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**“The American Way Is a Hideous Monster:” The Portrayal of American Society in the
Poetry of Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Amiri Baraka, and Chen Chen**

“Americký způsob je odporné monstrum.” Vykreslení Americké společnosti v poezii Allena
Ginsberga, Gregoryho Corsa, Amiriho Baraky a Chena Chena

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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KEYWORDS

Americká poezie; Allen Ginsberg; Gregory Corso; Amiri Baraka; Chen Chen; 20. století; 21. století; Studená válka; COVID-19; kritika společnosti; Spojené státy Americké; rasismus; politika; 9/11

American poetry; Allen Ginsberg; Gregory Corso; Amiri Baraka; Chen Chen; Twentieth century; Twenty-first century; Cold War; COVID-19; Social critique; United States of America; Racism; Politics; 9/11

ABSTRACT

This bachelor thesis deals with the portrayal and criticism of American society in the poetic works of twentieth and twenty-first century poets, namely Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Amiri Baraka and Chen Chen, focusing predominantly on the style of the depiction and issues addressed in the selected poems. The objective of this thesis is to determine some of the principal topics of their social critique and show the impact the historical context had in the composition of their poems and on the commentary contained therein. Selected poems of each author are analyzed separately to point out the notions that are unique to their portrayal and to show that despite differences in personalities and historical periods, certain issues of the United States are discussed and continue to be discussed by poets from both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The thesis demonstrates, however, that specific social and racial circumstances, together with historical context, inform each poet's writing, showing that the poets of the twentieth century pose different questions from the poets of the twenty-first century even as their opinion of American society as a whole remains critical.

ABSTRAKT

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá zobrazením a kritikou americké společnosti v básnických dílech básníků dvacátého a jednadvacátého století, jmenovitě Allena Ginsberga, Gregoryho Corsa, Amiriho Baraky a Chena Chena, přičemž se zaměřuje především na styl zobrazení a problematiku řešenou ve vybraných básních. Záměrem této práce je určit některá ze zásadních témat jejich kritiky společnosti a ukázat, jaký vliv měl historický kontext na kompozici jejich básní a na kritiku v nich obsaženou. Vybrané básně každého autora jsou analyzovány zvlášť, aby bylo poukázáno na pojmy, které jsou pro jejich zobrazení jedinečné, a také aby bylo ukázáno, že navzdory rozdílům v jejich osobnostech a historických obdobích se určitými otázkami Spojených států zabývali a nadále zabývají básníci dvacátého i jednadvacátého století. Práce však ukazuje, že jejich specifická společenská třída a rasa spolu s historickým kontextem ovlivňují uměleckou tvorbu jednotlivých básníků, a ukazuje, že básníci dvacátého století kladou jiné otázky než básníci jednadvacátého, i když jejich názor na americkou společnost jako celek zůstává kritický.

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1. Introduction

In 1981, Malcolm Cowley stated that the public paid little attention to poetry because the poets “no longer tell stories,” and that the majority of the contemporary poems were “no longer mnemonic.”¹ Considering the events of the twentieth century, it is no surprise that every part of human existence, including literature, was reshaped and reevaluated. Stephan Delbos argues that during the beginning of the Cold War, “arguments about poetry and national policy overlapped,” and points out that critics often publicized their political leanings in poetry reviews.² American poets also began to utilize their poetry to express their views, opinions, beliefs and grievances, making their work an outlet of social and political critique. In the following chapters, the poems of four American poets—Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Amiri Baraka and Chen Chen—are examined in terms of their portrayal of the United States and American society as influenced by their historical context. Each author provides a unique perspective, pointing out different issues via their unique, idiosyncratic style. Since there are almost seventy years between the first and the last analyzed poem, this examination offers a wider view of American society, the history of the United States, and even of American poetry of the twentieth and twenty-first century, focusing on the social and political struggles of each period. Adrienne Rich remarked that most of American poetry originates from the “point of stress in society,” and that a specific language needs to be found in order to explore contemporary conditions. Due to the turmoil of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this seems especially true when one considers contemporary and recent poetry.³

¹ Malcolm Cowley et al., “The Place of Poetry: Symposium Responses,” *The Georgia Review* 35, 4 (Winter, 1981): 716, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41399879>.

² Stephan Delbos, *The New American Poetry and Cold War Nationalism* (Cham: Springer, 2021), 1.

³ Jonah Ruskin, *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl' and the Making of the Beat Generation* (California: University of California Press, 2004), xxi.

The thesis is arranged into five separate chapters, including this introduction, and followed by a conclusion. One chapter is dedicated to each poet, organized chronologically from the earliest to the latest: Ginsberg, Corso, Baraka, and Chen. The four chapters are then divided into three sections—introducing the poet and examining three specific ideas—and a conclusion. The analysis of the poems focuses on the poet’s choice of themes, images, references, language, tone, and the overall message their poetry seems to communicate in relation to American society, politics and historical situation. In this sense, the thesis looks at Ginsberg’s “In The Baggage Room at Greyhound,” “Supermarket in California” and “America;” Corso’s “The American Way;” Baraka’s “Somebody Blew Up America;” and Chen’s “Self-Portrait With & Without,” “& then a student stands up, says, *Are you serious?*,” “Winter,” “我疼你” and “The School of Fury.” Via these works, this thesis explores the depiction and criticism of the United States through a period of circa 70 years as demonstrated by the selected American poets, proving the validity of the analysis of the twentieth and twenty-first poetry in terms of social critique.

Chapters two and three are dedicated to the examination of Ginsberg and Corso respectively, two poets of the latter part of the twentieth century mainly known for their affiliation with the Beat Generation. For the purpose of this thesis, Ginsberg’s poems are analyzed in terms of their depiction of working-class American society, consumerism and the politics of Cold War America, paying specific attention to the portrayal of individuals who do not quite fit the conformist community. Similarly, the analysis of Corso’s “The American Way” in chapter three explores the work’s criticism of post-war America’s values and beliefs. These chapters show similar, yet distinct views of Cold War America, troubled by consumerism, conformity, the threat of nuclear war and much more, leaving many in a state of unease. Likewise, chapters four and five address the works of two poets of color of the twenty-first century: Baraka, a Black American, and Chen, a Chinese American. In the fourth

chapter, Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America" is analyzed in regards to its portrayal of American politics of the past and present, with emphasis on the issue of racism, violence terrorism, and racial superiority in white society. Correspondingly, the investigation of Chen's poems shows an illustration of present-day America, with special focus on gun violence, COVID-19 and Coronavirus-related discrimination and violence against Asians. The sixth and final chapter provides a short summary and comparison of the poets, arguing that the work of the twentieth-century poets is concerned mainly with the deteriorated state of America and the values of American society, while the poets of the twenty-first century are preoccupied with violence and racist behavior. Similarly, this thesis shows that the Cold War impacted the works of earlier poems, and the global pandemic and terrorism has informed the later ones, proving that historical context plays an important role in the poetry of social criticism.

2. Allen Ginsberg as an Outcast in America

Allen Ginsberg was one of the most prominent figures of the Beat Generation, a poetic movement concerned with writing that, according to Kimmelman, “challenged the false sheen of American patriotism,” offering “one of the strongest modern-day critiques of America as spiritually bereft and bloated by consumerism.”⁴ In the context of the aforementioned quote by Rich, Ruskin claims that in *Howl and Other Poems*, which came from a turbulent postwar era plagued by the threats of the Cold War, Ginsberg “discovered the very language he needed [...], a language of the mundane and the apocalyptic.”⁵ Through the choice of form and language, vivid images and both dramatic and ironic tone, Ginsberg not only comments on American society, government and politics, but portrays what it was like for people like him in 1950s America, which made an enemy and an outcast out of anyone who did not fit in or follow the mainstream. Ginsberg’s portrayal and criticism of American society can be seen in works that are collected in *Howl and Other Poems*, namely “In the Baggage Room at Greyhound,” “Supermarket in California” and “America.” “In the Baggage Room at Greyhound” offers a gloomy depiction of working-class America with a focus on individuals who do not fully fit into the standard of Cold-War American society, which is even more emphasized through the feeling of dislocation caused by the theme of traveling. In “Supermarket in California,” Ginsberg displays an outsider bewildered by the commercial and conformist state of society, who, due to his sexuality cannot fulfill the expectations or enjoy what others seem to blindly accept as the ideal. Lastly, “America” represents a complete criticism of American society and the government through the voice of an American citizen who feels like an outcast in the environment of Cold War paranoia. Ginsberg’s work illustrates everyday reality via clear imagery drawn from his personal

⁴ Burt Kimmelman, *The Facts on File: Companion to 20th-Century American Poetry* (New York: Facts On File, Inc., 2005), 33.

⁵ Ruskin, *American Scream*, xxi.

experience, and offers commentary on and criticism of society and politics through witty statements and irony.

In the critical discourse, there has always been debates about the literary “I,” about the gap between the author and the narrator of the poem.⁶ Axelrod claims the “poet’s subjectivity” remains unseen among modernist writers; he even restates that T. S. Eliot believed poetry to be a way one can “escape from personality.”⁷ Nevertheless, Axelrod points out that “Cold War poets, conversely, frequently centered their poems precisely on subjective chaos,” which for Ginsberg also meant “putting [his] own inner voids and monsters at the forefront of [his] work.”⁸ In “In the Baggage Room at Greyhound,” “Supermarket in California” and “America,” it is often hard to discern where the poet ends and the poetic voice begins, due to Ginsberg’s personal approach and the poems’ autobiographical elements, which play a significant role in his illustrations not only of American society and politics, but also of his own position within the community. All three of the discussed poems contain multiple references and fitting images from Ginsberg’s life—mostly concerning the everyday reality influenced by the Cold War alongside consumerism and conformity—and so the distinction between the poet and the poetic persona is very thin, perhaps non-existent. The poetic voice communicates Ginsberg’s “personal emotions and memories,” bringing together the notions of casual depiction with dramatic commentary, illustrating everyday America, while at the same time criticizing American society, and adding to the validity of his illustrations.⁹

⁶ Steven Gould Axelrod, “Between Modernism and Postmodernism: The Cold War Poetics of Bishop, Lowell, and Ginsberg,” *Pacific Coast Philology* 42, 1 (2007): 8, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25474214>.

⁷ Axelrod, “Between Modernism and Postmodernism,” 9.

⁸ Axelrod, “Between Modernism and Postmodernism,” 10.

⁹ Axelrod, “Between Modernism and Postmodernism,” 8.

2.1 Ginsberg at the Greyhound Terminal

Drawing from Ginsberg's personal experience, "In the Baggage Room at Greyhound," depicts the grim reality of working-class America through vivid illustrations enhanced by poetic vocabulary and a melodramatic tone, imagery and choice of language, due to which the work carries a sense of dislocation and exclusion. The poem displays a specific place, people and things to portray the America the poet experiences: the America of common, dispirited people in their natural environment and their sometimes dire financial situations. Instead of celebrating post-war America's working conditions and economy, it displays the social atmosphere in bleak and pessimistic terms, complaining about the economic and mental state of the workers, and indirectly introduces issues such as racism, justice and politics, focusing on people who are living at the fringes of society.

As is alluded to in the title, the setting of the poem is a Greyhound bus station in North America, where the narrator observes his surroundings and expresses his emotions in regards to the scene. The poem refers to an exact time of "12:15 A.M., May 6, 1956,"¹⁰ which corresponds with the fact that Ginsberg himself worked at Greyhound in 1956.¹¹ As an ex-worker at the Greyhound, Ginsberg cannot really be considered as an outsider there, but at the same time, the narrator of the poem operates as a passive observer without any visible interaction with anyone.

Illustrating people and the setting, the narrator says:

In the depths of the Greyhound Terminal
sitting dumbly on a baggage truck looking at the sky
 waiting for the Los Angeles Express to depart
worrying about eternity over the Post Office roof in
 the night-time red downtown heaven,
staring through my eyeglasses I realized shuddering
 these thoughts were not eternity, nor the poverty
 of our lives, irritable baggage clerks,

¹⁰ Allen Ginsberg, "In the Baggage Room at Greyhound," *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1959), 47.

¹¹ Bill Morgan, *Letters of Allen Ginsberg* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2008), 128.

nor the millions of weeping relatives surrounding the
 buses waving goodbye,
nor other millions of the poor rushing around from
 city to city to see their loved ones,
nor an indian dead with fright talking to a huge cop
 by the Coke machine,
nor this trembling old lady with a cane taking the last
 trip of her life,
nor the red-capped cynical porter collecting his quar-
 ters and smiling over the smashed baggage,
nor me looking around at the horrible dream,
nor mustached negro Operating Clerk named Spade,
 dealing out with his marvelous long hand the
 fate of thousands of express packages,
nor fairy Sam in the basement limping from leaden
 trunk to trunk,
nor Joe at the counter with his nervous breakdown
 smiling cowardly at the customers,
nor the grayish-green whale's stomach interior loft
 where we keep the baggage in hideous racks,
hundreds of suitcases full of tragedy rocking back and
 forth waiting to be opened,
nor the baggage that's lost, nor damaged handles,
 nameplates vanished, busted wires & broken
 ropes, whole trunks exploding on the concrete
 floor,
nor seabags emptied into the night in the final
 warehouse.¹²

Written as a single long sentence, the above quotation contains a gloomy depiction of the atmosphere at the Greyhound Terminal, showing a diversity of people from young to old, from Native Americans to African Americans. Thanks to the detailed illustrations of “baggage clerks” and “millions of the poor rushing around from city to city,” it is clear that the focus is on the lower-class of American society. All of the images are full of emotion as some people are described as “weeping,” others are “dead with fright” or “trembling.” There is a notion of melancholy running through the poem due to these expressions, and it is even more highlighted by melodramatic phrases like “worrying about eternity,” “last / trip of her

¹² Ginsberg, “In the Baggage Room at Greyhound,” 44-45.

life” and “the horrible dream.” The theme of traveling evokes a sense of dislocation, supporting the idea of an outsider, or somebody who does not feel he belongs.

