

# The Poet as Activist: Chronotopes of San Francisco in the Poetry of Lawrence Ferlinghetti

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## Abstract

The impact of one's economic, cultural and political contributions is vital to a city's welfare. Activism, however, is a crucial component of community life, which has determined the real meaning of individual freedom through the efforts of the social actors of the last century. In this respect, the literary texts of the Beat Generation thoroughly portray the relation between time and space and the way in which it is connected to social action. From a geocritical approach, the choronotopes found in the poetry of Lawrence Ferlinghetti offer the reader an authentic taste of San Francisco during the second half of the twentieth century as well as the Beats' perspective on one's emergence and evolution in the metropolis during the post-war era. Space and time foster the evolution of group identity and, in the same time, they shape the development of social and political endeavours. This research focuses on the intersections between time, people, and creative places and seeks to portray the city as a sociocultural construct from the point of view of a poet and an activist.

**Keywords:** time, chronotope, city, activist, San Francisco

## Introduction

The Beat Generation writings often portray the city through the lens of the activist. San Francisco, being a Beat hub itself, is described in Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poems through the use of chronotopes that define the second half of the twentieth century and the youth movements at the time. Descriptions of time-space, which depict the socio-cultural dimension of communities in different eras and locations, can be understood through Mikhail Bakhtin's "chronotope", coined in his *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975). As Bakhtin notes, "we will give the name chronotope (literally, 'time space') to the intrinsic

connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84). An analysis of Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s works reveals that the aesthetics of time-space used may offer new understandings of temporality and the corresponding social reactions of the post-war era in the metropolis. The social and cultural challenges of the city of San Francisco at mid-century are recurrent in Ferlinghetti’s works and they position the poet in the shoes of the activist.

Manuel Castells asks a series of questions in his book, *The City and the Grassroots* (1983), when thinking about the relation between time, places and subcultures: “What are the cultural themes of the community, the forms of its social organization, the waving flags of its political battles?” (Castells, 1983, p. 139). Time and space foster the development of group identity and, at the same time, they are shaped by social, cultural, and political endeavours. As Bakhtin further notes, “time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84). Time is viewed as the fourth dimension of space, as space modifies and transforms throughout time. The symbolic meaning of certain places may become emblematic for a time period. In this regard, San Francisco remains emblematic for the liberation movements that started post-war and serves as an image of freedom at a time of conformity.

Beat poetry aims at offering the society a different way of life and an alternative mindset. In this respect, one can interpret such poetry as an example of activism and perceive the poet as an activist. Ferlinghetti’s work reflects on his own personal experiences and offers the readers an honest representation of his life and of the world that surrounds him. The main theme in Beat poetry is the decay of the world due to shallowness, hate, urban development, corruption, unfairness, discrimination, and pollution. These motifs appear in Ferlinghetti’s poetry and, thus, translate as desperate “howls” for a better change. It is the requests expressed by the young generation of the 1950s that attempted to explain, through their poetry, that people are different and that they cannot fit into the same social system. The analysis of Ferlinghetti’s work portrays San Francisco as the place that fostered his creativity and offered him a sense of belonging by hosting his City Lights Bookstore, which contributed greatly to the Beat Generation’s visibility as both a literary and activist movement. San Francisco’s chronotope, as seen in Ferlinghetti’s poems, is one of multicultural diversity, of various communities that reshape the metropolis, such as having both an Italian church and a China town in the same city. Ferlinghetti wishes to preserve the San Francisco’s cultural environment and to encourage other young Beats into writing and creating art.

