green auto-rickshaws. *Hari Om*, a salutation to the divine, can be found in raised letters on the bottom of plastic laundry tubs and on license plates. Corner stores sell *Maha Lakshmi* (“Great Goddess of Abundance”)

brand plastic bags and advertise *Shiva Om* (“Holy God of Creation and Recreation”) spices. A shrine honoring the monkey god Hanuman stands beside an enlarged poster of a body builder at a local Banaras gym. Devout Hindus will respectfully kneel before entering that gym, and many merchants will bless the money a customer gives them, touching it to their forehead several times. Multitudes bear *tilaks*, a mark on the forehead symbolizing the third eye, wear sacred red thread tied around their wrists, and worship at residential shrines, public temples, and the numerous festivals.

Worship involves offerings of prayers, or items such as incense, flowers, fruits, or sweets known as *prasaad*, that Ginsberg calls “god food” (*Indian Journals* 137). This is a tangible exchange between god and man, as the devotee first offers it to the Divine and then can partake himself. Religious historian Marc Katz, defines the term in further detail,

*prasaad*: i.e., the ‘leftovers’ of divine enjoyment which sustain Mankind and are symbolically represented in the daily distribution of divinely consecrated foodstuffs to worshipers in the home, at temples, and in diverse religious ceremonies. This paradigm of the divine/human relationship also addresses the importance of *human input*...the everyday temple *prasaad* is dependent upon a reciprocal relationship in which the human input is devotion and offerings.  
(Katz 28)

This passage highlights how God and man are involved in co-creation, in an exchange similar to the Christian communion. In Hinduism, it was *Shiva Nataraj* (the dancing form of Shiva) who set the universe in motion with his cosmic dance, but humans give life to the deities through the energy of their devotion. The sensibility that miracles can happen at any time permeates the country, and the stuff of magic is an everyday occurrence, coloring India’s reputation as a place of infinite spiritual potential. Housden notes of rural India,

[it is] literally a magical world in which anything is possible; in which the borders between the visible and the invisible are flimsy enough to allow contracts to be made across them daily.  
(Housden 3)

What he writes about rural India definitely applies to the traditional city of Banaras, which is the spiritual heart of the land, and what Ginsberg experienced there as well as in many other places he visited.

### **India through Ginsberg’s Eyes**

Despite pre-departure fears, Ginsberg felt an immediate affinity for India that grew over the course of his time there. He demonstrated a great humility and respect for the people, culture, and customs. Mitra and Mitra comment on how Ginsberg and Orlovsky arrived in Bombay in formal Western clothing, and wore “coat, trousers, tie, shirt, shoes, socks” while traveling through North and Northeastern India. The Mitra couple explains,

Once they arrived in Calcutta (now Kolkata), their metamorphosis began. They threw away their Western dress and clothed themselves in the home-attire of the Hungryalists of the time, viz., handloom kurta-pyjama [a long tunic over loose pants] and rubber chappal footwear, with a cotton sling bag hanging on the shoulder. They allowed their hair and beard to grow like some of the Hungryalists. (Mitra)

In Banaras, Ginsberg adopted traditional male garb, a piece of cotton cloth wrapped around the waist, as he describes, “Walking (in dhoti & lumberjack shirt) thru Benaras alleyways” (*Indian Journals* 139). He could speak and also read some Hindi, and would greet people with the typical exclamations hailing the gods,

went down for milk & cigarettes — at the tobacco stall always greeted by Jai Guru or Jai Hind — I reply Jai Tamara or Jai Krishna or Jai Citaram & namaste clasped hands to brow or breast, clutching cigarettes & matches in one fist. (*Indian Journals* 138)

In *Indian Journals* he shows his respect to a Hindu holyman, “the leper Saddhu,” with the Indian gesture demonstrating utmost respect,

—emerged with his lip a dull blister & puffed face — hands & feet sore — cracked heel — pink fissure dirty — with whom we shared his pipe — I touched his feet to leave — (*Indian Journals* 138)

As Ginsberg defines his relationship with Supreme Reality in *Indian Journals*, he acknowledges the responsibility of the community to care for one another and that people can see divinity through others, “But to have faith in Who? And love who? & weep for who but all us Whos alive — ” (*Indian Journals* 184). The celebration of all things human was certainly not confined to the lines in his poems, as he shows his humility and love of communitas for even the ragamuffins and vagabonds he encounters. They feature in his signature poems, as he describes some American ones in “Howl,” “who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking.” In “Footnote to Howl,” he announces their

sacredness, “the unknown buggered and suffering / beggars holy the hideous human angels!”.

He actualizes the belief central to the poem: “The bum’s as holy as the seraphim!” (“Footnote to Howl” 134), as well as the values of serving his fellows,

Holy forgiveness! mercy! charity! faith! Holy! Ours!  
 bodies! suffering! magnanimity!  
 Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent  
 kindness of the soul! (‘Footnote to Howl’ 134)

He humbly donates money, food, and, more significantly, his time and energy in acts of compassion to various people in need. One particular man catches his attention, “the beggar made of bones,” who he watches for days and describes at great length,

The beggar — the Kankal man — skeleton  
 perched squatting tall on his wasted skinny legs  
 and big feet...hip sores a feast for black  
 buzzing circle of eaters flies, he droop lidded  
 indifferent squinting black cheeked, he breathing stretched out  
 head in the gutter long arms and legs brown tendons  
 streched skin — Buttocks no hollows in the place where  
 he sits on his spine and thin stick thighs — or legs  
 drawn to his chest balanced on long feet, lifted into crossleg  
 for support lying down at ease unconscious or asleep —  
 after Milk, he asked for bread — Dipped the sweet  
 crust in the hot milk — (Indian Journals 198)

He visits the beggar again the following day, grateful to see him still alive,

as I said *Namaste* with adoring palms  
 joined at my chest. (Indian Journals 199)

He balances the grandiose extremes of seeing himself as a prophet and as chosen with humility in an inherent sense of duty, the dharma to serve his fellow man. His definition of prophecy concerns making a connection with another person that transcends time,

What prophecy actually is is not that you actually know that the bomb will fall in 1942. It’s that you know and feel something that somebody knows and feels it in a hundred years. And maybe articulate it in a hint—a concrete way that they can pick up on in a hundred years. (“Art of Poetry” 14)

He actualizes his brotherly love in his immersion in *communitas*. Ginsberg expresses gratitude for his circumstances, and that he has “no need to rush out and carry burlap bags full of dung to make money” (*Indian Journals* 134). Ginsberg fought for his personal freedom of expression, and was quick to assist others in need of protection. He would even

go so far as to lend money to people who had stolen from him. American society labeled him a deviant for breaking the social taboos in an expression of love, his homosexuality, attempting a traditional spiritual path via intoxicants, and shining the light on injustice. For these expressions of his core beliefs, America deemed him a criminal offender.

Similar to the public's judgments formed against the Beats, the dirtiness of the Ganges River prevents many from accepting her holiness. To believers, the spirituality of the river overrides any physical impurities. Housden explains,

Hindus are generally convinced that nothing can pollute their sacred river, and many tests seem to show that Ganga water does seem remarkably capable of retaining its purity. Other tests prove the opposite... The matter rests, for the present in one's own belief system. (Housden 31)

The river, affectionately called Ganga Ma or Ganga Ji is a goddess. She can never become dirty or defiled no matter how abundant the debris or how many tests reveal high bacteria levels. All sorts of colorful flotsam and jetsam, including the occasional corpse, share the same waters where people go for a holy morning bath, though bathers naturally veer towards the cleaner areas of the river. Housden notes, "what defies logic – but then India does not live by Western logic – is that this most sacred of all rivers is used as an open sewer" (Housden 31). Ginsberg highlights this image in *Indian Journals*:

as squatting to pee  
on the night Ganges —  
Back there the firelit ghats. (Indian Journals 139-140)

Ginsberg joins the locals, bathing and doing his laundry in the river by the cremation grounds,

Later bathing near the fires on steps surrounded by boats I  
pushed & hung my head under the prow in deep water,  
Washed underwear on wet steps with red soap — my hair  
scrubbed and cracks of feet & ears in red loincloth — (Indian Journals 180)

Ginsberg spent countless hours along the river at the cremation grounds, observing the Hindu funeral rites and interacting with nearly everyone he met there. He would frequently smoke ganja in social rituals with the locals, who did not view natural substances such as marijuana,

bhang, hashish, or opium as immoral. Ritualistic use of herbal intoxicants is an integral part of certain Hindu traditions. These drugs were readily available at the cremation grounds and at government-approved shops, until the anti-substance law was enacted in the 1980s, though a similar drug-culture exists today.

### **The Goddess Kali**

Ganga Ma is a continuous presence in the backdrop of *Indian Journals*, but it is goddess Kali who is the divinity appearing most frequently in the published *Indian Journals*. It is difficult to determine the extent of Ginsberg's knowledge of this powerful goddess, but the prime significance lies in what she means to him. Kali plays a central role in Bengal, and Ginsberg's closest friends in India were the group of Bengali writers, who appear in a following section in further detail. Ginsberg's poetry suggests a very personal and complex relationship to this particular expression of Supreme Reality. In one description of her Ginsberg writes,

Black, half naked. Claws. Tusks. Garland  
of skulls, red tongue & mouth  
dripping blood

*(Indian Journals 22)*

This traditional portrayal is quite aggressive and can easily be misinterpreted as carrying a message of violence. In it, Kali's hair is wild and she bears nothing upon her bluish-black skin except a garland of severed heads and a skirt of severed arms. She steps on her seemingly lifeless husband Shiva, her mouth bloody and tongue extended, "her foot & tongue stuck out & black face" (*Indian Journals* 81). Her expression, however, is not of blood-thirst, but of the shock upon realizing the offense she has committed in disrespecting her husband by stepping on him. According to the story, she had battled the demon and drank his blood in order to save the world, for if one drop of it had touched the earth, a new demon would have sprung up in its place. After killing the demon, she was still in such a rampage that Shiva laid himself at her feet to prevent her from destroying the entire world. Her multiple, outstretched arms grasp various weapons, and she holds her uppermost right palm open in the gesture of

*Abhya Mudra*, signaling her devotees to have no fear. Other portrayals highlight her mild nature as the gentle Mother, which been the increasingly the trend in recent times especially for Bengali people. A myth largely unfamiliar to the West tells of the infant Shiva halting Kali's frenzy after she kills the demon by crying, rather than laying at her feet. Kali picks the baby up, kisses his head and breastfeeds him.

Kali's different aspects invite speculation on Ginsberg's relationship to this complex Goddess. He writes of her in various contexts, including as a symbol of both the sacred and profane. He connects with her in a very personal way, describing her relation to his friends, family, and nation. He casts her as his own mother, revealing her gentle, maternal qualities, and also details her fiercer, Tantric aspects.

Kali, like every other Hindu goddess, is an aspect of the goddess Durga. Usually depicted astride a lion, the armed Durga has aspects ranging from fierce demon-slayer to maternal protectress. The three goddesses Kali, Lakshmi, and Saraswati are Durga's three primary avatars. Ginsberg could easily have been attracted to other Hindu deities besides Kali. For instance, Ginsberg could easily have become a devotee of Lord Shiva or the goddess Saraswati. Shambu Bharti Baba was a Shivaite who greatly influenced the poet during Ginsberg's residence in Banaras, and Shiva is the patron deity of this city that felt like home to Ginsberg. Another fitting option might have been the beautiful Saraswati, who is the goddess of knowledge, poetry, and music, and the intoxicant *soma*. However, he only briefly records factual descriptions in the *Indian Journals'* section, "SARASWATI'S BIRTHDAY" (*Indian Journals* 158), such as her title of "Goddess of learning / Queen of Sanskrit prosody" (*Indian Journals* 165). He later developed a relationship to the god Krishna with his mantra chanting and the organization ISKCON (The International Society for Krishna Consciousness), but it was Kali who held the greatest appeal for Ginsberg in India. Of all the

thousands of Hindu deities, it was Kali Ma who Ginsberg turned to — or she who chose him, as a Hindu might comment.

Mahakala the great skeleton — veined venereal Adam, Lord of Death —  
Kali the goddess of Nimtallah street in her red cloth (*Indian Journals* 148)

Ginsberg conflates the immortal and the mortal with images of the Hindu deity of time and transformation as death (*Mahakala*), and the first man God created in the Bible (Adam). He describes each with the reciprocal divine or human attributes. *Mahakala*, “Great Time/Death,” is another name for Shiva. It is the masculine form of *Mahakali*, “Great Kali,” and frames this form of him as the husband to this avatar of the goddess. Ginsberg associates *Mahakala* with the physical remains of a human being, which he also describes as “great” (“great skeleton”). The two adjectives describing Adam (“veined venereal”) accentuate his impermanent, mortal qualities by calling attention to his physiological form and emphasizing its fragility in a diseased state, and the title of “Lord of Death” simultaneously grants him immortal qualities. In the second line, Ginsberg again juxtaposes the divine and the mortal again in describing a woman on Nimtallah Street with the Goddess Kali’s name. He highlights her human qualities as he narrows her realm to a single street and describes the concrete object of her raiment with the sacred color red, as well as emphasizing that she bears a divine name.

He reiterates this image with the Banarasi beggar woman “Kali Ma,” another microcosm of the sacred and the profane, appearing both in the text of in *Indian Journals* and in a couple of photographs. She features in the opening line of the section detailing the main stairway to the river in Banaras, “*Describe: The Rain On Dasaswamedh:*”

Kali Ma tottering up steps to shelter tin roof, feeling her way to  
curb, around bicycle & around a leper seated on her way  
to piss on a broom (*Indian Journals* 176)

Ginsberg views all humans as children of God, and in these lines he highlights the holiness and childlike movements of a particular beggar-woman. Ginsberg included the passage in his

*Collected Works* as a poem with the same title as the journal entry, and the notes underscore that she shares the name with the Black Goddess, “Benares beggar lady with a holy name.” The poem emphasizes her mortal condition with descriptions of her unsteadiness, tactility, physical needs, and mundane objects.

In a memorial poem addressing his idol, the Modernist poet William Carlos Williams, Ginsberg speaks of Kali as a divinity accessible to everyone, even those ignorant of her. He imagines how Williams was able to see the Hindu goddess in an American river despite ever having been to India, since Ginsberg regards divinity as the same everywhere in the universe.

Poor man never saw Ganges never  
bathed — but glimpsed Passaic  
as Ma Kali just the same (*Indian Journals* 61)

Ginsberg reaffirms his belief in the accessibility of Supreme Reality to anyone who is seeking, repeating this similar image toward the end of *Indian Journals*. He muses upon having received the delayed news of Williams’ passing.

Quietly unknown for three weeks; now I saw Passaic  
and Ganges one, consenting his devotion,  
because he walked on the steely bank & prayed  
to a Goddess in the river, that he only invented,  
another Ganga-Ma. (*Indian Journals* 189)

Though Williams died before he had the opportunity, Ginsberg was able join the community centered around the Ganges, to experience Supreme Reality in the river, and by extension to the same sacredness in the Passaic, as imagining himself as Williams in a creative form of prayer. Ginsberg religiously visited Ganga Ma’s banks and ghats, the stairwells leading down to the water.

### **Close Readings of the Goddess Kali in *Indian Journals***

In the poem “*Kali*,” Ginsberg’s first concerted poetic attempt in *Indian Journals*, Kali features in the image of the Statue of Liberty.

Kali as Statue of Liberty starts moving  
with ten arms  
reading counterclockwise  
1) High above her head one hand clutches

Theory of Relativity  $E=Mc^2$  torch  
sparklers illuminating

(*Indian Journals* 22)

He continues numbering her other hands in his typical Whitmanesque catalogue-style and structure, reminiscent of “Howl-s” composition. The first part of “Howl” lists the various qualities of its hagiography, beginning each line with “who:” “**who** bared their brains to Heaven...**who** loned it through the streets...**who** howled on their knees” (emphasis added; “Howl”). In “*Kali*,” Ginsberg details what is in each of the Goddess’ multiple hands, 4) **one** Electric Chair...5) **one** Mandala of hot air...6) **one** hand covering her pubic hair...” (emphasis added; *Indian Journals* 23).

Ginsberg conflates the American symbol of political freedom with the spiritual liberty that Kali represents. In doing so, he questions the whether what he calls “Land of the free with gaping mouth” is actually as tolerant as the national anthem declares as the “Land of the free and the home of the brave” (*Indian Journals* 16). The cultural moment marked a hotbed of concern toward personal liberties, and Ginsberg had certainly felt the country trammelled his own personal freedom. The year after Ginsberg departed India marked the historical Free Speech Movement at the University of California at Berkeley, which was vital to broadening the boundaries that defined American civil liberties. Ginsberg held a powerful role as a promoter of free speech, and though he did not play a major role in this particular movement, he played a significant part in political activism in Berkeley and other areas. He encouraged a peaceful attitude of non-violence that India had refined in him, the same policy of *ahimsa* that Gandhi had practiced in the first half of the century. It is a vital underpinning of daily life, as one historian explains,

[India’s] fundamental unity is based on the positive, though negatively expressed, principle of *Ahimsa* which manifests itself in the positive form of tolerance enabling solution, assimilation, and absorption of foreign sentiments and ideals in its own context. (Prasad ix)

The Vietnam War, known as “the living room war,” came much closer to home than any preceding it, and many Americans were cautious of any gathering, peaceful or otherwise.

These turbulent times prompted philosophers and writers like Ginsberg and the Beats to redefine their beliefs of society, morality, and their notion of God.

Ginsberg muses over the boundaries of something as abstract as Supreme Reality in *Indian Journals*. The first line of the addendum to “*Kali*” declares,

I  
                   am  
                           traveller  
   eyes

(*Indian Journals* 24)

Roughly halfway through the poem, the speaker redefines him- or herself:

I am this  
                                   Ten armed Durga  
                   Red tongued Kali

(*Indian Journals* 24)

These fragments explore the liminality between the individual experience and Supreme Reality, and to what extent each can be defined. The first words of the poem, “I am traveller eyes,” evokes the famous Emersonian sentiment captured by his image of the “transparent eye-ball,” as the speaker’s eyes are not merely a part of him, but define him. It symbolizes the loss of individuation in natural experience, where an objective view replaces the subjective: “I am nothing; I see all” (Emerson). The step-like placement of the words creates movement as the reader’s eyes travel diagonally downwards, becoming “traveller [travelling] eyes” as they journey down the page. In the manner he has constructed line breaks and spacing and excluded punctuation, the referent of “I am this” becomes unclear. The speaker could be the goddesses themselves, or perhaps the speaker is saying that he and the goddesses are one. The three words could be self-referencing, as a complete statement of an ontological expression of existence.

This ambiguity and shifting meaning implies several ramifications. These include the ubiquitous nature of God, that Supreme Reality is infinite, and that it is imperative an individual defines what he believes God to be. Ginsberg suggests the importance of establishing and maintaining a clear connection to God. *Indian Journals* is a whimsical mixture of non-fiction and fiction, and the speaker lends himself to interpretation as

Ginsberg's own voice. A traveler in India, he could most certainly be the "traveller eyes" in his journal. In light of his claims to be a prophet, he might here be positioning himself as another aspect of divinity, casting himself as an avatar of Durga, like Kali.

Ginsberg accepts Kali as his own maternal figure, and he further personalizes his relationship to her by framing his biological mother in terms of the Black Goddess. In *Indian Journals*, Ginsberg includes a passage entitled "Notes for Stotras to Kali as Statue of Liberty," *stotras* denoting Hindu hymns, especially ones sung while under the influence of the intoxicant *soma*, revealing Ginsberg's attraction to devotional songs that this study expands upon in the following chapter. In this passage, Ginsberg imagines his mother as Kali,

Rays of schizophrenia streaming from her lousy forehead in every direction thru the myriad human worlds & looks like shocking pink in this; (*Indian Journals* 14)

The reference to schizophrenia alludes to psychological disturbance of his mother, Naomi, and in the preceding line Ginsberg emphasizes disassociation,

She leads a separate cultural life of her own, her left hand doesn't know what her right hand is doing (*Indian Journals* 13-14)

In another poem in *Indian Journals*, "*DURGA-KALI — MODERN WEAPONS IN HER HANDS*," he describes the goddess Durga with the feminine glamour associated with a Hollywood sex symbol,

Greta Garbo's Face on Durga  
Nails & Claw like Scimitars (*Indian Journals* 22)

He intensifies the contrast between the goddess' serene, beautiful face and the destructive weapons she holds by describing her in this image as actually having animal-like appendages. He calls attention to the image of the Swedish actress as he reiterates it a few pages later with Durga's avatar, as one of the final images of "*Kali*" describes her with "Greta Garbo's face pasted" (*Indian Journals* 23).

The line at the end of Ginsberg's masterpiece "Kaddish," the memorial poem he wrote for his mother between 1957 and 1959, makes explicit the link between the goddess

and his mother with the symbol of the actress, “O beautiful Garbo of my karma.” Ginsberg’s interest in Hinduism, as he mentions the notion of karma, reveals his familiarity with Hindu concepts before his trip to India. Ginsberg composed section IV of “Kaddish” in a style similar to the cataloguing of his Kali poem in *Indian Journals*, though instead of describing what she holds in her hands, he details his mother’s different body parts. One line states, “with your eyes of starving India” (“Kaddish” 226). Ginsberg’s conflation of the spiritual, the political, the sexual, and the maternal is a recurring theme in his works. He applies this theme to Kali, “Covered with copies of Time Magazine & India Illustrated News, her sexual skin —” (*Indian Journals* 13-14). Ginsberg frequently refers to his mother and maternal themes, but rarely mentions the paternal, though early on in *Indian Journals* he envisions his father as a Hindu ascetic in America, “Imagine my father wandering around New Jersey in orange robes and big serious expression” (*Indian Journals* 65).

In *Indian Journals*, Ginsberg writes at length of his visit to Tarapith, “home of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century holy fool Bama Kape” (*Indian Journals* 81), where he worshipped Kali Ma along with Bama Kape’s followers, describing how the resident pandit was “eating the Prasad in his own Kali mouth” (*Indian Journals* 85). While a guru there guides Ginsberg on “the first step of pranayama,” the yogic practice of controlling the breath, Ginsberg “— saw his blue image of Kali with delicately painted eyes, where he sat...in Saffron robe and long black hair” (*Indian Journals* 83). In another passage he reiterates the Goddess’ tender side, describing her “— with a soft expression and deep eyes.” He also includes visual documentation with a photograph of a Bengali papier-mâché statue of Kali Ma with her wide eyes set in a mesmerizingly calm and loving gaze. The Hungryalists dramatically influenced Ginsberg with their view of Kali as a loving, gentle presence. At another instance in *Indian Journals*, accompanied by two Hungryalists, he describes participating in Kali-worship, “— familiar whiney saddhus putting red black 3’rd eye on my skull front — homage to Kali Ma —”

(*Indian Journals* 111). He comments here on his familiarity with the holymen's childlike chanting, as they place the sacred mark between his eyebrows in honor of Kali.

