

# Exploration of America's Socio-Political Climate and Counterculture in Jack Kerouac's Novel on the Road

---

Jovanović, Ivana

Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad

2021

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište u Rijeci, Filozofski fakultet**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:186:605900>

Rights / Prava: [In copyright](#) / [Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2025-02-28**



Repository / Repozitorij:

[Repository of the University of Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences - FHSSRI Repository](#)



University of Rijeka  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Department of English Language and Literature

**Ivana Jovanović**

**EXPLORATION OF AMERICA'S SOCIO-POLITICAL CLIMATE AND  
COUNTERCULTURE IN JACK KEROUAC'S NOVEL *ON THE ROAD***

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B.A. in English  
Language and Literature and Croatian Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

Supervisor:  
Dr.sc. Lovorka Gruić-Grmuša

July 2021

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the socio-political climate of the 1950s United States through the scope of Jack Kerouac's acclaimed novel *On the Road*. While referring to the specific excerpts from the novel, the thesis will explore the notion of counterculture and illustrate the socio-political state of the 1950s American society. Since the late 1940s, various authors of the Beat Generation aimed to raise the awareness that American society was blinded by conformity and overconsumption, while the government was still engaging in foreign wars, constantly prompting militarism and unfair treatment of the minorities. The further influence those writers had on the young people of the 1960s was immense, as their observations paved the way for important social movements. The data used in this thesis will include various magazine and web articles, books, and essays, as well as the author's own outlook on the given topics.

**KEYWORDS:** Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, the Beat Generation, The United States, counterculture, society, 1950s, conformity, capitalism, militarism, police brutality, social movements, hippies

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. POST-WAR CONFORMITY AND THE RISE OF THE COUNTERCULTURE.....	2
3. A NEW LITERARY STREAM.....	3
3.1. Beat Generation and their recognition in the 1950s .....	3
3.2. Life and literary work of Jack Kerouac .....	4
3.3. <i>On the Road</i> .....	5
4. AMERICA’S SOCIO-POLITICAL CLIMATE THROUGH THE EYES OF SAL PARADISE: RURAL UNDERDEVELOPMENT, AUTHORITY MISUSE, CONSUMERISM AND MILITARISM .....	7
5. AMERICA IN THE 1960’S: VIETNAM WAR, CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND 1968 CHICAGO PROTESTS .....	15
6. <i>ON THE ROAD</i> : LITERARY LEGACY .....	18
7. CONCLUSION.....	19
8. REFERENCES.....	20

## 1. INTRODUCTION

After the formidable years of the Great Depression and World War II, people of the United States were avid to put the hardships behind them and embrace the modern age. Families longed for a life that is easy-going and comfortable, which resulted in a large growth of suburbs. New forms of media triumphed, becoming modern sources of news, entertainment, and particularly – advertising. In a short time, marketers recognized and geared a range of products suiting the needs of a middle-class American household.

However, during the prosperous post-War era, several countercultural ideas started to emerge among the authors gathered around the literary stream called *The Beat Generation*. Abhorred by the capitalistic overproduction, aggressive advertising and militarism, which was due to Cold War still omnipresent in the mainstream media, they strived to emphasize the emptiness of intense industrialisation, materialistic worldview and indoctrination through media. Among the central figures of the movement was Jack Kerouac, whose acclaimed novel *On the Road* acknowledged the existence of a different, invisible side of America, delivering a message that the threats were no longer economic, but ideological.

Upon determining the socio-political climate in the mid-century United States, this paper is going to define the terms of *counterculture* and *The Beat Generation*. Subsequently, it will provide an analysis of themes such as class differences, overproduction and militarism, through the scope of the events listed in Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*. Lastly, Kerouac's influence on his audience will be discussed, drawing attention to the novel's important contribution in countercultural movements of the 1960s.