Few individuals are pointed out in the poem, and they are mostly people that somehow stand out in society: an old person, a Native American, an African American, a disabled or mentally unstable worker, the poor, the queer. Although racism and racial segregation was still in full effect in the 1950s, the one individual the speaker celebrates the most is “mustached negro Operating Clerk named Spade,” who “reminded [the narrator] of [an] Angel,” and the reference to “an indian” terrified of “a huge cop” further elaborates on the issue of racism and injustice, although indirectly, as the interpretation of what the image means is left for the reader.¹³ These images simply portray the reality of the Greyhound station, but it is also an indirect political statement, as these groups are often excluded from mainstream post-war American society. The speaker, together with his fellow coworkers and some other individuals, are further separated from the community due to their economic circumstances, and the whole poem presents a sort of meditation on the situation. The narrator concludes:

The wage they pay us is too low to live on. Tragedy
reduced to numbers.
This for the poor shepherds. I am a communist.
Farewell ye Greyhound where I suffered so much,
hurt my knee and scraped my hand and built
my pectoral muscles big as a vagina.¹⁴

The three previous stanzas were all written as one long line, but the last stanza, quoted above, presents shorter sentences, which suggest much angrier sentiments. The melodramatic tone of the poem, which is strengthened by the word choice and syntax, slowly builds the tension of Ginsberg’s critique and escalates through phrases “I am a communist” and “muscles big as a vagina,” due to the utilization of two words that are considered inappropriate, politically or poetically.

¹³ Ginsberg, “In the Baggage Room at Greyhound,” 44-45.

¹⁴ Ginsberg, “In the Baggage Room at Greyhound,” 47-48.

It is clear that “In the Baggage Room at Greyhound” deals with the depiction of lower or working-class society in the United States. The subjectivity of the speaker and the connotation of certain phrases give a slightly political feel to the work, and the choice of language creates a both pessimistic and melodramatic tone that only highlights the author's dissatisfaction with what he experienced and witnessed. Through the portrayal of specific people, settings and things, Ginsberg illustrates the dire conditions, in which he and others that are not living the ideal of American post-war life have to exist. Although the poem talks about a variety of people across society, there is a sense of dislocation and misery that unites them, placing all of them on the outskirts of the standard American community. An interesting echo of this can be found in a statement by Johnston, who argues that the Beats, rather than “defining a political or economic position,” were determined to “escap[e] from one,” and often connected “values of awareness with a detachment from the existing society.”¹⁵

2.2 Ginsberg in the Supermarket

Ehrenreich states that the authors of Beat Generation displayed “the first all-out critique of American consumer culture,” which can be seen in Ginsberg’s “Supermarket in California.”¹⁶ However, even though the poem is full of references to shopping and family life in Cold War America, that is just the backdrop. Through the juxtaposition of nineteenth-century America represented by Walt Whitman, the poem contemplates what is and what could have been, and demonstrates the emotions of someone who feels like an outcast in Cold War society. The depiction of consumerism, conformity and the standard of American community—families, grocery stores, and homes—is enacted through simple but

¹⁵ Allan Johnston, “Consumption, Addiction, Vision, Energy: Political Economies and Utopian Visions in the Writings of the Beat Generation,” *College Literature* 32, 2 (Spring, 2005): 103, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25115269>.

¹⁶ Johnston, “Consumption, Addiction, Vision, Energy,” 104.

striking images, and the choice of language and references create a sense of nostalgia, loneliness and especially dislocation, expressing the exclusion of the narrator from this post-war America, maintaining the motif of an outsider. The autobiographical elements in “Supermarket in California” and dramatic images from Greek mythology further elaborate the feeling of never being able to fit in. Ginsberg’s personality, next to the figures of Whitman and García Lorca, suggests the idea of an individual who is queer, probably underprivileged, without a family, and also politically active—all of which was against the standards of post-war America—but at the same time, he represent someone who does not seem to make any attempt to be part of a community that vilifies him and supports values he does not.

It seems that the narrator prefers to walk alone, fantasizing about a dead writer, with whom he at least feels some sort of connection:

What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for I walked down the sidestreets under the trees with a headache self-conscious looking at the full moon.

In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!

What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!—and you, García Lorca, what were you doing down by the watermelons?

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.

I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the pork chops? What price bananas? Are you my Angel?

I wandered in and out of the brilliant stacks of cans following you, and followed in my imagination by the store detective.

We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier.¹⁷

¹⁷ Ginsberg, “Supermarket in California,” 29.

These lines display the theme of shopping via phrases such as “neon fruit supermarket,” “grocery boys” and “the cashier,” and through the depiction of “whole families shopping at night,” the speaker hints at the idea of postwar American family ideals. However, these images make the narrator think of the queer poets Walt Whitman and García Lorca. Homosexuality is definitely something that would make a person an outcast in 1950s’ American society due to the Lavender Scare, which was concerned with the persecution of homosexuals who were like communists viewed as “security risks.”¹⁸ The narrator is clearly present throughout the quote, commenting on what he sees in a style of a monologue directed at the two poets, talking about “shopping for images,” which is then skillfully elaborated on by short exclamations portraying those “images,” which seem almost like a description of an advertising poster. However, the dramatic nature of those expressions emphasized by exclamation marks makes them sound almost ironic and mocking. Rather than rejoicing in the affluence, the speaker seems to rebel against the expected standard, not only by walking alone and thinking about queer poets, but also by not buying anything, and thus not participating in the consumerist and conformist culture.

Even without digging into Ginsberg’s biography, the reference to Whitman as a “childless, lonely old grubber,” who is “eyeing the grocery boys,” brings the poem the notion of queerness or otherness into the poem, as it is juxtaposed against the “husbands,” “wives” and “babies,” which symbolize the conformist society that advocated familial relationships. Both the speaker and Whitman walk through the aisles in what he calls “solitary fancy,” passively and actively trying everything, but not buying into the act of consumption by “never passing the cashier.” Although the focus seems to be on the grocery store, there is the ever-present concept of a queer old man, who is bewildered by all he can see around him,

¹⁸ Delbos, *The New American Poetry and Cold War Nationalism*, 91.

especially if his America of the past was distinct and stood for different values. The theme of dislocation from society and solitude is even more prominent in the last stanza:

Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors
close in an hour. Which way does your beard point
tonight?

(I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in
the supermarket and feel absurd.)

Will we walk all night through solitary streets?
The trees add shade to shade, lights out in the houses,
we'll both be lonely.

Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love
past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent
cottage?

Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-
teacher, what America did you have when Charon quit
poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking bank
and stood watching the boat disappear on the black
waters of Lethe?¹⁹

After walking through the supermarket where the speaker, even though he is in the company of other people, seems alone, he imagines walking outside “through solitary streets,” “dreaming of the lost America of love,” which seems to be substituted by the America of commercialism. Phrases such as “our silent cottage,” “lonely old courage- / seeker,” and “we’ll both be lonely” emphasize the idea of the isolation these two writers experience, and the theme of wandering, which is present throughout the poem, supports even further the sentiment of displacement. Both of these emotions can be felt in the last picture of Whitman standing alone in an underworld, dramatizing the fact that the America and the company the speaker fantasizes about is out of reach, replaced by a society which might never accept him, or his views and values.

“Supermarket in California” presents American consumer and conformist culture as a backdrop to larger issues through realistic representations, which are devoid of any emotion. The depictions of a supermarket, families, and homes are very plain, almost mocking, as they are mostly in a style of ironic exclamations. The illustrations are juxtaposed against the idea

¹⁹ Ginsberg, “Supermarket in California,” 30.

of nineteenth-century America, and through the inclusion of queer poets—Whitman and García Lorca—in Ginsberg’s musings, portrayed via more emotionally-colored pictures. The poem is written as a monologue, but the narrator actually addresses Whitman by asking him various questions, although they are somewhat rhetorical, because of course Whitman cannot answer them. By placing the commercial culture next to Whitmanic America, the poet shows his dissatisfaction with what there is now, and laments what was and could have been. Through the motif of wandering, Ginsberg emphasizes the feeling of dislocation from society into which he does not fit—not only as a single man who does not follow the trend of consumerism, or who walks and lives in a small house, rather than having a car and a big house, but also because he is a homosexual in society disturbed by the Lavender Scare. Although Dandeleles claims that in comparison to Whitman, much of Ginsberg’s poetry is “overly political,” this does not seem to be true for “Supermarket in California,” which, even though it hints subtly at social criticism, seems more like a nostalgic lamentation for a long-gone American society and a sorrowful realization of the poet’s own displacement and loneliness.²⁰ Jeffs claims that “America’s climate of war and its economics of capitalism engendered a race [...] that Ginsberg juxtaposes with his emphasis on Whitmanic, tenderly comradeship.”²¹

2.3 Ginsberg as Frustrated Outsider in America

Paul Geneson in conversation with Ginsberg mentions the poet’s use of what they call “magic phrases,” which communicate ideas that, as Ginsberg says, alluding to Alexander Pope, “oft [were] thought, but ne’er so well expressed.”²² Geneson particularly remembers

²⁰ Gregory M. Dandeleles, “The Laurel Tree: War and Walt Whitman in Allen Ginsberg’s ‘America,’” *The Journal of American Culture* 36, 3 (September, 2013): 221, Wiley, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jacc.12026>.

²¹ Dandeleles, “The Laurel Tree Cudgel,” 221.

²² Paul Geneson, et al., “A Conversation with Allen Ginsberg,” *Chicago Review* 27, 1 (Summer, 1975): 32, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25303265>.

the following utterance: “I hereby declare the end of war.”²³ It is not surprising that Ginsberg was heard saying that “great poetry ought to be read aloud,” because such “magic” expressions, which he often utilized in his poetry, are even more powerful spoken in front of an audience.²⁴ Similar equivalents to the end-of-war declaration can be found in the 1956 poem “America.” Here the poet expresses his dissatisfaction with Cold War America, especially in regards to its society and politics, which he seems to oppose and mock. American society stands for values that make the poet an outcast, but in “America,” the poet’s commentary gives the impression that he accepts it proudly and rather decides to speak up about what he sees as wrong. There is a sense of sincerity, irritation and irony throughout the verses, thanks to the simplicity and frankness of some statements, and the humor of others.

Each line, however random, is passionate and sharp, and the juxtaposition of dramatic phrases against more sarcastic ones adds to the poem’s power to express the poet’s annoyance with American society and government:

America I’ve given you all and now I’m nothing.
America two dollars and twentyseven cents January
17, 1956.
I can’t stand my own mind.
America when will we end the human war?
Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.
I don’t feel good don’t bother me.
I won’t write my poem till I’m in my right mind.
America when will you be angelic?
When will you take off your clothes?
When will you look at yourself through the grave?
When will you be worthy of your million Trotskyites?
America why are your libraries full of tears?
America when will you send your eggs to India?
I’m sick of your insane demands.
When can I go into a supermarket and buy what I
need with my good looks?
America after all it is you and I who are perfect not
the next world.
Your machinery is too much for me.

²³ Geneson, “A Conversation with Allen Ginsberg,” 32.

²⁴ Geneson, “A Conversation with Allen Ginsberg,” 27.

You made me want to be a saint.
There must be some other way to settle this argument.
Burroughs is in Tangiers I don't think he'll come back
it's sinister.²⁵

Many “magic phrases” are utilized in the above quotation, and various things are being commented upon here. What stands out is the fact that the speaker addresses America directly, as if it was a person he could reason with. Through questions and assertions, the poem critiques the economy, consumerism and politics. The criticism of the Cold War and the use of nuclear weapons is obvious from the excerpt, especially due to two phrases that are placed next to each other. The speaker asks America “when will [they] end the human war,” but right after he condemns the use of the “atom bomb,” which led to the end of WWII and the beginning of the Cold War.²⁶ He clearly wants the wars to end, but does not support the use of violence in order to achieve peace, as he says that America’s “machinery is too much” for him, and that “there must be some other way to settle this argument.” The critique of the state of Cold War American society continues throughout the poem.

The speaker pleads with America in one sentence, but then ridicules its war propaganda in the next one:

America you don't really want to go to war.
America its them bad Russians.
Them Russians them Russians and them Chinamen.
And them Russians.
The Russia wants to eat us alive. The Russia's power
mad. She wants to take our cars from out our
garages.
Her wants to grab Chicago. Her needs a Red *Reader's*
Digest. Her wants our auto plants in Siberia.
Him big bureaucracy running our fillingsta-
tions.
That no good. Ugh. Him make Indians learn read.
Him need big black niggers. Hah. Her make us
all work sixteen hours a day. Help.²⁷

²⁵ Ginsberg, “America,” 39.

²⁶ Dandele, “The Laurel Tree Cudgel,” 225.

²⁷ Ginsberg, “America,” 42-43.

In this excerpt, the narrator refers to war again, but he also mentions Russia and China, two major countries that were involved in the Cold War with the United States. The irony of the last line shows how the government and society blamed everything on Russia, regardless of whether it made sense or not. The lack of proper syntax results in a comical effect, downplaying the statements about Russia, but also poking fun at the ignorance of Americans. Nevertheless, even though the poem starts strongly, attacking America's involvement in twentieth-century wars, the rest of the poem carries a sense of the poet's vexation and his dislocation from America, mainly due to the present state of its society and politics, which castigates certain aspects of the poet's personality.