### **Cremation Grounds**

According to some traditions, Kali is the goddess that rules over the cremation grounds, and it was also Ginsberg's favorite haunt. He spent hours nearly everyday at the famous grounds in Banaras, known as *Manikarnika* (Mitra). Eck explains, "Manikarnika is the famed 'burning *ghat*' the tourist sees from the safe distance of a boat, or from the turret of an old riverside temple now fallen into disuse," however Ginsberg's observations were onsite, face-to-face (Eck 248). Ginsberg became a Manikarnika-local during his time in Banaras, writing about it extensively in his journals and in letters,

Wrote Bill long letter & all night up at Ghats, a black skull hanging down the end of the wood bed — Peter asleep on Ghat Curled up in wooden perch on stone platform — back here turned on & wrote till morning  
(*Indian Journals* 193)

Mitra and Mitra explain that the "constant reminder of inevitable mortality, a reminder that the living flesh is tender and vulnerable" fascinated Ginsberg, as opposed to a grave that suggests an illusion of immortality (Mitra). Hungryalist Malay Roychoudhury emphasizes the impact that the burning ghats had on Ginsberg,

Whether be it Benaras, Kolkata, Tarapith, Chaibasa or Patna, Ginsberg invariably visited the burning ghats (where the dead are consigned to flames), accompanied by one or several members of the Hungryalist Movement. The experience was so earthshaking for him (quite a normal one for any Hindu) that he could, for the first time in his life, understand the difference between the occidental quest for immortality and the oriental quest for eternity.  
(Roychoudhury)

Roychoudhury makes the distinction between a focus on the self and the singularity of a lifespan for Westerners who idealize living forever, and the expanded Eastern view of transcending the succession of lifecycles called *samsara*. Hindus believe that a soul is reborn until it is liberated from the cycle of reincarnation, reaching a state of *moksha*. Ginsberg commands on the final page of *Indian Journals* to abandon the idea of living forever, since it is an ignorant longing, "—leave immortality for another to suffer like a fool" (*Indian Journals* 210).

Denizens of the cremation grounds include saddhus of various sects, with whom Ginsberg regularly socialized. Saddhus are Hindu renunciates, who relinquish all sexual and material attachments. In order to become a saddhu, one must participate in special initiation rites that symbolize a termination of the mortal life and a corresponding rebirth to a divine existence. The saddhu's guru is central to his new life, representing a parent and an incarnation of God, and discourages thinking or talking about the former life. After their initiation, saddhus are considered to be dead in Hindu society, and their bodies are not cremated when they die.

The sect known as *Naga Saddhus* are a prehistoric organization of Shiva devotees, who are known as the "warrior ascetics." Ginsberg refers to another name for Shaiva saddhus, *sanyassis*, which means someone who has renounced the desires of the mortal realm. After The Naga sect is organized into divisions called Akharas, similar to an army, and they carry various weapons, which are mostly only symbolic of their power. Tridents are the most common weapons among the Naga Saddhus, symbolizing the god Shiva. Naga Saddhus channel their sexual desires into psychic and spiritual powers, and other disciplines encompass a broad range, though common practices include not wearing any clothes, not cutting their hair, and the use of intoxicants. Saddhus often smoke a mixture of hashish and tobacco through cupped hands in a small clay pipe called a *chilam*. Ginsberg describes a typical scene at Banaras' burning ghat,

— the same endlessness / that wandering leads me mornings to the stone porch and the trident  
and fire & pipe / and naked saddhus who don't talk, crosslegged smoking dope / to overlook  
the corpse meat-dolls / people bodies bursting and black-charred falling apart on log  
woodpiles by Ganges green fields (*Indian Journals* 135)

Ginsberg regarded the Naga Saddhu, Shambu Bharti Baba, as one of his main gurus. He writes frequently about him in *Indian Journals*, including him in the dedication and also mentioning him in post-India works, such as "Wichita Vortex Sutra:" "Shambu Bharti Baba naked covered in ash" ("Wichita Vortex Sutra" 406). This phrase refers to a common practice

of applying ashes over their entire body, so that many Shaiva sanyassis look white. In *Indian Journals*, he describes meeting Shambu Bharti Baba and smoking with him,

This morning down to the burning ghats & sat with same group of sadhus...one friendly Sadhu named "Shambu Bharti Baba" with whom I've sat and smoked before — today seeing my difficulty with the red clay pipe he made & accompanied me smoking a cigarette mixed with ganja. (*Indian Journals* 130)

Several paragraphs later, Ginsberg mentions that Shambu Bharti Baba's vow of silence, "he don't talk but makes finger gestures —" (*Indian Journals* 130). *Indian Journals* includes two photographs of him posing boldly for the camera, identical except in one wears a *dhoti*, a knee-length white cloth wrapped around his waist, and in the other he is stark naked. His expression is intense and confrontational, and he holds a long trident.

Many members of the *Aghori* sect frequent the cremation grounds. *Aghor*, an epithet of the god Shiva, translates to "no terror." Following the branch known as left-handed Tantra, Aghoris practice a spiritual path of excess, primarily worshipping Shiva as *Mahakala*. To abolish the illusion of binary opposites, left-handed Tantric practices involve breaking taboos, such as the use of alcohol and various intoxicants, nudity, eating meat and even cannibalism, vows of silence, various sexual practices, and midnight meditation upon corpses at the burning ghats. They collect artifacts of death, eat and drink from skulls and cover themselves with and consume cremation ashes. Many of the more advanced practices are kept very secret and are done only in the presence of their guru. Ginsberg's phrase "turned on" in the quotation above implies both literary inspiration and also alludes to sexual energy that Tantra channels.

The Tantric approach to the goddess Kali is to confront her lugubrious side with courage, as she offers them enlightenment through horrors with the death of the ego.

Commenting on the work of the well-known Bengali Kali-devotee, Kinsley writes,

To be a child of Kali, Ramprasad often asserts, is to be denied of earthly delights and pleasures. Kali is said to not give what is expected. To the devotee, it is perhaps her very refusal to do so that enables her devotees to reflect on dimensions of themselves and of reality that go beyond the material world. (*Hindu Goddesses* 128)

Unpredictability was familiar to Ginsberg, having experimented with various drugs, and also from the instability of his childhood home. It is easy to see how the Tantric aspect of Kali held a special appeal for Ginsberg, since it had the power to validate the turbulence of his childhood, and especially the conflicted relationship to his mother. The horrific and loving extremes of Kali paralleled his mother's mood swings. A mother may have frightful aspects, but to her child she is nevertheless a goddess, in the unconditionally sacred relationship between mother and child.

Kali figures as the leading aspect of the ten manifestations of Tantric *shakti*, the divine feminine. Kinsley queries how to categorize the extremes of these ten unique goddesses known as the *Mahavidyas*,

What is one to make of a group of goddesses that includes a goddess who cuts her own head off, another who prefers to be offered polluted items by her devotees who themselves are in a state of pollution, one who sits on a corpse while pulling the tongue of a demon, another who has sex astride a male consort who is lying on a cremation pyre, another whose couch has as its legs four great male gods of the Hindu pantheon, another who prefers to be worshipped in a cremation ground with offerings of semen, and yet another who is a haglike widow?

*(Tantric Visions 1)*

Ginsberg socialized with many people at the cremation grounds, but the relationship he develops to the goddess Kali, as he outlines in *Indian Journals*, is predominantly through his interaction with the Bengalis. He also comments of the typically aggressive visual portrayals of her. He does not specifically mention either Aghoris or the Mahavidyas, but this study mentions them to highlight the range of spiritual extremes in India. Ginsberg's harsh American critics might have been more tolerant of Ginsberg's poetry, had they seen the ceiling raised to this degree. In India, Ginsberg could be anonymous and have a respite from the negative side of being a radical figure in the American public eye. A part of his reason for going was to escape the notoriety he accrued after the publication of "Howl," and Mitra and Mitra explain that "Ginsberg had come to India for a makeover of the image for which Jack Kerouac had warned him of a quick burn-up" (Mitra). As the Mitras affirm, Ginsberg was experiencing profound changes. His poetry about Kali symbolizes his process.

## Meeting the Hungryalists

Poet Malay Roychoudhury, along with his elder brother Samir Roychoudhury, Shakti Chattopadhyay, and Debi Roy, launched the Hungryalist Movement in November 1961, the year before Ginsberg's arrival in India, with the publication of an English manifesto on poetry. The name "Hungryalist" came from the work of the British poet Geoffrey Chaucer, *In the Sowre Hungry Tyme*, and on the cultural theories of Oswald Spencer. With parallels to a Hindu worldview, Spencer did not believe that history progressed linearly. Instead, history was a collection of numerous independent cultures, each with a distinct spirituality, based upon their philosophy of space and agency. According to this theory, the cultures progressed in a self-contained process of ascendance and decline, where historically intelligible laws did not apply. The Hungryalists wrote to express their core belief,

the post-colonial dream of a new, ecstatic, resurgent India has turned sour due to license and permit raj of a corrupt bureaucracy-politician nexus and the country was hurtling towards a nightmare after partition of the Bengali *time and space*. (original emphasis, Mitra)

The Hungryalists were unfamiliar with Ginsberg before meeting him July of 1962, but Ginsberg had known about the Bengali poets through regular media coverage before coming to India. From his arrival in Calcutta, Ginsberg collected Hungryalist manifestoes and sent them to friends back home. Mitra and Mitra comment on the special appeal the Bengali Literary Movement held for Ginsberg, "It is interesting to note that he did not make friends with poets and artists of Marathi, Hindi, English, Punjabi, etc. languages though he visited those states also" (Mitra). During the Hindu Rathayatra Festival in April 1962, in his second month in India, Ginsberg stayed with Samir Roychoudhury at his hilltop hut in the tribal village of Chaibasa. Hungryalist poets Shakti Chattopadhyay, Asoke Fakir, and Karunanidhan Mukhopadhyay frequently appear in the pages of *Indian Journals*, as they accompany Ginsberg on visits to various holy places and people, strengthening his personal affiliation with India. Some notable visits include Sri Sitaram Omkardas Thakur, Swami Shivananda, who was the renowned yogi in Rishikesh, Meher Baba, Swami Satyananda,

Gopinath Kaviraj, Kali Pada Guha Rai, Bankebihari, Shambu Bharti Baba, as well as Emperor Akbar's tomb and Malay Roychoudhury's home in Patna. He also visited the Kumbh Mela, a mass assembly of sadhus from all over India, and the world's largest gathering of people for a common spiritual aim ("Sadhu"). Ginsberg frequently smoked ganja with some of the Hungryalists, who stayed away from chemical substances, but did not regard herbal inebriants as narcotics.

In Banaras, the Hindi and Buddhist poet Nagarjuna introduced Ginsberg to the harmonium, a musical instrument with a keyboard and an accordion-like bellows. It is a traditional accompaniment to songs of devotion, including mantras and the songs of saint-poets such as Tulsidas, Kabir, and Mira Bai (Mitra). Malay Roychoudhury comments that Ginsberg refined his practice while learning from his relatives, including his cousin's sister Savitri Banerjee. He notes Ginsberg's affinity to the instrument, describing how he composed improvisational poems on the lines of several ancient Bengali poets known as Kaviyal, with the small harmonium suspended from his shoulders (Roychoudhury). Many foreigners used Malay Roychoudhury's parents' house as a stopover on the way to Nepal, but Ginsberg remained in India, staying on with the family. Roychoudhury comments on Ginsberg's "adoption" into the family,

A tanned Ginsberg in Khadi [home-spun cotton] pyjama-kurta, oiled long hair, a red ethnic towel on right shoulder and vermilion dot on his forehead looked completely Indian and treated as one by my parents. (Roychoudhury)

On a broader scope, Nagarjuna told the Mitra couple about the level of Ginsberg's acceptance in the surrounding society, "that his tanned skin and long black hair gave him such an Indian identity that he freely entered all Hindu temples, which are otherwise barred for non-Hindus" (Mitra).

### **Communitas and Banaras**

Considering his close friendships, his devotion to Indian lifestyle, the Hindu goddess Kali as his spiritual mother, and his acceptance in Indian society, it is clear that Ginsberg felt at home

in India. He was at ease with the people there, among ebullient and fervent multitudes that inspired him. A very warm and welcoming culture, it is common to call biological family members and also acquaintances *baiya* or *didi*, the respective terms for brother and sister. Malay Roychoudhury notes, “Ginsberg was overwhelmed with ordinary Indian human being’s tolerance, tenderness, resilience, pluralism, hetero glossia, syncreticity and eclectic capabilities” (Roychoudhury). He blossomed in the sense of acceptance that embraces the Indian environment, and enables a harmony among the stark contradictions and various disparate parts. The spirit is relaxed, there is a flow, and the tempo agrees with a natural pace of life. The focus is on the moment and accomplishing what one is able to in a single day, and whatever is left over can be done the following day. A daily spiritual practice honoring the living presence of Supreme Reality comes foremost, above all else. Devotion and rituals provide practical means to transcend the gap between the human and divine realms, which is even possible within a single lifetime, accounting for the plethora of saints and holy people in India. After commenting upon Arjuna’s yogic lessons of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Ginsberg notes his desire to focus on the present moment in *Indian Journals*, “And when will I ever turn my attention (here) to the streets and figures of daily India?” (*Indian Journals* 29). His friends and his daily encounters with people are his true gurus, and Ginsberg values the immediacy of these meetings. He speaks of the vast potential of exciting visions he wishes to express,

...where children drag their dresses and wiggle chanting below low roofs & old householders stand in group or sit in doorways in the early night, unnoticing the familiar neighborhood scene...Thousands of scenes like this in India I haven’t writ, but saw. (*Indian Journals* 8)

The children figure as members of the *communitas*, as everyone is welcome to enjoy each other’s company, old and young alike. The all-inclusiveness contrasts the compartmentalization in the United States, such as in the separation of adults and children and the specific realms assigned to each, paralleling Michel Foucault’s poststructuralist theory about constructed identities. In a country so different from his own, where tourists can

easily feel alienated, it is significant that Ginsberg describes the foreign neighborhood as “familiar.”

Ginsberg thrives in the nurturing environment, traveling with the Hungrylists and eventually settling into an apartment in India’s spiritual and cultural center in Banaras. He lived in the Bengali area known as Bengalitola, where Hungrylists painters Anil Karanjai and Karunanidhan Mukhopadhyay had their studio (Mitra). He and Orlovsky found a room neighboring a temple of the goddess Kali,

Moved into black & white high 3’d floor room... plenty blankets for cool winter in Benares — a desk and shelves to hold accumulated mss. and notebooks — feel at home & happy.  
(*Indian Journals* 126)

He repeats the image of the preceding line, delighting over the “many shelves in the wall for images & books” (*Indian Journals* 126). Indian tradition regards knowledge and learning as a pinnacle of holiness and considers books as incarnations of the Goddess Saraswati, paralleling Ginsberg’s attitude on writing as a form of prayer. In the dedication to *Indian Journals* he mentions, “Poetry is a Sadhana,” the Hindi term for spiritual practice (*Indian Journals* 184). In the 1974 interview he comments, “The writing itself, the sacred act of writing, when you do anything of this nature, is like prayer” (Packard 73). Almost like a to-do list, in *Indian Journals* he copies down the names and detailed contact information of various holy men, gurus and places to visit in Banaras (*Indian Journals* 151). Many of these holy men from this list surface in his later work, such as the famed poem “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” that chapter four of this study details.

Justin Quinn’s article, “Coteries, Landscape and the Sublime in Allen Ginsberg,” propounds a historical angle to the communitas, surroundings, and the divine that marks the poet’s life. Quinn couches the spiritual in terms of following a lineage of literary history,

Ginsberg socializes and ‘familiarizes’ the sublime: friends, family, and even the larger patterns of national fate are no longer abandoned by the rhapsode, but are imbricated within the very texture of his transcendental experience.  
(Quinn 194)

“Howl” describes people hungry for God, who are “burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo” (“Howl” 126). Ginsberg “mobilizes a coterie of fellow-visionaries to counter this antinomian hazard [of the inability to express his vision],” and shows them all as equals, including himself (Quinn 195). This equality occurs both literally, in the repetitive structure that forms the poem, and theoretically, as Quinn describes,

that unique part of human sentience, identical in all men, which the individual shares with his Creator...Poetry is the record of individual insights into the secret soul of the individual and because all individuals are one in the eyes of their creator, into the soul of the world. The world has a soul. (Quinn 196)

Quinn’s comment recalls Ginsberg’s description of his Blake-vision, when he saw the “sky was the living blue hand itself” (“Art of Poetry” 28). Of great concern to Ginsberg was America’s spiritual emptiness, which features among “Howl’s” characters,

who fell on their knees in hopeless cathedrals praying  
for each other’s salvation and light and breasts,  
until the soul illuminated its hair for a second... (‘Howl’ 130)

Ginsberg also comments in *Indian Journals* upon this emptiness and the lack of communitas in American society. Ginsberg portrays the goddess Kali as isolated within an American framework, as in the semblance of the Statue of Liberty, she delivers a monologue on the telephone,

There’s nobody on the other end of the telephone she has in her top hand, she’s talking to yourself — / Will somebody please answer the phone? And tell him it makes no difference what time he gets to the funeral, the undertaker will take care of the details and somebody else will pay the bill, & somebody else will play music & somebody else will pray & everybody will forget it fast as it takes for the vultures to clean up a corpse... (*Indian Journals* 15)

The phrase “shes talking to yourself” conflates she and you, commenting that all humans are divine manifestations but do not realize it when they are not present. The telephone replaces the face-to-face contact that is so essential to Indian culture, and Ginsberg dramatizes the absence in stating that “someone else will pray.” He comments on the repression of American society, exemplified in funeral rites that are dispatched and quickly forgotten, as opposed to a Hindu tradition of the general public’s attendance to a death procession and daily remembrance of the deceased.

Being connected to a local community is vital to the Indian method of learning. A *guru* is “the dispeller of darkness,” who helps his student along the path to enlightenment. The Sanskrit term *parampara* means, “passing on from one to another,” as a teacher bequeaths knowledge to the student (Singh Seminar). The personal relationship between guru and disciple is one of the most sacred interpersonal connections within *communitas*. Housden notes, “classical Hinduism is not a religion of the books: it is a ‘heard’ tradition” (Housden 49). Ginsberg learned from the surrounding *communitas* on a person-to-person level, in a broad practice of *parampara*. *Communitas* is also core to religion, and worshipping together is a very bonding practice. Ginsberg refers to *darshan* in *Indian Journals*, which translates to “a vision of god.” It is a matter of preference, and it is common to combine an individual spiritual practice with group worship. Katz comments on *darshan* as an underpinning of Banaras, which also applies to the larger Hindu community, “*Darshan* is a central theme in everyday Banarasi activity: *Darshan* is often the phrased object of an evening stroll or family outing” (Katz 53). Ginsberg writes of his participation in religious assemblies called *satsangs* which literally translates to “a gathering of the good” (Katz 351).

A pervasive *communitas* makes a strong network flexible enough to endure change and the physical and emotional hardships that extremes such as weather and difficult relatives can incur. The “chaotic sacrality of human interrelatedness or *communitas*” that characterizes the Beats is just as typical of India (Prothero 211). Banaras, especially, exemplifies this *communitas* with its intense spirituality and religious syncretism.<sup>2</sup> *Banarasipan* is a “pattern of behavior bordering on *cultural-socio-religious* ecstasy” typified by passion, freedom, carefreeness. It cannot be transmitted vicariously, as Katz insists that it is something that “must be experienced” (Katz 27). The tone of the Banaras-passages in *Indian Journals* encompasses *Banarasipan*, and in one passage Ginsberg contrasts Banaras’ milieu to restrictive American propriety, Ginsberg comments, “But who Cares in Benares,” (*Indian*

*Journal* 174). This statement follows a New York reverie, “that was a nice delirious surprise that someone could tickle your armpits in broad daylight” (*Indian Journal* 174). This quotation describes Ginsberg’s newfound sense of freedom in the loving and tolerant Indian milieu, far away from the judging eyes of the American public. In 1993, Ginsberg reminisces in an interview,

Naga [naked] sadhus walking around naked—people would have been arrested in America...or for that matter—I remember writing to Kerouac—everybody walking around in their underwear, in striped boxer shorts. What would seem outrageous or strange to Americans was just normal—it was hot and people wore very light cotton—it seemed so obvious. That showed me the absurd artificiality of some American customs... (Ganguly 25)

It is quite ironic that Ginsberg’s very spiritual poetry was condemned on the basis of immorality, and reveals the extreme caution and fragility of the American society during the war. Traditional Indian culture practiced a much more solid and natural approach:

The contribution of the Sanskrit poets has never been viewed in isolation from the main spiritual ideology. Poetry and drama which roused only low desires were condemned as *Asatkavya*, low writing. (Prasad lxxiii)

The spirit of action, harmony, and endurance imbues the world’s oldest living city that remains standing even after having been razed four times (Singh Seminar). Eck describes,

To linger in Banaras is to linger in another era, an era which one cannot quite date by century. It is very old, and yet it has continued to gather the cumulative Hindu tradition, right to the present. (Eck 8-9)

Katz lists the changes he has noted in Banaras since the 1960’s, concluding, “But despite these outward changes, the city is still ancient, spiritual, and unified. It is still Banaras” (Katz 3). The religious syncretism of Banaras underlies the harmony among its residents, who consider all aspects of life as holy, united under shared experience for a common divine purpose, which Ginsberg expresses in his poetry.

Communitas honors every part of life, including procreation and death that other cultures tend to compartmentalize. With even more frequency than they appear in Ginsberg’s poetry, sacred representations of sexual organs dot Banaras’ temple landscape. The Hindi

term is *lingam*, which describes the symbol of an erect phallus on a base representing female genitalia. Procreation features as a primary spiritual concern and Hindus worship statues of sex organs as powerful icons of re-creation and life. Complete with an illustration, Ginsberg observes, “Lingams worshipped here” (100), and provides detailed descriptions throughout *Indian Journals*,

Flowers arranged in the dim Darshan [vision of God] cellarlike light of the inner Sanctum, 10  
AM sun rays falling into the well of blot-light – making neon of the little pink and white  
flower mouths opened shining on the granite black lingams – (Indian Journals 100)

The residual restrictions of Puritanism repress sexuality in American society, which deemed Ginsberg’s sexual references as obscene.