## 2. POST-WAR CONFORMITY AND THE RISE OF THE COUNTERCULTURE

Encouraged by the victory in World War II, the Soviet Union and the United States arose as the two leading industrial powers. Due to luxuriant government supports for home loans and education, the American economy flourished in the post-War era. Consequently, during the 1950s and 1960s, a great number of children were born, collectively known as the *baby boomers* (*Popular culture and mass media in the 1950s*, Khan Academy). However, the post-War period was also marked by the outspread fear of communism, incited by the rivalry with the Soviets and the government's foreign policies. As the world entered a nuclear era, the boomers developed bigger social consciousness than any generation before them. Expressing themselves through various art forms, they reflected a desire to oppose the strong conformism of the times, feeling the need to counter the mainstream culture. (*Popular culture and mass media in the 1950s*, Khan Academy)

The term *counterculture* (originally *contraculture*) was coined in 1960 by the American sociologist John Milton Yinger, in his article published in *American Sociological Review*. Yinger wrote that the term can be used "wherever the normative system of a group contains, as a primary element, a theme of conflict with the values of the total society, where personality variables are directly involved in the development and maintenance of the group's values, and wherever its norms can be understood only by reference to the relationships of the group to a surrounding dominant culture" (629).

In her book *American Countercultures: An Encyclopedia of Nonconformists, Alternative Lifestyles, and Radical Ideas in U.S. History*, Gina Misiroglu explained how the need to oppose the mainstream was not something entirely new in American literature:

It is in their work and creative vision, however, that artists and writers have played the most influential role in the history of American countercultures. Works of art and literature are, almost by definition, countercultural expressions, as they attempt to reformulate the way people see themselves and the world in which they live. (...) Still, it was not until the post–World War II era that art and counterculture became most intimately connected (19).

Allen Ginsberg's ecstatic poem *Howl*, William S. Burroughs' experimental novel *Naked Lunch* and Jack Kerouac's bohemian novel *On the Road* planted the seed for the strivings that will in the forthcoming decades be represented by the hippies, who succeeded beatnik countercultural values, united in raising their voices against militarism, oppression, and social injustice of every kind.

### **3. A NEW LITERARY STREAM**

#### **3.1. Beat Generation and their recognition in the 1950s**

Between 1944 and 1965, a new stream of writing came to prominence on the American literary scene. Though frequently labeled as a movement, a biographer Barry Miles explained the ideas of the Beat circle:

The group was more of a fraternity of spirit and attitude than a literary movement, and their writings have little in common with each other; what they did have in common was a reaction to the ongoing carnage of World War II, the dropping of the atomic bomb and the puritan small-mindedness that still characterized American life (2).

These literary tendencies appeared in the 1940s among its early writers, most notably Herbert Henucke, Lucien Carr and Allen Ginsberg on the premises of the Columbia University Campus. After 1956 and the publication of three fundamental works, Allen Ginsberg's poem

*Howl*, William S. Burroughs' novel *Naked Lunch* and Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*, the focus of readers turned towards this small but passionate group of writers.

The term *beat* became essential in defining the group's literary identity. "In 1944, the use of the term by a Times Square hustler, Herbert Hunke, came to the attention of Burroughs, who passed it on to Ginsberg and Kerouac at Columbia University. According to Ginsberg, Hunke's original street slang meant to be "exhausted, at the bottom of the world, looking up or out, sleepless, wide-eyed, perceptive, rejected by society, on your own, streetwise" (qtd. in Ginsberg 16) (Misiroglu 105).

Their work is recognizable for its experimental structure, including elements of confessional poetry and stream-of-consciousness writing, while incorporating autobiographical subjects. Providing a critique of a post-War society, the work of the Beat Generation authors "bridged the modernist practices of the postwar avant-garde with the youth counterculture of the 1960s" (Belgrad 27).

### **3.2. Life and literary work of Jack Kerouac**

Jack Kerouac was born in 1922 in Lowell, Massachusetts, an industrial town with a large French-Canadian population. Upon receiving a football scholarship, in 1940 he enrolled at Columbia University, where he met two writers who became his lifelong friends: Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs. (Jack Kerouac, Encyclopedia Britannica). After dropping out and spending a short time in the Navy, Kerouac returned to New York and fell in with a group of writers who eventually defined a literary circle known as the Beat Generation. In 1946, Kerouac met Neal Cassady, with whom he made several journeys across the United



States, spending a total of seven years travelling. He recounted the travels in his most acclaimed novel, *On the Road*. Kerouac's discovery of Buddhism in the mid-1950s further shaped the philosophical outlook of his writing. Taking the name Duluoz, he depicted his life in twelve novels, known as the *Duluoz Legend* (Misiroglu 575). His early novels *The Subterraneans*, *The Dharma Bums*, *Doctor Sax*, *Maggie Cassidy*, *Book of Dreams*, and *Visions of Cody* were published shortly after *On the Road*.