## Environmental Activism, Animal Rights and Ferlinghetti's 'Frisco'

Social protest in large cities is usually a consequence of the dysfunctionalities of the city management. Class is one factor that installs tension among citizens, and lack of support and integration of the lower classes is many times what lies as the root cause of why people try to disobey the system. While New York, another important Beat Generation hub, has a long history of multicultural and economic tensions, which is portrayed in the work of Allen Ginsberg, a Beat poet himself, San Francisco in the 1950s was seen as a possibility to a better lifestyle and a more inclusive way of thinking. Lawrence Ferlinghetti makes public his concerns about the future of the city in his Inaugural Address as San Francisco Poet Laureate and makes reference to that week's *San Francisco Bay Guardian* newspaper, which showed the results of a survey about the city's atmosphere: "it reveals a city undergoing a radical transformation—from a diverse metropolis that welcomed immigrants and refugees from around the world to a homogeneous, wealthy enclave" (Ferlinghetti, 2003, p. 9). Ferlinghetti's concerns about the city he had been living in for seventy years until his death in 2021 reinforced the Beat thought, which aimed at facilitating an alternative lifestyle and the peaceful inclusion of people with fewer opportunities, who are usually marginalized in large cities. While technological development made the city richer and an exciting touristic destination, the middle- and lower-class citizens suffered of being alienated by the rise of capitalism. Ferlinghetti captures the city's environment and atmosphere through his poems as he observes the changes that happen and offers his perspective as a citizen, artist, entrepreneur, and Beat poet.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti is known as an environmentalist, and his eco-poetry did not seek to raise awareness only on issues related to nature, but also to animal protection. In his poem "DOG", the author maps the city from the point of view of a stray dog, which comes across different spaces and people:

The dog trots freely in the street  
and sees reality  
and the things he sees  
are bigger than himself  
and the things he sees  
are his reality  
Drunks in doorways  
Moons on trees  
The dog trots freely thru the street (Ferlinghetti, 2003, p. 37)

Just like the Beat writings, the dog's journey in Ferlinghetti's poem creates a cartography that shows the authentic San Francisco. The use of chronotopes such as "the street" offers the reader "his reality," which is the way in which the dog encounters it. In the poem, we follow the dog through the city and imagine the built-in environment, which maps the city and creates the chronotope of San Francisco: Chinatown, the San Francisco Meat Market, Romeo Ravioli Factory, and Coit's Tower.

While the dog takes us through its city route, it also takes us through a cultural and political journey. The poem could also reflect the author's own thoughts, while the dog may represent Ferlinghetti himself, as he was an underdog of the society, as all Beats were. Therefore, the use of chronotopes in the poem compels the reader to believe that the dog is a simple and innocent character and influences the audience to rediscover the city from the point of view of the dog. The use of "Drunks in doorways," or "cats and cigars," shows that the dog is strolling around a poor neighbourhood and the reader may empathize with the dog's precarious situation. The dog "doesn't hate cops," "he merely has no use for them," and "he's not afraid of Congressman Doyle," as he is "just another fire hydrant for him" (Ferlinghetti, 2003, p. 38). The poetic voice expresses disappointment with the city's authority, as neither policemen nor authority seem to make a change in the city. The audience tends to rely on the dog's perspective on what is happening, as it is "a sad young dog," and "a serious dog":

a real live democratic dog  
engaged in real  
free enterprise  
with something to say  
about ontology  
with something to say  
about reality  
and how to see it  
and how to hear it (Ferlinghetti, 2003, p. 39)

Through his choice of words, Ferlinghetti presents the political tensions of the 1950s in San Francisco and tries to convince the reader that the underdogs of the society are struggling for a better change.

Ferlinghetti's concern with animal protection is portrayed as well in his 1974 poem, "Rough Song of Animals Dying," which serves as a desperate cry for people to become aware of the existing animal cruelty everywhere in the world:

In a dream within a dream I saw  
how seals are beaten on the ice fields  
the soft white furry seals with eggshell skulls  
the Great Green turtles beaten & eaten  
exotic birds netted & caged & tethered  
rare wild beasts & strange reptiles & weird woozoos  
hunted down for zoos  
by bearded blackmarketeers  
who afterwards ride around Singapore  
in German limousines (Ferlinghetti, 1988, p. 121)