Indian society honors both the manifestation and passing on of life. In regards to the acceptance of death, a powerful symbol is the public funeral pyres, where all aspects of life center. The cremation grounds witness saddhus worshipping, and sleeping, and even cooking food on the same fires that burn the bodies. Ginsberg describes a saddhu preparing his dinner, “I passed along the row of burning corpses. . .the next firepit where bearded Saddhu crouched toasting his pancakes (little flat poories) in the fire ashes speckled with live coals” (*Indian Journals* 116). Eck comments, “Manikarnika is alive around the clock” (Eck 248). Ginsberg celebrates this seemingly macabre aspect of *communitas* with spirited descriptions of childlike delight, “— the middle corpse had burnt thru the belly which fell out, intestines sprang up (that is) like a jack in the box charcoal glumpf —” (*Indian Journals* 125).

## Chapter 2: Summary

The second chapter discusses Ginsberg's spiritually motivated travels that he and the Beats used as the subject of their work. It outlines Hinduism and the spiritual nature of India, specifically God as a living presence, the relationship between God and man, and the importance of a daily spiritual practice, supported by concrete examples of devotion. It delineates the temperaments of the Hindu pantheon, particularly the goddess Kali who magnetized Ginsberg. It explores Ginsberg's multifaceted relationship to her and his fascination with the burning ghats, with support from *Indian Journals*' relevant poems and journals. The chapter discusses different sects of Hindu ascetics, such as Naga Saddhus (like Shambu Bharti Baba) and the Aghori sect, his interaction with the Hungryalists, his time in Banaras and specific features of the city, including Ginsberg's essential experience of *communitas*, describing his feelings of familiarity, potential, and promise in India.

## Chapter 2: Notes

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<sup>1</sup> One of the most well-known yogic scriptures is the *Bhagavad Gita*, which Ginsberg refers to as “really an universal poem, really archetypal” in a 1993 interview (Ganguly 23). The title of this sacred text literally translates to “Song of God,” and outlines a spiritual way to live according to yoga. Lord Krishna teaches Arjuna the different yogic paths in eighteen chapters, notably those of self-transcending knowledge, selfless action, and devotion to God.

<sup>2</sup> See Katz, *Children of Assi* for an engaging, in-depth study on the communitas and syncretism of Banaras.

### Chapter 3: The Change

Both confusion and potential characterized the Indian voyages of Ginsberg and his predecessor Columbus, who both found what they had been looking for in an unexpected form. Although he did not reach the country he had intended, Columbus eventually managed to set foot on new shores. Ginsberg did not find the guru he had set out to meet, but left India with an increased spiritual awareness and renewed inspiration to write.

Ginsberg had believed in God all along, and just needed his beliefs to be reaffirmed by like-minded others. For this reason, the advice from Maurice Frydman, “stop going around looking for Gurus,” Swami Shivananda, “Your own heart is the Guru” and Swami Satyananda, “Be a sweet poet of the Lord” struck so true to him (*Indian Journals* 4). His inner voice had been drowned out by his own doubts and echoed by the cacophony of negative critics of a rigid wartime society. Professor Howard McCord comments upon the unique influence India has on poets, as distinct from other nations,

Every attitude has its poetry, and a small, neat nation may, in one age, present a singularly unified attitude and its poetry to the world, as did England in the last sixteenth century. But such a tidy clarity is impossible for India. No country in the world offers greater extremes or variety in the total experiences which shape poets. Every social ordering from the most primitive to the most sophisticated, may be found; every major religion and most of the minor ones are practiced: the world views and value structures of India are nearly endless and expressed in 723 languages. The only area in the world that offers even remotely an equivalent complexity and confusion is the whole of Africa. (McCord)

From his arrival in India, Ginsberg had intentions of finding a personal connection to God, but did not know how to begin. Early in *Indian Journals*, he confesses, “If it’s a matter of each being has to create its own divinity, far be it from me to know what to do or be,” and over the course of his time in India, he developed a number of daily spiritual practices that opened him to new ideas and resulted in his changed attitude (*Indian Journals* 11). The first part of this chapter outlines Ginsberg’s disciplines of thought and breath, diet, and devotion that he adheres to in the yogic practices of meditation and pranayama, vegetarianism and avoiding chemical narcotics, and communal worship through song. A discussion of the influence of the Hungryalists transitions to the second part of the chapter that deals with Ginsberg’s renunciation of his fixed

ideas of Blake, coming to terms with Burroughs' use of the literary technique of "cut-ups," and confrontation of death at the cremation grounds and the resulting change he experienced, characterized by an unconditional self-acceptance. Chapter three ends with an examination at the impact of Ginsberg's change.

The dedication to *Indian Journals* that Ginsberg added in 1968 lists the highlights of his travels and the people who most influenced him. Here it is reprinted in its entirety for the reader's cursory review, in order to get a feel of Ginsberg's compact and energetic style, and to show the large number of people he met in India that profoundly impacted him.

Maurice Frydman who said stop going around looking for Gurus, Swami Shivananda who said "Your own heart is the Guru," a Mohammedan Baba in Bombay who kissed Peter Orlovsky, H. H. the Dalai Lama who asked "If you take LSD can you see what's in that Briefcase?" whereafter Gary Snyder chanted the Prajnparamita Sutra in a cave at Ajanta, Sri Krishnaji disciple of Meher Baba who performed vow of perpetual silence sweetly declaring all was well without his further talk & that silence would be good for America. Asoke Fakir who led the way to Nimtallah Ghat, Swami Satyanda of Calcutta who said, "Be a sweet poet of the Lord," Gopinath Kaviraj who said, "What you are doing seems to be well," Kali Pada Guha Roy who replied to my doubt of Poesy as a spiritual discipline fit for the Void by saying "Poetry is also a Saddhana & Yoga also drops before the Void," Srimata Krishnaji and Bankey Behari of Brindaban who urged "take Blake for your Guru," Dudjom Rimpoche N'yingmapa Lama in Kalimpong who sucked air through his teeth in sympathy calming my fears of LSD hallucination and advised "If you see anything horrible don't cling to it if you see anything beautiful don't cling to it," the unknown Nepalese lady-saint at the Magh Mela in Allahabad 1962 who sang Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare so sweetly I remembered it thereafter, Shambhu Bharti Baba who motioned me welcome to sit and smoke Ganja with silent Abhya Mudra in the Burning Ghat at Benares, Citaram Onkar Das Thakur who advised quitting onions meat sex cigarettes in order to find a Guru by repeating the mantra Guru Guru Guru Guru Guru Guru three weeks continuously (and also said "Give up desire for children,") which led to conversation on bamboo platform in Ganges with Dehorava Baba who spoke "Oh how wounded, how wounded!" after I fought with Peter Orlovsky. (*Indian Journals* 4)

This study makes an introductory analysis to Ginsberg's dedication, taking a closer look at several of the references, yet the dedication warrants an in-depth examination since critics have largely ignored it. Malay Roychoudhury points out,

His biographers and critics, who are either Jew[ish] or Christian, have never taken into epistemic consideration the dedication page of Ginsberg's *Indian Journals*. Why [Hindu holymen were] relentlessly sought after by Ginsberg...needs to be examined by researchers.

(Roychoudhury)

### **Yogic Practices**

Yoga, one of Indian philosophy's six orthodox systems that encompasses both spirituality and science, is a form of mental and physical discipline that outlines an essential path to liberation.

Patanjali, the compiler of the *Yoga Sutras*, defines yoga as “the suppression of states of consciousness” or *yogah cittavritti-nirodhahi* (qtd. in Eliade 47). For Ginsberg, it meant relief of his anxiety and the unwanted mental chatter he experienced. Eliade further explicates,

The point of departure of yoga meditation is concentration on a single object; whether this is a physical object (the space between the eyebrows, the tip of the nose, something luminous, etc.), or a thought (a metaphysical truth), or God (Ishvara) makes no difference. This determined and continuous concentration, called *ekagrata* (“on a single point”), is obtained by integrating the psychomental flux (*sarvarthata*, variously directed, discontinuous, diffused attention”). This is precisely the definition of the yogic technique: *yogah cittavritti-nirodhah*. (Eliade 36)

The main forms of yoga offer salvation through works, *karma yoga*; faith, *bhakti yoga*; knowledge, *jnana yoga*; mantras or spells, *mantra yoga*; activation of the *chakras* or subtle energy centers of the body, *laya yoga*; physical culture, *hatha yoga*; and through spiritual culture, *raj yoga* (“Yoga” 616). Ginsberg repeatedly relates his spiritual practices and poetry in terms of yoga. Ginsberg was formally introduced to yoga as a child, as he recounts in the 1993 interview thirty years after his travels, “Actually, when I was twelve years old I heard an American give a lecture on yoga in Patterson, New Jersey. That always intrigued me and it’s still vivid in my mind” (Ganguly 22). The following pages outline Ginsberg’s yogic practices of meditation and breathing exercises, abstaining from meat and narcotics, and devotional chants and song, and how he developed them over the course of his time in India.

Ginsberg struggled with formal sitting meditation when he first came to India. At the beginning of *Indian Journals*, after he describes his frustration with yoga, as he comments at the beginning of *Indian Journals*, “There is no direction I can go to without strain — nearest being lotus posture and quiet mornings...I may never be able to do that with devotion” (*Indian Journals* 10). He wryly adds, “Yoga is good for making an entity sit down on the ground and wait,” implying an anxiety in doing nothing rather than relaxing in a conscious pause (*Indian Journals* 12). When Snyder and his girlfriend, poet Joanne Kyger, accompanied Ginsberg and Peter in India, she wrote, “Allen keeps talking about Meditating while he is on drugs. That is the only time, he says that he can sit still long enough to ‘meditate’” (Kyger 190). After trying many

types of yogic practices, he did the ones that suited him best, such as pranayama and bhakti yoga, the yoga of devotion.

Outlining the yogic disciplines, Eliade notes,

The most important—and certainly the most specifically yogic—of these various “refusals” is the disciplining of respiration (*pranayama*), the refusal to breathe like the majority of mankind, that is, unrhythmically...it induces the respiratory rhythm by harmonizing the three “moments” of breathing: inhalation, retention, and exhalation of the inhaled air. (“Yoga” 521)

Ginsberg records the instructions for pranayama in *Indian Journals*,

“Breathe air into your mouth – as in smoking ganja – ‘deep into the lungs and fill out the belly’ – ‘hold it there and expel thru one or another nostril’ – that being the first step of pranayama” (*Indian Journals* 83)

He describes practicing these breathing exercises in a later passage, “Sunset, sitting crosslegged on the sand bank overlooking the ocean below, waves roar like car crashes...pranayam holding breath 4:16:8...(4 inhale 16 hold 8 exhale breath.)” (*Indian Journals* 98-99). Here he details a basic *pranayama* practice that involves sitting in lotus or another position of spinal alignment. Holding the right hand over the face, with help from the thumb and ring-finger, one alternately closes the left and right nostril upon inhalation and exhalation. He details his method of breathing in for four counts, holding his breath for another sixteen, then letting his breath out for a count of eight.

### **Spiritual Nutrition**

A hallmark of yoga and the Hindu faith is abstaining from meat, and Ginsberg’s shift to vegetarianism marks his adherence to a yogic doctrine, rather than following a Tantric path. Throughout *Indian Journals*, Ginsberg mentions eating meat with negative connotations and his desire to become vegetarian. The following night after Peter brings “two big dead stuffed chickens to eat,” he shows his allegiance to the traditional Hindu community, reporting his feelings of guilt over eating a carnivorous diet and what the community might think,

chicken bones to dispose of in a Quality Restaurant box — sneaked him [a dog] a handful and as I left heard the snarling & yipes of a 4 dog fight — I sneaked guiltily around the Ganges side street market looking for a trash barrow to leave my cannibal bones hid from Hindu Paranoiac gazers. (*Indian Journals* 137-138)

Another time he brings vegetarian food for himself and Peter, commenting on its purity, “I brought up sweets & tea & fruits – Sattvic diet –” (*Indian Journals* 102). A *Sattvic* diet is also known as a yogic diet, based on the ancient Indian science of Ayurveda, to cleanse and purify the body. The yogic diet includes fresh fruit, dairy, whole grains and many vegetables, avoiding chemicals, meat, and very strong foods such as garlic and onions, in the belief that they incite passion and dull the mind. By the end of his time in India, Ginsberg practiced discipline in his diet. His vegetarianism was an outward marker of his internal change, of the mental discipline in managing difficult emotions and felt comfortable in his own skin, as he describes in “The Change,” discussed at the end of this chapter.

### **Phasing Out Hard Drugs**

Upon returning to the United States, he favored acts of spiritual devotion rather than analysis, and traditional Indian practices over chemical means of enlightenment. In the 1993 interview, the interviewer asks him if he had known about soma, “a god and a hallucinogenic plant in ancient India, with roots in heaven,” and Ginsberg answers,

I was very interested in soma...I was prepared to take that mythology a little more literally than most Westerners, as signifying something more literal on a spiritual level. There were realms of modalities of consciousness that were available and real, that were not within the Western psychological category except maybe in William James's *The Variety of Religious Experience* or in the hermetic tradition of Blake. (Ganguly 24)

In *Indian Journals* Ginsberg repeatedly speaks of drugs as edifying, outlining “the lesson of drugs,” (*Indian Journals* 52) and he parallels a psychedelic hallucination with one of the most sacred Indian texts,

Chapter XI Bhagavad Gita — Visva-Rupa-Dharshana, The  
Vision of the Universal Form —  
is what I often see on LSD etc. (Indian Journals 28)

Ginsberg had faith that drugs could be a path to Supreme Reality, but vacillated between whether they were the best option for him or not. He credited the use of various drugs for their literary propensity,

— Ganja makes me write  
tho the writing seems self-important  
disconnected and useless as per theory (Indian Journals 191)

Ginsberg experimented heavily during his stay, and just shortly after setting foot in India he writes of his visit to an opium den in his first journal entry in India, “*March 19, 1962, 3:30 AM – The Left Hip*,” describing “Visit to Delhi O Den...The smoker recumbent on left hip” (*Indian Journals* 7). He frequently smoked ganja and other natural drugs in social and ritualistic use with Shambu Bharti Baba and the holymen at the burning ghats, some of the Hungryalists, and other people he met in Banaras and while traveling throughout India. He also writes of his use of dangerous narcotics, injecting morphine and atropine. In *Indian Journals*, Ginsberg reflects upon the advice of another Eastern-oriented poet, “Pound recommended yoga instead of “drugs” in typewritten note on window of disciple-Rabblrouser skeleton’s bookshop — 1950 — (*Indian Journals* 85). This comment reveals how Ginsberg was grappling with whether his personal spiritual path should include drugs, as well as his awareness of yoga as a discipline that had worked for one of his contemporaries.

In the 1966 interview, he described his time in India as rescuing him from the “corner [he] painted [him]self in with drugs,” and many critics misinterpret this comment and related statements as an admission to being an addict (“*Art of Poetry*” 39). However, the “corner” Ginsberg describes was not the prison of addiction, but holding too tightly to the fixed idea of drugs as a spiritual path. The final lines of *Indian Journals* command, “[do] not get stuck in the corner of the universe sticking morphine in the arm and eating meat,” revealing how Ginsberg is redefining his spiritual path as one of abstaining from hard drugs and meat (*Indian Journals* 210). The fixed idea he had held about narcotics was similar to his obsession over Blake, as he clarifies in an interview in 1966,

But it all winds up in the train in Japan, then a year later, the poem “The Change,” where all of a sudden I renounce drugs, I don’t renounce drugs but I suddenly didn’t want to be dominated by that nonhuman anymore, or even be dominated by the moral obligation to enlarge my consciousness anymore. (“*Art of Poetry*” 40)

Ginsberg has realized that to simply “be human,” without striving for experiences, is the most spiritual path for him. He feels free to be spontaneous, and to simply act without excessively thinking about what he will do and the motivations for his actions.

Weinreich describes Ginsberg’s trip to India as an escape, misrepresenting his change,

“The Change: Kyoto-Tokyo Express” describes Ginsberg’s own evolution from a destructively obsessive refusal to deal with the social realities of the West (by traveling to India and taking drugs) to a desire to “open the portals to what Is.”

(Weinreich 248-249)

He dismisses that Ginsberg’s intentional search for a guru motivated his trip, and that his change was an actual shift to a higher consciousness, and not merely a desire. His willingness to become more conscious was the harbinger for his journey, which he had had since his youth. The reason he wrote poetry was to express his experience of divinity, as he explains in the 1966 interview, “About 1945 I got interested in Supreme Reality with a capital S and R” (“Art of Poetry” 28). His use of drugs was also an attempt to seek enlightenment, and neither simply an escape nor something he did covertly. On the contrary, Ginsberg openly advocated the use of drugs as a viable path to enlightenment, as it had been used traditionally since ancient times before the propaganda against drugs and the addiction the Opium Wars spawned in the nineteenth century.

### **Bhakti**

The branches of yoga are not completely distinct from one another. Bhakti is the yoga of devotion, and commonly includes chanting, singing, and mantra, which also are forms of *Nada* yoga, or the yoga of sound. Pranayama combines meditation and physical postures, and anything done as an offering to God can be called bhakti. Some devotees demonstrate extreme practices to show their devotion, such as an ascetic who had kept one arm raised toward the sky for eight years, to be closer to God. Traditional bhakti practices are singing and chanting, such as *kirtan*, which literally translates to “chanting the names of the divine to praise the infinite source, the One who orchestrates all” (qtd. in Govindas). Kirtan is often practiced as a group and accompanied by a harmonium or small cymbals. Swami Shivananda comments on the necessity of kirtan, “Life without kirtan is like a garden without flowers” (qtd. in Govindas).

Upon moving into his Banaras apartment, Ginsberg describes items of both physical and spiritual illumination, “— installed bright 100 watt lightbulb & statue wood Chaitnya” (*Indian Journals* 126). Malay Roychoudhury mentions this statue, “collected by him at Nabadwip, the paints on which had flaked off due to overuse” (Roychoudhury). Sri Krishna Chaitanya was a Krishna devotee, in the Vaishnava school of bhakti yoga. He visited Ramakrishna Math, the foundation dedicated to the most notable Indian saint of the nineteenth century, who was a proponent of bhakti yoga and a Kali devotee. These two bhakti-saints feature in Ginsberg’s post-Indian poem “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” and a close-reading of this poem follows in chapter four of the present study. In the 1993 interview, Ginsberg recalls communal singing at Banaras’ cremation grounds,

And then I saw people singing outside on Thursday nights and other nights too. That was amazing, and the noise was rousing, very loud, and I would sit around, pay attention and listen, and try to get the words. (Ganguly 26-27)

Ginsberg paid close attention to the chants, noting his translation of them in his journals, as he parenthetically indicates under the heading “BAUL SONG FRAGMENTS,” “(*Copied thru Asoke Fakir’s fast translation...*)” (*Indian Journals* 87). Ginsberg writes of another instance when he copies down part of a song he heard at the burning ghat,

Byom Byom Mahadeva! (Bom Bom Mahadeo!) (Invocation to Shiva before smoking Ganja.)  
Deva of Devas Lord Shiva Sound of Tandava.  
Similar verse awkwardly transcribed in burning ghat:  
Lata patra tatva jital vale  
Ba bam bam ba bam bam maha sabda gale (*Indian Journals* 70)

He writes the whole of *Indian Journals* with a keen attentiveness to sound. In one passage philosophizing on the conscious use of sound as a vehicle to the divine,

“The Conscious experiencer travels along traces of sound  
(sabd) to the ultimate vibration.”  
Traverses the Sound. (*Indian Journals* 94)

Indian musical practices provided the vehicle for Ginsberg to express for the universal pulse he describes in “America.” “I have mystical visions and cosmic vibrations,” and he continuously developed his harmonium playing and his singing.

Through concrete spiritual practices, Ginsberg gained a greater understanding of his personal requirements for being a happy, healthy individual. In *Indian Journals*, Ginsberg muses how he has been “*demanding* in mental war,” and that the solution was “the light outside” to illuminate the calm space inside of him. Here he defines what spirituality is to him, “mercy-bliss-tenderness-peace-calm-“spiritual” (*Indian Journals* 51).

### **Hungryalist Influences on Ginsberg**

A great part of Ginsberg’s understanding of India is due to his friendships with the Bengali poets, and he developed his spiritual life and literary practice dramatically from their interaction, reaching a comfortable understanding of where the two realms meet.

In his 2010 article on the Hungryalists, McCord asserts that,

The Indian press believes to this day that the group’s origins can be traced to the 1962 visit of Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, and Gary and Joanne Snyder. But however stimulating the visit of these American poets, however inspired by such writers as Artuad, Genet, Michaux, Burroughs, Miller, and Celine, I believe the Movement is autochthonous and stems from the profound dislocations of Indian life. (McCord)

The Hungryalists back up his claim, confirming that they had no knowledge of the Beats until meeting them in India. Speaking specifically of Ginsberg, Mitra and Mitra assert that the contrary is true, “Hungryalists had an indelible impact on all dimensions of his identity” (Mitra). The Hungryalists did dramatically and permanently change Ginsberg’s worldview, and this shift involved cultural, religious, literary, and theoretical themes. The Hungryalists guided Ginsberg in assimilating the cultural and religious aspects of India, and as the previous chapter outlines, he came into contact with sacred places and people, and adopted Indian customs and devotional practices.

Malay Roychoudhury explains that the moment of realization Ginsberg wrote about in “The Change” reflects Hungryalist influence,

he was actually revealing the impact of the Hungry Generation on him, a newness beyond Howl and Kaddish which sought “cosmic consciousness” not in visions but in “contact with what was going on around me.” It was the Hungryalists who weaned him away from [the] Hollywood world of Judeo-Christian visionary flashes. (Roychoudhury)

A catalyst to this change was Ginsberg's shift from a mentality based on binary opposites that is typical of a Western logic-based mindset and contemporary with the emerging theories of post-structuralism. Roychoudhury relates that a core revelation for Ginsberg was in transcending the "colonial compartmentalization such as Good/Evil, God/Devil etc binary opposites," paralleling the distinction he made between the Western and Eastern quests for "immortality" and "eternity" (Roychoudhury). The burning ghats are a clear symbol that death is an intrinsic part of life, something to be respected, but not avoided, and an event that can take place openly. *Indian Journals* documents bodies being carried through the city, and Ginsberg emphasizes that the entire funeral procession occurs in full public view, "Corpses heaped with flowers in a litter carried thru street...disappear right in front of you like burning a big meat doll or pillow of Sofa –" (*Indian Journals* 64). A fundamental binary opposition in Western thought is that of life and death, and Ginsberg underwent a fundamental shift when Indian culture unlocked him from this opposition. A counterpart to this concept is dissolution of time, which Ginsberg experienced at the burning ghats, philosophically under the Hindu view of reincarnation, and physically with the use of herbal inebriants, as well as through meditation. To devoted members of the Indian community, worship is infinitely more important than time, and the day centers around *puja* more than on the clock. Time is an extension of the divine, represented by certain deities such as the form of Shiva as Mahakala, who Ginsberg compares to Adam, as the second chapter discusses. In *Indian Journals*, with the Hungryalists, Ginsberg records the conversation, "[w]hat time is it now, Puja time?" (*Indian Journals* 82).