Dandele specifies that "America's enemies" during the Cold War were Russians but also "Communists in America," and as was mentioned before, the 1950s witnessed rising antagonism toward homosexuals, whom many people considered as dangerous as communists, bringing forward two major political agendas: The Red Scare and the Lavender Scare.²⁸ Ginsberg did not try to hide his homosexuality and often spoke about his mother's political history, which was linked to communism. Moreover, Ginsberg's Russian heritage resonates strangely in relation to the phrase "them bad Russians." But even though these three words would be offensive enough to the state, Ginsberg likes to add more to strengthen his image as a madman and a rebel, strengthening his position as an outcast. This can be seen in the following lines:

America I feel sentimental about the Wobblies.
America I used to be a communist when I was a kid
 I'm not sorry.
I smoke marijuana every chance I get.
I sit in my house for days on end and stare at the roses
 in the closet.
When I go to Chinatown I get drunk and never get laid.
My mind is made up there's going to be trouble.
You should have seen me reading Marx.
My psychoanalyst thinks I'm perfectly right.

²⁸ Dandele, "The Laurel Tree Cudgel," 224.

[...]

America when I was seven momma took me to Communist Cell meetings they sold us garbanzos a handful per ticket a ticket costs a nickel and the speeches were free everybody was angelic and sentimental about the workers it was all so sincere you have no idea what a good thing the party was in 1835 Scott Nearing was a grand old man a real mensch Mother Bloor made me cry I once saw Israel Amter plain. Everybody must have been a spy.²⁹

These are quite explicit references through which the speaker admits his affiliation to Communism, and although his mother's influence is clear, he stresses that he is "not sorry" about it, and even describes the "Communist Cell meetings" from a child's perspective with an ironic remark that "everybody must have been a spy." A sense of rebellion can be heard in the above phrases, but there are also subtle references to mental instability and dislocation in the lines about "Chinatown" and a "psychoanalyst."

It is apparent that "America" is spoken in the voice of an outcast, who seems irritated and angry with the country, its society and politics. The condemnation of America's participation in twentieth-century wars is openly pronounced in the poem, alongside ridicule of the government's propagandas. The poet is American, but his natural identity, which is connected to Russia and Communism via his mother, as well as his sexual preferences, exclude him from society and make him an adversary of Cold-War America. Dandeleles states that Ginsberg cannot "give himself fully to a cause which saw him as the enemy," but the ending of "America" seems to go against that claim:

I'd better get right down to the job.
It's true I don't want to join the Army or turn lathes
in precision parts factories, I'm nearsighted and
psychopathic anyway.
America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel.³⁰

²⁹ Ginsberg, "America," 40-42.

³⁰ Ginsberg, "America," 43.

Thus, the poem ends with a notion of the narrator's active participation in the changes he sees as necessary in American society. Actually, rather than a sense of dislocation, there is a pronounced acceptance of his role as an outcast with a realization that the poet himself is "America," and so, even though he is queer and mad he is "putting [his] shoulder to the wheel." Overall, via the utilization of "magic phrases," both dramatic and ironic, with explicit references to specific ideas, "America" presents a critique of the 1950s American society, politics and the Cold War through the lens of an American citizen concerned with the state of his native country, although he is an outcast from it.

2.4 Conclusion

Allen Ginsberg, a queer poet and the son of a Russian immigrant with connections to Communism, clearly represents an individual who did not quite fit within the American society of the 1950s, which was troubled by threats of the Cold War as well as homosexual and Communist paranoia. His poetry comments on the present state of America, its community and the ongoing war and politics. *Howl and Other Poems*, which was published at the height of the Cold War, is primarily concerned with depicting the United States. Particularly, "In The Baggage Room at Greyhound," "Supermarket in California" and "America" discuss society and the government from the perspective of someone who is both an American citizen and an outsider. The first poem focuses on the working-class environment, while in "Supermarket in California" the outcast meets the more mainstream consumerist society, resulting in his voluntary seclusion and his lamentation of a long-gone America that existed before the twentieth century, ruled by repression and wars, came into being. "America," the most political of the three, further explores the political and social atmosphere of Cold War America, where a person connected to Russia, Communism and homosexuality was regarded as the enemy. Although the poems seem to condemn 1950s America, the narrator retains a sense of patriotism towards his native country, illustrating his

position as an outcast without sounding too bitter in regard to his situation. On the other hand, he openly demonstrates his criticism of consumerism and the use of nuclear weapons, both of which are representative of Cold War America.

3. Gregory Corso and The Melodramatic Story of a Monster

Gregory Corso, another important figure of the Beat Generation, was not only “often compared to [...] Percy Bysshe Shelley,” but also “remained one of the most popular Beat poets” throughout his life.³¹ Corso believed that the artist’s obligation was “to be a site of resistance to everything negative.”³² His 1970s collection *Elegiac Feelings American*, namely the poem “The American Way,” does just that: it portrays Corso’s critique of post-war America. In this poem, Corso depicts American society, which was at the time burdened by the aftermath of World War II, and by the threats imposed by the Cold War, through a story about a monster that endangers the American people, although the monster is not any outside threat but the American Way itself. Corso critiques the American society of his time by focusing on American values, such as education, progress and individualism, which were advocated by the ideology behind “The American way” and “The American Dream.” He uses the motif of a story of a monster, images related to Catholicism, direct commentary, and a unique, melodramatic tone to offer a critique of twentieth-century American society, which had, according to him, significantly deteriorated in comparison to nineteenth-century America, and to articulate his belief in the need for a social change. Via the chosen images and language, Corso shows that at present the difference between good and evil is not as easily distinguished and that it is not really the fault of American citizens. Nevertheless, examining this particular poem and these aspects of Corso’s writing style makes it clear that Corso views the state of America’s society of his time as in decline and in need of improvement.

³¹ Paul Varner, *Historical Dictionary of the Beat Movement* (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 64, ISBN 1-280-84417-5, EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=e000xww&AN=473797&lang=cs&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

³² Kimmelman, *The Facts On File*, 103.

Corso's childhood in New York City was filled with hardships and misfortune: from living on the streets to spending time in prison.³³ He began reading classical literature and even writing poetry quite early, but Corso's poetic career and lifelong friendship with Allen Ginsberg began in 1950 in a Greenwich Village bar shortly after his final release from prison, and, together with Jack Kerouac, Ginsberg and Corso composed what Burt Kimmelman calls "the poetic nucleus" of the Beat Movement.³⁴ The beatniks commented on the situation of postwar American society as soon as World War II ended, and with time their views became more articulate and direct,³⁵ but Allan Johnson claims that Corso himself was not "directly involved in social criticism."³⁶ Although, his personal preference was not to belong to any poetic group, Corso's poetry fits within the notions of the Beat Generation,³⁷ and his use of long lines, frequent repetitions and often shocking imagery to portray his ideas show the influence Ginsberg had on Corso's literary creation, which is especially visible in *Elegiac Feelings American*, though it still carries his unique voice.³⁸ Corso's early poetry was, according to Ginsberg's opinion, often sentimental and full of street talk and slang, but Loni Reynolds notes that his later work grew increasingly political and more interested in the condition of his native country, although the critic makes clear that Corso retained his "Catholic sensibility," which often influenced his work.³⁹

3.1 Corso and the Motif of Catholicism

Although Corso's work is not as spiritual as that of Ginsberg, Reynolds claims that "his writing explores the possibility of religious redemption in the shattered, uncertain

³³ Nelly Reifler, "Corso, Gregory (1930-2001)," *World Poets*, ed. by Ron Padgett, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000), 259, Gale eBooks, <https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/apps/doc/CX1386400033/GVRL?u=karlova&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=f38d56e3>, accessed January 21, 2023.

³⁴ Kimmelman, *The Facts on File*, 103.

³⁵ Johnston, "Consumption, Addiction, Vision, Energy," 103.

³⁶ Johnson, "Consumption, Addiction, Vision, Energy," 118.

³⁷ Reifler, "Corso, Gregory," 264.

³⁸ Loni Reynolds, "'A Humane Yet Dark Tribute to Life: The Eucharist in the Work of Gregory Corso,'" *Religion & Literature*, vol. 47, no. 1 (Spring, 2015): 162, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24752954>.

³⁹ Reynolds, "A Humane Yet Dark Tribute to Life," 162.

mid-twentieth century world,”⁴⁰ and, since Corso was a Catholic himself, he often utilizes the motif and metaphors of Catholicism in his poetry.⁴¹ “The American Way” shows that American society’s problems have roots in its institutions, which control the people, and that in the new modernized world full of consumerism. Further, the poem suggests that Christ and the devil are difficult to tell apart, because American values and priorities have changed. This commentary on American society is illustrated via the recurrent motif of a monster, which Corso also manages to portray through images inspired by the biblical story, such as its characters and events, and Catholic traditions. Concepts related to Catholicism appear as early as the sixth line of “The American Way:”

They are frankensteining Christ in America
 in their Sunday campaigns
They are putting the fear of Christ in America
 under their tents in their Sunday campaigns
They are driving old ladies mad with Christ in America
They are televising the gift of healing and the fear of hell
 in America under their tents in their Sunday
 campaigns⁴²

It might be hard to say for sure what the above quotation means by “they,” because, although at first glance one could argue the poem talks about Americans in general, it might not be as simple as that. Reynolds asserts that Corso’s view of Catholicism seems conflicting at times, but the critic stresses that it does not mean that Corso rejects faith. He does, however, seem to question and judge the “institutional Church.”⁴³ Therefore, it stands to reason that “they” more likely represents the Church and that the criticism is aimed at the institution and their behavior.

Throughout the poem, institutions are said to be doing various things to Christ in America through imagery that evokes the idea of a monster: from reanimating Him out of

⁴⁰ Reynolds, “A Humane Yet Dark Tribute to Life,” 143.

⁴¹ Reynolds, “A Humane Yet Dark Tribute to Life,” 143.

⁴² Gregory Corso, “The American Way,” *Elegiac Feelings American* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 69, ProQuest <https://www.proquest.com/books/american-way/docview/2141171254/se-2?accountid=15618>.

⁴³ Reynolds, “A Humane Yet Dark Tribute to Life,” 163.

dead parts, “frankensteining” him, “putting the fear of” Him in people, to making him into a spectacle to be televised. But after introducing these, for the narrator, false understandings of Christ, the poem goes on in the third stanza setting the record straight:

Man is not guilty Christ in not to be feared
I am telling you the American Way is a hideous monster
 eating Christ making Him into Oreos and Dr. Pepper
 the sacrament of its foul mouth
I am telling you the devil is impersonating Christ in America⁴⁴

The narrator seems to want to reassure the reader that Christ is not the villain or the monster here, on the contrary, it is the American way of life and, presumably, the institutional Church of the time, because “they” use Christ as a tool for the manipulation of American society into blind worship and fear. The poem comments further on this by reimagining the act of Eucharist made of “Oreos” and “Dr. Pepper” instead of the traditional bread and wine, bringing America’s consumerism into Catholic practice and into the poem. The narrator indicates that consumerism is replacing Christianity as the new religion, and that these American-made products are seen as the savior, and even if, as Reynolds states, this type of “Christ might be modernized, reflective of some sort of progress,” it is false and evil idol that Corso likens to the devil.⁴⁵ The motifs related to Catholicism are applied in order to critique the Church, but are also aimed at America and its society, which is fueled by consumerism instead of faith. Nevertheless, however bleak or harsh the criticism is throughout the poem, it does end on a positive, if violent note:

I see standing on the skin of the Way
 America to be as proud and victorious as St.
 Michael on the neck of the fallen Lucifer—⁴⁶

With the combination of Catholicism and the image of a monster, which for most Catholics would automatically refer to the devil, it makes sense the metaphor of the biblical battle between St. Michael and Lucifer is also alluded to. Through this allusion, Corso demonstrates

⁴⁴ Corso, “The American Way,” 70.

⁴⁵ Reynolds, “A Humane Yet Dark Tribute to Life,” 162.

⁴⁶ Corso, “The American Way,” 75.

his optimism that the corrupted way of American life and the issues disrupting the well-being of American society, can one day be overcome by America herself.

Clearly, one of the motifs through which Corso portrays and comments on America is that of Catholicism, a tradition to which he has a personal connection. Mainly, he utilizes the notions of Christ and the Devil, but he also refers to the Catholic custom of the Eucharist, and the biblical battle between two archangels. Even in this theme of religion, however, Corso applies the idea of a monster threatening the American people, clarifying who is the metaphorical Christ and who is the devil. From the above quotations, it is visible that Corso does not criticize American people directly. Instead, he criticizes the institutions and the established way of life regarded as the standard of American society. Issues of Catholicism get mixed with the criticism of other everyday life issues in the poem, such as consumerism. For Corso, the American Way, which will be addressed in more detail in the following chapters, is a monster, the devil, something that needs to be eradicated just like St. Michael overcomes Lucifer in the Bible. Corso's work might examine the possibility of religious redemption in a postwar America, however, some claim he believed that there was a need for a Christ of "new consciousness" that would fit within the ever-changing modern world, because the one they worship now seems to do more harm than help.⁴⁷

3.2 Corso and the Critique of American Values

Corso's commentary in "The American Way" deals primarily with the issue of endorsing the American values that are closely connected to the American way of life and the American Dream, and with how America has or has not changed in regards to these values, which can be dated back to the country's beginnings. Via the image of a monster, commentary on specific principles advocated by the society, and comparison of the twentieth-century America to that of eighteenth century, Corso critiques the American way of

⁴⁷ Reynolds, "A Humane Yet Dark Tribute to Life," 144.

life and the illusion of the American Dream, and shows that the state, upkeep and growth—or lack thereof—of the values of twentieth-century American society are a greater threat than any other outside forces.