Due to his diffident nature, Kerouac was never able to comprehend the fame *On the Road* brought and his life devolved into a blur of alcohol addiction. Suffering the loss of his sister in 1964 and close friend Neal Cassady in 1968, he alienated himself from the Beat writers and felt little solidarity with the hippies of the counterculture. Embittered by the critics who attacked his improvisational style and frustrated by misrepresentation by the public, in 1969 he had no money, and many of his books were out of print. He died in Florida at the age of 47 (Misiroglu 575).

### **3.3. *On the Road***

In 1951, during the course of three weeks, Kerouac compiled his diary entries and typed the manuscript of *On the Road*. It was famously written on a 120-foot roll of teletype paper, without any paragraph breaks or margins (Ginsberg 180). In his university teachings on the Beat Generation, Allen Ginsberg pointed out that "Kerouac was a swift typist, able to produce 120 words per minute" and had "amazing neural rapidity between his brain and fingers" (182).

Although the novel was written swiftly, Kerouac had a hard time finding its publisher. Due to experimental writing style and content considered to be too explicit, editors feared publishing it could lead to obscenity charges, which already occurred with Ginsberg's poem *Howl*. During the next six years, Kerouac worked several jobs and continued to write extensively. In 1957, *On the Road* was finally published by the Viking Press.

The novel is based on several journeys Kerouac made travelling throughout the United States with his friends, most notably Neal Cassady (referred by the pseudonym Dean Moriarty), a bohemian and a wild-spirit who was somewhat of a muse to Kerouac. The novel's distinctive style Kerouac termed as *spontaneous prose* and compared it to the improvisations of jazz musicians. In his essay, *Essentials of Spontaneous Prose*, he laid out how he felt fiction should be written. It included, most famously, the method of "No periods separating sentence - structures already arbitrarily riddled by false colons and timid usually needless commas — but the vigorous space dash separating rhetorical breathing, as jazz musician drawing breath between outblown phrases" (72, 73). *On the Road* is *roman à clef*, portraying well-known real people disguised as fictional characters, the majority of them being prominent figures of the Beat Generation, most notably William S. Burroughs as Old Bull Lee, Allen Ginsberg as Carlo Marx, John Clellon Holmes as Tom Saybrook, Neal Cassady as Dean Moriarty and Kerouac himself as Sal Paradise, the narrator (*Roman à clef, Encyclopedia Britannica*).

Despite the novel's immense success, Kerouac felt uncomfortable being called *the king of Beat Generation* and found himself constantly defending the term *beat*, which was misused by the media to name a group of young bohemians, not accurately representing who Kerouac considered himself to be. Exhausted by the fame *On the Road* brought, he wrote in the novel *Big Sur* that he despised being interviewed and having to rehearse his poetry readings under the *hot lights of Hollywood* (Kerouac 12).

#### 4. AMERICA'S SOCIO-POLITICAL CLIMATE THROUGH THE EYES OF SAL PARADISE: RURAL UNDERDEVELOPMENT, AUTHORITY MISUSE, CONSUMERISM AND MILITARISM

While travelling across the *groaning American continent*, as he frequently calls it, fictionalized version of Kerouac encounters various types of people who represent American society of the late 1940s. Sal Paradise, a young writer and Kerouac's alter ego, makes a distinction between two types of people he meets: laborers - people who pick cotton or work on the railroad tracks, and intellectuals - his circle of fellow writers whose reflections on the society he calls tiring and negative. Author Karen Skinazi explains: "He looks from the outside-in at Americans of all forms and from right across the country. The book unfolds as a poem in prose to the cowboys of the West and the intellectuals of the East and, of course, to the romance of the road in between" (91). Although seldom explicitly stating his political opinions, Kerouac's Sal Paradise becomes the leading chronicler of post-War American society, reflecting on his experiences and conversations with people he meets along the way.