The Mitras assert that Ginsberg's new poetic style was directly a result of his time in India. Speaking of his experience at the burning ghats, they insist, "We are sure that his post-India discourse is built on this premise" (Mitra). Roychoudhury comments on Ginsberg's existential and lingual breakthrough,

Having come in touch with the Hungryalist writers and painters, Ginsberg's understanding of relation between language and reality encountered a sea-change due to Indianisation of his being. However, in the case of other Beat poets, including Gary Snyder who visited India, they remained at the same metropolitan cultural level. (Roychoudhury)

Mitra and Mitra discuss the absence of binary opposites as a distinguishing feature of Indian culture and Hinduism, explaining, “such binary opposites as God and Devil, and therefore, pure good and evil, were non-existent” (Mitra). They remark upon Ginsberg’s initial confusion with this philosophy, “Being born into a Jew[ish] family, absence of the binary opposites was a riddle for him,” and how India granted him clarity on the matter (Mitra). This clarity allowed him a way out of the writer’s block he came up against when trying to produce poetry in the same style he had before, as in “Howl” and “Kaddish,” which the Mitras explain as “products of a social consciousness squeezed out of [the] clash of monotheistic binary opposites” (Mitra). Ginsberg repeatedly comments on his poetic impasse in *Indian Journals*, and the Mitra couple notes several pages in *Indian Journals* of failed attempts to write poems in the same manner (Mitra). The Mitras also attribute Ginsberg’s statement, “if it isn’t composed on the tongue, it’s an essay,” and the refinement of his poetic aesthetics of “spontaneous composition” to the oral poets of nineteenth century Calcutta, which chapter four discusses in further detail (Mitra). The following section details the counterparts to Ginsberg’s breakthrough of binary opposites, as he let go of his fixed ideas of Blake, overcame Burroughs’ cut-ups, and came to terms with death, all of which contributed to his ultimate self-acceptance that he writes about in “The Change.”

### **Letting Go of Blake**

In connection to the yogic practices and interactions with Indian society, Ginsberg also developed his aesthetic vision and literary practice. Scholars have noted that Ginsberg’s post-India change comes about when he renounces his earlier Blake visions, that Portugés labels the “supernatural” visionary paradigm (*Poetics of Vision* 95-96). The primary work detailing this shift is in the poem, “The Change: Kyoto-Tokyo Express,” which he wrote shortly after leaving India.

In an unpublished interview Ginsberg speaks of the change he experienced,

But I also said at the time, now that I have seen this heaven on earth, I will never forget it, and I will never stop referring all things to it, I will never stop and from now on I’m chosen, blessed,

sacred, poet, and this is my sunflower, of this is my new world, and I'll be faithful for the rest of my life, and I'll never forget it and I'll never deny it, and I'll never renounce it.

(qtd. in *Poetics of Vision* 131)

He describes his new vision as his “sunflower,” replacing the former one that was Blake, in reference to Blake’s poem, “Ah! Sunflower.” “ Blake figures in prominently in *Indian Journals*, more as an obsession than as a source of inspiration. He affixed a photograph of the poet in his Banaras apartment: “Blake life-mask photo on a nail on the wall between the two balcony doors” (126). He repeats the image several pages later, with a sentiment of anxious anticipation,

Blake’s photo on the wall, waiting waiting waiting — with his life mask eyes closed — thinking — or receiving radio messages from the cosmos source — (*Indian Journals* 132)

Ginsberg finds his spirituality clouded with ambiguity, as his main muse remains inaccessible to him. The divine “cosmos source” sends messages artificially, transmitted by radio, which recall the images of his mother’s paranoid delusions, and characterize Ginsberg’s feelings of confusion.

While Kerouac’s approach is to discard old ideas when confronted with the new, Ginsberg’s style is to assimilate what he experiences. The benefit for Ginsberg resulted in his eclectic, synergistic philosophy, but the downside came when a new idea jarred too much with a preexisting one. Ginsberg could hold onto some ideas too tightly, obstructing space for new thoughts. He repeatedly comments upon his creative standstill in *Indian Journals*, and prays to Blake for inspiration,

October 1962:  
When I was young you came with the  
voice of tender rock.  
    Transformed the Sun.  
Exact pictures no longer describe.  
My poetry no longer describe. The  
Contact. Dear Blake, come back.

(*Indian Journals* 58)

He frets over the loss of his memory to recall the event in detail, and to convey the divine expression he experienced through his writing. In *Indian Journals*, he makes explicit that his longing had become an obsession in the passage, “ROOM DROWSE MEDITATION,”

Blake Mask tacked on wall / Black photo life made plaster...I have been waiting 15 years / all time thinking Harlem befutured / But heartfelt the minute of now / Postponed except for orange mist / flat mirror Ganges dusk boatfulls”

(*Indian Journals* 172)

The phrase “all time thinking Harlem befutured” refers to his 1948 Blake vision in New York’s Harlem neighborhood, which he had felt certain to recur. He acknowledges how he has been living in the past and that this awareness, along with the vision of the holy river, inspires him to join the present moment. That his Blake effigy in the form of a mask is significant in that Ginsberg used his obsession over the poet as a cover-up to avoid being present. The symbolism deepens as the mask itself was once a lifelike image, “Black photo life made plaster,” the way that Ginsberg’s true nature has been covered up by a false images by his and the society’s projections and his own fixed ideas of himself and what he expects from the universe (*Indian Journals* 172). *Indian Journals*’ dedication lists the suggestion, “take Blake for your Guru,” which Ginsberg had believed was the case. However, he had been clinging to the idea of Blake more as a god than a guru. He had aggrandized the memory of his Blake vision that had revealed a glimpse of God, but the recollection of it was not Supreme Reality. He had put Blake on a pedestal, forgetting that Blake was merely a guide to help him experience God.

Jackson comments upon the magnitude of Ginsberg’s change,

“The climax to his Asian pilgrimage came suddenly in 1963, when, speeding by train in Japan, he underwent a second deep mystical experience that marked a new turning point in his life...[He describes] the epiphany in his highly charged poem, “The Change: Kyoto-Tokyo Express, dated July 18, 1963.” (Jackson 62)

This study argues that the climax had actually occurred while Ginsberg was in India, as he writes the penultimate entry from India, “Ginsberg had experienced numerous revelations, yet none equalizing the intensity of his Blake vision. After he let go of his desire to revisit the same experience, he became open to a new one. In the 1974 interview, Ginsberg clarifies,

My energies of the last...oh, 1948 to 1963, all completely washed up. On the train in Kyoto having renounced Blake, renounced visions...There was a cycle that began with the Blake vision which ended on the train in Kyoto when I realized that to attain the depth of consciousness that I was seeking...I had to cut myself off from the Blake vision and renounce it. Otherwise I’d be hung up on a memory of an experience. Which is not the actual awareness of now, now. (qtd. in Packard)

Blake’s position atop a pedestal was the crux of Ginsberg’s spiritual impasse, which formally manifested in his poems with strict meter and the rigid format of the sonnet. He did not

heed even Blake's caution on overly structured poetic forms, that "Poetry Fetter'd, Fetters the Human Race!" (*Jerusalem*). Towards the beginning of *Indian Journals* there is a strictly metered rhyming poem, following the question and answer of the preceding lines that read,

What's the thing I fear the most?: I don't even know —:  
The ogre that goes with the rose. (*Indian Journals* 29)

The rose here refers to Blake's poem "The Sick Rose," which appears in the collection that had inspired Ginsberg's initial revelatory vision. Ginsberg's humorous poem reveals his acute awareness of his literary standstill, "Hey Ho Anonymo / Ruined Ginsberg sang — / ...It's all a mess / Celestial orders show —" (*Indian Journals* 30).

Later in *Indian Journals* Ginsberg's reflects upon process to find a natural sounding poetry,

A Natural Poetry — the problem is to write Poetry which is, which *sounds* natural, not self conscious.

Generally rhymed verse sounds self conscious – except where some Genius has opened up & the Self Consciousness is lost in a burst of sincerity or passion or amazement or ecstasy, or comedy... By Self Consciousness, meant here simple "sophomoric" recognizable egoistic self consciousness (*Indian Journals* 156-157)

He sheds the formal rhyme-scheme in favor of a more natural rhythm based on breath-span, inspired by the music and songs he hears in India.

### **Overcoming Burroughs' "Cut-ups"**

Central to Ginsberg's literary paralysis was his struggle to accept the aleatory literary technique called "cut-ups" that Burroughs employed. Cut-ups, what the 1920's Dadaists played with, are just as the term describes: the cutting up and rearranging of a text to create another text. The randomness of this non-linear method negated deliberate meaning for Ginsberg, and devalued his role as poetic saint. He had formerly treated words in a painstaking manner similar to Blake's approach, that the nineteenth century poet describes in the dedication to *Jerusalem*, "Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit / place" (*Jerusalem*). In *Indian Journals*, Ginsberg details the importance of meaningful connections between words and the timely use of the words themselves:

Hair. Bedstead. Iron. Resurgence.  
Rock. Capital. Indigent. Psycho.

It is like the word association test I took in Stanford on LSD with Dr. Joe Adams. The discrete words meant nothing except superficial associations, but as words were solid objects which I had no practical use for at the time. (*Indian Journals* 40)

The cut-ups confused him and rendered him wordless. Early in *Indian Journals* he writes,

— the fan whirling overhead for the last 12 hours — Everything random still, as any cut-up. Burroughs it's already a year still haunting me. I slept all afternoon & when I woke up I thought it was morning. I didn't know where I was. I had no name for India. (*Indian Journals* 42-43)

It was beyond the premonitory declaration of “Kaddish,” “No more to say,” since in India Ginsberg suffered from the inability to name something (“Kaddish” 209). At the time of his mother’s death, it was not an inability to express himself, but in the lack of things to say from the creative exhaustion of deep grief. Hyde comments that Ginsberg’s genius lies in his ability to aptly name things, “It is this naming, signifying quality of his language—it is associative, not analytical, and it is incredibly concentrated—that is such a striking invention. His use of it is beautiful” (Hyde 453). Ginsberg’s greatest fear was aphasia, wordlessness and the inability to formulate his vision, captured by the image of the “ogre with the rose” (*Indian Journals* 29). He laments in *Indian Journals*, “my mind development at the year moment seems blocked and so does my ‘creative’ activity, blocked...I really don’t know what I’m doing now” (*Indian Journals* 39). For him, the inability to name things obliterated meaning altogether and took the power away from his authority as a prophetic speaker. Hungerford describes of the speaker of “Howl” as “nothing less than Genesis’s YHWH” and “a single, powerful, embodied, and yet transcendent speaker” of “Kaddish” (Hungerford 274). In the 1966 interview, Ginsberg comments on the psychological impact of producing these prophetic speakers, and the interweaving of his poems and his emotions,

Sometimes I feel in command when I’m writing. When I’m in the heat of some truthful tears, yes. Then, complete command. Other times—most of the time not. Just diddling away, woodcarving, getting a pretty shape; like most of my poetry. There’s only a few times when I reach a state of complete command. Probably a piece of “Howl,” a piece of “Kaddish,” and a piece of “The Change.” And one or two moments of other poems. (“Art of Poetry” 45)

Clark then asks, “By *command* do you mean a sense of the whole poem as it’s going, rather than parts?” to which Ginsberg replies, “No—a sense of being self-prophetic master of the universe” (original emphasis, “Art of Poetry” 46).

An essential part of being “in command” to Ginsberg lay in the all-inclusiveness of his poems. In his interpretation of Paul Cézanne’s style, which had dramatically influenced him during his art course at Columbia in 1945, Ginsberg repeatedly specifies the term “reconstitution,” “Actually he’s *re*-constituted the whole fucking universe in his canvases — it’s like a fantastic thing! —” (original emphasis “Art of Poetry” 18). He emphasizes that it is an act of creating anew, with a focus on the artist’s individual interpretation of Supreme Reality. He specifies how he strives to emulate this re-creation in his own work in the 1974 interview, “Cézanne is reconstituting by means of triangles, cubes, and colors—I have to reconstitute by means of words, rhythms of course, and all that—but say it’s words, phrasings” (Packard 19). In *Indian Journals*, Ginsberg ponders, “But how ever recreate India?” (*Indian Journals* 193).

The word *holy* derives from *whole*. A profound sacredness and all-inclusiveness characterizes Hinduism and Indian culture, and these themes dominate Ginsberg’s work and life. They manifest formally with the prophetic speaker of his poems and in his catalogue-style. Ostriker reports on Ginsberg’s theory of “principally no cutting out,”

In another sense, one might argue that “no cutting out” is an extension of Ginsberg’s characteristic insistence on compassion, the refusal to judge, the refusal to reject, simultaneous with the geographical extension of his subject. (Ostriker 125)

This method, which he employed in his early poems, shows a direct opposition to Burroughs’ cut-ups, suggesting how it had the power to so completely stultify him. In the 1966 interview, Ginsberg describes the latent meaning in the subconscious that writing can reveal,

see, and actually in the moment of composition I don’t necessarily *know* what it means, but it comes to mean something later, after a year or two, I realize that it meant something clear, unconsciously. Which takes on meaning in time, like a photograph developing slowly. (“Art of Poetry” 19)

According to Ginsberg’s style, he could not understand how cut-ups could allow the unconscious to manifest in the same way that it did in deliberate composition, which was the

essential feature of his poetry, since he regarded the unconscious as a connection to truth and to the divine. The connection between the divine, unconscious mind, and human awareness features in Wieman's definition of religion in chapter one of this study, "Man's acute awareness of the realm of unattained possibility and the behavior which results from this awareness" (qtd. in Wasserman 145). Ginsberg's recollection in *Indian Journals* of a dream he had had in Banaras matches this definition,

& the awesome mystery rains in my heart — reminds me of the unexplored depths of feeling all man has — 'moving around in worlds not realized — blank misgivings.'  
(*Indian Journals* 150)

The "blank misgivings" he expresses is his temporary hopelessness that corresponding to his writer's block, though he generally maintained a very forward-looking and faith-based attitude. Although he did not always understand the meaning of his own poems, Ginsberg was definitely clear on the spiritual nature of his work, as he wrote in a letter, "[t]he poems are religious and I meant them to be" (*To Eberhart* 32).

Hungerford writes, "the construction of an efficacious poetry had preoccupied Ginsberg since his return from India in '63, where he had gone to confront a spiritual and poetic crisis" (Hungerford 273). India did dramatically change the way Ginsberg constructed his poems, but Ginsberg had been concerned with possible poetic solutions during his time in India. The following passage from *Indian Journals* describes an idea that could make the cut-ups more pliable,

"Rubber Chand" — rubber lines — that's what Neerala wrote too — some critic called it rubber — because you can pull the lines out or snap them in short any way you got the strength. —  
Rubber Meters. ( *Indian Journals* 179)

The trip marked the nadir of his spiritual crisis, but he had actually been formulating his vision long before departing for India. As chapter one mentions, it was with great vigor that he had thrown himself into developing a poetic theory after the Blake visions, and that Ginsberg's penchant for the mystical began well before his first visionary experience. Growing up in a very dysfunctional household pushed him to seek something beyond than the suffering he notes in

*Indian Journals* of his “childhood prison” (*Indian Journals* 134) and the “old traumas of Paterson” (*Indian Journals* 128). Facing the impossibility of describing a religious experience, Baker describes, “Ginsberg, however, was undaunted” (Baker 11). An efficacious message was certainly vital to his “vow to illuminate mankind” that he describes already in “Kaddish,” which he wrote between 1957 and 1959. It is quite probable that the seeds lay dormant in his precocious mind even before he was able to verbalize or identify it for himself.

### **Confronting Death and “The Change”**

Ginsberg’s change in India was an encompassing acceptance of himself, just the way he was.

Critics most frequently cite the following lines marking his self-acceptance in “The Change”:

Tears alright, and laughter  
alright  
I am that I am —

(“The Change” 336)

By loving himself, he also accepted the present moment, as he explains in the 1966 interview,

...because I was suddenly free to love myself again, and therefore love the people around me, in the form that they already were. And love myself in my own form as I am. And...willing to live as a human in this form now.

(“Art of Poetry” 40)

He had seen most everything as holy through and through, save himself. He features specifically among “Howl’s” hagiography of the God-hungry, but “Footnote to Howl” only includes him under the general claim that “everyman’s an angel!” His self-confidence was high and he believed in his capabilities to act, but at times his self-esteem was extremely low and he doubted his self-worth, “Nobody loves me, I’m old / ugly Allen” (*Indian Journals* 175). At the beginning of *Indian Journals*, he is impatient with the rate of his spiritual progress, “when will I ever learn? All the saints like Shivananda handing me rupees & books of yoga and I’m no good...I don’t even have a good theory of vegetarianism” (*Indian Journals* 10-11). In his mind he had held the belief that the mundane was holy, but his experience in India made it an undeniable part of his own experience.

The public had become aware of Ginsberg’s shift upon his return to the United States through the Indian influences of his lifestyle and the 1963 publication of “The Change.” though

Ginsberg did not publish *Indian Journals* until 1970. Ginsberg wrote “The Change” on a train in Japan shortly after leaving India, but his shift had already manifested in India. At the end of *Indian Journals* after Orlovsky has moved to another room in Bengalitola, Ginsberg mulls over the “slow drift” between the two, “Peter unwelcoming & silent & determined on his separate music & untouchable energies” (*Indian Journals* 208). Orlovsky had engaged what Mitra and Mitra describe as a “torrid affair” with the female guitarist Manjula Sen, and stayed on in Banaras with the Hungryalist artists when Ginsberg departed India (Mitra). Ginsberg writes this passage as a farewell to Banaras and India from the vacated apartment, “Now alone in the bare whitewashed black floored room in Benares with the surf noise of cows drums and bicycles murmuring on the street – this room a quiet one-night cave emptied of the furniture” (*Indian Journals* 207). After nearly a page of nostalgic recollections, Ginsberg shifts his tone, asking, “Now what to do with this familiar melancholy but salute the burning ghats? –” (*Indian Journals* 207). He recalls a moment of quiet contemplation at the holy river, noting his abstinence from meat and marijuana, and how he has come to terms with difficult emotions,

I had nothing to say, being washed up desolate on the Ganges bank, vegetarian & silent  
hardly writing & smoking no pot except many leters & kidney attacks don't care. Still this  
melancholy aloness is like returning home. (*Indian Journals* 208)

He ends with the sentiment of “familiar melancholy” he presented in his rhetorical question. Once again, Ginsberg has “nothing to say,” as in the introductory lines to “Kaddish,” “No more to say” (“Kaddish” 209). Ginsberg has overcome his aphasia and his earlier struggle to name things, as he indicates he still writes many letters to his friends, though he is “silent” and “hardly writing.” His experiences in India have changed him profoundly, as he has gained the ability to manage his emotions and to detach from his thoughts in a much healthier way. His description of feeling “washed up desolate,” the disregard of the pain in his kidney and feeling depressed and isolated hint at defeat. However, the framing within the introductory question and final phrase reveals the passage in a new perspective and Ginsberg’s change, as he is able to view these difficult feelings with a healthy detachment and see them as familiar. Rather than defeat,

he is surrendering to his feelings, with the faith that they will pass. Instead of bemoaning his loneliness, he experiences it as a familiar presence, paradoxically experiencing companionship by way of feeling isolated. Ginsberg's new skill lies in his ability to self-soothe and to find solace simply by the awareness of his psychological state. In the last few lines of *Indian Journals*, he writes in his final journal entry from India, "May 22, 1963 Last Night in Calcutta –"

Light multiplies  
light to the fast bong of father clocks.  
Skin is sufficient to be skin, that's all  
it ever could be, tho screams of pain in the kidney  
make it sick of itself, a hollow dream

(*Indian Journals* 210)

It is most significant how Ginsberg speaks in a detached relationship about his pain in this passage and in the previous one, since it reveals the extent of his self-acceptance. Both passages exude strains of prophecy, since Ginsberg died from liver cancer in 1997, three days after being diagnosed. "The Change" echoes the self-acceptance he experiences in India, particularly in the parallel ontologies, "I am that I am" (in "The Change") and "skin sufficient to be skin" (in the final journal passage from India) signifying that Ginsberg's change had already taken place before he departed India. In the 1966 interview, Ginsberg indicates the Indian sages as the catalyst for his change,

Anyway a whole series of India holy men pointed back to the body—getting *in* the body rather than getting out of the human form. But living in and inhabiting the human form...the gurus one after another said, Live in the body: this is the form that you're born for. ("Art of Poetry" 40)

On the grounds of their suggestions, Ginsberg renounced his expectations of God, himself, and his work, and became open to Supreme Reality.

In "The Change," Ginsberg names "S. B. B. and Abhya Mudra," referring to the Naga Saddhu Shambu Bharti Baba, who also features in the dedication to *Indian Journals* and in "Wichita Vortex Sutra." At the cremation grounds, Ginsberg came to terms with what psychologists deem as man's greatest fear of death and dying, as Ginsberg explains in the 1966 interview, "And nothing more to fulfill, except to be willing to die when I am dying, whenever that be" ("Art of Poetry" 40). His willingness and acceptance feature as the transformative

surrender in “The Change,” “In my train seat I renounce / my power, so that I do / live I will die” (“The Change” 328). Although he felt the full impact of his shift once distance allowed him perspective, by the time Ginsberg left India, he was undeniably already a changed man, as Mitra and Mitra assert, “He went back a different man” (Mitra).

Ginsberg learned a great deal from his time at the burning ghats and the highly respectful Hindu attitude toward death, honoring it as an essential part of life. Photographs of deceased relatives and gurus frequent houses and shops, where their loved ones daily perform the ceremonial rituals known as *puja*. It is a common occurrence to see a shrouded corpse carried through the streets by chanting men on their way to the holy Ganges. The burning ghats are mesmerizing, marked with pungency and heavy sweetness in the air from prayers, incense, flowers, and ashes. It does not have the lugubrious feeling that the word “funeral” can conjure, and tears are few. Eck notes, “Mourning and wailing are said to be bad luck for the dead, and here is an atmosphere of almost casual solemnity” (Eck 249). The “Abhya Mudra” that Ginsberg mentions is the same gesture that chapter one describes in association with the Goddess Kali. *Aghori* means “no terror” in Sanskrit, and Ginsberg reiterates the image of Shambu Bharti Baba teaching him fearlessness in the dedication to *Indian Journals*. The poem he wrote on New Year’s Eve proclaims, “What year is this we have survived, triumphed, flourished sat with the burning dead & slept on the warm marble of Taj Mahal in misty nights with blankets —,” his death-related experiences as highlights of the previous year, both at the cremation ghats and at the world-famous mausoleum erected as a symbol of eternal love (*Indian Journals* 144). In the 1993 interview, Ginsberg first comments on the singing at the burning ghats, and then describes his experience there,

For one thing I was amazed by the openness of death, the visibility of death which is hidden and powdered and rouged and buried in a coffin in the West. To suggest the opposite, the openness of it is like an education which is totally different from the cultivation of the notion of the corpse as still relevant and alive and “don’t kick it over.” There they just lay it out and burn it and the family watches the dissolution; they see the emptiness in front of them, the emptiness of the body in front of them. So I had the opportunity to see the inside of the human body, to see the face cracked and torn, fallen off, the brains bubbling and burning. And reading Ramakrishna at the time: the dead body is nothing but an old pillow, an empty pillow, like burning an old pillow.