Through the dark images of animals suffering and dying, the poetic voice urges people to empathize and invites them to militate for animal rights. Environmentalism started to take shape as a political movement in the 1960s, being encouraged by various parallel movements such as the Anti-War, the Civil Rights and the Second-Wave Feminism. However, the movement became popular at large scales in the 1970s, when Earth Day takes place for the first time (22 April 1970), coordinated by the environmental advocate Denis Hayes (Lewis, 1990, p. 13). The 1970s also mark an increase in the environmentalists' concern with toxicity and pollution, which pushed President Richard M. Nixon to sign the Water Quality Improvement Act among other amendments that followed the environmental political agenda at the time (Chow, 2020, p. 11). Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poem does not focus only on the problem of animal cruelty but also on issues related to climate change and human-induced environmental hazards:

In a dream within a dream I dreamt a dream  
of the earth heating up & drying out  
in the famous Greenhouse Effect  
under its canopy of carbon dioxide  
breathed out by a billion  
infernally combustion engines  
mixed with the sweet smell of burning flesh (Ferlinghetti, 1988, p. 121)

The apocalyptic image of the Earth that Ferlinghetti details is not only applicable for the situation of the 1970s, but it is still very relevant for today's need for awareness. With the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), founded in 1970 by President Nixon, the organization shared brochures with the status and trends of air quality in the US from 1970 through 2019. The charts show an increase in air quality by 77 percent throughout the fifty years, although population, economy, energy use

and driven miles increased (EPA Celebrates 50 years!, 2020). The dystopian chronotopes created in Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "Rough Song of Animals Dying" feel as if the poetic voice is warning people about the horrific consequences of consumerism, where animals die for humans' unnecessary fastidiousness. The poem maps the Earth through the description of animal cruelty happening on different continents, from the "seals beaten on ice fields" to "exotic birds netted & caged & tethered":

in shrinking rainforests  
in piney woods & high sierras  
on shrinking prairies & tumbleweed mesas  
captured beaten strapped starved & stunned cornered & traded. (Ferlinghetti, 1988, p. 121)

The cartography of animals dying that the poet creates emphasizes the fact that animal rights is a global problem and that globalization itself may be one of the factors that fuelled animal cruelty world-wide: "bearded blackmarketees/ who afterwards ride around Singapore/ in German limousines" (Ferlinghetti, 1988, p. 121). Besides using animals as a resource for clothing, alimentation, drug testing, labour and entertainment, the pollution caused by industrial waste and the expansion of unsustainable infrastructures led to animal cruelty and extinction as well. This eco-poem is an example of activism sustained by the author as it aims to educate its readers about existing problems of the community, be it the city, the country, or the world.

### **Interculturality in San Francisco**

Besides environmental awareness, another common theme in Ferlinghetti's poetry is the interculturality found in San Francisco. The city consists of a big Chinese community, and the poet portrays that in "The Great Chinese Dragon":

And the great Chinese dragon passing thru the Golden Gate  
spouting streams of water like a string of fireboats then broke  
loose somewhere near China Camp gulped down a hundred  
Chinese seamen and forthwith ate all the shrimp in San Francisco Bay  
(Ferlinghetti, 2003, p. 49)

Ferlinghetti observes the Chinese New Year parade and imagines the journey of the inflatable dragon balloon through the city. He thinks about the creature being "forever after confined/ in a Chinatown basement and ever since allowed out only for/ Chinese New Year's parades and other Unamerican demonstrations" (Ferlinghetti, 2003, p. 49).

Therefore, the dragon, the symbol of power, good luck and of the Chinese culture in general, became suppressed by America and only for one day is allowed free in the city. This can be interpreted as the author's allusion to the fact that the Chinese community has been oppressed by the dominant white society.