First of all, one of the central problems Kerouac focuses on is poverty. Although the post-War period was presented as comfortable and easy-going for the average American household, there was still a large number of people to whom government supports and brand-new products were far from available. Marginalized because of their nationality or underdevelopment of the rural areas, laborers of the South exhibit that, while the middle-classes in the suburbs enjoyed the prosperous period, the time has stopped for those whose survival still remained formidable as it was during the Great Depression. These two opposite extremes are omnipresent throughout the novel, as *On the Road's* social commentary reminds the mainstream that immigrants, Okies, and the homeless still exist at the outskirts

of society. Upon encountering a family of Oklahoman cotton pickers, Sal Paradise describes a vicious circle of low-wage survival the family got stuck in:

In a larger tent next to ours lived a whole family of Okie cotton pickers; the grandfather sat in a chair all day long, he was too old to work; the son and daughter, and their children, filed every dawn across the highway to my farmer's field and went to work. (...) The grandfather had come from Nebraska during the great plague of the thirties – that selfsame dust-cloud my Montana cowboy had told me about - with the entire family in a jalopy truck. (...) In the ten years the old man's son had increased his children to the number of four, some of whom were old enough now to pick cotton. And in that time, they had progressed from ragged poverty in Simon Legree fields to a kind of smiling respectability in better tents, and that was all. They were extremely proud of their tent (Kerouac 57).

Having no chance for progress, generations of families settled to work hard manual jobs for which they daily earned a few dollars, because at least it paid for their food, while being stuck in the system which blocked any escape to greater opportunities. Even Paradise himself is at first awed by the opportunity to work and be paid immediately: "My back began to ache. But it was beautiful kneeling and hiding in that earth. If I felt like resting I did, my face on the pillow of brown moist earth. Birds an accompaniment. I thought I had found my life's work (Kerouac 57). However, a few weeks later he realized that once he gets caught in the circle, in ten years the tent will be the one thing he is most proud of, and he will be stuck in a system that ensures his insufficiency. As illustrated in the excerpt, Kerouac uses a satiric tone to comment on rural underdevelopment and the mainstream's distorted view of the late 1940s America, stating ironically how it only took ten years for the family to make progress from borderline slavery to life in a slightly better tent. The previously mentioned excerpt is one of first instances in the novel that prove Kerouac's great ability to observe and pay attention to people who fall outside of the homogenous image of the American society. By acknowledging their existence and difficulties, Kerouac gives his readers a first-handed insight into the harsh

life of the American South, revealing the truth which has been concealed by the government and mass media.

Moreover, another way Kerouac portrays class-related differences is when writing about various forces of the law – the police, security guards and other figures of authority who come across the migrants, African Americans and others who fall outside the mainstream (Spangler 7). During the years in which Kerouac was travelling and writing the novel, the government was, among other things, intensely focused on securing the public's trust in the federal authorities. However, the safety and reliance provided by the forces of the law were reserved almost exclusively for white middle-class Americans, while the others still faced brutality and severe intimidation by the police on a daily basis.

For instance, upon taking a job as a security guard while staying in California, Sal Paradise meets officers who maintained law during the Great Depression, a period in which an atmosphere of fear created the prolific ground for crude patrol forces, who often dealt with minorities and the poor in the unscrupulous ways. Nervous because of the atmosphere in the station, he describes other policemen as bloodthirsty and eager to demonstrate their authority on unarmed men:

They were always sitting around on their asses; they were proud of their jobs. They handled their guns and talked about them. They were itching to shoot somebody. (...) The cop who had been an Alcatraz guard was potbellied and about sixty, retired but unable to keep away from the atmospheres that had nourished his dry soul all his life. Every night he drove to work in his '35 Ford, punched the clock exactly on time, and sat down at the rolltop desk. (...) Then he leaned back and told stories. «You should have been here about two months ago when me and Sledge» (that was another cop, a youngster who wanted to be a Texas Ranger and had to be satisfied with his present lot) «arrested a drunk in Barrack G. Boy, you should have seen the blood fly. I'll take you over there tonight and show you the stains on the wall. We had him bouncing from one wall to another" (Kerouac, 41)

Invoking images of savage brutality performed by the guards, Kerouac's commentary on authority misuse resonated with minorities who regularly felt it on their own skin. He

witnesses that among the policemen, the “crime of poverty” was still the legitimate reason for intimidation and violence.