Nothing to be afraid of. So it removed a lot of the fear of the corpse that we have in the West.  
(Ganguly 26-27)

The Hindu notion of *samsara*, the cycle of creation and recreation, features in Ginsberg's lengthy descriptions of the burning ghats, that chapter two of the present study discusses. In *Indian Journals*, he writes, "...in that black holey place amid / cracking / wood — Same man I saw dying before & before & before —" (*Indian Journals* 183). He frequently conflates images of the living and the dead. Death, sleep, wakefulness, and sexual stimulation surface in the *Indian Journals*, when Ginsberg writes Bill a letter at Manikarnika, as quoted in the previous chapter of this study. At another instance, he writes,

— one halfnaked saddhu stretched with his loincloth slipped off his buttock looking like one of the dead corpses beside the all nite fire of the old man whose head I saw adorn the pile earlier.  
(*Indian Journals* 78)

The redundancy of the phrase "dead corpses" implies the existence of "living corpses," like those who are spiritually sleeping and unenlightened. He applies this figure of speech to himself, "Well, where now me, what next, / lying here in the church gloom naked mattress / like a Corpse under Covers" (*Indian Journals* 133). On his balcony, watching the crowds below, he writes, "I stared in wonder — are they all walking corpses? At the burning ground the bodies are just the same, only they're not moving, they're dead corpses, here" (*Indian Journals* 137).

Ginsberg practiced physical yogic postures, and he was most likely familiar with the essential posture *shavasana* or "corpse posture" is a resting position where one lies supine in complete stillness, with total awareness. In *Indian Journals* he had transcribed the related term for corpse in Bengali, "SháBá — Corpse (Bengali)" (*Indian Journals* 186). *Shavasana* typically begins and ends a physical yoga program, as well as balancing strenuous positions. There are many postures requiring utmost strength, flexibility, and balance, yet yogis generally consider *shavanasana* to be the most difficult to master.

Following a description of the burning *ghat*, he describes it is "where the dying came to spend last days breathing smoke" (*Indian Journals* 125). He plays on two meanings of "smoking," in one sense how he and the saddhus shared pipes at the ghat, and also how a

burning corpse dissipates. He imagines his own demise in various other passages, “I will when I die perhaps — one may — decompose painfully — after a violent space ship crash —” (*Indian Journals* 98). Eck comments upon the duality inherent in honoring re-creation and reincarnation at the cremation grounds,

In Banaras today, the name Manikarnika bears with it the double-edged power of a living and transforming symbol. For the pilgrims, it calls to mind the sacred *kund* [small lake for ritual bathing] with its life-giving waters of creation, and at the same time it calls to mind the cremation ground with its burning fires of destruction and liberation. Here at the heart of the sacred city is the transformation of life and of death. While the very word Manikarnika may bespeak death, it is death in Kashi [ancient name for Banaras], which is liberation. (Eck 251)

Ginsberg also experienced liberation in Banaras, and in *Indian Journals*, he writes of the revelatory moment he experienced at Manikarnika,

And my singing beggar now squatting on a red pit, lucidly chanting away gods name — I thought perhaps this be Master Sign since I been earlier so rejectful to him & he turning out to be such a simple holy sustained all nite praying fellow like this in front of my eyes —” (*Indian Journals* 78)

Almost hidden in a stream of text, this moment reveals Ginsberg’s changing attitude as he opens up to a divine power in his life that feels alive and genuine. He sees he may have overlooked divine signals in clutching to his fixed idea. He is open to the idea that the weighty “Master Sign” could be less dramatic than his previous visions, and in even “such a simple” individual. He witnesses the divine presence in a human directly “in front of his eyes,” which is exactly what he intended to do when at the beginning of his trip he asked himself the question, “And when will I ever turn my attention (here) to the streets and figures of daily India?” (*Indian Journals* 29). The fact that Ginsberg is overwhelmed by the beggar’s devotion and singing points at how much it affects him, and he assigns a personal pronoun to the man, calling him “**my** beggar” (emphasis added). The lessons of the cremation grounds taught Ginsberg an even deeper degree of tolerance, compassion, and respect for life.

### **Transforming a Burden to a Privilege and the Impact of Ginsberg’s Changed Attitude**

His self-acceptance freed him from the enormous guilt he carried at not being able to cure his mother. Ginsberg grew up feeling he had a world of responsibility on his shoulders. After the

death of his mother, he recreates this burden by assuming the responsibility of saving the world.

In “Kaddish” he woes this dharma,

By that afternoon I stayed home from school to take care of you —  
once and for all — when I vowed forever that once man disagreed with my  
opinion of the cosmos, I was lost—  
By my later burden — vow to illuminate mankind — (‘‘Kaddish’’ 213)

These lines also reveal how essential *communitas* was to Ginsberg, since he felt he “was lost” without a supportive community who shared his beliefs. It also underscores his rationale to be a poet: to share his enlightenment with others, that in turn liberated him. In the 1966 interview Ginsberg comments of the change he underwent, “I was completely in my body and had no more mysterious obligations” (“Art of Poetry” 40). He was able to transform his suffering into gratitude, in seeing it as an imperative part of his spiritual duty in the tradition of the poet doubling as a prophet or shaman. Ostriker comments upon the duty of the spiritual poets Blake and Ginsberg,

That cultures as well as individuals may be ill or insane is of course assumed by both Blake and Ginsberg, and for both poets, there is a method in madness, of which the logic is essentially quite simple. To the world, the inspired man is mad, because he is unworldly. But to him, it is mad, because it is unpoetic and uninspired; and the symptoms of its madness are the facts of human suffering. Therefore, if the duty of the poet-prophet is restoration of unity—rather than the division of the saved from the damned—then the necessary act of the poet is to enter into the madness of this world, descending into its hell to suffer it, to respond to it, trace it to its source, become what he beholds, and by doing so both heal himself and it. (Ostriker 128)

The need was enormous for the American public, who Portugés calls “an audience bent on denying the mundane as well as the sublime” (“Pater Omnipotens” 131). Ginsberg’s renewed faith in his role as a spiritual poet revealed to him that the madness in his life had a purpose. “The Change” outlines how he has come to accept himself with all his talents as well as his foibles. Letting go of his attachments to the past, widening his “opinion of the cosmos,” and staying true to this inner voice, he freed up an enormous energy that opened the door to the next phase in his life, characterized by Ginsberg’s continued practice of *mantra* and *bhakti*. Within the cycle of *samsara*, transcendence to the spiritual realm is a specifically human potential after having been minerals, vegetables, and animals in past lives. With this privilege is also the duty to pursue the spiritual, exemplified in the Baul song fragments that Ginsberg transcribes in

*Indian Journals*, “O Listen mind, pick up the Spade / of Bhakti-Virtue” (*Indian Journals* 88).

These lines characterize his change: instead of seeing his work as onerous, he delights in performing the work of God as an act of devotion. The mind may fear work or discipline, but it is ultimately an act of both self-care and reverence to the divine.

The crux of Ginsberg’s spiritual impasse, and what his time in India resolved for him, was that even the holiness akin to the Blake-vision could be perceived every single day and not just in infrequent revelations. Hungerford comments, “abandoning Blake’s supernatural visions or those of the Old Testament is not the same thing as abandoning the supernatural altogether” (Hungerford 283-284). It is true that Ginsberg’s language manifested from the divine, but it is specifically the divine in the everyday, and where the sacred and profane meet. In the process of celebrating the everyday, the mundane becomes divine, transcended. In a reciprocal exchange, it is the human devotion that gives life to the gods, as in the offering and partaking of prasaad. It is the language of the heart, as Ginsberg comments in the 1966 interview that he did not want to “do anything anymore except be my heart—which just desired to be and be alive now” (“Art of Poetry” 40). He comments upon Swami Shivananda’s advice in the same interview,

Then there was Swami Shivananda, in Rishikish in India. He said, “Your own heart is your guru.” Which I thought was very sweet, and very reassuring. That is the sweetness of it I felt—in my heart. And suddenly realized it was the heart that I was seeking. In other words it wasn’t consciousness, it wasn’t petites sensations, sensation defined as expansion of mental consciousness to include more data—as I was pursuing that line of thought, pursuing Burroughs’s cut-up thing—the area that I was seeking was heart rather than mind. In other words, in mind, through mind or imagination—this is where I get confused with Blake now—in mind one can construct all sorts of universes, one can construct model universes in dream and imagination, and with lysergic acid you can enter into alternative universes and with the speed of light; and with nitrous oxide you can experience several million universes in rapid succession. You can experience a whole gamut of possibilities of universes, including the final possibility that there is none. And then you go unconscious—which is exactly what happens with gas when you go unconscious. You see that the universe is going to disappear with your consciousness, that it was all dependent on your consciousness. (“Art of Poetry” 39)

Ginsberg describes the advice from the famous yogi as a catalyst for his spiritual awakening, and it is another testimony to the dramatic influence India had on him.

### **Chapter 3: Summary**

The third chapter outlines the change Ginsberg underwent in India, marked by a self-acceptance that enabled a breakthrough in his spiritual and literary impasse. He acquired a treasure-chest of spiritual advice from various people he met during his travels, the most notable of whom he lists in the dedication to *Indian Journals*. Ginsberg practiced various yogic disciplines, including meditation, breathing exercises, abstinence from meat and hard drugs, and the yoga of devotion. The Hungryalists greatly influenced Ginsberg's practices and philosophies, and he redefines his poetic vision after overcoming his obsession with his Blake-visions, Burroughs' use of the "cut-ups," and confronting death at the burning ghats. *Indian Journals* reflects his change, which revisits him at a more conscious level on a train in Japan. He writes about his mystical experience in "The Change: Kyoto-Tokyo Express." Ginsberg was able to view his work as an act of devotion rather than as a burden, as India helped him develop his spirituality into a living practice. He witnessed the sacred in the everyday and was attuned to the language of the heart.

## **Chapter 4: After India**

Upon returning to the United States, Ginsberg maintained the bonds and practices he had established in India. The following chapter outlines his correspondence with the Hungryalists, and the continuation of his yogic practices, including meditation, bhakti, and mantra, in his personal life, performances, and political demonstrations. It also examines his ideology of poetry as a form of yoga, supported by his reassessment of Cézanne and his earlier works in terms of yoga. In addition, this chapter discusses the yoga in the his poetry, with the attention to breath and mantra in both the form and content and the fusion of the two, represented in his 1966 poem “Wichita Vortex Sutra.”

### **Maintaining Contact with the Hungryalists**

Ginsberg promoted relations between these poets and the United States, especially when they faced charges for obscenity in their work. Ginsberg, having experienced a similar situation in America with his publication of “Howl,” rallied to their cause. In a letter to Malay Roychoudhury, he lists the numerous letters he had written for them upon hearing of the Hungryalists’ arrest, “As soon as I read about it, I racked my brains what I could do to help and so today wrote a whole bunch of letters to the following...,” as well as sending him a list of contacts. The year after Ginsberg left India, six Hungryalist poets appeared in the 1964 November issue of TIME magazine, detailing the charges they faced. New York poets would read Hungryalist works to raise money to support them during the lengthy trial.

As the Hungryalists became increasingly popular in the United States, their translated works appeared more frequently in various literary magazines. Dozens of writers and artists were actively in contact with the Bengali poets, including the Beat Generation’s Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and some even visited India to participate in Hungryalist events. American academic institutions took an interest in the Bengali poets, including a writers’ workshop based on their works at Bowling Green University, the publication of Malay Roychoudhury’s

controversial “Stark Electric Jesus,” and the establishment of a Hungryalist Archive at Illinois University (Mitra).

On the frontispiece to *Indian Journals*, published by City Lights in 1970, Ginsberg printed a hand drawn image of the three fish sharing a common head, which he permanently adopted as his personal logo on all his subsequent publications and recordings. Malay Roychoudhury had introduced the symbol to Ginsberg during their visit to the tomb of Emperor Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar, who ruled his kingdom under his policy of *Deen-E-Ilahi*, combining the tenets of Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism (Christianity had not yet entered the nation). With Ginsberg’s personal beliefs based on syncretism, it is easy to see why he identified with the symbol. Roychoudhury explained the symbol’s history to Ginsberg when he came across the symbol again at the Patna Khudabaksh Library in Roychoudhury’s hometown, imprinted in silver on the leatherbound cover of the Emperor’s *Deen-E-Ilahi* treatise. The Allen Ginsberg Project has reprinted a personal letter Ginsberg wrote to the *Catholic Letter* in 1967 that included his drawing of the three-tailed fish, where he mentions finding the symbol at Bodh Gaya, the place where Buddha became enlightened. He writes, “I saw the three fish with one head, carved on insole of naked Buddha Footprint stone at Bodh-Gaya under the Bo-tree” (Allen Ginsberg Project). Members of the Allen Ginsberg Project (1997-2010) note their struggles to find information on Ginsberg’s relationship to the fish, “Recently however we unearthed this paragraph he wrote for the *Catholic Worker* back in 1967, which is the most thorough and complete description we’ve been able to get our fingers on” (Allen Ginsberg Project). In his article on the impact of the Hungry Generation, Roychoudhury comments, “Ginsberg’s biographers and critics have never bothered to unravel Allen’s *Deen-E-Ilahi* fascination and the correlation thereof to his post-Planet News poetry” (Roychoudhury).

After his trip to Bodh Gaya, Ginsberg had stayed with the Roychoudhury family in Patna, bringing with him a stone he used in his meditation practice, relating to Malay of a transformative experience he had undergone there. Bodh Gaya was undeveloped at the time, and

Ginsberg had used two bricks as a makeshift toilet, discovering that one had small Buddha figures carved in it. He took the broken temple stone to a pond nearby and carefully cleaned it with his toothbrush. Though customs prevented transport of the stone back to America, Ginsberg reportedly kept a common brick-like stone on his windowsill in New York. Roychoudhury mentions that Ginsberg had recorded his experience at Bodh Gaya in his journal from April 1963, which was stolen from his cotton sling bag in Patna (Roychoudhury).

Ginsberg's synergistic beliefs became more harmonious with the dissolution of binaries he experienced through his interaction with the Hungryalists and the burning ghat community, which the previous chapter discusses. He assimilated various philosophies as he had previously done, but with a much greater liberty and self-confidence, strengthened by his personal spiritual practices.

### **Less Drugs**

Ginsberg's participation in the ritualistic use of herbal inebriants with the Hungryalists and men at the burning ghats supported his beliefs that certain substances could enhance spirituality. Although he focused less upon the use of drugs for his own purposes, he continued to advocate the choice to consciously use drugs upon returning to the United States. In the 1974 interview, Ginsberg receives the question, "Has LSD been less of a factor in your life lately?" to which he responds,

Less, though it was a strong influence and I think basically a good influence. I went through a lot of horror scenes with it. Finally, through poetic and meditation practice I found the key to see through the horror and come to a quiet place while tripping. (Packard 31)

### **More Meditation**

From his introduction to yogic breathing in India, Ginsberg's pranayama eventually progressed to a regular meditative practice that he continued well into his later years (Jackson 63). Shortly after leaving India, he joined Snyder in Japan and participated in a four-day meditation practice (Jackson 63). He began formal meditation in the United States in 1970 when Ram Dass, fellow Indian adventurer and the author of *Be Here Now*, introduced him to the Hindu guru

Muktananda. He practiced this meditation for a year and a half until he met Trungpa, and adjusted to the Tibetan Vajrana approach (Ganguly 31).

### **More Bhakti**

Bringing his harmonium with him from Banaras, Ginsberg continued to practice devotional chanting and singing in America. In the 1966 interview, three years after his return from India, Ginsberg explains his understanding of bhakti yoga and its predominance over all other forms of yoga,

The *only* way out that they generally now prescribe, generally in India at the moment, is through bhakti-yoga, which is Faith-Hope-Adoration-Worship, or like probably the equivalent of the Christian Sacred Heart, which I find a very lovely doctrine; that is to say, pure delight, the only way you can be saved is to sing...the Hindu bhakti is like excess of devotion; you just, you know, give yourself all out to devotion. (original emphasis, “Art of Poetry” 23)

He became close friends with the founder of the Hare Krishna movement in the West, A.C. Bhaktivendata Swami Prabhupada. They toured together and Ginsberg played a major role in helping to establish the first Hare Krishna temple in the United States. References to mantra and the god Krishna also frequently appear in Ginsberg’s post-India work and performances.

In the 1993 interview, Ginsberg comments upon the convergence of poetry and song, and how they had the power to unite people,

The Indian influence was first of all on the voice itself and on the notion of poetry and music coming together...So India helped me to rediscover that relationship between poetry and song. I heard people singing in the street, chanting mantras, so I began singing mantra too—“Hare Krishna Hare Rama” or “Hare Om Namah Sivaye. (Ganguly 25)

From singing in the streets in India, Ginsberg progressed to incorporating song and chant in his poetry readings, accompanied by finger cymbals and the harmonium. He describes that his voice deepened,

which slowly began to fill up my body and resonate in the breast area (you might say by hyperbole, “heart chakra”), so that I could talk from there, and be reminded of the voice of Blake that I had heard, as if my youthful apprehension of that voiced was a latent resonance of my mature voice. (Ganguly 29)

Ginsberg’s shift in hearing the external voice of God to hearing God’s voice as his own signifies his self-acceptance and obedience to Swami Shivananda’s advice to trust himself and to heed his inner voice. As the previous chapter outlines, Ginsberg’s change in India was marked

by different forms of yoga replacing Blake as Ginsberg's main channel to the Divine. It was through yoga that he was able to reunite once again with his beloved Blake. He adds that "things came together with the seed mantra planted," delineating how singing became the vehicle for him to focus on sacred song, when he began composing tunes to Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in 1968 (Ganguly 29). By the following year, he was creating his own folk songs, recording his Blake songs, and also began recording music with the legendary poet-musician Bob Dylan in 1970 (Ganguly 29).

### **More Mantra and Some *Oms***

Hungerford affirms that mantra is "[t]he answer Ginsberg finds in India" to his poetic and spiritual impasse. The shift to mantra was radical and pervasive, and he does not merely adopt the chanting as a formality. Hungerford attests to the actuality of the transformation that went beyond his words, and that it was dramatic and apparent, "Before anyone saw the poem 'The Change,' which announced his new approach to poetry and self, they saw the sign of the change in Ginsberg's mantra chanting" (Hungerford 278). Roychoudhury attributes breath as well as Hungryalist influences to the change in Ginsberg's poetic style,

Poems written by Ginsberg after his India visit are composed in the breath-span of mantras, pranayamas as well as Bangla poetry of the 1960s, all of which remained beyond Euro-American academic comprehension. (Roychoudhury)

He also provides a reason why critics have been slow to analyze a complete picture of Ginsberg's use of mantra. Ginsberg experimented with political uses of chanting, implemented it as a regular ritual in his poetry readings, and also used it in his writing. Mantra provided the link that reconnected Ginsberg to God through his poetry. The solution lay in the ideology that words are significant beyond their intended meaning and independent of context, and in the practical aspect as an act of devotion. In *Power of Mantras: Revisited*, Subas quotes the ancient Hindu *Puranas*, "the utterance of a mantra is formed vocal sacrifice" (Subas 22). When India exposed Ginsberg to the unshakeable faith of millions, he saw his experience of the "Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!" he had written in "Footnote to Howl" reflected back at him from the universe ("Footnote



insignificant whether they were cut up from their context. Mantric theory backed this presumption, and Ginsberg's chanting was a powerful catalyst to his breakthrough. According to Dr. Guy Beck,

sphota is the aspect of the inner consciousness that is awakened when one reads a sentence or hears a mantra being chanted. It's something greater than the sum total of all the parts, or syllables, of the mantra, and which is latent within human consciousness. They're flashes, of sorts, which open up inside the mind, kind of like the "light bulb" effect when someone understands something. (qtd. in Rosen)

The appeal of mantra as a panacea, including such afflictions as madness, lay in the promise of something that could have cured his mother. The notes to Ginsberg's *Collected Works* defines mantra as a "Sacred verbal spell or prayer composed of elemental sound 'seed' syllables, used in meditative concentration practice. Literally, 'mind protection' speech" (*Collected Works* 779). Ginsberg encouraged demonstrators at the 1968 Festival of Life to chant together, which was a peaceful gathering in Lincoln Park planned to coincide with the Democratic National Convention. The anonymous advertisement had announced,

In the case of hysteria, solitary or communal, the magic password is Om, same as Aum, which cuts through all emergency illusions... Ten people humming Om can calm down one hundred. One hundred people humming Om can regulate the metabolism of a thousand. A thousand bodies vibrating Om can immobilize an entire downtown Chicago street full of scared humans, uniformed or naked. (qtd. in Hungerford 271)

As something that could allay fears and protect, mantra itself had a role as a mother. Housden notes, "the word *matrika* means both mother and letter: so in India, the alphabet gives and generates life" (Housden 48).

A *mantra* is a mystic formula. The whole alphabet being, according to this school, but an embodiment of the Mother Goddess, every letter has a mystic significance; only, one should have the knowledge to recognize and use them. (Prasad lxxi)

Also a remedy for wordlessness, it allayed Ginsberg's fear of aphasia. It loosened the Gordian knot of the challenges of his poetic vision and he was finally able to let go of his fear of not having anything to say or not being able to express himself. A simple "Om" would take care of everything, channeling the yogic power to reunite him with the universe. Once connected, he had no need to search for meaning, as mantra provided a meaning in itself:

In the Upanishads themselves, the whole language is held to be a manifestation of the mystic syllable *OM*, the grammarians who adore language accepted an imperishable, eternal substratum

of sound, which was called *Sphota*, out of which perishable utterances and sounds emanate, and of which, as the sole ultimate reality, meaning and objective reality themselves are only a manifestation (*Vivarta*). (Prasad lxxii)

Though the historical and the theoretical inspired Ginsberg, it was the simplicity of mantra that held immense appeal for him, and how it was such a practical spiritual tool. It possessed the natural sense of the spiritual, a no-fuss, down-to-earth connection to the divine that Ginsberg favored, and the experience he believed common to all humans. He explains in the 1969 interview,

Although there are all sorts of intellectual-mystical-theological potentials involved in chanting a mantra, on its simplest, most Americanesque level, it is just like singing in the shower or an interesting phys. ed that can get you high. (Playboy)

Housden comments on the ubiquity of mantra in India, “All Indian traditions, north and south, make use of the *mantra*, a sacred word of power which connects the inner and the outer worlds” (Housden 50). Prasad describes the specificities and necessary caution in using them: “The *mantras* can be learnt only from a teacher in person; the abuse of them is fatal” (Prasad lxxi). Ginsberg had started chanting in India with Swami Shivananda, who the Hungryalists had taken him to visit. In *Indian Journals*, Ginsberg pens a lengthy list of books he read during his travels, which includes “Shivanada — Raja Yoga” (*Indian Journals* 72).