However, the issue of the American way of life likened to a monster is not just pointed out, the poem expresses the necessity for this threat to be eradicated. The style of living is referred to directly in the title of the poem, because the phrase “the American Way” is a nationalistic ethos, which stands for “a method or manner of behaving or living that is regarded as distinctively characteristic of the U.S and representative of its values.”⁴⁸ In 1955, just six years before the composition of “The American Way,” Will Herberg wrote:

The American Way of Life is *individualistic* [...]. It affirms the supreme value and dignity of the individual [...]; it defines an ethic of self-reliance, merit, and character, and judges by achievement [...]. The American believes in *progress*, in *self-improvement*, and quite fanatically in *education*. But above all, the American is idealistic [...].⁴⁹

The above quote mentions some of the concepts Corso’s critique also touches upon in regards to American society: individualism, education, progress and self-improvement, and due to the abstract nature of the theory of the American way and the lack of one single sufficient interpretation, Herberg’s quote could be used as a starting point while analyzing the social criticism of the poem, because it was written around the same time, and while Herberg celebrated the American Way, Corso represented it as a monster.

Herberg claims that the life of Americans is “individualistic,” but Corso’s conviction is that America’s society creates “replica[s]” of people that “think alike / dress alike believe alike do alike,” which is addressed even in other lines:⁵⁰

I see in every American Express
[...]
I see the same face the same sound of voice
the same clothes the same walk

⁴⁸ “American way,” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/American%20way>, Accessed 28 Jan. 2023.

⁴⁹ Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1955), 79.

⁵⁰ Corso, “The American Way,” 70.

I see mothers & fathers
no difference among them
Replicas
They not only speak and walk and think alike
they have the same face!
What did this monstrous thing?
What regiments a people so?⁵¹

Thus, instead of supporting individualism, Corso argues that America makes everyone the same, from their looks to their needs, but it is important to note that he does not blame the whole society, but mainly responsible for education. Even if Herberg claims that the “American believes [...] quite fanatically in education,” which might easily be true, there is a sense of disapproval of the state of it in the poem, when the speaker asserts:

America’s educators & preachers are the mental-dictators
of false intelligence they will not allow America
to be smart
they will only allow death to make America smart
Educators & communicators are the lackeys of the
American Way
They enslave the minds of the young
and the young are willing slaves (but not for long)
because who is to doubt the American Way
is not the way?
The duty of these educators is no different
then the duty of a factory foreman
Replica production [...] ⁵²

It can be seen that the narrator views “educators” and “preachers” as supporters of the “monster;” and even likens them to “mental-dictators.” Since these individuals are in charge of the education of young Americans, the narrator believes they are the ones causing this sameness and unintelligence, which is referred to just a few lines above by saying: “ignorance is a good Ameri-cun.” The poem does not claim that all educators are evil, nevertheless, those who are not, those “few great educators,” are portrayed as “weak [and] helpless,” and the poems suggests that they are in fact more “dangerous because their intelligence is not denied / and so give faith to the young.”⁵³ Thus, the speaker dares to

⁵¹ Corso, “The American Way,” 73.

⁵² Corso, “The American Way,” 70.

⁵³ Corso, “The American Way,” 70.

conclude that “if America falls it will be the blame of its educators,” because they reinforce the monstrous “American Way” through control of America’s young generation, which might blindly believe this way to be the right way, and so not demand a change.⁵⁴ The last thing referred to in Herberg’s quote is progress and self-improvement, to which the poem alludes through the metaphor of growing.

The narrator says that “America has grown into the American Way,” and that “it has grown into an old thing.”⁵⁵ Growing old would be the logical direction for a human being, but evolution of the world for Corso means being young and constantly new; the speaker says: “the true direction grows ever young.”⁵⁶ The poem complains about the lack of growth and preservation of America’s values in comparison to its past in the following lines:

How outrageous it is that something old and sad
 from the pre-age incorporates each new age—
Do I say the Declaration of Independence is old?
Yes I say what was good for 1789 is not good for 1960
It was right and new to say all men were created equal
 because it was a light then
But today it is tragic to say it
 today it should be fact—
Man has been on earth a long time
One would think with his mania for growth
 he would, by now, have outgrown such things as
 constitutions manifestos codes commandments
 that he could well live in this world without them
 and know instinctively how to live and be⁵⁷

Although Corso picks at a highly respected document of American history, he is not disrespectful of it; he agrees that in the past it was necessary to tell America that “all men were created equal.” Back then it was a novelty, but it is clear that Corso concludes that America should have outgrown this necessity, that it should have advanced and automatically uphold these values. The reference to “constitutions manifestos codes commandments” is definitely related to the political situation during the Cold War, and one could interpret it as

⁵⁴ Corso, “The American Way,” 71.

⁵⁵ Corso, “The American Way,” 71.

⁵⁶ Corso, “The American Way,” 71.

⁵⁷ Corso, “The American Way,” 71.

an opinion that by then there should be no need for such writings; perhaps everyone should know the difference between good and evil. On the whole, Corso's poem implies that the values the society promises to every American, such as equality and freedom, do not seem to be realized. These values are directly linked to the American Dream, which is, according to the narrator, what the "American Way" is born out of.⁵⁸

Throughout the poem, the speaker ascertains the link between the "Way" and the American Dream thus:

What is the Way?
The Way was born out of the American Dream
 a nightmare—
The state of Americans today compared to the Americans
 of the 18th century proves the nightmare—⁵⁹

The phrase "the American Dream" is another nationalistic ethos and widely recognized concept, which is, however, also hard to define. Many claim that there cannot be one single satisfactory explanation, because technically there is not only one American Dream anymore.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, Hauhart and Sardoč explore its possible origins and related ideas in and have come up with terms such as hope, freedom, individuality, material wealth, equality, and many more.⁶¹ Hence, it is not surprising that the poem calls the American Dream a "nightmare," since what is generally recognized as basic concepts behind the American Dream, is exactly what is demonstrated as wrong with 1960s America. For the speaker "America *today* is America's greatest threat," and "it will not be the Communists will kill America / no but America itself," which is quite a daring statement for a Cold War era. Therefore, Corso's criticism is based on the comparison of what America looked like when values connected to the American way and the American Dream were first formed, and how these values are or are not advocated in Cold-War America.

⁵⁸ Corso, "The American Way," 73.

⁵⁹ Corso, "The American Way," 73.

⁶⁰ R. Hauhart, M. Sardoč, "Introduction: What Is the American Dream?" in *The Routledge Handbook on the American Dream*, vol 1 (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022), 1.

⁶¹ Hauhart, Sardoč, "Introduction: What Is the American Dream?," 1-24.

Corso's portrayal of American society is concerned with the upkeep of American values that are expressed through phrases "the American Way" and "the American Dream." The concepts are those of individuality, education, progress, but ideas like equality and freedom are also mentioned. The American Dream is likened to a nightmare, based on the state of society of the 18th century and that of Corso's time, and on the visible lack of growth. Similarly, the American way is likened to a monster, because the cherished way of life, which is supposed to ensure the individuality, education and self-improvement of every American citizen, seems to deteriorate as people are molded into obedient copies. There is a parallel between Corso's criticism of the institutional Church and the American values enforced by nationalistic ideologies like the American way and the American Dream, because he does not judge Americans in general, but places blame on the system. Kimmelman argues that Beat poets "challenged the false sheen of American patriotism" and implies that the political situation of the second half of the twentieth century "contradicted America's wholesome image."⁶² Corso illustrates his disappointment with the United States via the motif of a beast, which will be addressed in more detail in the following section. This beast, or monster, oppresses and threatens American society, so that its people need to be saved in order to be "glorious [...] once again."⁶³

3.3 Corso and The Story of a Monster

"The American Way" is mostly concerned with the social criticism of twentieth-century America, but rather than being serious, Corso employs motifs, images and language, which are often extreme and over the top, resulting in a somewhat ironic and melodramatic tone, and via the motif of a monster the poem works not just like a social commentary, but like a dramatic story of a battle against evil. Corso's lines of various lengths

⁶² Kimmelman, *The Facts on File*, 33.

⁶³ Corso, "The American Way," 75.

are written in an informal style that evokes everyday speech, meaning that majority of the lines have a loose sentence structure, which might also resemble the stream-of-consciousness or a casual conversation, but here and there Corso chooses exaggerated expressions, strong language and exclamations, which sound, in comparison to the relaxed manner of much of the poem, dramatic and absurd. To express his opinions and uneasiness, Corso transforms the abstract dangers he speaks against, the American way of life, into a character of a monster with life-like features, which threatens the American people, who in turn need to be saved from it. This concept of a story is enforced by images related to the Bible and to freedom, battle and death, which are illustrated through a careful selection of words and expressions that often sound dramatic and serious, but also somewhat ridiculous. Therefore, this over-the-top tone makes one wonder whether to take the poem seriously or not.

The motif of a monster turns the poem into a story of an unnatural being dominating “great people;” a story that at the same time calls for their deliverance from this evil.⁶⁴ In the poem, only two other monsters are alluded to: Frankenstein and the Devil; but at the beginning Christ is also implied to be a monster, because “they are putting the fear of Christ” in people, telling them to beg for forgiveness. The speaker explains that He is not to be feared, hence the important message is that life is not always the way it seems, and that good and evil might be hard to distinguish, because often “the devil is impersonating Christ.”⁶⁵ Either way, the main monster of the poem remains the American way of life, which is also called a “beast,” and a “snake of many tentacles,” and is throughout the poem referred to as if it was a living being, because it was born, it eats or is fed, has a skin, and can die.⁶⁶ When highlighting the dangers of “the Way,” the motifs of subjugation, battle and death are utilized, which are then further enforced via exaggerated expressions and exclamations that result in a melodramatic tone, showing the poet’s attitude in regards to the urgency of the message.

⁶⁴ Corso, “The American Way,” 75.

⁶⁵ Corso, “The American Way,” 69-70.

⁶⁶ Corso, “The American Way,” 70-75.

Throughout the poem, the description of a monster is presented in logical order, and even if the poem does not really have a plot, it unfolds in a story-like manner. The monster is presented shortly after the beginning of the poem; it is described as an evil, living thing that eats and controls the American people, harming the entire society. As the poem progresses, the urgency of the situation and the need for deliverance is often commented upon:

They are caught in the Way—
And those who seek to get out of the Way
 can not
[...]
Something great and new and wonderful must happen
 to free man from this beast⁶⁷

The imagery of subjugation, such as imprisonment and slavery, which was also seen in the previous sections, illustrates the control the Way has over the American people, especially young people, who are even said to be fed to the Way.⁶⁸ It is clear, through the word “victory,” that Corso sees this oppression as a battle that needs to be won. The motif of battle is likewise clearly portrayed at the end of the poem, where the conflict between the Way and Americans is likened to the biblical fight between St. Michael and Lucifer. Nevertheless, the tone gets more dramatic as the narrator calls for the death of the Way.

According to the poem, the only manner through which this story can have a happy ending, is if “some great and wondrous event” happens. But this great event will have to be violent.⁶⁹ The speaker expresses his attitude and the gravity of the situation with the exclamation in the following lines:

This is serious! I do not mock or hate this
 I can only sense some mad vast conspiracy!
Helplessness is all it is!
[...]
There is no way getting out of the Way
The only way out is the death of the Way
And what will kill the Way but a new consciousness
[...]

⁶⁷ Corso, “The American Way,” 74-75.

⁶⁸ Corso, “The American Way,” 72.

⁶⁹ Corso, “The American Way,” 75.

It is a beast we can not see or even understand
For it be the condition of our minds
God how close to science fiction it all seems!
As if some power from another planet
 incorporated itself in the minds of us all
It could well be!⁷⁰

Based on the above quote, it is clear that the Way cannot just be overcome, it needs to die, like a monster in a movie. And while the call for its death sounds mellow, the rest of the lines are urgent and almost melodramatic. However, although the poem presents death as the only way out, perhaps the speaker just exaggerates, and he does not seem to know what or who should do something about the monster. In this way he introduces his worries about the American way of life and calls for social change, but does not know how to go about it. All he knows is that “some great and wondrous event” must happen for this war with the beast to end and for the American people to be saved, as you might see in a classic American movie.⁷¹

3.4 Conclusion

Although Corso is grouped with the Beat Generation, and much of his work shows the influence of Ginsberg, he cultivates a unique poetic style and expresses his opinions and criticism via motifs that he has a personal connection with. In “The American Way,” Corso portrays the state of American society in relation to values advocated by phrases “The American way” and “the American Dream,” and by pointing out differences between past and present America. The critique is illustrated via the comparison of the American way of life to a monster and by transforming the poem into a story about oppression and the dangers that American society is in because of said monster. But beside the issue of America’s values, Corso demonstrates via this unique narration that good and evil are often hard to distinguish, especially when people are controlled and their well-being threatened unbeknownst to them. Most of Corso’s opinions are articulated through the motif of Catholicism and images related

⁷⁰ Corso, “The American Way,” 74-75.

⁷¹ Corso, “The American Way,” 75.

to the Bible, via direct commentary on the past and present state of American society. And, for the most part, the urgency and his attitude towards the message of the poem is illustrated by the utilization of story-like features, such as characters and plot. The language of the poem creates a somewhat melodramatic tone, which sounds both serious and absurd. Nonetheless, “The American Way” is not just a simple poem concerned with social criticism, but due to its images and strong language, it is a melodramatic call to battle against the corrupted, dangerous American Way. Thus, the poem expresses the necessity for a social change, or, as Corso says, the need for a “new consciousness,” in order for America and the American people to be just as great as they once were.⁷²

⁷² Corso, “The American Way,” 74.

4. Amiri Baraka and the Age of Terror

Amiri Baraka, previously known as LeRoi Jones, was recognized by many as one of the most notable Black American writers and activists of the twentieth and twenty-first century. Having decidedly influenced African-American literary culture, Baraka is considered a “unique force in American poetry,” and his work, which spans at least seventy years, has the potential to agitate a variety of emotions due to its directness and engagement with delicate topics.⁷³ A year after the infamous September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York City, Baraka recited his poem “Somebody Blew Up America,” setting himself up for a national controversy with a few biting lines about Israel, because of which many condemned the work for “spreading hate speech” and called Baraka an Anti-Semite.⁷⁴ On the contrary, in the context of the September 11th terrorist attacks, which rekindled American nationalism, Baraka’s “Somebody Blew Up America” voices criticism of American society, especially of the government, by calling attention to America’s complicity in the history of violence and exploitation of the weak caused mainly by the belief of their own superiority and imperialist tendencies. In two hundred and forty-three lines, the poet utilizes the voice of an angry persona to portray America in terms of politics, war, terrorism, racism and other related topics, delivering a sharp and accusatory poem which is anything but passive. It depicts America's participation in the world's brutality, oppression and discrimination in order to criticize the hypocrisy of American nationalism and assumed supremacy through a collection of images and ideas taken from American history, politics and the struggle against terrorism. The speaker offers a window to America’s past to enlighten its present and future.