The author takes us on another journey in San Francisco, the dragon serving as the guide—just like the dog does in the poem “DOG.” The readers can see the city through the eyes of the dragon, which goes through the Golden Gate, China Camp, Adler Alley and Grant Avenue. These chronotopes inspired Ferlinghetti to write about the Chinese parade and compelled him to offer an authentic look at San Francisco's Chinese heritage and its status in the city. The Golden Gate Park, Chinatown and the streets of the city are presented as representations of ethnic patrimony and spaces of tradition, seen through the writers' view and reimagined by the readers. These markers of heritage, present in San Francisco, are celebrated by both poems “The Great Chinese Dragon” and “The Old Italians Dying” and raise awareness about the importance of social inclusiveness and identity rights and also serve as actions of protest in favour of social diversity and interculturality.

In “A North Beach Scene,” Ferlinghetti offers the reader a view of the neighbourhood that hosted and helped the Beats to develop as counterculture:

Away above a harborful  
of caulkless houses  
among the charley noble chimneypots  
of a rooftop rigged with clotheslines  
a woman pastes up sails  
upon the wind  
hanging out her morning sheets  
with wooden pins  
(Ferlinghetti, 2003, p. 11)

Ferlinghetti contemplates at the North Beach environment and associates it with a Mediterranean-like space, similar to a village, in which people are modest and live a simple way of life. The Bay, as a chronotope, depicts a sense of freedom and simplicity at a time when technological development is increasingly more present, when World War Two is part of the recent memory and the tensions of the Cold War instil the country with a sense of confusion and insecurity over the country.

In "The Old Italians Dying", the poet dedicates his lines to his ethnic roots and emphasizes the big Italian community of the city he lives in:

You have seen them  
every day in Washington Square San Francisco  
the slow bell  
tolls in the morning  
in the Church of Peter & Paul  
in the marzipan church on the plaza  
(Ferlinghetti, 2003, p. 44)

They are the old Italians, the immigrants who left their homeland for America. Ferlinghetti portrays a similar picture of the city in his "They Were Putting Up the Statue...", describing a "flâneur-like" perspective on the San Francisco of the 1950s:

They were putting up the statue  
of Saint Francis  
in front of the church  
of Saint Francis  
in the city of San Francisco  
in a little side street  
just off the Avenue  
(Ferlinghetti, 2003, p. 34)

The church of Saint Francis, which dates as early as the 1800s, is part of the architectural and cultural heritage of San Francisco and, thus, a symbol of the city, whose name was inspired by the same saint. Ferlinghetti's use of temporal and spatial aesthetics depicts the multicultural sphere of the city, as the church is a legacy for its Italian community.

San Francisco's multicultural background is also depicted in "Great American Waterfront Poem," where the readers are exposed to several minorities living in San Francisco: "Filipino fishermen," "Hawaiians in baseball caps," "Puerto Ricans with pile-worms in tincans," "Old capital N Negroes with catfish," "An Arab on the bridge his turban flying," "thick Norwegian accent," and "The Last of the Mohicans" (Ferlinghetti, 2003, p. 55-57). In the poem, Ferlinghetti observes the passers-by and recalls memories from his past that are linked to the city: "The first poem I ever wrote in San Francisco twenty years ago," "married on a rooftop in North Beach." The poem's chronotopes convey a state of melancholy and nostalgia as the poetic voice describes the surroundings in a stream-of-consciousness manner.