Ginsberg chanted and sung mantras with intensity and devotion, as Hungerford describes his zeal at an event in 1963, “with characteristic over-the-top enthusiasm at a Vancouver poetry conference, did almost nothing but chant the Hare Krishna mantra” (Hungerford 278). He used mantra to enforce political change when confronting the police at the Festival of Life, leading crowds in chanting “Om.” Ginsberg’s solid faith in mantra enabled him to at one point continuously lead different groups in Om and Hare Krishna chants for seven hours. The ensuing indictment after Ginsberg’s participation in the Festival of Life revealed how legal boundaries were constantly being redefined. It has been nearly two hundred years prior, in 1791, when the first amendment to the United States’ Constitution had made the addendum, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

Hungerford highlights Ginsberg's status as a "spiritual leader' for the counterculture," and argues that it was on the basis of his religious beliefs that Judge Forman indicted him at the Chicago Seven Trial (Hungerford 270). Ginsberg showed his devotion to mantra as he practiced his newfound panacea even in the courtroom. The *New York Times* reporter Lukas reports, "a melodious 'om' sounded from the witness box, where Mr. Ginsberg was sitting." The article, "'Om,' Ginsberg's Hindu Chant, Fails to Charm a Judge in Chicago," describes,

Under Mr. Foran's persistent questioning, Mr. Ginsberg said he could be regarded as the "religious experimenter" of the Yippies. He conceded that he was interested in "spiritual and physical uplift." (Lukas)

When the judge asked Ginsberg if he could explain the religious significance of a particular poem, he replied,

Yes. One of the major yogas, or "yoking"—yoga means yoke—is bringing together the conscious mind with the unconscious mind, and is an examination of dream-states in an attempt to recollect dream-states, no matter how difficult they are, no matter how repulsive they are, even if they include hysteria, sandwiches of human flesh... So it is part of yoga which involves bridging the difference between public, as in this Courtroom, and private subjective public, which is conscious, which we can say to each other in family situations, and private, which is what we know and tell only our deepest friends. ("Testimony")

### **Mantra in "Wichita Vortex Sutra"**

Ginsberg demonstrated his belief of poetry as a spiritual practice by including mantra in his poems. He composed the antiwar poem "Wichita Vortex Sutra" in 1966, three years after his return to the United States, dictating the poem while driving from Nebraska to Wichita, Kansas. Both the form and content build upon the power of language to change reality, which Ginsberg calls a "huge 17 page...big Shelleyan poem ending Vietnam War" (qtd. in Scharnhorst 375). He wrote it against the war, for the freedom of artistic expression, and to reawaken people's awareness of language, focusing on the repressive artistic atmosphere in the Midwest that he felt had grown to be a vortex engulfing the creativity and freedom there. He argued, "the city imposes a dark night on the soul of its youth" (qtd. in Scharnhorst 374). His biographer Barry Miles provides a detailed description of the poem,

He collected Midwestern images, glimpses of the snow-covered farms and silent afternoon small towns, and collaged them with the hysterical headlines, reactionary radio editorials, quotes from political speeches, books, and articles, until the poem reached its climax when Ginsberg

summoned all the powers of his imagination and...he proclaimed the end of the war.  
(qtd. in Scharnhorst 385)

Ginsberg linked the violence in Vietnam and the situation at home, “suggest[ing] that the experience of Vietnam is much closer to us than the normative categorical separations in human perceptions would usually allow,” as scholar David R. Jarraway explains (Jarraway 83). “Wichita Vortex Sutra” outlines the results of the dearth of *communitas* in the United States, and also provides a solution through mantra. Ginsberg highlights the paradox that all humans share a loneliness, yet that feeling of being separate is the unifying force, “because not only my lonesomeness / it is Ours.” This echoes the perspective of “familiar melancholy” and that “melancholy aloneness is like returning home” that he writes on his last night in Banaras in the bare apartment (*Indian Journals* 208). He speaks of the spirituality of feeling alone as it motivates people to seek connection to each other and to Supreme Reality, “O tender fellows — / & spoken lonesomeness is Prophecy,” as a kind of a gift of desperation and longing. Thus, loneliness is actually comforting, as a feeling shared by everyone, and becomes transformed to a peaceful solitude. Ginsberg also appreciates loneliness and feeling alone in their qualities of being singular, rare and unique. Ginsberg honors the singularity of God as he writes,

Nebraskas of solitary Allah,  
Joy, I am I  
the lone One singing to myself  
God come true— (“Wichita Vortex Sutra” 397)

venerating “One” through capitalization. Singing, the speaker realizes God and is blessed with the divine manifestation of “God come true—.”

Jarraway notes the play of absence and presence in the poem,

Ginsberg’s nameless Mystery in the Lacanian address of a “want” or “lack” in the above (*see Ecrits 1-9*) thus becomes the absence in discourse perpetually affirming presence, together with the presence, together with the presence perpetually denying absence, in a golden braid extending to infinity. (Jarraway 86)

It is in the interplay and movement of this “golden braid” where Ginsberg resolves his dilemma of the prophetic speaker that the cut-ups had disempowered; the speaker of “Wichita Vortex Sutra” is a solid presence in the poem, but one characterized by absence.

I come,  
 lone man from the void, riding a bus  
 hypnotized by red tail lights on the straight  
 space road ahead— (“Wichita Vortex Sutra” 394)

Lack features in the words “lone,” “void,” “hypnotized,” which indicates “space” and an absence of thought, as well as in the line breaks and the visual placement of the words on the page, especially in the space before the word “space.” As in the Lacanian concept Jarraway describes, absence defines the speaker’s presence, which transcends the all-powerful, prophetic speaker of “Howl” and “Kaddish” in the distinction between a universal power as spoken through a “lone man.” India taught Ginsberg to love his humanness and no longer long for immortal experiences, since sacredness exists in the connections between humans, and humans can easily access the divine at any time through devotion. In “Wichita Vortex Sutra” the speaker again wields an immortal power, but this time he remains in human form.

I am the Universe tonite  
 riding in all my Power riding  
 chauffeured thru my self by a long haired saint with eyeglasses (“Wichita Vortex Sutra” 397)

Ginsberg plays with temporality, and emphasizes that time is made up of successive moments in a forward movement, as the speaker is “riding...riding.” He distinguishes the awakened self and the physical body, with the speaker being all-powerful at a specific time, “tonite,” when the Universe is in the speaker’s form, “chauffeured thru my self.” The separation of “myself” into two words highlights the division of the thinking mind and the spiritual being within a single entity, where the physical human body is a vehicle carrying the soul, as the car is carrying the speaker as a passenger. The verse suggest that there may even be three entities: the “I,” the Universe, and the long haired saint, where the I is the human form, the Universe is the spiritual, and the saint is the fusion of the two, the self spirited by a divine power. This detached perspective of the self solves the problem of simultaneously being all-powerful and mortal, the way a human can become when they are connected to the divine power. The “long haired saint with eyeglasses” is presumably Ginsberg as the speaker of the poem, who has once again

returned to the status as a prophet or a saint he had envisioned since childhood, now at a more conscious level.

Despite the violence, absence, and crisis that the poem depicts, it is ultimately a very positive poem, since it presents a solution that has the capacity to fully recover the situation. He reveals his confidence in writing as possessing the unifying power to unite people and lead them to enlightenment, “O but how many in their solitude weep aloud like me —...almost in tears to know / how to speak the right language...I search for the language / that is also yours —” (“Wichita Vortex Sutra” 410). Language is a very potent force, with the ability to destruct and to heal, and when people regard it as sacred, it can be a panacea. The solution lies in the unifying power various mediums of expression like mantra, song, and writing, characterizing Ginsberg’s concept of poetry as a form of yoga.

The critical turn in the poem occurs when the speaker calls upon his human faculties and an eclectic pantheon to assist him to manifest an event through the power of language,

I call all Powers of Imagination  
to my side in this auto to make Prophecy,  
all Lords  
of human kingdoms to come  
Shambu Bharti Baba naked covered with ash  
Khaki Baba fat-bellied mad with the dogs  
Dehorahava Baba who moans Oh how wounded, How wounded  
Sitaram Onkar Das Thakur who commands  
give up your desire  
Satyananda who raises two thumbs in tranquility  
Kali Pada Guha Roy whose yoga drops before the void  
Shivananda who touches the breast and says OM  
Srimata Krishnaji of Brindaban who says take for your guru  
William Blake the invisible father of English visions  
Sri Ramakrishna master of ecstasy eyes  
half closed who only cries for his mother  
Chaitanya arms upraised singing & dancing his own praise  
merciful Chango judging our bodies  
Durga-Ma covered with blood  
destroyer of battlefield illusions  
million-faced Tathagata gone past suffering  
Preserver Harekrishna returning in the age of pain  
Sacred Heart my Christ acceptable  
Allah the Compassionate One  
Jahweh Righteous One  
all Knowledge-Princes of Earth-man, all  
ancient Seraphim of heavenly Desire, Devas, yogis  
& holymen I chant to—  
Come in my lone presence  
into this Vortex named Kansas,



powers. By himself, he is a “lone presence” with a single voice, but with the awareness that he can channel divine energies through his “own voice.” This speaker accepts his limited human qualities, and is open to ask for help, reflecting Ginsberg’s personal change to an attitude of self-love and relying upon himself, the *communitas*, and God. “Wichita Vortex Sutra” reinstates Ginsberg’s prophetic speaker to the invincible status of “Howl” and “Kaddish,” in the moment he “raises his voice aloud,” just as Ginsberg connects with God through his devotional singing and chanting.

In “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” Ginsberg harnesses the power of mantra and declares an end to the war in the act of its creation. Housden explains some of the logistics behind the practice of mantra,

By raising the vibration of the *mantra*, you attune the subtle body to the Absolute, and when you do that, you can leave the body at will. There are literally millions of *mantras*, many of them complete gibberish. But in making non-sense, they bypass the rational mind and access the deeper power of the sound. (Housden 51)

Ginsberg truly believed that the power of word alone, through poetry, could stop the Vietnam War, with the use of commands backed by the power of mantra. There is no direct correlation between Ginsberg’s declaration of the end of the war in “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” and the actual termination of the war, but it did have some peaceful effects. Although it is impossible to assess the degree he influenced the political situation, “Wichita Vortex Sutra” had an enormous impact on the literary front, as Trigilio describes,

The poem forecasts the aesthetic turn that would become the Language movement in U.S. contemporary poetry in the following decade, where form *is* content rather than an extension of content. Innovations in contemporary poetry such as “organic-form and open-field poetics” can be recast as “organic time-spacing” in “Wichita”: the mind’s thought and the mouth’s utterance are coexistent in time, and the line itself performs the circumstances of its composition, with tape-recorder clicks reproduced as line breaks that climb down the page. (Trigilio *Buddhist Poetics* 97)

At the first reading of “Wichita Vortex Sutra” on Valentine’s Day in 1966 in Wichita, Ginsberg introduced the poem by chanting a mantra. He asked the audience, “Everybody more or less straight about what’s happening now?” and then,

In the hush, Ginsberg began chanting in a deep, droning voice which gradually became louder until it almost echoed in the small room. He clanged two tiny cymbals together

faster and harder and some of the listeners began swaying back and forth.  
(qtd. in Scharnhorst 376)

### **Mantra, Om, and Indian Influence in Other Poems**

In Ginsberg's poem "Hūṃ Bom!" published in 1971 and a second half added in 1984, he bases the poem's formal aspects on mantra. The phonetics imitate the sound, cadence, repetition, and rhythm of mantra. Ginsberg emphasizes the linguistic roots in the title, "Hūṃ Bom!" by including the diacritical marks. The mantra mimics a well-known Tibetan Buddhist mantra, "Om mani padme hum," showing how Ginsberg developed his interest in mantra and Indian culture in the branch of Buddhism that is most heavily influenced by Hinduism. The mantra addresses the deity of compassion, who arose from a Hindu-Buddhist cult ("Avalokitesvara"). Ginsberg reverses the syllables "Om" and "hum," in the title of "Hūṃ Bom!" which are interjections without linguistic meaning. "Mani padme" translates to "jewel in the lotus," though most Tibetan texts regard the meaning as secondary to the number of syllables ("Om mani"). Meaning also becomes secondary in Ginsberg's poem, as "Hūṃ Bom!" linguistically has no meaning in itself, but refers to the question "Whom bomb?" in the first stanza. The similar sounds of the title and the words "Whom bomb?" create a comparison that implies the senselessness of warfare and bombing. In Ginsberg's poem, the first section consists of five stanzas, each stanza a repetition of four couplets. For example, the poem reiterates the first couplet "Whom bomb? / We bomb them," four times. The second part follows the same structure, with the exception of the final stanza that repeats the same phrase, "We don't bomb!" eight times. Reading the poem produces the same effects as a mantra, as the repetitious sound predominates over the meaning of the words. The message is essentially the same as in "Wichita Vortex Sutra," emphasizing the atrocities and senselessness of war, and ending with a performative command to end the fighting.

Ginsberg records his developing mantra practice in *Indian Journals*, and his awareness and reverence of the sounds around him,

Milkstand of Now!...on my back on my Mattress Om

Cat pur, dog bark, retch-cough, drip  
 & groaning buzz of the train on the bridge  
 its whistle tweet tweet O alas I can't see  
 you invisible Olive, tho I can hear the  
 train still now & see a picture of Blake.  
 O sounds!

*(Indian Journals 174)*

In another passage, Ginsberg interprets the noise of the moving train as the universal sound of Om,

roaring om om on the tracks, the faint  
 other universe howl inhalation  
 ear esophagus grill —

*(Indian Journals 117)*

These lines conflate Om, breath, and the title of his masterpiece, “Howl.” He registers the power of mantra with the force of a mighty engine, “roaring om om,” as the personified man-made vehicle assumes a cosmic grandeur. This passage, written while in transit, reveals his transition in India from a place of spiritual longing, represented by the howl of his poem “Howl,” to “Om” as an affirmation of the universe. In the poem “Howl,” Ginsberg was finding words to describe the spiritual longing he shared with humanity. It is significant that he has this awareness of Om on a train in India, as it reveals that God is in everything, since that even the sound of the locomotive signals the presence of Supreme Reality. His awareness that God can be seen in everything and every being, including in himself, revisits him on the train in Japan and becomes the subject of “The Change.” Mantra channels the rawness and desperation that a howl connotes into a “roaring om.” The practical and theoretical structure of Om, mantra, and sacred sound had the power to transform Ginsberg’s burning desperation to passionate devotion. In these lines about the train, he compares the vocalizations “howl” and “om,” recasting the poem “Howl” in a mantric perspective. The title “Howl” recalls the vocalizing of cosmic expression, and Ginsberg’s electrifying performance of “Howl” demonstrated the same sensibility through action.

Echoes of mantra surface in other pre-India works, as the word “Hymmnn” in “Kaddish” is also a precursor of Om, lengthening the word “hymn” and emphasizing its sonic quality (“Kaddish” 227). The final line of “Kaddish” invokes a chant by its repetition, “Lord Lord Lord

caw caw caw Lord Lord Lord caw caw caw Lord” (“Kaddish” 227), and conflates the divine and the mundanity of crow calls. Ginsberg repeats this “bird-mantra” in *Indian Journals*, “Caw Caw Kaw Kaw of crows along the beach road in Konerak — real Ravens —” (*Indian Journals* 102). These pre-India instances show Ginsberg’s mantric tendencies even before he encountered Swami Shivananda in India. Roychoudhury comments upon how meaningful mantras were to Ginsberg,

Unlike T.S. Eliot, whose usage of mantra was a modernist technical intervention outside the Indian world view, Ginsberg’s chanting and singing of mantra were pregnant with values inculcated in a historical faith-penumbra of the people he lived with in India. (Roychoudhury)

Another poem where Ginsberg includes mantra is the 1963 poem “Angkor Wat,” named after the famous temple complex in Cambodia. Ginsberg flew to Thailand from India, and under *Indian Journals*’ final entry “*Bankok – May 28, ’63*,” the book ends with the phrase “Chinese meats hanging in shops –...” a stark contrast from the Hindu vegetarian lifestyle he had become accustomed to, to the Theravada Buddhist tolerance of a omnivorous diet (*Indian Journals* 210). Both Theravada Buddhist nations, Thailand and Cambodia inspired Ginsberg to write about the Buddhist elements he observed, yet the influence of India remained within him. The following verse from “Angkor Wat,” reveals the juxtaposition of Hinduism and Buddhism,

I’m not going to eat meat anymore  
I’m taking refuge in the Buddha Dharma Sangha  
Hare Krishna Hare Krishna  
Krishna Krishna Hare Hare  
Hare Rama Hare Rama  
Rama Rama Hare Hare

(“Angkor Wat” 309)

The first line might be a recommitment to his Hindu lifestyle, or to a general idea of Buddhist as vegetarians, though Theravada Buddhists do eat meat. The second line refers to the Three Refuges, the allegiance to the Lord Buddha, his teachings, and the community. Ginsberg explains his own interpretation on the Refuges, “I take my refuge in my Self...the nature of my Self...[and] the company of my fellow Selves,” which reveals his typical personal take on established philosophies (*Collected Works* 771). Next, he includes the entire *Mahamantra*, the “great mantra” or “great prayer” honoring the Hindu god Krishna. In the notes to his *Collected*

*Works*, Ginsberg adds that it was “first recommended it to [him] by Swami Shivananda... can be sung with ecstatic rock beat” (*Collected Works* 771).

The poem “Kral Majales,” dated May 7, 1965, alludes to mantra and reveals Indian inspiration in its visual portrayal in the two vertical page-length images bordering the text. Mirror-images of one another, the graphics outline silhouettes of a naked Ginsberg with multiple hands, with each hand holding a pair of finger cymbals. The image is framed within an enlarged version of Ginsberg’s sketch of the lingam in *Indian Journals*, and his portrayal is based on a fusion of a Naga Saddhu like the naked holyman Shambu Bharti Baba, and a typical representation of a many-armed Hindu deity. Indian elements also feature in the poem’s content. Ginsberg structures the poem on the repetition of the phrase, “I am the King of May,” cataloguing the speaker’s various characteristics. In one sentence he describes,

I am the King of May, naturally, for I am of Slavic parentage and a Buddhist Jew,  
 who worships the Sacred Heart of Christ the blue body of Krishna the straight back of Ram  
 the beads of Chango the Nigerian singing Shiva, Shiva in a manner which I have invented.  
 (“King of May”)

This passage is symbolic of Ginsberg’s eclectic spiritual fusion, as he specifically delineates that though he is a “Buddhist Jew,” he has faith in other spiritual entities. These lines also are significant in that they reveal Ginsberg’s familiarity with Hindu chants, to the point where he creates his own tunes to the sacred songs.

In addition to the aforementioned works, Ginsberg revised passages from *Indian Journals* and published them as separate poems. For example, the poem “Stotras to Kali Destroyer of Illusions” follows the structure of the work that this study discusses in chapter one, depicting Kali as the Statue of Liberty. The final version, however, omits the description of her many hands and what they grasp. The other poems that he wrote in India, which Ginsberg includes in the *Collected Works* chapter titled “Planet News: To Europe and Asia” are the following, “To P.O.,” a birthday poem Ginsberg dedicates to Peter Orlovsky, “Heat,” “Describe: The Rain on Dasaswamedh Ghat,” where he portrays the beggar woman Kali Ma and Banaras’ main ghat, “Death News,” in memorium to William Carlos Williams, where Ginsberg likens the

Passaic River to the Ganges, “Vulture Peak: Gridhakuta Hill,” “Patna-Benares Express,” and “Last Night in Calcutta.” “Last Night in Calcutta” contains the passage where Ginsberg declares, “Skin is sufficient to be skin, that’s all / it ever could be” (“Last Night in Calcutta” 301). All of these poems are rife with references to India, which also surface in scores of Ginsberg’s other works, such as “Guru Om,” 1970, and even his poems influenced by Buddhism. For example, the 1973 poem “Mind Breaths” alludes to the burning ghats in both Calcutta and Banaras.