Kerouac recalls another occasion during which he and his friends were intimidated by the police officers. This time, finding himself on the other side of the law, not wearing a uniform of a guard, he describes their behavior towards the group who got stopped due to reckless driving.

There was a mean cop in there who took an immediate dislike to Dean; he could smell jail all over him. He sent his cohort outdoors to question Marylou and me privately. They wanted to know how old Marylou was, they were trying to whip up a Mann Act<sup>1</sup> idea. But she had her marriage certificate. Then they took me aside alone and wanted to know who was sleeping with Marylou. «Her husband,» I said quite simply. They were curious. Something was fishy. They tried some amateur Sherlocking by asking the same questions twice, expecting us to make a slip. (...)

Finally, the mean one inside fined Dean twenty-five dollars. When Dean protested, the mean cop threatened to take him back to Pennsylvania and slap a special charge on him.

«What charge?»

«Never mind what charge. Don't worry about *that*, wiseguy.»

(...)

The American police are involved in psychological warfare against those Americans who don't frighten them with imposing papers and threats. It's a Victorian police force; it peers out of musty windows and wants to inquire about everything, and can make crimes if the crimes don't exist to its satisfaction (Kerouac, 81).

The policemen are suspicious and aiming to charge them with more than a speeding ticket, doing everything they could to find a loophole in Sal and Dean's stories. Kerouac once again uses a satiric tone to refer to the policemen's incompetence, the “amateur Sherlocking” techniques they use to question him and his friends. Although the group is not daunted easily, knowing that the policemen have no right to attribute them any other crime than a speeding ticket, situations like the one mentioned in an excerpt were a common occurrence in the mid-

---

<sup>1</sup> The Mann Act (also known as the White-Slave Traffic Act of 1910) is a federal law that criminalizes the transportation of “any woman or girl for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery, or for any other immoral purpose.” (*Mann Act*, Legal Information Institute)

century United States, where the forces of law frequently abused their power for no legitimate reason. Threatening to “slap a special charge” on Dean after he protested, the policemen want the group to know that they have no problem making the lives of innocent men miserable, just to show their authority. They know the system is so corrupt it would be impossible for those without money or power to leave without any charges. Upon finally continuing their journey, Dean scoffs “Those guys have it so damn easy. They’ll out and shoot you if you complain, too. (Kerouac, 81).

The problem of police brutality became especially prominent during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, when numerous incidents covered by the media resulted in national outrage. However, the message conveyed in Kerouac’s words indicates that the majority of the incidents remained unknown to the public and were only told among the policemen, accompanied by bragging and words of approval by their colleagues. By retelling the stories, Kerouac condemns America’s long history of authority misuse, sending out a warning about a crooked system where property rights are more important than civil rights, and where people are feared of those who are supposed to protect them.

Furthermore, even though Kerouac was apolitical most of his life, one of the fundamental notions all the Beat Generation writers had in common was against the consumerist living and overproduction of the 1950s. As previously mentioned, due to publicized rivalry with the Soviet Union, people of the United States were encouraged to spend their money on various kinds of products, in order to nourish the image of a post-War commodity. During the 1950s Eisenhower era, America’s GDP grew by 150%, along with union membership reaching historic peak, as 35% of the nation’s workforce belonged to some kind of a labor union (*Popular culture and mass media in the 1950s*, Khan Academy).

While visiting a fellow writer Old Bull Lee, William S. Burroughs' alter-ego, Kerouac reflects on America's economic boom through dialogue with Lee. Nostalgic for the times when goods were made to last, Lee comments how with the invention of cheap materials, people have become dependent on buying expandable items, which made them slaves to overproduction and overconsumption:

Sal, do you realize the shelves they build these days crack under the weight of knickknacks after six months or generally collapse? Same with houses, same with clothes. These bastards have invented plastics by which they could make houses that last forever. And tires. Americans are killing themselves by the millions every year with defective rubber tires that get hot on the road and blow up. They prefer making cheap goods so's everybody'll have to go on working and punching timeclocks and organizing themselves in sullen unions and floundering around while the big grab goes on in Washington and Moscow (Kerouac, 88).