⁷³ Kimmelman, *The Facts On File*, 30.

⁷⁴ Piotr Gwiazda, “The Aesthetics of Politics/The Politics of Aesthetics: Amiri Baraka’s ‘Somebody Blew Up America,’” *Contemporary Literature* 45, 3 (Autumn, 2004): 465, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3593534>.

4.1 Baraka and 9/11

There are many poems in the American literary canon that inflamed the public and the government opinion with their political and social commentary of the United States, including Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America," which has the capacity to enrage and surprise readers thanks to its structure and biting allusions to specific events. Baraka's critique of America is introduced and motivated by an event imprinted in the memory of every patriotic citizen: the September 11th terrorist attacks in New York City and the subsequent presidential address delivered by George W. Bush. After the catastrophe, Bush as the president of the United States declared: "Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists;" a notion problematic for a Black American poet like Baraka, who knows well that even the "us" terrorizes people like him every day.⁷⁵ Inspired by the 9/11 attacks and Bush's address, Baraka's poem presents a myriad of questions in an authoritative voice and an angry, melodramatic tone, introducing the poem's themes concerning politics, terrorism, racism and American patriotism. Both the incident and the response it generated are of considerable relevance when analyzing the poem's structure, message and critique aimed at the hypocrisy of America and its assumed superiority. Due to the poem's historical context, the title of the poem, "Somebody Blew Up America," and many words like "terrorists" and "bombs" allude to 9/11.⁷⁶ The work is almost entirely composed of questions, mirroring not only the state of American society after the terrorist attack but also the human practice of seeking information, while at the same time highlighting the difficulty to tell the true answers from the conspiracies and lies, especially in regard to politics and state affairs.

⁷⁵ George W. Bush, "Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People," The White House Archives: George W. Bush, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>, accessed March 24, 2023.

⁷⁶ Amiri Baraka, "Somebody Blew Up America," *African American Review* 37, 2/3 (Summer, 2003): 198-199, EBSCO, <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.is.cuni.cz/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=a9h&AN=11258818&lang=cs&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

The poem, delivered a year after the 9/11 events, begins in a matter-of-fact, passive tone, but within the first few lines, the speaker assumes an authoritative voice full of anger, melodrama and irony, and then begins his outburst of accusatory questions:

(All thinking people
oppose terrorism
both domestic
& international...
But one should not
be used
To cover the other)

They say it's some terrorist, some
barbaric
A Rab, in
Afghanistan
It wasn't our American terrorists
It wasn't the Klan or the Skin heads
Or the them that blows up nigger
Churches, or reincarnates us on Death Row

It wasn't
the gonorrhoea in costume
the white sheet diseases
That have murdered black people
Terrorized reason and sanity
Most of humanity, as they pleases

They say (who say? Who do the saying
Who is them paying
Who tell the lies
Who in disguise
Who had the slaves
Who got the bus out the Bucks⁷⁷

This opening sets up the rest of the poem, which is mostly composed of questions beginning with “who,” like a hoot of an owl, an animal aligned with knowledge.⁷⁸ Dowdy maintains that the poem opens in a strangely emotionless voice, demonstrating the speaker’s antagonism to terrorism and serving as “de facto justification for its oppositional perspective” that is to come.⁷⁹ What follows is a myriad of question-like sentences, through which Baraka,

⁷⁷ Baraka, “Somebody Blew Up America,” 198.

⁷⁸ Gwiazda, “The Aesthetics of Politics/The Politics of Aesthetics,” 476.

⁷⁹ Michael Dowdy, *American Political Poetry in the 21st Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 64.

according to Dowdy, manages to question the culprits, while at the same time “defining them,” playing with the notion of “who” as both interrogative and relative pronoun.⁸⁰ Although the main theme is the September attack, the focus of the poem is not the “somebody” who destroyed the Twin Towers. On the contrary, the speaker concentrates on those “who do the saying,”⁸¹ drawing “the battle lines,” as Gery remarks, not between the terrorists and America, but “between the state and [the citizens].”⁸² Correspondingly, Leong believes that the poem is in “direct response to Bush’s” 9/11 speech, and that it “challenges the hypocrisy of US nationalism with an alternate string of anaphoric phrasings.”⁸³

“Somebody Blew Up America” seems reminiscent of the speech that celebrated America as the alleged land of freedom and union toiling in the war against terrorism, especially due to the poem's opening lines.⁸⁴ President Bush in his address, delivered a few days after the attacks, says: “Americans have many questions tonight. Americans are asking: ‘Who attacked our country?’”⁸⁵ In the same address, Bush answers the question by declaring Osama Bin Laden, an Arabic leader of a terrorist organization, as responsible for the attack, calling Al Qaeda the “enemies of freedom.”⁸⁶ Therefore it stands to reason that Baraka’s “they,” who claim that “it’s some terrorist, some / barbaric / A Rab, in / Afghanistan” who “blew up America,” implies the presidential administration. The hypocrisy of Bush’s address lies not only in its emphasis on the liberty of all American citizen and the necessity of punishing the wrongdoers, but also in its criticism of the terrorists for “abandoning every value except the will to power” and their willingness to sacrifice human lives “to serve their

⁸⁰ Dowdy, *American Political Poetry in the 21st Century*, 65.

⁸¹ Baraka, “Somebody Blew Up America,” 198.

⁸² John R. O. Gery, “Duplicities of Power: Amiri Baraka’s and Lorenzo Thomas’s Responses to September 11,” *African American Review* 44, 1/2 (Spring/Summer, 2001): 169, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41328712>.

⁸³ Michael Leong, “Amiri Baraka’s Anti-Epic Poem About America’s Destruction: The Poet Was Accused of Antisemitism After Presenting ‘Somebody Blew Up America,’” Literary Hub, <https://lithub.com/amiri-barakas-anti-epic-poem-about-americas-destruction/>, Accessed March 20th 2023.

⁸⁴ Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People.”

⁸⁵ Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People.”

⁸⁶ Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People.”

radical visions,” something that even America and the American government is guilty of.⁸⁷ This notion alludes to the opening of the poem, which stresses that one act of terrorism “should not / be used / To cover” another, suggesting that one should not forget all the “terrorism” and threats happening on US soil, or any other transgressions committed by America, which the poem presents and are addressed in the following chapter.

By alluding to a sensitive historical episode that is regarded as representative of America and of the struggle against evil and terror, Baraka exposes himself to criticism and controversy. “Somebody Blew Up America” was written in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, but it is far from commemorative due to the way it handles the topic. On the contrary, the speaker utilizes the attack as a framing device. Just as Bush declared in his address that Americans are in search of answers, so does the speaker of the poem show his interest regarding America’s complicity in the world of terror. The poem does not undermine the gravity of the September 11th happenings, nor does it join in the nationwide attempt to assign blame and celebrate the greatness of American people; the narrator simply utilizes the event to approach his message concerning the hypocrisy of American society and government by shifting the focus on America rather than the enemies outside of the state. By depicting and somewhat ignoring an event representative of the American struggle against terrorism, and due to the correlation with a speech that celebrates America’s strength, liberty and unity, “Somebody Blew Up America” sets up the criticism of the government and the overall adopted superiority of the United States, and as Leong claims the poem “conceptualizes the 9/11 attacks within a longue duree of colonial and neocolonial violence in order to shock [...] an already shocked nation from the amnesiac stupor of American exceptionalism,” an idea which is further explored in the following chapters.⁸⁸ Although Bush claims that “the entire world has seen for itself the state of [America’s] union,” Baraka’s poem wishes to weaken

⁸⁷ Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People.”

⁸⁸ Leong, “Amiri Baraka’s Anti-Epic Poem About America’s Destruction.”

such notions by revealing issues from history related to American war politics, terrorism and discrimination.⁸⁹

4.2 Baraka and the Attack on the Government

In the context of 9/11, “Somebody Blew up America” throws light on the political agendas of the American government by exposing known, unknown or uncertain events from America’s history related to what Leong calls “colonial and neocolonial violence.”⁹⁰ Smith agrees that the work is full of controversies, most of which have “been provoked by Baraka’s own deliberately incendiary polemics.”⁹¹ Through an angry, authoritative voice and suggestive questions containing direct references to specific people and places, the speaker acknowledges the controversies surrounding the American government and their dubious schemes of war justification, land acquisition and interferences in the politics of other countries, particularly in regard to September 11th, the Spanish-American War, assassinations and political executions, thus questioning the assumed greatness and superiority of the United States. The poem recollects certain war- or death-related episodes from national history, many of which not only left the American people in a state of heightened nationalism and condemnation of the opposition, but are also believed by some to have been in fact committed or sustained by America’s government or its agencies for self-serving purposes. Black American political figures are also criticized, yet in a somewhat less angry and more ironic tone. Although the statements incriminating the United States government cannot be proven, the structure of the poem, suggestive framing of the sentences and the specificity of accusations illustrate the speaker’s opinions, and suggest that the assumed superiority of America inevitably leads to violence, war and death, for which the evidence lies in America’s past and present.

⁸⁹ Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People.”

⁹⁰ Leong, “Amiri Baraka’s Anti-Epic Poem About America’s Destruction.”

⁹¹ Dowdy, *American Political Poetry in the 21st Century*, 63.

After introducing the already discussed themes of terrorism in the poem's opening, an assertive voice mentions various events and conspiracies:

Who stole Puerto Rico
Who stole the Indies, the Philippines, Manhattan
[...]
Who found Bin Laden, maybe they Satan
Who pay the CIA,
Who knew the bomb was gonna blow
Who know why the terrorists
Learned to fly in Florida, San Diego
[...]
Who killed Malcolm, Kennedy & his Brother
Who killed Dr King, Who would want such a thing?
Are they linked to the murder of Lincoln?
[...]
Who blew up the Maine
& started the Spanish American War
[...]
Who frame the Rosenbergs [...] ⁹²

The speaker delivers his accusations in a highly suggestive tone and colloquial phrases, forcing the reader to re-examine American national history and question the alleged virtue and innocence of the American government in light of the presented controversial moments of violence and war-related episodes. For example, the backdrop of Baraka's poem, September 11th, is a devastating memory for many Americans, especially for those whose lives were altered because of what many called an attack on American freedom and capitalist power. Nevertheless, as the speaker suggests, many people believe that the American government was aware of the assault in advance and allowed it to take place in order to justify military action in the Middle East.⁹³ Others go as far as to claim that the entire incident was orchestrated by the CIA for the same reason, but none such claims can ever be verified.⁹⁴ The situation in the Middle East was on the mind of the American government prior to September 2001, but 9/11 attacks "reshaped [America's] approach," allowing Bush to take

⁹² Baraka, "Somebody Blew Up America," 198-202.

⁹³ Gwiazda, "The Aesthetics of Politics/The Politics of Aesthetics," 465.

⁹⁴ Kathryn S. Olmsted, "The Truth Is Out There: Citizen Sleuths from the Kennedy Assassination to the 9/11 Truth Movement," *Diplomatic History* 35, 4 (September, 2011): 673, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24916337>.

offensive actions against any threats overseas terrorists might pose to America.⁹⁵ Therefore, the destruction of the Twin Towers was the final catalyst that offered the American administration a justification for military action, and at the same time weakened any anti-war opinions.

A similarity can be seen in the circumstances of the Spanish-American war and the explosion of USS Maine in Havana, which is regarded as the beginning of said war. Gleijeses examines the context of that earlier conflict, affirming that there was a large body of anti-war sentiments before the destruction of the ship, even though “Americans had long felt contempt and hostility toward Spain.”⁹⁶ Gleijeses also demonstrates that most of those opposing the war changed their views and supported America’s intervention in Cuban-Spanish conflict after the USS Maine affair, which led to the Spanish-American war and to the appropriation of Puerto Rico and Philippines, which is referred to in the poem as well.⁹⁷ The USS Maine exploded under dubious circumstances, which remain unclear even today, but the narrator’s suggestiveness and the position of the phrase within “Somebody Blew Up America” seem to insinuate that the American government could have had their hand in the explosion, just like many believe it to be the case with the World Trade Center. In a passive, yet somewhat aggressive way, the narrator hints at the possibility of the destruction of the USS Maine as a planned catalyst and justification for the US government to declare war on Spain, which gave them the potentiality to acquire more land by force from Spanish colonies. A related point of view is applied to the subjects stated prior to USS Maine: the killings of John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and the Rosenbergs.

Kennedy’s death represents another event that shook the entire country, however, many have never been satisfied with the state’s pronouncement of Lee Harvey Oswald as the

⁹⁵ White House Archives, “Peace in the Middle East,” <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/mideast/>, Accessed March 23, 2023.

⁹⁶ Piero Gleijeses, “1898: The Opposition to the Spanish-American War,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 35, 4 (November, 2003): 681, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3875829>.