The choice of words portrays Ferlinghetti's attempt to influence the image of San Francisco that the readers may perceive: "asleep in the sun," "fog lifting the sun the sun burning through," "bright steamers," "this waterfront of existence," "A great view," "opposite Alcatraz by the thousand fishing boats nested in green thick water," "The sea a green god," "morning October sun," "the tracks embedded in asphalt," and "the Bank of America towering over" (Ferlinghetti, 2003, p. 55–58). The repeated use of words related to sun, sea, and green makes one imagine a relaxing atmosphere and a place of prosperity and well-being. Moreover, the poetic voice describes his encounters with various people of various ethnicities, which makes the city look very cosmopolitan, dynamic and inclusive. As the author lures the reader to fancy the city, he also begins and ends the poem with his disappointment about the city's imperfections and leaves an open ending to the poem in order to install a sense of hope for the future of the city. The poet enumerates various locations where he spent most of his "divorce of civilization in and out waterfront hangouts" (Ferlinghetti, 2003, p. 55). The Beats used to attend this kind of public spaces as an attempt to escape the social pressure of the society at the time. The fact that the poetic voice mentions that he "wouldn't be back until they tore down the Embarcadero Freeway along with the rest of petroleum civilization" (Ferlinghetti, 2003, p. 55) proves the author's involvement in environmental issues and his opinion on the destructive effects of technology and development over nature and cultural heritage. The author predicts this tension between nature and the "sky-highway," Embarcadero Freeway, as thirteen years after writing the poem, the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake destroys it.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti rebuilds the city of San Francisco in his poems, from his Beat point of view, through the use of chronotopes that refer to the outcasts of the city and their daily experiences. He resonates with these outsiders and feels as part of a minority himself, expressing a sense of love for the city that serves as his home as well as frustration with its shortcomings. Inequality, lack of social inclusion, and pollution are three issues that Ferlinghetti fought for through his work and, therefore, he gave a voice to those silenced by the authority and by the capitalist trends. In order to influence the reader to understand and sympathize with these causes and to see the city at mid-century the way he does, the author builds the chronotope of San Francisco seen as the city of social pariahs, in a world where they seem to be powerless in the face of industrial and corporative progression. Ferlinghetti seems to blame politics and technology as the evil forces that degrade the city. The poetic voice wishes to escape social pressure, norms, and restraint by retreating to public spaces where there is a sense of belonging. Such places are either in nature or bars and cafés, where one can engage in peer-group relations or spiritual experiences.

## Conclusion

By analysing the city of San Francisco at mid-twentieth century, through spatial and temporal aesthetics, as depicted by the work of Lawrence Ferlinghetti, this study proves that the author, together with the Beat Generation group, faced various challenges during the Golden Age in order to affirm themselves and to resist the social pressure of traditionalist values.

Ferlinghetti can be considered an activist who fights, through his works, against the governmental and capitalist forces. His poems have a sense of both hope and decay: the writer emphasizes the flaws of society, such as unintegrated minorities and pollution, but also alludes that there is hope for a better fate for America. The poetic voice is conveyed as the voice of the social underdog; that way, the reader is offered an image of the outcasts' side of the city, which shows the margins of rich urban spaces and a life that aims at surviving more than enjoying.

San Francisco is often presented through images of nature, hills and water. The Beat poems also have the role of immortalizing social realities just the way they are. Ferlinghetti takes the reader on a tour of the city, as seen by a dog that "is just about to have his picture taken" (Ferlinghetti, 2003, p. 37). He resonates with this stray urban animal that walks freely through the city, being beaten from one street to another, seen by the society as unimportant and as dangerous for the wellbeing of the collective. Therefore, Ferlinghetti can be considered a contemporary underground "flâneur" who documents the city from the perspective of those marginalized.

His poetry, as well as the literary works of other authors that he published through City Lights, follow a political agenda which fosters non-violent protest, pacifism and ecology: "in addition to a political commitment that blended anarchism and ecology—he loathed the motor car, calling it 'the infernal combustion engine'" (Campbell, 2021, p. 1). Ferlinghetti also protested for social cohesion and believed in the importance of a strong, united community. He was enrolled in the Second World War and saw Hiroshima a few weeks after the bomb, which determined him to become a pacifist: "there was just three square miles of mulch with human hair and bones sticking out ... blackened unrecognisable shapes sticking up on the horizon, teacups full of flesh" (Saunders, 2019, p. 13). The horrors of the war witnessed by Ferlinghetti encouraged him to dedicate his artistic and literary work to fighting authority, conventions, animal cruelty, war and pollution. His City Lights Book Store has been a place of inspiration and encouragement for the literary scene and stands as a political statement which keeps Ferlinghetti's philosophy about the world still present and influential in San Francisco.

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