In essence, Kerouac sees little difference between Oklahoman cotton pickers and unionized factory workers, perceiving them both as slaves to a disturbing capitalist system that rewards them with crumbs and makes it impossible to climb any career ladder. Old Bull Lee points out that although there is a technology that enables the production of the goods that are long-lasting, governments have decided not to make it available to the people, placing the low-quality products instead, while individuals are being reduced into consumers. An idea that gathered all the Beat Generation writers together remains obvious – material goods have gained a cult following and the government's loans to the people are only a tool that encourages them to spend more, with the money still ending up in the hands of the wealthiest.

Next, among numerous historical events that marked American politics of the mid-century, the Cold War stands out as the most prominent, accompanied by the Vietnam War, a conflict that was the main reason for the anti-authoritarian propensity that escalated in the 1960s. Living and writing during the "nuclear age", as well as during America's involvement in one of history's largest bloodsheds, Kerouac does not hesitate to condemn the government's fierce



militarism and the manifestation of the nuclear force. His commentary on American politics can be gathered from Paradise's observations upon encountering the native people of Mexico. Seeing young women selling minerals in the Mexican desert, he remarks: "They didn't know that a bomb had come that could crack all our bridges and roads and reduce them to jumbles, and we would be as poor as they someday, and stretching out our hands in the same, same way" (Kerouac 172). Witnessing an image that is the complete opposite from those seen in his country, Paradise's words convey a strong anti-war message, as he even envies the natives on the ignorance, wishing he could enjoy it as well. This anti-war attitude becomes obvious in another instance, when Paradise and his friends arrive in Washington D.C. on the day of Harry S. Truman's inauguration for the second presidential term. Looking out at the parade, he describes great displays of war and military force, witnessing a scene which corresponded with the omnipresent promotion of Americanism and Cold War strategies:

Great displays of war might were lined along Pennsylvania Avenue as we rolled by in our battered boat. There were 6-295, PT boats, artillery, all kinds of war material that looked murderous in the snowy grass; the last thing was a regular small ordinary lifeboat that looked pitiful and foolish. Dean slowed down to look at it. He kept shaking his head in awe. «What are these people up to?» (Kerouac 80)

Kerouac's indifferent tone illustrates how unimpressed he is by the displays of patriotism, considering it to be fabricated and shallow. He condemns the government's need to show off their weaponry, seeing no point in bragging about owning the most expensive machine to shed blood of the other human being. Paradise once again discusses the topic with a fellow writer Old Bull Lee, who points out that even science, a domain which he considered to be the most neutral, has fallen under the influence of a militaristic rivalry: "When a man dies, he undergoes a mutation in his brain that we know nothing about now but which will be very

clear someday if scientists get on the ball. The bastards right now are only interested in seeing if they can blow up the world” (Kerouac, 90).

Lastly, upon arriving to Hollywood in order to find a job, Sal Paradise comments on the frenzy that surrounds America’s fascination with movie stars and celebrities:

We went to Hollywood to try to work in the drugstore at Sunset and Vine. Now there was a corner! Great families off jalopies from the hinterlands stood around the sidewalk gaping for sight of some movie star, and the movie star never showed up. When a limousine passed they rushed eagerly to the curb and ducked to look: some character in dark glasses sat inside with a bejeweled blonde. «Don Ameche! Don Ameche!» «No, George Murphy! George Murphy!» They milled around, looking at one another. Hollywood Boulevard was a great, screaming frenzy of cars; there were minor accidents at least once a minute; everybody was rushing off toward the farthest palm - and beyond that was the desert and nothingness (Kerouac, 52).

Expressing his scorn towards the celebrity culture, Kerouac finds it difficult to comprehend the public’s obsession with the stars of Hollywood, and considers it to be an embodiment of America’s shallow façade of welfare, beyond which lays “the desert and nothingness.” He reflects on the ridiculousness of families who come from the remote areas looking for work, getting excited over possibly seeing a movie star who does not care about any of them.