⁹⁷ Gleijeses, “1898: The Opposition to the Spanish-American War,” 681.

culprit. On the contrary, due to the circumstances behind the assassination, conspiracies regarding the government or the CIA's involvement keep piling up.⁹⁸ By the proximity of the references within one stanza, it is hard not to interpret the deaths of Malcom X and Martin Luther King in similar terms, especially due to their political and societal importance. By asking the audience who is responsible, the narrator not only illustrates the distrust many people have in the news and the American government, it also shows how hard it is to tell truth from falsity. Similarly, the execution of the Rosenbergs for "conspiring to commit espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union" has been draped in controversy as they are the only people to be "put to death by a civil court in America for such a crime."⁹⁹ It is another reference portraying the possibility of manipulation the government might be guilty of. There are people that believe, as the poem indicates, that the Rosenbergs were "framed," either due to what Parrish calls "anti-Communist hysteria," or because of some governmental conspiracy to "soothe the public's fears of domestic subversion" or even to promote the Red Scare.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, all of the above mentioned episodes represent mere conspiracies, but the formulation and the authoritative tone in which these questions are posed suggest the narrator's conviction regarding the subjects.

Throughout the poem, the narrator chooses words with certain connotations and of colloquial nature. The verbs he uses are quite strong, such as "killed," "blew up" or "was gonna blow." The majority of the references to killings, acquisition of land and other political affairs are delivered in an angry, yet serious tone. Interestingly enough, when the narrator mocks prominent Black political figures, he does it with irony:

Who do Tom Ass Clarence Work for
Who doo doo come out the Colon's mouth
Who know what kind of Skeeza is a Condoleeza
Who pay Connelly to be a wooden negro

⁹⁸ Olmsted, "The Truth Is Out There," 673.

⁹⁹ Michael E. Parrish, "Cold War Justice: The Supreme Court and the Rosenbergs," *The American Historical Review* 82, 3 (October, 1977): 805, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1865114>.

¹⁰⁰ Parrish, "Cold War Justice," 806.

Who give Genius Awards to Homo Locus
Subsidere¹⁰¹

As can be seen, Black Americans are also attacked in Baraka's poem, but instead of an angry voice, these politicians—Clarence, Colin, Condoleeza, Connely—are illustrated with wit and funny wordplay. However, both the angry persona and the ironic one manage to get the point across successfully, depicting the speaker's opinions of the topics he presents. By portraying controversial episodes from America's history, the narrator shows the hypocrisy of American patriotism and Bush's address after 9/11, since it seems America is just as guilty as those she condemns. Emotionally infused words that are utilized in the poem add to its gravity and power to enrage, surprise and stir the nation.

"Somebody Blew Up America" contains references to significant but sensitive affairs from the poet's national memory, and due to the deliberate phrasing of each line, the narrator assumes a somewhat affirmative, if not manipulative voice, thanks to which one interprets each line as a statement, rather than a question. Through allusions to specific and real events and people from American political history, the poet explores the conspiracies behind the government or its agencies, mainly those related to war justification, land acquisition and other political agendas, critiquing the hypocrisy of America's condemnation of similarly conniving methods of other countries. The poem remembers, among others, the controversy of the war in the Middle East, the Spanish-American war, 1960s assassinations and the Rosenbergs' execution. Although the government had presented reasonable explanations of the above-discussed affairs, the poet seems to believe otherwise, insinuating the government's involvement and manipulations of the situations. In this sense, the poem seems to question the American government's trustworthiness, criticizing America's hypocrisy by pointing out its complicity in the world of terror and violence caused by their adopted superiority. In the end, it is surprising that most of the opposition the poem gets is in relation

¹⁰¹ Baraka, "Somebody Blew Up America," 202.

to its supposed anti-Semitic claims, and not because of the attacks it launches on the United States government.

4.3 Baraka and the Attack on White Supremacy

In the face of criticism for anti-Semitic undertones, Baraka declared that “Somebody Blew Up America” informs about the “domestic terrorism” perpetrated against Black Americans, calling into question “racial supremacy–white supremacy to be specific,” which he, as Black American activist, struggled against most of his life.¹⁰² The poem depicts episodes from the history of America’s brutality and political discrimination of Native Americans and African Americans in order to illustrate the hypocrisy and dangers of America’s accepted dominance, and to highlight the contemporary issue of racism, thus challenging Bush’s declaration of the United States as the land of freedom and unity that thrives in the well-being of all its citizens.¹⁰³ Through colloquial language, an angry tone and authoritative and melodramatic attitude the speaker explores America’s complicity in the maltreatment of Native Americans and African Americans, caused mainly by what Gwiazda calls “imperialist and racist thinking.”¹⁰⁴ “Somebody Blew Up America” addresses events related to discrimination and violence, such as the forceful relocation of Native American tribes from their homelands, the enslavement of Africans, and the subsequent segregation and racist behavior that continues to be an everyday reality even today. Baraka stated that “the Afro-American nation is an oppressed nation,” and that “the evils of imperialism” with its related “evils of racism” are the “main forces of injustice.”¹⁰⁵ As was mentioned before, the images and references in the poem are delivered in an enraged, yet passionate voice to underline the gravity of the situation of America’s past, present and future.

¹⁰² Gwiazda, “The Aesthetics of Politics/The Politics of Aesthetics,” 464-466.

¹⁰³ Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People.”

¹⁰⁴ Gwiazda, “The Aesthetics of Politics/The Politics of Aesthetics,” 464.

¹⁰⁵ Gwiazda, “The Aesthetics of Politics/The Politics of Aesthetics,” 464.

Employing colloquial language and an emotional attitude, the narrator of the poem depicts white oppressors as liars, manipulators, terrorists, the devil and even “gonorrhea in costume / the white sheet diseases.”¹⁰⁶ The poem opens with a direct attack at racist brutality symbolized by the “American terrorist” group the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist organization founded in the United States, which through the juxtaposition against the non-American terrorists, such as those responsible for 9/11, highlights the irony of America’s hypocrisy when it comes to struggle against “terrorism” in general.¹⁰⁷ Many lines are devoted to the issue of subjugation and abuse of racial minorities, namely Native Americans and African Americans:

Who got fat from plantations
Who genocided Indians
Tried to waste the Black nation

Who live on Wall Street
The first plantation
Who cut your nuts off
Who rape your ma
Who lynched your pa
[...]
Who killed and hired
Who say they God & still be the Devil
[...]
Who bought the slaves, who sold them
Who call you them names
[...]
Who believe the confederate flag need to be flying
[...]
Who invented AIDS Who put the germs
in the Indians’ blankets
Who thought up “The Trail of Tears”
[...]
Who decided Affirmative Action had to go
Reconstruction, The New Deal, The New
Frontier, The Great Society,
[...]
Who poison Robeson,
 who try to put Du Bois in Jail
Who frame Rap Jamil al Amin,
Who frame the Rosenbergs, Garvey

¹⁰⁶ Baraka, “Somebody Blew Up America,” 198.

¹⁰⁷ Baraka, “Somebody Blew Up America,” 198.

The Scottsboro Boys, The Hollywood Ten

[...]

Who want the world to be ruled by imperialism and national
oppression and terror
violence, and hunger and poverty.

[...]

Who you know ever
Seen God?

But everybody seen
The Devil¹⁰⁸

The words utilized in the poem are quite expressive, colloquial and often melodramatic. Instead of using emotionally neutral phrases, the speaker says “got fat,” “tried to waste” and “cut your nuts off.” The narrator even employs religious images of God and devil not only to make the statements more dramatic and serious, but also to explore the issue of who is good and who is evil. The sentences are simple but carry an angry tone delivering the message of the poem about racism, oppression and violence.

The above excerpt contains specific references to the abuse of power against the oppressed in order to shed light on the continuous violence happening on the American soil motivated mainly by imperialism and racism. One of the examples is the backdrop of the colonization of North America, which is clouded by the cruelty employed in dealing with Native Americans, whose land the colonists confiscated by force. The narrator reminds the audience of the “Trail of Tears,” an event symbolic of all the violent relocations of Native American tribes from their homelands, during which many died.¹⁰⁹ The poem also exposes instances of what some call biological warfare used during the Pontiac Rebellion of 1763, and although the fact whether the army actually supplied the Natives with small-pox infected blankets is unclear, Jeffrey Amherst, a Commander-in-Chief of the Forces in the British Army, expressed such a plan in his letter, apparently hoping to find a way to exterminate the

¹⁰⁸ Baraka, “Somebody Blew Up America,” 198-203.

¹⁰⁹ Ronald N. Satz, “The Cherokee Trail of Tears: A Sesquicentennial Perspective,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 73, 3 (Fall, 1989): 431, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40582012>.

Native Americans.¹¹⁰ Even though the perpetrators of these acts were the initial colonists, such as the British, it does represent the establishment of the United States, and so does slavery and the oppression of Black Americans.

Baraka's poem examines two forms of abuse the Black American suffers in America: the physical and the political. The image of slavery, the "confederate flag" and Ku Klux Klan are probably the main emblems of physical violence African Americans faced in America in the past, from dehumanization as slaves and property, to rape and lynching, all of which are questioned in the poem. With the progress of time and the attempts to integrate Black Americans into American society, political discrimination became another valid issue. Mentioned by the narrator, Affirmative Action,¹¹¹ The Reconstruction,¹¹² The New Frontier¹¹³ and The Great Society are notions all concerned in some way with the eradication of discrimination of minorities, especially in regards to providing equal opportunities and rights for all citizens.¹¹⁴ Through references to these, the narrator indicates there is opposition to ideas that wish to eliminate inequalities in the US hinting that still the Black American has to struggle against people who do not want to grant them the same liberties America seems to promise to everybody. Similarly, the last issue addressed in the excerpt is the juridical system, which is illustrated mainly via the allusion of "The Scottsboro Boys" that refers to a "civil rights controversy," in which nine Black boys were charged, judged and sentenced to death after an unfair, racism-influenced trial.¹¹⁵ Reminding the audience about this episode, the

¹¹⁰ Philip Ranlet, "The British, the Indians, and Smallpox: What Actually Happened at Fort Pitt in 1763?" *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 67, 3 (Summer, 2000): 427-428, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27774278>.

¹¹¹ Legal Information Institute, "Affirmative Action," Cornell Law School, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/affirmative_action#:~:text=Affirmative%20action%20is%20defined%20as,or%20looking%20for%20professional%20employment, Accessed April 28, 2023.

¹¹² Eric Foner, "United States History: Reconstruction," Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Reconstruction-United-States-history>, Accessed April 28, 2023.

¹¹³ "United States History: New Frontier," Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/New-Frontier>, Accessed April 28, 2023.

¹¹⁴ "American Politics: Great Society," Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Society>, Accessed April 28, 2023.

¹¹⁵ Amy Tikkanen, "Scottsboro Case: Law Case," Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Scottsboro-case>, Last Modified Feb 11, 2023, Accessed March 29, 2023.

poem portrays the injustices of the American justice system affected by racism, which makes one wonder what Baraka would think of the latest issues of police brutality and its related Black Lives Matter movement.

Despite the backlash the poem received, there is no doubt that “Somebody Blew Up America” is an angry commentary on the terrible effects of imperialism and assumed racial supremacy in the United States. In the context of 9/11 attacks and the state of American society in reaction to it, “Somebody Blew Up America” represents an outlet through which the speaker points out that Black people and Native Americans have been terrorized, discriminated against and killed in America for a long time, that America is also guilty of what should be regarded as “domestic terrorism.”¹¹⁶ The speaker employs suggestive, colloquial phrases to refer to the maltreatment of Native Americans and the ongoing oppression of Black Americans, illustrating that the supremacy of white Americans is dangerous and criminal. The poem depicts violent events perpetrated against Native Americans, such as the relocation during colonization, and against Africans during and right after the era of slavery. The speaker then elaborates on the continuing physical and political discrimination that follows the lives of Black Americans even today. The suggestiveness and anger of his remarks compel one to question America’s past and future, making the notions of America as a land of freedom and unity seem almost absurd and sad. While some have called the World Trade Center’s destruction the beginning of the “age of terror,” for many Americans this age began a long time ago.¹¹⁷

4.4 Conclusion

“Somebody Blew Up America” shows its preoccupation with what Leong calls “abuse of power against the oppressed,” a notion that was definitely personal for a Black

¹¹⁶ Baraka, “Somebody Blew Up America,” 198.

¹¹⁷ Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and American People.”

American poet such as Baraka.¹¹⁸ Utilizing an angry persona, a unique structure, suggestive and colloquial language, and sensitive topics, the poem informs and reminds the reader about violent and controversial episodes from American history, through which the poet criticizes American society and the government for its behavior and dubious methods related to imperialism and adopted superiority. Similarly, the poem exposes the ever-present problem of racism and discrimination to question the reality of America as the land of union and freedom. All of the above is set against the poem's historical context of the 9/11 terrorist attacks that shook the entire nation and rekindled patriotism in the hearts of all Americans. President Bush's address following the September 2001 events also contributed to the poem's composition and message, especially by its insinuation in regards to the power of the United States and the greatness of the American people. "Somebody Blew Up America" depicts controversial events from American history to show an alternative point of view on America's position in the world of violence and terror. Taking into consideration the theme and message of the poem, and the conflicts it ignited, it seems that the title not only aptly refers to the terrorist attacks, but also somewhat foreshadows the response the poem received.

¹¹⁸ Leong, "Amiri Baraka's Anti-Epic Poem About America's Destruction."

5. Chen Chen and the Issues of Contemporary America

Being born in Xiamen, China, and raised in the United States, Chen Chen is one of the many Chinese-American writers living in America today.¹¹⁹ In the “Foreword” to Chen’s first collection, *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities*, Jericho Brown celebrates Chen as a poet who is able to touch upon sensitive topics and still retain his sense of humor and adolescent perspective. His first book, together with his second, *Your Emergency Contact Has Experienced an Emergency*, illustrate America and American society through everyday imagery, which is delivered via a meditative and somewhat ironic tone, and insightful, but quirky language. Although Chen’s main topics include homosexuality and family relations, his work comments on current issues in America such as gun violence, school shootings, racism and COVID-19, offering readers an Asian American point of view on American society. Chen’s poems “Self-Portrait With & Without,” “& then a student stands up, says, *Are you serious?*,” “Winter,” “我疼你” and “The School of Fury,” display racial prejudice and the dominance of white culture in America, where many Asian Americans face racist stereotyping, discrimination and even violence. Chen’s work demonstrates the struggle of living in a country that will never accept immigrants as citizens, especially since the obsession with racial features such as skin color and eye shape is regarded as an identification of one’s nationality and identity. Chen himself operates on this level, emphasizing the skin color of every person his poems introduce, which highlights the conflict between Asian Americans and white society.