### **Poetry as Yoga**

This section details Ginsberg’s poetic aesthetic of poetry as a form of yoga, and what “yogic poetry” entails. Ginsberg writes some of his poems as yogic poems, such as “Wichita Vortex Sutra” and “Hūm Bom!” that are mantras. He believes that poems can be a form of yoga, as well as the process of writing. In *Indian Journals*, Ginsberg notes his belief in poetry as a spiritual practice, writing “And Poetry as a Sadhana —” (*Indian Journals* 184) and includes in the dedication, “Kali Pada Guha Roy who replied to my doubt of Poesy as a spiritual discipline fit for the Void by saying “Poetry is also a Saddhana & Yoga also drops before the Void” (*Indian Journals* 4). The notes to Ginsberg’s *Collected Works* define Kali Pada Guha Roy as “Tantric acharya or guru visited by author in Benares, 1963” (*Collected Works* 779). The sentence about him in *Indian Journals*’ dedication is semantically ambiguous, but it is clear that Ginsberg equates both poetry and yoga as spiritual practices. He reiterates the concept of “the void” in other works, such as in the poem “Allen Greenspan,” “Nothing left but void then to realize you are the void / and that the void is goodbye,” which concerns a feeling of emptiness and longing, yet also a nothingness where the self is reassuringly illusory (“Allen Greenspan”). Ginsberg’s spiritual regard of poetry corresponds to Indian philosophy, as Prasad explains, “the philosophy of music and the visual arts is also the same; they are expressions of the Lord who is the embodiment of all beauty and are only spiritual *Sadhanas*, means of realizing God” (Prasad lxxii). In the 1974 interview, Ginsberg reaffirms his belief of writing as a spiritual act, and specifies it as a yogic practice,

The writing itself, the sacred act of writing, when you do anything of this nature, is like prayer. The act of writing being done sacramentally, if pursued over a few minutes, becomes like a meditation exercise which brings on a recall of detailed consciousness that is an approximation of high consciousness. High epiphanous mind. So, in other words, writing is a yoga that invokes Lord mind.  
(Packard 71)

When he is with the Bengali poets, Ginsberg jots down the Sanskrit word for thinking in *Indian Journals*, the same term Patanjali uses in his definition of yoga, “Yes the cellular network is different in each brain, no different Universe but the experience is of mind-stuff, Citta, and everyone experiences that” — (*Indian Journals* 82). The “mind-stuff” is what makes people feels separate from each other. Ginsberg was familiar with the etymology of the term “yoga” from the Sanskrit *yuj*, as he explained in his testimony at the Chicago Seven Trial, “yoga means yoke” (“Testimony”), and he was extremely attentive to the union that *yuj* defines. Ginsberg held a firm belief that humans share feelings of being separate, coupled with a longing to unite with the Universe, as he quotes a diary entry to Kerouac in a 1945 letter, “We are sealed in our own little melancholy atmospheres, like planets, and revolving around the sun, our common but distant desire” (qtd. in Laden). In the 1966 interview he reveals his faith in a secret, shared understanding between all humans,

But all of a sudden I realized that *he* knew also, just like I knew. And that everybody in the bookstore knew, and that they were all hiding it! They all had the consciousness, it was like a great *unconscious* that was running between all of us that everybody *was* completely conscious, but the fixed expressions that people have, the habitual expressions, the manners, the mode of talk, are all masks hiding this consciousness.  
(“Art of Poetry” 32)

These common bonds were intrinsic to his poetic vision. In an interview to Paul Carroll, Ginsberg explains his need to fulfill his teenage “vow to illuminate mankind,”

it’s just necessary for me to place my word out there, not to overwhelm but to clarify other people’s sane thought, or to make it conscious or to bring it to the surface of their minds, so they say *Oh, yeah! That’s what I think, too! Why didn’t I say that before?*”  
(original emphasis, qtd. in Hungerford 280)

In an unpublished interview in 1976, Ginsberg discusses the clandestine form of communication in his poems,

I immediately saw poetry as a hermetic or secret way of talking about experiences that were universal, cosmic, that everybody knew about, but nobody knew how to refer to, nobody knew how to bring it up to front brain consciousness or to present it to social consciousness...  
(qtd. in Portugés *Poetics of Vision* 135)

Writing as a form of yoga was Ginsberg's solution to unite people. The all-inclusive nature of yoga, open to anyone, regardless of age, social standing, or faith, appealed immensely to Ginsberg, especially in the practical solution it offered to feelings of being different and separate. Hyde comments how the yoga of Ginsberg's poetry brings people together,

Ginsberg, yoga-style, creates a vortex that descends to stillness. He does not attempt to "expand our consciousness" (as many believe, equating his poetry with LSD), but copes instead with an already exacerbated, overburdened consciousness—for this is exactly the dilemma of modern man: that he is battered by mental forms he cannot act upon, or even join together: attitudes, pseudoevents, artifacts of culture, formulations of threat and anxiety, banal little myths of social cohesion—the swarming gnats of distraction. Ginsberg takes them upon himself (or finds them within himself), and then—often with hugely comic effect—proceeds to disentangle them, that is, *to name them*.  
(Hyde 452-453)

### **A Yogic Restrospect of Cézanne and "Howl"**

With the perspective he gained from his spiritual practices in India, Ginsberg updated his previous philosophies in a yogic light. Ginsberg refers to Cézanne in *Indian Journals*, and after returning to the United States, he connects his former understanding of Cézanne in terms of yoga. He comments on the artist in the 1966 interview, "You realize that he's really a saint! Working on his form of yoga, all that time, in obvious saintly circumstances of retirement in a small village..." ("Art of Poetry" 17). In the 1974 interview he notes a phrase Cézanne reiterated concerning the concept of "reconstitute" that chapter two mentions, that particularly struck Ginsberg,

...it was the phrase "*reconstitute the petites sensations* that I get from nature, and I could stand on a hill and merely by moving my head half an inch the composition of the land totally changed." So apparently he'd refined his optical perception to such a point where it's a real contemplation of optical phenomena in an almost **yogic** way, where he's standing there, from a specific point studying the optical field, looking, actually looking at his own eyeballs in a sense. The attempting to reconstitute the sensation in his own eyeballs. And what he does say finally—in a very weird statement that one would not expect of the austere old workman, he said, "And this *petite sensation* is nothing other than *pater omnipotens aeterna deus*."  
(bold emphasis added, Packard 17)

In his mantric studies, Ginsberg investigated the effects of vibration and sound to the human ear, emulating Cézanne's "yogic way" and the painter's own studies of sight and the optic nerve. During his course in modern art at Columbia in 1949, Ginsberg had studied Cézanne's paintings, letters and notes so he could learn the key to imitate the painter's technique

in his own works. In the 1974 interview, Ginsberg details his interpretation of Cézanne's yoga, noting "[an] element of Cézanne that was interesting,"

Has something to do with Blake: *with not through the eye—You're led to believe a lie when you see with not through the eye.* He's seeing through his eye. One can see *through* his canvas to God, really is the way it boils down. Or to Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus. ("Art of Poetry" 19)

A yogic perspective entails looking deeply, and being aware of what you are seeing, as if you were a detached witness simply observing your own actions. In retrospect, "Howl" becomes a yogic text, since Ginsberg's interpretation of Cézanne's yogic power became a major inspiration for the poem. Ginsberg wrote the following stanza as a tribute to the painter,

who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space  
through images juxtaposed, and trapped the  
archangel of the soul between 2 visual images  
and joined the elemental verbs and set the noun  
and dash of consciousness together jumping  
with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna  
Deus

("Howl" 132)

Portugés comments that "Howl" as a whole pays homage to Cézanne, "because it is one of the first successful poems Ginsberg wrote using the spontaneous method of composition" ("Poetics of Vision" 152). He further stresses Cézanne's influence on Ginsberg's entire aesthetic vision,

But "Howl" is a homage to the great painter in another way. After Ginsberg had adapted the spontaneous method from his studies in Cézanne, he continued to ponder the possibilities of creating in his own poetry the "mysterious impression" that Cézanne had produced in him. ("Poetics of Vision" 152-153)

Ginsberg was able to successfully recreated this "mysterious impression" by chanting and in poems such as "Wichita Vortex Sutra" with the use of mantra.

### **Pranic Poetry and Breath, Silence, Gaps and Space**

A counterpart to the sounds of bhakti is the meditative stillness Ginsberg experienced in India. The yogic themes of his post-India work included the sacred syllables of mantra and their corresponding breath-span, along with the rhythm of pranayama and Hungryalist poetry. Hyde notes the transcendent quality of Ginsberg's work, "we discover the still eye of the storm, separate sin from the sinner, and share a breath or two of the great breath of existence" (Hyde 453). Bob Rosenthal, the director of the Allen Ginsberg Estate declares, "Allen taught us to breathe in the poison and breathe it out again as nectar," in an image paralleling a story of the

Hindu god Shiva (Allen Ginsberg Project). In a 1968 interview with Michael Aldrich, Ginsberg retrospectively acknowledges that what he had been doing through his poetry was his own style of pranayama. He discusses the yoga of his masterpiece works, “Howl” and “Kaddish,”

the rhythmic...units...that I'd written down...were basically...breathing exercise forms...which if anybody else repeated—would catalyze in them the same pranic breathing...physiological spasms...that I was going through...and so would presumably catalyze in them the same *affects* or emotions. (original ellipsis, qtd. in Hungerford 280)

The “pranic breathing” refers to *pranayama*, which derives from the Sanskrit term “prana,” that ancient Indian philosophers used to denote the “vital breath” and the “principal manifestation of a person’s immortal soul” (Zysk 198). Hungerford affirms that it is “the yogic tradition, from which the majority of Ginsberg’s notions about sound and breathing come” (Hungerford 279). Ginsberg continued to refine his pranic-poetic practice in the United States by focusing even more on the formal aspects of his poetry in terms of breath.

The breath is central to Hinduism, with formal yogic practices complementing the science of the breath. Breath and meditation presented a counterpart solution to mantra, which could also transcend the randomness of Burroughs’ cut-ups and recreate the “*petite sensations*” that he studied in Cézanne’s work. To Ginsberg, the space was an integral part of Cézanne’s yoga, corresponding to Patanjali’s definition of yoga as the cessation of moods and thoughts, as mentioned in the introduction to the current chapter. Ginsberg describes “turning on to space in Cézanne” and the unique phenomenon he experienced in the artist’s works, how in the “space gap...the mind would fill in with the sensation of existence” (“Art of Poetry” 16, 18). In the short poem “Cézanne’s Ports,” written in 1950, he describes his attraction to these spaces,

But that meeting place  
isn’t represented;  
it doesn’t occur on the canvas. (‘‘Cézanne’s Ports’’ 53)

Ginsberg read the writings of Ramana Maharishi, the Hindu sage whose quintessential teachings were based on his powerful silence, and who also encouraged bhakti yoga. Ginsberg admired holymen such as Shambu Bharti Baba who maintained vows of silence, and he also practiced abstaining from speech, as he describes in *Indian Journals*, “Sat down with her then & held my

tongue out (holding it with thumb & forefinger) to show I couldn't talk" (*Indian Journals* 116). In the dedication to *Indian Journals*, Ginsberg names a saint whose silence inspired him, "Sri Krishnaji...who performed vow of perpetual silence sweetly declaring all was well without further talk & that silence would be good for America" (*Indian Journals* 4).

Silence and the "space gap" are like a peaceful ashram amid the bustling multitudes in the Indian landscape. Ginsberg's poetry reflects the "space gap" in various forms, such as the juxtaposition of descriptions, and also in the visual aspects of the poem. The center of the title page of *Indian Journals* lists "BLANK PAGES," along with "NOTEBOOKS," "DIARY," and "WRITINGS" (*Indian Journals* 2). He uses long dashes to connect one thought to the next and is very particular about spacing and the arrangement of the words on a page. Blake is acutely attentive to the interplay of image and text, which Ginsberg likewise manifests in the drawings, sketches, and photographs of *Indian Journals*, such as in the following passage,

hand plies the pen to itself on the page  
and makes a physical point → ●  
that's a beginning.

(*Indian Journals* 191)

*Indian Journals* includes the self-portrait titled "*Regional Tourist Office Rest Room Mirror, 13 Dec, 1962,*" which Ginsberg composed entirely of small dots, emphasizing the space of the page surrounding them (*Indian Journals* 124). In his performances, Ginsberg also paid special attention to the use of the breath and pauses, whether he was reading poetry, singing, or chanting. Ginsberg disclosed to Aldrich in an interview that composing with a tape-recorder "is like a form of Yoga: attempting to pronounce aloud the thoughts that are going through the head" (qtd. in Trigilio *Buddhist Poetics* 97). His change signifies his acceptance in a symbolic sense that he no longer fears the gaps, and can see even wordlessness as a positive and necessary silence, a space filled with potential.

## Chapter 4: Summary

Chapter four details the impact of Ginsberg's trip to India, and how he develops the Indianized lifestyle he adopted there to fit with his life in America. It mentions his contact with the Hungryalist poets and his role in spreading Krishna-consciousness. The chapter outlines his adherence to a spiritual path, with a decrease in drug usage, and an increase in meditation and bhakti yoga. It describes how he played the harmonium and eventually recorded his own songs. The chapter discusses Ginsberg's use of mantra and chanting Om, in performances and in political demonstrations, such as the 1968 Festival of Life and the ensuing Chicago Seven Trial, as well as in his poetry. It highlights his role as a spiritual leader of the counterculture and an examination of mantra in the form and content of "Wichita Vortex Sutra," as well as mantra, Om, and Indian influences in his other works, including close-readings of *Indian Journals*. An examination of Ginsberg's conception of poetry as yoga follows, as well as his reassessment of previous poetry in terms of yoga, including the work of Cézanne and the yogic tendencies of own poems "Howl" and "Kaddish." The chapter closes with an outline of the pranic aspect of his poetry, based on the rhythmic in- and exhalations of mantra, pranayama, and Hungryalist poetry. It highlights how he infuses his work with his consciousness of the breath, silence, and the "space gap" he discovered in Cézanne's art, that unifies people in their feelings of being separate.

## Conclusion

This study presents the current most thorough academic exploration of Allen Ginsberg's Hindu themes, his time in India, and *Indian Journals*, as far as over a year of research has turned up. In a recent article from 2010, Hungryalism's founder, Malay Roychoudhury writes,

Ginsberg's biographers and critics, most of whom are American, are almost ignorant of Indian complexities, have never taken into account the contributory factors that impacted the poet to such an extent that his post India poems changed structurally, semantically, and semiotically, though his Indian Journals reveal that he had been making vain efforts to regain rhymes, meters, and breath-spans in Howl-Kaddish refrain. (Roychoudhury)

The present study attempts to fill in this gap, presenting the following information: chapter one discusses Ginsberg's early years, spirituality, poetic aesthetics and his attraction to India, as well as the shift in critical perspective regarding the Beat Movement. The second chapter discusses Ginsberg and the Beats' call to pilgrimage, India through Ginsberg's eyes and how he felt at home and inspired in India. It reviews salient features of Hindu devotion and Indian deities, focusing on Ginsberg's relation to Kali, his friendship with the Hungryalists, and his time among the Banarasi communitas. Chapter three outlines Ginsberg's self-acceptance, detailing elements of the change he underwent in India, characterized by various spiritual disciplines and corresponding psychological breakthroughs that allowed him a renewed connection to God and poetic inspiration. The fourth chapter describes his return to the United States, outlining his correspondence with the Hungryalists, and favoring spiritual practices such as meditation and bhakti yoga over drug use. It examines his musical affinities, his chanting, and use of mantra and Om in political demonstrations and in the form and content of his poetry. It focuses on close-readings of mantra in "Wichita Vortex Sutra" and Indian influences in other works, along with an examination of Ginsberg's philosophy of poetry as a form of yoga, and how he uses this philosophy to reassess previous works. It ends with a discussion of the breath as a fundamental unit to Ginsberg's work, based on the bellows of mantra, yogic breathing exercises, and Hungryalist poetry.

Ginsberg assumed various roles in his life, and traditionally critics have credited him first and foremost as a writer. Critical perspectives have widened and place Ginsberg in his quintessential position as a holy man. The website of the Allen Ginsberg Project lists the many roles of Ginsberg, starting with his spiritual calling,

Spiritual seeker, founding member of a major literary movement, champion of human and civil rights, photographer and songwriter, political gadfly, teacher and co-founder of a poetics school, Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) defied simple classification. (Allen Ginsberg Project)

### **Beat Yogi**

*Yogi* is an appropriate term to describe Ginsberg, as it is broad enough to encompass the poet's eclectic spiritual blend. The Hindu and Sanskrit term features among entries in English dictionaries, and has been assimilated into Western vernacular. Ginsberg accrued spiritual knowledge from a wide variety of sources, and this study argues that it was his experience in India that had the greatest spiritual impact on his life. It confirmed his preexisting values, transformed his spirituality into a living practice, and enabled him to pursue the paths that opened up to him there which he adopted permanently into his lifestyle. In *Allen Ginsberg in America*, Kramer notes Ginsberg's adherence to an "American brand of mysticism," that she describes as being "rooted in humanism and in a romantic and visionary ideal of harmony among men" (Kramer xvii). His fusion of Eastern and Western ideas, and his zeal for the United States determine him as specifically an American yogi.

Yoga is not affiliated to any particular religion, and can complement any faith. Spiritual diversity marks Ginsberg's life, and yoga was a unifying force to the many cultures, ideologies, religions, texts, and individuals that comprised his personal beliefs. Born into a Jewish family, he began studying religion and philosophy at an early age and was interested in mystical and alternative faiths. Ginsberg's openness led him to visit monasteries, mosques, and temples alike in the syncretic Indian landscape, as he describes the "Mullah chanting in the Mosque Tower," "Christ-Atman," and the "Kali chapel" all on a single page in *Indian Journals* (*Indian Journals* 191). Snyder voices a sentiment that Ginsberg expresses in similar statements,

Oh, it is all one teaching. There is an ancient teaching, which we have American Indian expressions of, and Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese, Indian, Buddhist expressions of.

(qtd. in Jackson 67)

To assuage writer's block, classical poets invoked the muses upon writing, as Ginsberg calls upon superhuman powers at the beginning of *Indian Journals*,

Kali, Durga, Ram, Hari, Krishna, Brahma, Buddha, Allah, Jaweh, Christ, Mazda, Coyote, hear my plea!

Avaloketesvara, Maitreya, St. John, Ho-Tei, Kuan-Yin, Satan, Dipankara, Padma Sambava — whoever there is — is there ever anyone but me? (*Indian Journals* 10)

In the interview with Ganguly, Ginsberg explains how highly he values the syncretism in India,

The greatness of India I saw was the absorption into Hinduism of all the gods — the Western ones and the Buddhist ones — and the open space, the accommodation to all varieties of human nature. (Ganguly 31-32)

Ginsberg's involvement with yoga encompasses a wide range, as the previous chapter outlines, and he has inspired millions through his practices and his poetry. His appearance in a 1997 issue of *Yoga Journal* points to his status as a yogi in popular culture. This has been his domain, the realm of the God-hungry masses, while the critics have been slower to catch on to Ginsberg's message of spirituality. The evidence is there, but critics have not yet adequately examined the matter, and it is only a matter of time for this awareness to imbue the academic sphere. This study hopes to be a springboard for further analysis.

In her 2010 book on the history of yoga in America, Syman credits Ginsberg as the one who pioneered a "graduated approach to psychedelics and yoga (qtd. in Ramchandani).

Ginsberg supports that it was he who first popularized India's reputation as a spiritual land. In the 1993 interview, Ganguly asks Ginsberg whether the "60s craze to go East, to 'spiritual India' and all that" was present before Ginsberg went abroad. Ginsberg responds negatively,

at that time India was pretty well unknown. There weren't that many people who went there. There were rare people, famous rare people who did that, but it wasn't a whole generation that took it on. It became a stereotype almost instantly when *Esquire* sent some photographer to take pictures of us and put out a fake cover with a guy who looked like me, and a piece on beatniks in India. And that apparently became a model for people going there... So there was a whole network of understanding, of experience, of education that led ultimately to things like the Naropa Institute, to an institutionalization of the meeting of Eastern and Western minds. (Ganguly 22)

The back cover of *Indian Journals* reports,

*Indian Journals* took half a decade to transcribe and edit; when it was originally published in 1970 it catalyzed a large movement of young Western pilgrims to explore India and Eastern thought. (*Indian Journals* back cover)

Ginsberg encouraged spiritual seekers and very actively promoted various paths of yoga as viable methods to unite with the Divine. He had followed through on his teenage vow to enlighten his society, and he delighted in the interchange of ideas among the *communitas*.

### **Misled Critics**

The Western trend towards pursuing spiritual longings, like the characters in “Howl,” has made society much more accepting of the unfamiliar since the racially segregated society of 1950’s America. Amram reasons how the Beats’ spirituality went largely undetected,

But Beat became a flavor of the month, rather than a philosophy or an inquiry into life. The fashion industry, the entertainment industry and TV (we didn’t call it the Media way back then) all latched on to what was being presented as the latest fad, more akin to the hula hoop or padded bra rather than anything relating to new artistic values or new ways of understanding a changing society. We were a new generation of artists of all disciplines, all of whom shared fresh values and a new way of informing others about a desire for positive change. So, the last thing that anyone ever thought about when hearing of the new crazy people, who were supposed to be Beat, was that Beat was also a deeply spiritual way of approaching life. No one ever equated art on the America of the 1950s with anything to do with any kind of religious experience. (Amram xvi-xvii)

Ginsberg’s honest reportage of even the darker areas of his mind was what led to the misconceptions formed by the early critics. This parallels the common misinterpretation of Lord Shiva as creator and destroyer, when he is actually a creator and re-creator, within the cycle of *samsara*. Ginsberg was not destroying American values, as many political figures and critics feared, but was reconstructing them. Another oversight involves the Goddess Kali’s aspect as a loving mother. Critics have overlooked Ginsberg’s spiritual actions by either taking him at face value, or not understanding his commitment to honesty that underlie the grotesque or obscene images in his poems. Despite the very spiritual nature of his trip in India, Ginsberg was very humble and downplayed talking about this aspect in later interviews. Perhaps he felt that he would be misunderstood, as many people believe that India must be experienced in order to understand it. He shows his spirituality through his poems and his practice, rather than what he says about it, taking care to not become fixed to an idea. In the 1976 interview, when asked about how his travels in India had impacted his spiritual process, he replied,

My trip wasn't very spiritual, as anybody can see if they read *Indian Journals*. Most of it was spent horsing around, sightseeing and trying the local drugs. But I did visit all of the holy men I could find and I did encounter some teachers who gave me little teachings then that were useful then and now. Some of the contacts were prophetic of what I arrived at later here in America.  
 (“Online Interviews”)

He is careful not to become fixed on any particular concept that can easily misrepresent the reality, such as calling something “spiritual” when the word has about as many definitions as there are people. India is rich with gurus, holymen, saints, but there are also many frauds and charlatans. In *Indian Journals*, Ginsberg makes a distinction between the truly spiritual yogis and the imposters at the Kumbh Mela, “The sitting bloodshot-eye yogis down below the path -- ? ‘Ah, they’re just poster advertisements for the real holy yogis invisible in the mountains near Gangotri’” (*Indian Journals* 64).

In the interview “Allen Ginsberg in India,” he at first claims he does not really remember what he associated India with, “You know, it was thirty years ago and I don’t remember very clearly except snake charmers” before launching into a detailed description (Ganguly 22).

Hungerford points out that he may be silly and histrionic, but his faith is constant,

Ginsberg’s acts and statements are sometimes theatrically absurd. That said, this quality of his discourse does not belie his underlying beliefs, but rather (as he surely intended) makes those beliefs all the more palpable, their logic all the more apparent. Because Ginsberg jokes about himself as a holy man does not mean that he does not, at the bottom, believe that he is a holy man; because Ginsberg is flamboyant about claiming supernatural powers for his poetry does not mean that he does not, at bottom, believe that the poetry does indeed have such powers. The personal pain of the crisis that occasions some of these beliefs attests to Ginsberg’s ultimate sincerity.  
 (Hungerford 273)

When asked about the spiritual imagery in his recent poetry in the 1976 interview, Ginsberg replied,

Ginsberg: Not so spiritual; it is more practical observations during the course of meditation or after.

Chowka: "Down-to-earth" spiritual, then. You don't like the word "spiritual?"

Ginsberg: Yeah, I'm not even sure if the word is helpful because it gets people all distracted with the idea of voices and ghosts and visions. I used to get distracted that way.

(“Online Interviews”)

Ginsberg tones down the visionary element in his poetry that he previously had aggrandized at times, describing it in the 1969 interview as “really literal realism, simply common sense” (*Playboy*).

