



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

22 May 2023

Reviewer's Report on BA Thesis

"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

By Alexandra Moravec Zajkr

This is an interesting thesis which explores social critique in the work of four US poets. It ranges through issues of the Roman Catholic church, race, Covid, and spirituality, over a period of seventy years. In general, it is written clearly and precisely. There are some small glitches – Adrienne Rich's name is misspelled – but in general the student cites and formats correctly. However, the overall research aim and structure are problematic.

At the end of the thesis, Alexandra summarizes the research results thus:

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. (75)

If there were a body of criticism that held that poetry is solely for entertainment purposes or pleasure, then this might be a good research aim. But there isn't. Most critics throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries acknowledge the poetry's function as social critique. Again, that Ginsberg, Corso, and Baraka (though not Chen) provoked political debate was clear from the outset of their careers, so once again this does not shed much light on their poetry. A BA thesis does not have to present an original argument; it can excel by reviewing extant criticism. Alexandra does some of this work, but could have done more, by engaging with some of the more prominent critics of these writers, such as Robert Von Hallberg, Paul Breslin, Norman Podhoretz (esp. on the Beats), Barry Miles, Jennie Skerl, and Helen Vendler, among many others.

The other structural difficulty is the inclusion of Chen, which creates a chronological anomaly. The other poets all came to maturity in a particular time, which had a particular "structure of feeling," to use Raymond Williams's phrase – that is, a complex set of ideologies, social behaviors, and personal expectations, which are not the same as recent years. In short, there is no sense of necessity in the choice of these four poets; with such a general research aim, any poets could have been chosen.



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At the outset, I remarked that the thesis was of interest. I appreciated some of the individual discussions along the way, and the aforementioned clarity of the writing. For these reasons I recommend the grade of **2/velmi dobře**.

Doc. Justin Quinn Ph.D.