5.1 Chen on Gun Violence

Although most of Chen’s poetry is concerned with his experiences as a queer Asian American living in a somewhat hostile environment at home and in public, he also addresses

¹¹⁹ Chen Chen, “About the Author,” *Your Emergency Contact Has Experienced an Emergency* (Rochester: Boa Editions, LTS, 2022), 149.

current issues that seem to haunt American society. In “Self-Portrait With & Without” and “& then a student stands up, says, *Are you serious?*” Chen comments on gun ownership and school shootings, both of which are a worrying reality in America today. Many of his poems are delivered in a reflective, almost wondering tone, depicting situations in a simple and everyday language. In “Self-Portrait With & Without,” the narrator hints at school shootings as an everyday reality, expressing that even the survivors of such crime are left changed. “& then a student stands up, says, *Are you serious?*” presents a meditation on gun violence and societal division regarding gun ownership through the narrator’s observation of a student debate. Chen’s poems do not sound angry or overly critical, and they do not offer a solution for the issue, but they do bring the notion forward in a subtle, and slightly eccentric way, which makes the problem stand out as worth considering, illustrating the opposition to guns as a symbol of American freedom via casual remarks by the narrator. The topic of mass shootings, especially at schools, has been on the mind of Americans at least since the 1990s, but lately gun violence has been on the rise, and so has been the debate about gun control.¹²⁰

“Self-Portrait With & Without,” published in Chen’s first collection in 2017, contemplates a variety of things that the narrator does or does not possess, all of which form his “self-portrait.” There does not seem to be a relation between the many topics mentioned in the poem, but referring to school shootings, the narrator observes in a casual and relaxed manner:

[...] With thinking
I’ve grown up now because I regularly check the news in the morning.
With the morning the children, spared or missed by the child with a gun,
go back to school, make the same jokes they made three Mondays ago
but in a different voice.¹²¹

¹²⁰ BBC News, “How Many US Mass Shootings Have There Been in 2023?” BBC.Com <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-41488081>, Last Reviewed March 28, 2023, Accessed April 7, 2023.

¹²¹ Chen, “Self-Portrait With & Without,” *When I Grow Up I Want to Be a List of Further Possibilities* (Rochester: Boa Editions, LTD, 2017), part 1, Kindle.

The quote above portrays a scene of a morning after a school shooting, imagining students having to return to the place where they experienced something tragic. In a matter-of-fact voice, the narrator illustrates a situation, where a “child with a gun” shoots and kills some of his fellow classmates. The poem does not openly state anything about anyone being killed, but this notion is suggested via the description of the other kids as “spared or missed.” The quote ends with the sentiment that even if the students were physically unharmed, their minds will be forever changed, despite them trying to act like they are unharmed. The way this topic is approached by the narrator indicates that school shootings are an event that happens often enough in America that society is already accustomed to it, regarding it as a possible reality of everyday life. When Chen refers to gun control in his second collection, he again examines the issue through the eyes and words of students.

In the 2022 poem “& then a student stands up, says, *Are you serious?*” Chen utilizes his experience as a teacher, depicting students’ discussion of gun control, a quite frequent topic due to the increasing number of gun-related violence and mass shootings:

& then a student stands up, says, *Are you serious?*

to the student who’s still standing,
who’s just finished presenting what sounded like
a Sahara-dry book report—until
the last sentence, *Guns are not the problem*,
which she said like
an eager teacher, like she was, is, in fact, at the front
of the classroom.
& then, the classmate. Her *Are you serious?* with a great
snort of laugh
that means, *I am serious, I am standing.* & I stand up
from a chair in the back. & everyone goes silent,
even the student who taps, always
taps his foot against his backpack on the floor, he stops,
while I start looking to the birds
outside our window, wishing they would
beak right through, bird
me away. Me, the brilliant one who decided
current events, sure,
guns, yes, my students finally want to talk,
let them.

Guns are not the problem? How are they
not? & my feet
 want to stomp in agreement. My legs
 want to stand with
 this student, her questions, not with the one who began
 her protestation, *Gun ownership*
is a basic American right, an important part of what makes
our society free. & despite the impressive
 lack of intonation, my chest wondered if
 she owned a gun, if
 she ever carried in class, if I would notice, if she noticed
 during her five minutes
 how I was trying not to be angry with her
 five minutes—my trying,
 my face, she must've seen.
 Still she stood.¹²²

Through realistic narration, the speaker addresses the notion that Americans view gun ownership as their innate right, thinking that banning guns would be a breach of their freedom. The speaker's attitude to what's been said indicates his disagreement with such belief. Even in times of frequent mass shootings, many Americans assert that "guns are not the problem," which does seem a bit backhanded, as it might imply that the problem is either gun control laws or Americans in general. The narrator's contemplation of whether the student herself owns a gun portrays the possibility of anyone acquiring a weapon in America, no matter whether they are a child or an adult. As portrayed in the poem, America's society seems divided on the issue of gun control, some preoccupied with the importance of gun ownership as a symbol of America's freedom and others hoping better gun laws might help solve the frequent shooting problem of contemporary times.

Chen's poetry frequently refers to contemporary American issues that affect his life, and although he mostly incorporates topics related to his Asian descent, sometimes he touches upon more general problems. In "Self-Portrait With & Without" and "& then a student stands up, says, *Are you serious?*," Chen addresses school shootings and gun ownership. Both poems are delivered in a casual, calm voice, refraining from direct criticism

¹²² Chen, "& then a student stands up, says, *Are you serious?*," *Your Emergency Contact*, 45.

or angry exclamations, but the speaker's opposition to guns and his feelings in regard to school shootings are obvious through his attitude and commentary. "Self-Portrait With & Without" acknowledges school shootings as a frequent occurrence and notes that they negatively affect those who experience it. "& then a student stands up, says, *Are you serious?*" shows a divided society through a heated debate about gun control and ownership, after which the narrator hints at the fact that nearly anyone in America may be carrying a gun at any time. The topics are merely implied, relying on the reader's awareness of the issues the poems address. Instead of a direct approach, Chen chooses a quiet, sometimes ironic and quirky criticism of contemporary America, both in terms of gun violence and racial discrimination.

5.2 Chen on COVID-19

Although the Black Lives Matter movement has been the center of most racism-related debates in the United States in recent years, COVID-19 led to a significant rise in Asian hate in the US, especially since the disease was first detected in Wuhan, China, and was often referred to by the American presidential administration and the media as the "Chinese Flu" or "Kung Flu."¹²³ This notion intensified the racist sentiments of many Americans, rooted in what Hwang classifies as the "persistent view of Asian Americans as not quite 'real' Americans."¹²⁴ Chen has had to deal with discrimination all his life—both in society and at home, both as a queer and as an Asian American—but the pandemic brought the opposition towards Asian people up to a new level. Chen portrays the circumstances of COVID-19 and the "rise of hate crimes against Asians & Asian Americans" in the 2022 collection *Your Emergency Contact Has Experienced an Emergency*, particularly in poems

¹²³ Roland Hwang, "COVID-19 through an Asian American Lens: Scapegoating, Harassment, and the Limits of the Asian American Response," in *Being Human during COVID*, ed. Kristin Ann Hass (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 329, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.12136619.29>.

¹²⁴ Hwang, "COVID-19 through an Asian American Lens," 329.

“我疼你” and “Winter,” in which he expresses his own experiences of an queer Asian American surviving the pressures of the pandemic, when anyone of Asian descent was blamed for the situation or automatically seen as carrying the virus.¹²⁵ In the context of COVID-19, these poems meditate on racism in twenty-first century America and the related identity struggle via the motif of sickness and realistic remarks taken from everyday situations disclosed through straightforward and personal language. “我疼你” juxtaposes homophobia against Coronavirus-motivated racism, and “Winter” portrays the contemporary state of American society in wake of COVID-19 paranoia, while at the same time acknowledging different forms of racist behavior and how they influence one’s identity. The latter poem also hints at the role social networks play in today’s world. These poems suggest that American society refuses to look past one’s heritage and recognize the Asian American population as part of the United States.

Chen’s work often talks about his family’s unacceptance of his homosexuality, depicting his life-long struggle to maintain both his relationships and his true identity. In “我疼你,” the narrator addresses his parents, who view his homosexuality as a sickness, a motif borrowed from Chen’s first collection. Placed in the context of the Coronavirus, this notion of illness carries a different connotation and value, revealing what a sad foreshadowing of the future such perception brought:

Once, you said you were worried
I’d get my brothers, your other (truer?) sons, sick.
More than once. The both of you. Said. This.

Sick with what, neither of you could say
out loud. *Get out before you get them sick, too.*
& now the country we live in believes everyone with a face
like ours is sick. Our sick faces, sick countries, *go back*
*before you get us sick.*¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Chen, “Winter,” *Your Emergency Contact*, 77.

¹²⁶ Chen, “我疼你,” *Your Emergency Contact*, 117.

The point of view of homosexuality as an illness can be seen already in a poem from Chen's first collection: "You're sick. Get out / before you get your brother sick."¹²⁷ Although it seems that the main antagonists of homosexuality in Chen's poetry are his parents and not society, COVID-19 brought a whole new meaning to the notion of being sick, which is so well remembered by the poet. The poem also illustrates the racist sentiment that has long been an everyday reality for many Asian Americans, despite the fact that many of them have been born or raised in the US.¹²⁸ The narrator of "我疼你" hints at the struggle Asian Americans face living in COVID-19 America, a country that "believes everyone with a face / like [them] is sick."¹²⁹ This illustrates the paranoia and racist thinking of contemporary American society, which is addressed in more detail in "Winter," with its images of racial prejudice and discrimination, taken from daily life at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

By April 2020, COVID-19 touched and altered almost all areas of day-to-day life in the United States, forcing many Americans to either stay at home or implement protective measures to ensure their safety.¹³⁰ The narrator of "Winter" describes his fraught daily life as an Asian American in New York, which not only has a large Chinese-American population, but also had one of the highest numbers of confirmed cases in April 2020:¹³¹

I tweet about a white checkout boy who is handing a receipt to a customer, who sees me in line, who demands I step back, wait behind the red x on the supermarket floor. I thought it was my turn, apologize. Then while I'm still waiting, a white man crosses the red, steps up right behind me. The boy says nothing.

It's April. Where are the tests?

¹²⁷ Chen, "Poplar Street," *When I Grow Up*, part 3, Kindle.

¹²⁸ Hwang, "COVID-19 through an Asian American Lens," 330.

¹²⁹ Chen, "我疼你," *Your Emergency Contact*, 117.

¹³⁰ David J. Sencer CDC Museum: In Association with the Smithsonian Institution, "CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: 10, <https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/covid19.html>.

¹³¹ David J. Sencer CDC Museum, "CDC Museum COVID-19 Timeline," 12.

Maybe I should delete the tweet about the white checkout boy & the white man & red x. Was it racism? It wasn't getting spat on. Kicked. Punched. Spat on spat on spat on. It wasn't an acid attack. But, it wasn't a coincidence.

[...]

It's April & what the fuck?

I consider Trump's lies vs. mine. The government's lies vs. the people's. Was my student asking about being stuck in her writing or in 2020?

I tweet about a white cook working in a banh mi food truck refusing to give me a box for my banh mi after seeing my hands on the still-wrapped sandwich. I tell him, *The wrapping's not enough; I'm taking this on a long subway ride back home.* He says, *We're not supposed to touch the food again &* expresses concern for my safety. Then hands a white customer's order back to her in the box she asked for. Smiles at her. She smiles back.

[...]

The smallest words, I tell my students, can make a world of difference. Conjunctions like "but," "and," "or." Adverbs like "then."

How often "then" occurs in scenes like at the food truck—the lie the cook tells me, the truth he smiles at her, the reality that depends on the lie that there is only one, pure truth.

[...]

Every time I see "Kung Flu" on Twitter, I make a note to get another honey oolong milk tea once Kung Fu Tea reopens.¹³²

Such anti-Asian discrimination was widespread across America, making the lives of Asian Americans unpleasant, especially during times when everyone was scared for their lives and the lives of their loved ones. The poem illustrates the antagonistic attitude of American society, which refuses to recognize Asian Americans as real Americans, and leaves them stranded somewhere between Asia and America, forcing them to struggle with their own identity and self-esteem. The narrator also questions what is and should be regarded as racist behavior, because although he is not attacked physically, he is denied his intrinsic value both as a person and as an American citizen.

¹³² Chen, "Winter," *Your Emergency Contact*, 77-78.

Based on the treatment he receives, the narrator is left to question his identity and position among his fellow Americans, who do not see past his Asiatic features to respect him as another human being living in the world crippled by the pandemic. To highlight the racial prejudice of American society, the speaker juxtaposes his situation with that of his white American boyfriend, coming back to the issue of illness:

It's April & I would eat three bags of J.'s hair, too.

Though lately can't stop thinking about how he isn't the one whose
food these other white men won't touch.

[...]

The fact that I love J. for J.

Just as this country does. Most of this country does, before learning
he has a boyfriend. What percentage of this country loves me, after
reading my name, after seeing my face, after hearing me talk about
my boyfriend?