## **Buddhist Slant**

Many critics have analyzed Ginsberg's Buddhist leanings in his later life, but few examine or give credit to the abundant Hindu and Indian elements. The Beat's affinity to Buddhism has since been an integral part of their identity, and did a lot to popularize Buddhism in American culture. Jackson surmises,

It may well be that *The Dharma Bums* did more to spark American interest in Zen Buddhism in the late 1950s than all the excellent Zen studies authored in the years before 1958 by the great Japanese scholar, D. T. Suzuki. (Jackson 60)

It seems that the critics had also gotten caught up in the wave of Buddhism, as Jackson states, "Looking back, several decades later, it is clear that commentators exaggerated the American appeal of Zen, which never touched more than a few thousand" (Jackson 53). Similar to the way chapter one describes how Kerouac's erratic personality characterized the Beats as a whole in the eyes of critics, Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* gave the Beat Generation a reputation of all members having converted to Buddhism. Jackson adds, "The assumption that the Beats were fascinated by Zen has obscured recognition of a much wider and more profound interest in Asian thought" (Jackson 53-54). The residual effects of the Buddhist slant still remain in contemporary criticism.

The title of Ishmael Reed's article "A Buddhist Take-over?" attests to the sweeping popularity of Buddhism. This trend manifested both in popular culture as well as in the critical sphere. Prothero states, "Historians of American religion who have explored beat spirituality have tended to focus almost exclusively on the beats' engagement with Zen" (Prothero). Within this imbalanced view, scholars have discounted the validity of "Beat Buddhism," "dismiss[ing] that engagement as haphazard...tend[ing], perhaps unintentionally, to render beat spirituality illegitimate even while informing us about it" (Prothero 207-8). Since the printing of his article, many scholars have written numerous books validating the spirituality view of the Beat Generation. However, these publications focus almost exclusively on Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> Many scholars consider the 1955 Six Gallery reading as the birth of the Beat Generation, which advertised "Wine, music, dancing girls, serious poetry, free satori" (qtd. in Jackson 63). *Satori* is the Zen

Buddhist term for “enlightenment,” which the advertisement promoted as an instantaneous panacea. In reality, the Beats did not represent a magic-pill promise to get high and were willing to work for their awakenings. In fact, that is just about the only thing the Beats – and especially Ginsberg – did, through writing and other spiritual practices. A friend of the Beats shares,

If we had one thing in common, though, there in the 1950s, it was that none of us were looking for a quick-fix, thirty second solution on how to achieve Nirvana. Jack himself had said that Beat meant Beatific, i.e. living a day to day life in accordance with the Beatitudes of Jesus and the Teachings of the Buddha. (Amram xvii)

In his later years, Kerouac rejected Buddhism, “O I’m not a Buddhist anymore – I’m not anything anymore!” (qtd. in Jackson 59). This is actually quite a Buddhist statement, as many Buddhist avoid labels that can cloud the reality of things, and it is reminiscent of the doctrine of No-self, though he may have been speaking more in terms of agnosticism. He commented that “my serious Buddhism” traced back to India, embracing such teachings as compassion, brotherhood, charity, “don’t step on the bug” and the “sweet sorrowful face of Buddha” (qtd. in Jackson 59). Kerouac’s coloring of the Buddhist neutrality reflects more Tantric, Tibetan, or Hindu influences of the gods as having feelings and subjectivity.

As Ginsberg notes, Hinduism accepts Buddha as another incarnation of the Divine. Though Ginsberg had a Tibetan Buddhist guru in his later years, he continued with his Hindu practices, demonstrating how the two philosophies complement each other. Tibetan Buddhism shares a similar vibrancy, cacophony, and colorful deities that characterize Hinduism, along with a parade of grotesque demons, which starkly contrast a stereotypical image of Zen austerity. Jackson describes Ginsberg’s Buddhist teacher and poet Chögyam Trungpa as, “[c]ontemptuous of conventions, the Tibetan teacher ate what he wanted, drank alcohol freely and smoked” (Jackson 13). Tantric features rarely figure in analyses of Ginsberg’s Buddhist poetics, which tend to focus on Zen characteristics and the general Buddhist tenets of emptiness, no-self, sitting and meditation. One exception is Whitlark’s “The Beats and Their Tantric Goddesses: A Study in Erotic Epistemology,” published in 1977, which discusses Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums*.

Many critics have noted Ginsberg's meditation and attention to breath solely as a Buddhistic influence, but Buddhism was just one more development in the progression of his poetic theory. Portugés acknowledges, "Ginsberg's studies in Buddhism brought him back to his earlier discoveries of Cézanne," and chapter four of the present study highlighted Ginsberg's Indian-inspired view of Cézanne as a yogi ("Cézanne" 152). In a 1976 interview with Portugés, Ginsberg answers affirmatively when Portugés notes that he has "always been concerned with breath, much longer than [he'd] been studying Tibetan Buddhism" (qtd. in Midal 427). When Portugés queries whether his "poetics of breath have changed as a result of Buddhist influences, Ginsberg clarifies,

No, because poetry, poetic practice is sort of like an independent carpentry that goes on by itself. I think, probably, the meditation experience just made me more and more aware of the humor of the fact that breath is the basis for poetry and song – it is so important in it as a measure. Song is carried out on the vehicle of the breath, which seems like a nice 'poetic justice' (*laughs*) – that the breath should be so important in meditation as well as in poetics. I think that must be historically the reason for the fact that all meditation teachers are conscious of their breath, as poets are.  
(qtd. in Midal 427)

Ginsberg pursued various paths to spirituality, trying on different religions and ways of thinking like different hats. He ultimately believed in a united, unifying power of love, rather than focusing exclusively on any single faith. For this reason, it is an oversimplification to say that Ginsberg was ("only") Buddhist. When Ginsberg transcended an attitude of binary opposites in India, his work and his worldview expanded. Likewise, he felt freer to choose his own blend of spirituality, indefinable by a term or a label. For this reason, to call Ginsberg a Buddhist is an oversimplification, and it is more accurate to say that he practiced a personal faith including influences of Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and others. From his negative experiences of being fixated on a particular concept, Ginsberg was extremely cautious about labeling things, like when he resists calling his revelatory trip to India a spiritual journey. Many Buddhists do not call themselves Buddhist, and there is a great distinction between a person who claims to be Buddhist or a guru or possessing superlative powers, and a person who demonstrates his spirituality through his actions. It is a feature of the Western tendency toward binary opposites

and logic, to want to place things neatly in categories, while the things are usually a blend of various elements and lie somewhere along a spectrum. This tendency has been true for the critics when they place Ginsberg in specific categories that misrepresent his true nature.

Ginsberg felt a deep sadness for the violence he saw around him and abroad, whether it was in repressing freedom of the youth in Kansas or the atrocities in Vietnam, as well as in his internal struggles and what he has described as his “mental war.” Ginsberg actively sought to find the harmony among different religions, both on a universal level with his political engagements for peace, as well as on a personal level. He wholeheartedly believed that mantra and meditation had the ability to change the individual and also the world. A powerful symbol of his absolute certainty in this power was in 1978 when he, Orlovsky and some friends meditated on the railroad tracks outside Rockwell Corporation Nuclear Facility’s Plutonium bomb trigger factory to protest nuclear warfare (*Collected Works* 796). In the 1974 poem “Jaweh and Allah Battle,” he writes of the convergence of religious influences,

under Allah Christ Yaweh forever one God  
Shema Yisroel Adonoi Eluhenu Adonoi Echad!  
La ilah illa’ Allah hu!  
.....  
SHALOM! SHANTIH! SALAAM! (“Jaweh and Allah Battle” 616)

“Allah Christ Yaweh” respectively names the three monotheistic gods of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The following line is the Hebrew prayer, and the one after that is the Arabic one for god. The poem ends with the exclamations of peaceful greetings in Hebrew, Sanskrit, and Arabic.

With millions of pages devoted to critiquing this iconic American prize-winning poet, it is curious that critics have yet to write a formal study on the Hindu influences of Ginsberg. Much misinterpretation surrounds Hinduism in the West, where even a spiritual practice like yoga has been distorted to the point where it is sometimes synonymous with an exercise session. In 2005, the Indian government took measures to reclaim yoga and to reinstate it to its true position as a spiritual path, and not merely as a means to get physically fit (“India Makes Moves”). The yoga

postures are just a small part of one branch of yoga philosophy. Although many Westerners view a trim physique as the goal of yoga, the opposite is true: the physical postures are merely preparation for the advanced concentration and meditation practices that ultimately lead to a union of the self and the universe. The distorted perspective of yoga parallels the reception of Ginsberg's spiritual message, to the critics who let physical descriptions distract them from seeing the higher plane of thinking. The main features of this blind spot include residue of the initial critics' stereotyping and pigeonholing, the popularity of Buddhism and the critical trend in favoring Buddhistic analyses, and the complexity and unfamiliarity with Hinduism.

In a personal interview on March 28, 2010 with Anand Prabhu Barat, critic of Beat spirituality at Banaras Hindu University, she proclaimed that the complexity of the Hindu religion is what deters critical perspectives (Barat Interview: March). In *Ivory in Gold* she explains, "Buddhism held a sway over Hinduism because of its empirical psychology and understandable normative behaviour" (*Ivory in Gold* ix). India accrued a negative reputation from the rumor concerning Maharishi Mahesh Yogi's sexual advances on the actress Mia Farrow, which prompted John Lennon and George Harrison's immediate departure from their trip to India in 1968. The rumor stuck in the public consciousness, and likely contributed to a rise in Buddhism's popularity over Hinduism. Another reason why the non-Buddhist Eastern influences have not been more thoroughly studied stems from the media's portrayal of Kerouac's and Snyder's Buddhism, along with Ginsberg's own tendency to verbally dismiss his experiences.

Jackson notes, "one of the legacies of the media coverage is the myth that insofar as they looked toward the East, the Beats restricted themselves to Zen Buddhism" and mentions the Beats' Hindu influences. He continues, "In fact, Zen was only one and, indeed with the exception of Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen, a passing concern of most Beat writers" (Jackson 53). This coloring still tinges criticism with a Buddhist hue.

Even Prothero, who argues for a broader view of the Beats' spirituality and their significance in American Religious History, frames his article with a Buddhist slant, using the Buddhist term *bhikku* to denote any holy person. The colorful title of "Manischewitz and Sake, the Kaddish and Sutras: Allen Ginsberg's Spiritual 'Self-Othering'" is what Craig Svonkin Allen chose for his original study on Ginsberg's "hybridized or syncretic spirituality" that he presented to the American Studies Association in 2009. Even the title of Allen's article implies Zen, as he lists Jewish and Japanese alcohol, though Ginsberg's association with the *Sutras* covers both Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism. In his review of *Allen Ginsberg's Buddhist Poetics*, by prominent Beat-scholar Tony Trigilio, Olmstead writes,

Unfortunately, Trigilio doesn't seem to have a firm enough grasp of Buddhism to always be able to distinguish between Ginsberg's dabblings in the Hindu philosophy and his actual practice and study of Buddhism. For example, he spends a great deal of time on Ginsberg chanting OM during the police riots that took place at the Chicago Democratic Convention in 1968. There is no mention that it was a Hindu-style chant, nor of Chögyam Trungpa's later advice to change his public mantra to AH, so as not to give the audience "a buzz and nowhere to go with it"...Ginsberg's image is most often associated with the sixties, as the cover of this book shows him, playing finger cymbals and chanting (most of his mantras at that time were Hindu).  
(Olmstead)

It is surprising that Trigilio's recent text blurs these two major world faiths, yet it is a common mistake. Olmstead comes closer to the truth, but he drastically minimizes Ginsberg's Hindu practices as mere "dabblings." A similar misrepresentation occurs in an article of a literary reference text,

His interest in Buddhism, going back to visits to India which was presented in *Indian Journals: March 1960-May 1963* in 1970, culminated in an acceptance of the teaching of Buddha under the instruction of Chögyam Trungpa...  
(Lewis 891)

This statement, presented as a fact in a reference text, is quite an understatement and extremely misleading. There were many reasons why Ginsberg went to India, including to explore spirituality, as a pilgrimage, to find a guru, to get away from the American press, and Buddhism did not play a major role in the motives for his India journey or in *Indian Journals*. Ginsberg stayed for an extended period in India, and did not make two or more "visits." Also, his interest in Buddhism goes back well before his Indian travels, from talks with Kerouac and courses at Columbia, and his interest in yoga began before he was a teenager. The claim that his trip to

India “culminated” in Buddhism is imprecise; Ginsberg accepted Buddhism before he went to India, and incorporates what Lewis calls “his amalgam of religions (Jewish/Buddhist/Hindu)” throughout his life (Lewis 892). Ginsberg increasingly turned to Buddhism in his later life, but still incorporated a blend of spiritual principles, and it is unfair to say that he was exclusively Buddhist.

Similar oversights occur in even in Hungerford’s well-written article, “Postmodern Supernaturalism: Ginsberg and the Search for a Supernatural Language,” published in *The Yale Journal of Criticism* in 2006, which discusses mantra and Om at length. Referring to a list in *Indian Journals* where Ginsberg had noted his recent influences, Hungerford comments, “He also cites spiritual practices, such as Tantric Buddhism” (Hungerford 276). However, Ginsberg does not actually specify Buddhism in his text. Hungerford assumes that his *Indian Journals*’ reference to “Tantric Mantras” is Buddhist, without providing any supporting evidence to her claim (*Indian Journals* 39). It is less important whether he intended specifically Buddhist Tantric mantras at that particular moment, since both Hinduism and Buddhism influenced him. It is of most interest to see how even recent critics take for granted the association of Beats and Buddhism. Prasad gives an explanation of Tantra:

Tantras are common to Buddhism and Jainism, and they also spread to the countries of Greater India in South-East Asia, where the unique phenomenon was witnessed of Saivism [centered on the prominent Hindu God Shiva] and Buddhism blending in the composite worship of Siva-Buddha. ...the role that the Tantra played in the religious consolidation of the country [India] cannot be overlooked. (Prasad lxx)

In the 1976 interview, Ginsberg provides a neutral response to the question, “Do you see his movement in contemporary Buddhism as the most vital one in America at this point?,”

Shakespeare has a very interesting line: "Comparisons are odious." So to say "the most vital" -- well, everybody's doing a different kind of work -- some quiet, some more flashy. I seem to be able to relate to Trungpa best, although I must say that it may be that the looseness and heartiness and charm of his approach is not necessarily the deepest for my case. (“Online Interviews”)

He avoids generalizations, emphasizes that each individual has their own particular path, which has been a hallmark of his unique spiritual blend.

### **Widening Critical Perspective**

It is Hinduism and Indian culture that catalyzes Ginsberg's spiritual and literary breakthrough. Indian culture influences the poet, who in turn influenced millions of individuals and the history of poetry, marking the aesthetic shift of the twentieth century. It is also in India where the doors to his future spirituality are opened. The Beats covered great distances in both symbolic and literal journeys, and critical perception of them has also come a long way. As Ginsberg continuously developed and enlarged his spirituality, so does the critical understanding of him and the Beat Movement. The present study follows the trend of seeing the spiritual side of the Beats, focusing on the Hindu and Indian cultural themes that have been ignored and misrepresented in Ginsberg's personal synergistic faith. He is an American poet whose experience in India profoundly and permanently changed him, who was inspired by an extremely eclectic blend religions, lifestyles, and attitudes, and who actively promoted peace and higher states of consciousness. The Beat Yogi will live on through his message, his words, and his songs. In the words of his Malay Roychoudhury, "American academicians and researchers working in Allen Ginsberg will have to rethink the issue and examine the work of the poet in light of his India visit" (Roychoudhury).

Ginsberg played a central role introducing Americans and the Western world to Indian influences. He inspired multitudes to journey to India and to engage in Indian practices in their own countries. "Bhakti" has become an everyday term in certain circles, and practicing yoga and devotional chanting is on the increase, symbolized by the Bhakti-based yoga studio, *Bhakti Yoga Shala*, in Los Angeles, California. Classes begin with chanting accompanied by a harmonium, and there are weekly kirtans and other yoga-related events in a fusion of Eastern and Western themes. Other evidence of the bhakti cultural trend is the annual BhaktiFest celebration that lasts for three days in Joshua Tree, California. Western bhakti singers, such as Krishna Das and Jai Uttal, tour internationally for kirtan performances.

Ginsberg's tribute to William Carlos Williams in *Indian Journals* is just as fitting as homage to himself,

He isn't dead  
 as the many pages of words arranged thrill  
 with his intonations the mouths of meek kids  
 becoming subtle even in Bengal. Thus  
 there's a life moving out of his pages; Blake  
 also "alive" thru his experienced machines.

(*Indian Journals* 189)

Ginsberg was able to successfully recreate in his own work the "space gaps" he observed in Cézanne's paintings. The proof lies in the fact that his works remain enormously popular, and poems like "Howl" still carry the same power as it did when it was published nearly half a century ago. The review "Still Howling after All These Years" declares, "*Howl* is as huge today as it was in 1956" (Timpane). Ginsberg certainly lives on, "alive" through his own works, fulfilling his role as a prophet poet, by his own understanding of prophecy,

Usually during the composition, step by step, word by word and adjective by adjective, if it's all spontaneous, I don't know whether it even makes sense sometimes. Sometimes I do know it makes complete sense, and I start crying. Because I realize I'm hitting some area which is absolutely true. And in that sense applicable universally, or understandably universally. In that sense able to survive through time— in that sense to be read by somebody and wept to, maybe, centuries later. In that sense prophecy, because it touches a common key... What prophecy actually is is not that you actually know that the bomb will fall in 1942. It's that you know and feel something that somebody knows and feels in a hundred years. And maybe articulate it in a hint—a concrete way that they can pick up on in a hundred years. ("Art of Poetry" 13-14)

This gift of prophecy places Ginsberg among what scholar Kostelanetz calls the "pantheon of American literature" (qtd. in *Poetry Foundation*). As poetic genius has been reincarnated in the tradition of spiritual poetry through Blake, who saw visions of Milton, and Ginsberg, who saw visions of Blake, perhaps a future poet will envision Ginsberg. Similar to how Ginsberg described William Carlos Williams' living on through his words, Ginsberg also lives on throughout his sacred, divinely inspired poems, as the yoga of his poetry continues to inspire people and to bring them together.

**Conclusion: Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> These include titles such as Tony Trigilio's "*Allen Ginsberg's Buddhist Poetics*," Carole Tomkinson's "*Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*," Anand Prabha Barat's "*Ivory in Gold: A Study of Keats, Huxley, Kerouac, Raja Rao, Ginsberg*."

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## Appendix I: Selected Glossary of Hindi and Sanskrit Words

The following are definitions as they relate to Ginsberg's understanding of Indian culture and his use of them in *Indian Journals*.

- Abhya Mudra*: *Abhya* means "no fear," and a *mudra* is a symbolic hand gesture; the position of this *mudra* is an open palm parallel to the body as a message to be unafraid.
- Aghori*: Literally "no terror" in Sanskrit; the most extreme of all Hindu sects.
- Baba*: The common term for a Hindu ascetic; also means father, grandfather, and uncle in many Indian languages.
- Banarasipan*: A "pattern of behavior bordering on *cultural-socio-religious* ecstasy" typified by passion, freedom, carefreeness.
- Bhagavad Gita*: A sacred Hindu text that describes the teachings of the god Krishna to Arjuna. He emphasizes detachment from personal motives, devotion to God, and fulfilling religious duties.
- Bhakti*: The yoga of devotion.
- Communitas*: Prothero defines it as the "chaotic sacrality of human interrelatedness" (Prothero 211).
- Dharma*: Duty; the Hindu ideology of an individual's obligation to adhere to religious and social duties. The Buddhist concept of dharma is of an essential truth.
- Dhoti*: Traditional Indian men's attire, consisting of a long strip of cotton fabric wrapped around the waist.
- Ghat*: Stairwells down to the Ganges River.
- Karma*: Action; the Hindu (and Buddhist) philosophy that an individual's present and future life is based on the collective actions of past lives.
- Kirtan*: Devotional singing and chanting, usually in a group.
- Lingam*: The sacred procreative symbol of an erect phallus on a base, representing female Genitalia.
- Mahakala*, "Great Time/Death," is another name for Shiva. The feminine variant is *Mahakali*, another name for Kali.
- Mantra*: The repetition of a sacred word, sound, or chant.
- Moksha*: The ultimate state of liberation, similar to a Buddhist nirvana or a Christian heaven.
- Naga Saddhu*: A particular sect of Hindu ascetics who worship the god Shiva and practice nudity as a spiritual discipline.
- Om*: A sacred syllable in Hinduism and Buddhism, used in mantras and prayers.
- Parampara*: Literally "from one to another," the traditional Indian style of learning with a guru.
- Pranayama*: Yogic breathing exercises.
- Prasaad*: Offerings to the divine, such as sweets or fruit, that are later consumed as a sacred food in a mutual exchange between God and man.
- Puja*: Ritual worship.
- Sadhu/Saddhu*: Hindu renunciates who have given up all material and sexual attachments.
- Saddhana*: Spiritual practice.
- Samsara*: The succession of lifecycles.
- Sanyassi*: Another name for Shaiva Saddhus, who are renunciates devoted to the god Shiva.
- Satsang*: A gathering for religious or spiritual purposes.
- Shakti*: The divine feminine.
- Soma*: An intoxicant made from plant juice, written about in the ancient Hindu scriptures known as the Vedas.

*Stotra*: A Hindu hymn, especially one sung while under the influence of the intoxicant *soma*.

*Sutra*: An aphorism of Hindu philosophy, intended to be memorized and later included in Hindu scriptures. The Buddhist definition denotes it as a classic religious teaching of the Buddha.

*Tantra*: The science of personality, and a method of exploring the mind and developing the range of perceptions (Svoboda 7).

*Yoga*: Defined by Patanjali as “the suppression of states of consciousness” or *yogah cittavritti-nirodhahi* (qtd. in Eliade 47). Specific spiritual disciplines outlining the paths to unite with the universe.

*Yogi*: A practitioner of yoga.

**Appendix II: Descriptions of Prominent Hindu Deities**

*Arjuna*: Not a god, but a mythical character of the Ramayana and the Bhagavad Gita.

*Durga*: Warrior, mother, and protectress, the goddesses of all goddesses. She rides a tiger and holds various weapons in her hands. Her three main forms are Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Kali.

*Ganesha*: Son of Shiva, the elephant god who removes obstacles.

*Ganga*: The goddess of the Ganges River, the sweetest of all goddesses.

*Hanuman*: The monkey god, symbolic of loyalty to Ram.

*Kali*: The Black Goddess, one of the three main incarnations of Durga.

*Krishna*: A blue-colored god who plays a flute and has many girlfriends. His lover is Radha.

*Lakshmi*: Goddess of wealth and abundance, she holds golden coins in her hands. One of the three main incarnations of Durga.

*Mahavidyas*: The ten manifestations of Tantric *shakti*, the divine feminine, of which Kali is the most prominent.

*Ram*: The “Doer.” Husband of Sita.

*Saraswati*: Serene goddess of knowledge and music. Her consort is a swan. One of the three main incarnations of Durga.

*Shiva*: God of creation and recreation. Holds a trident, wears a tiger-skin. Patron god of Banaras.

*Sita/Cita*: Represents the ideal wife as Ram’s partner.