*After a list of your loves, I tell my student who's feeling stuck,
perhaps in every possible way, make a list of your questions. Like:*

What is love? Is it just saying *I'll eat a hundred bags of your hair*? Or
is it also talking, continuing to talk about the fact of his whiteness, my
notness? How it is that I am an antonym for person, synonym for
sickness? This one & myriad before & mutations to come?¹³³

In comparison to his white boyfriend, who is loved by American society unless they find out he is a homosexual, the narrator has a lot going against him in a racially prejudiced world, although this comment also hints at the ongoing homophobia in the US. The speaker is preoccupied with "whiteness," which will be addressed in the following section, pointing the finger mainly at white Americans and not other ethnic groups living in America. Also, through the idea of "twitter" and "tweet[ing]," the narrator hints at the disassociated state of twenty-first century America, ruled by social networks, through which people share their grievances with the world. Either way, the discrimination the narrator experiences leaves him questioning the society he lives in, a society that dehumanizes him and other Asian

¹³³ Chen, "Winter," *Your Emergency Contact*, 78-79.

Americans into a symbol of COVID-19, a “synonym for sickness,” which not only affects his personality, but also his relationships and his outlook on the world around him.

Published in the aftermath of the COVID-19, “我疼你” and “Winter” portray American society at height of the pandemic. By depicting everyday situations, the poems contemplate anti-Asian racism, which intensified during the pandemic, because of the link between the Coronavirus and China. Since it was first detected in China, COVID-19 was often referred to as “Kung” or “Chinese” flu, which further strengthened the hate Asian Americans had to deal with already. Chen’s poems depict America as a society prejudiced against racial features and ancestry, ignoring or refusing to recognize one’s citizenship based on his physical appearance. In the context of the pandemic, Chen’s poems examine the forms of racism and issues of identity through situations, in which any Asian American was discriminated against, while the white people were treated politely. Sickness is a recurrent motif in Chen’s poetry, and although it previously symbolized his family’s view of homosexuality, in the 2020s, American society viewed anyone with Asian heritage as being potentially sick. Nevertheless, Chen’s “Winter” and “我疼你” portray pandemic America and the maltreatment of Asian Americans, which is based on deep-rooted racial prejudice from white Americans, who view anyone showing signs of different ethnicity as a “perpetual foreigner,” thus refusing to accept them as Americans.¹³⁴

5.3 Chen on Racial Prejudice

The United States has a large population of immigrants from all around the world, and according to the Migration Policy Institute, Chinese are the “third largest origin group among US immigrants.”¹³⁵ Despite the number of Asian American citizens, who were born on

¹³⁴ Hwang, “COVID-19 through an Asian American Lens,” 329.

¹³⁵ R. Rosenbloom, J. Batalova, “Chinese Immigrants in the United States,” Migration Policy Institute, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/chinese-immigrants-united-states>, Published January 12, 2023, Accessed April 6, 2023.

American soil to Asian immigrants, white American society continues to view these people as foreigners in their country.¹³⁶ Chen's work is preoccupied with the notion of whiteness and white supremacy, portraying white Americans as racially prejudiced or insensitive—in Chen's case towards Chinese-Americans. Emphasizing race and skin color, "Winter" and "The School of Fury" present moments of racial stereotyping and discrimination via Chen's typical idiosyncratic style, with realistic images and insightful remarks to illustrate a society preoccupied by racial and cultural differences. The poems do not display any form of physical violence, but focus on the harm of racist language, the stereotyping and dominance of white American culture, albeit in a seemingly innocent way. Both poems indicate the population's narrow point of view in regard to a person's identity as limited to one's race and physical features, and contemplates what influence such perceptions, together with the superiority of white culture, have on the person's self-acceptance and self-esteem. In theory, remarks related to racial stereotyping are another form of discrimination, even if the people expressing them do not realize it, which the narrator of one of Chen's poems from his first collection classifies as "racist comments from people who claim to be postracial."¹³⁷

Even Chen himself constantly utilizes adjectives such as white or Chinese to specify the race of those he is talking about, which only enforces the idea of a divided society. His poems portray the public's obsession with ethnicity and looks. In "Winter," the speaker thinks about making a "list of the white men," introducing the issue of whiteness.¹³⁸

I want to write about snow. Instead of my list of white men. Then realize I usually write "silver" to describe snow, instead of "white." The moon, too. "Silver" or "golden." & any bright light—just "bright." The fact that I can't write "white" without thinking of my list of white men. Of my first boyfriend, his bright white teeth as he said, *I like your eyes, they're not really chinky eyes*. They way I say, *Thank you*.

Or my third boyfriend, how he liked to call my dick an eggroll, proudly called himself a rice queen.

¹³⁶ Hwang, "COVID-19 through an Asian American Lens," 329.

¹³⁷ Chen, "In This Economy," *When I Grow Up*, part 3, Kindle.

¹³⁸ Chen, "Winter," *Your Emergency Contact*, 78.

All the ways I said, *Thank you*.

Or all the dates with white men where I just elated they didn't call themselves rice queens. Or the white professor who didn't call himself a rice queen but was always seen with younger Chinese men. Or the white professor who was always seen with younger Chinese men but didn't call himself a rice queen. How I was the younger man, had trouble calling myself Chinese.

The fact that I can't write about the snow without writing about standing in it, still as a tree, wishing it would cover my entire body in a thick blanket of white, white, white.

To realize some of my writing is just my saying to white men: Look how lovable I am.

How I've thought that being with a white man would whiten me, lighten my lonely. & actually, factually, being with some white men has blanketed me while covering me in lonelier.¹³⁹

This story-telling style perfectly expresses the narrator's obsession with "white" skin, which might be the result of the society's constant reminder of his Asian heritage through racially stereotypical references like "eggroll" or "chinky." The speaker is continuously reminded of being Chinese, which forces a socially predetermined identity on him, making him desire lighter skin, probably in order to be as accepted and loved as the white people around him. The constant highlight of the word "white" suggests the superiority of white people and white culture in America.

The struggle of immigrants in the predominantly white American society is more directly addressed in "The School of Fury:"

Or as I said, 8th grade was all Robert Frost & Alanis Morissette.
Because I had to learn who the important white people were.
& we worship immigrant hardships instead of building a house more breathable.
To read & remember & know & say so, without the echo of an accent.
When the white kids knew nothing about Marilyn Chin.
When the white adults know nothing about Lawson Fusao Inada.
When the 30-something white guy in poetry class says *A poem is this—*, based on what a
70-something white guy once said.
& everyone just nods & I want to say *No* & scream & would Frost have called me a chink?

¹³⁹ Chen, "Winter," *Your Emergency Contact*, 78-79.

& take everyone through the wound of it.¹⁴⁰

This excerpt portrays the hypocrisy of American society, which seems to “worship immigrant hardships” rather than trying to solve the problem of racism and inequality. American society’s narrow understanding is seen even in their knowledge of literature, which is portrayed as limited mainly to white writers.

Chin, a Chinese American poet, and Inada, a Japanese American poet, both of which are highly respected artists, remain unknown to most white Americans who focus solely on white culture and refuse to acknowledge Asian Americans as valid components of American culture. The poem suggests the ignorance of white American culture, which seems to accept anything that has been taught for centuries, rather than addressing the changes that happened or need to happen to build “a house more breathable” and to support multiculturalism. The speaker also stresses how the racial slur used to refer to Asians, “a chink,” leaves its mark on a human being; it is just as inappropriate as any slurs referring to African Americans, and the narrator wishes for those around him to experience the pain of it. The society depicted in the poem is rigid and unwilling to acknowledge Asian Americans as lawful citizens of the United States, and perhaps only if white Americans themselves were the minority, they might understand.

Addressing racial prejudice in America, “Winter” and “The School of Fury” illustrate a contemporary American society that is obsessed with white culture by focusing on racial differences and looks as determiners of one’s identity. Both poems indicate American society’s refusal to accept Asian Americans as American citizens. Through inappropriate language, Chen also portrays how racial stereotyping is another form of racism that is just as harmful to one’s personality and self-acceptance. The poems’ emphasis on skin color indicates the dominance of white culture in America and the overall division of societies, but

¹⁴⁰ Chen, “The School of Fury,” *Your Emergency Contact*, 25.

it also implies that the question of racist discrimination seems especially the problem of white American society. “Winter” shows the narrator’s obsession with whiteness and his desire to be just as white, which is probably caused by being constantly reminded of his differences. In “The School of Fury,” the speaker depicts the struggle of immigrants, who will always be viewed as immigrants rather than real Americans. Both poems address the hurtful effects of racist stereotyping, even if such expressions were not meant to be hateful. Nevertheless, such stereotyping and thinking, and the separation of society on the basis of race and nationality is a volatile issue in contemporary America.

5.4 Conclusion

The narrator in Chen’s “Poem in Noisy Mouthfuls” contemplates whether “all [he] write[s] about is being gay or Chinese,”¹⁴¹ wondering if he composes “in some way an immigrant narrative or another coming out story,” but if “identity” consists of one’s “qualities [...] that make them different from others,” it is not surprising that identity would be one of the topics Chen’s work examines.¹⁴² Both of his poetry collections confront and convey the life of Asian Americans in American society, their struggles related to immigration and living in a country that constantly reminds them of their differences and denies their citizenship. “The School of Fury” and “Winter” examine the racial prejudice that influences white society, while “Winter” also depicts present-day America plagued by COVID-19, which heightened anti-Asian sentiments. This notion is explored via the motif of sickness as seen in “我疼你.” Nevertheless, Chen’s work also talks about issues unrelated to race, such as gun violence, which is discussed in “Self-Portrait With & Without” and “& then a student stands up, says, *Are you serious?*” All of these topics are portrayed through a casual, meditative tone and via direct and often quirky language. Chen himself stresses the differences of ethnicity

¹⁴¹ Chen, “Poem in Noisy Mouthfuls,” *When I Grow Up*, part 3, Kindle.

¹⁴² Cambridge Dictionary, “Identity,” [Cambridge.Dictionary.org](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/identity), <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/identity>, Accessed April 6, 2023.

and skin color and often expresses his opinion of white society by telling his friend somewhat offensively that “all [he] write[s] about is being white / or an asshole.”¹⁴³

¹⁴³ Chen, “Poem in Noisy Mouthfuls,” *When I Grow Up*, part 3, Kindle.

6. Conclusion

Many believe that the poetry of the twentieth and twenty-first century “occupies an isolated place in the cultural life” of the United States, appealing to only a small segment of readers, and therefore it cannot be regarded as an agent “of social or political change.”¹⁴⁴ The preceding analysis of selected works of Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Amiri Baraka and Chen Chen reveals that the poetry of the second half of the twentieth century and today represents an important and poignant mode of expression when one seeks the portrayal and critique of the United States in terms of society, politics, lifestyle and values. Various poetic devices, choices of language, personas, allusions and many other techniques allow poets to express their opinions, their views and their criticism of America even if their historical context, societal and racial background, or their poetic movement differ. Through the examination of two poets of the twentieth century and two of the twenty-first century, it is clear, though, that the focus of the commentary is influenced by these differences. The way these poets approach their subjects is more of a result of their idiosyncratic style and unique personalities. Nonetheless, analyzing the work of these poets shows the value of poetry when depicting the United States, its history, politics, and contemporary beliefs. And it highlights poetry’s ability to provoke national debate and controversy, or to propose change. It also demonstrates the similarities, differences and overall images of America in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Both Ginsberg and Corso react in their poems to the political and societal situation of the United States, demonstrating the impact the Cold War had on the American public. They both in their unique ways address their dissatisfaction with the current state of the United States, comparing it with America of the past, but while Corso’s poetry is influenced, for example, by his Catholicism, Ginsberg’s depiction is informed by his heritage, political

¹⁴⁴ Gwiazda, “The Aesthetics of Politics/The Politics of Aesthetics,” 460.

affiliation and sexual orientation. Nevertheless, they both believed America was in decline. The examination of the twentieth-century poets shows they acknowledge that society underwent some changes, especially in terms of lifestyle and values, but overall those changes are seen as negative, depicting how the historical circumstances of the twentieth century impacted America. Their portrayal is mostly devoid of criticism of specific people, and Ginsberg's approach seems more personal.

Likewise, the selected poems of the twenty-first century display a similar notion of historical context as influential in artistic work. In the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks, Baraka employed the voice of an angry citizen, while Chen, illustrating America overwhelmed by COVID-19, utilizes a quirky, sensitive persona. As an Asian American, Chen is confronted with stereotyping and discrimination on a daily basis, especially since COVID-19 is linked to China, and being a Black American, Baraka's commentary links the present state of America as overwhelmed by racism and violence to the question of racial superiority and the desire for power. Both poets represent American poetry of minorities, depicting the contemporary struggles Asian and Black American deal with in terms of racial prejudice and discrimination. While Baraka thrives on making his allusions historically specific, Chen's poetry, however universal, focuses on his immediate environment. From a different perspective, for Ginsberg, the issue of his homosexuality renders him unfit for the 1950s post-war society, while for Chen, homosexuality seems more of a struggle with his family and less with the public. Corso, regardless of being a white American poet, also addresses issues of racism and equality, placing the entire American way of life into question, expressing the need for change. Interestingly, both Corso and Baraka choose to utilize biblical imagery to illustrate the issue of good and evil.

Despite the differences between the four examined authors, they all portray the state of America or American society mostly in critical terms, pointing out what they deem

problematic, negative or in need of change. Their image of America is influenced by the historical context they live in, and by their political, religious and artistic beliefs. In contemporary times, poetry is not one of the most popular artistic outlets, especially when talking about politics and social change, but it does offer endless possibilities when it comes to the depiction of the world, be it physical or spiritual. This thesis shows that poetry does not have to be solely for entertainment purposes or pleasure, but can be utilized to express one's dissatisfaction and criticism. It also demonstrates that Ginsberg, Corso, Baraka and Chen prove that poetry can provoke conversation about political and societal issues. It is obvious that contemporary poetic works deserve much more attention, as they represent a valuable mode of expression no matter the context, author, form or audience; poets are capable of capturing images as well as the emotions of the world around them.

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