On the other hand, he and his friends identify themselves with African-American jazz musicians and their marginal status in a white culture. They find the pleasure in enjoying vibrant jazz concerts in crowded pubs and cellars, which were the only places African-American musicians were allowed to perform. Once again, Kerouac celebrates the counterculture, contempting the side of America which adores the richest, while great talents such as jazz and bop musicians remain undiscovered, playing in small pubs for groups of social outcasts.

Calling into question an ideal image of the mid-century United States, previously quoted excerpts from *On the Road* illustrate that the country's true socio-political climate was, for the 1950s mainstream, difficult to comprehend. Among the events portrayed in the novel, Kerouac included a subtext dedicated to an invisible side of America, the one which did not fall under the omnipresent "white identity" and whose hardships were never properly acknowledged. *On the Road's* thought-provoking commentary concerning rural underdevelopment, police brutality, consumerism, militarism and white identity critically engages with the imposed image of post-War conformity, while Kerouac's Sal Paradise becomes a social commentator of everything America was turning its head away from. His reflections on previously listed problems and incredible ability for empathy resonated with an audience of young activists, and his anti-war message prompted the social consciousness towards the civil rights movement and the abolishment of the Vietnam war.

## **5. AMERICA IN THE 1960'S: VIETNAM WAR, CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND 1968 CHICAGO PROTESTS**

The anti-authoritarian propensity that escalated in the 1960s was motivated by United States' military action in Vietnam. With an aim to prevent the breach of communism into North Vietnam, American troops started to occupy areas of Indochina in 1950, doubling its numbers as the war progressed. By the 1960s, the conflict increased to an enormous scale, causing the loss of a tremendous number of lives.

Kerouac's critique and anti-war commentary of the American society echoed among the audience of young readers, whose anxiety over the nuclear conflict was increasing as the years went on. The earliest demonstrations against the involvement in Vietnam started in 1964 among the student activists at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1965, several activists set themselves on fire, providing gruesome images of how strongly they felt against the immorality of the war. During the following years, demonstrations escalated into an international movement, becoming one of the defining periods in American history.

Apart from a political movement dedicated to ending the war in Vietnam, several significant social events marked the age of *youth culture*, most important possibly being the Monterey Pop Music Festival in 1967. Marked as the beginning of *Summer of Love*, the festival was a celebration of music, youth, drugs and freedom, with the largest number of musicians yet assembled, playing for the largest crowd yet gathered.

While the white counterculture celebrated the *Summer of Love*, African-Americans were undergoing a transformation of their own. Gathered on college campuses and in civil organizations, African-Americans felt that America's discrimination towards this large minority of people finally needs to be put to an end. Celebrating the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr., the Black Power Movement burst on the scene, with an aim to protect the interests of the lower-class African-Americans, a demographic that was increasing rapidly. Due to constant police brutality, institutionalized racism and racial segregation, the 1960s were turbulent times for the black communities that exploded in rage, engaging in a wave of demonstrations.

Additionally, one of the major countercultural events occurred towards the end of the decade, at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, where the Democratic Party was supposed to select their new presidential candidate. All of the countercultural groups

were coming for the peaceful rally, most importantly Youth International Party, the Black Panther Party and National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam. Even though demonstrations were announced in advance, the mayor of Chicago refused to give permission for anti-patriotic groups to demonstrate at the convention and had the International Amphitheatre, where it was being held, ringed with barbed wire while putting the 11,000 officers of the Chicago Police Department on twelve-hour shift (Langguth 511). The third day of the convention began peacefully, but when the young protestor climbed the flagpole and lowered the American flag, the police charged. Under the full attention of TV cameras, they attacked demonstrators, reporters and bystanders, spraying teargas and instigating a police riot. Seven defendants, members of several groups, were charged with conspiracy against the state as well as crossing the state lines with an aim of instigating a riot. Although they believed in the support of the majority, especially due to police brutality, polls showed that a great number of the American public supported the mayor's tactics.

Even though many of the further countercultural movements outlived Kerouac, the ideas he conveyed in *On the Road* resumed in a new form. A fellow Beat writer Allen Ginsberg became one of the most important activists of free speech, participating in a number of demonstrations, including the 1968 Chicago protests. Apart from Ginsberg, several other artists became a bridge between the Beat Generation and the hippies, including musician Bob Dylan and authors Bob Kaufman and Ken Kesey. Kerouac's refusal of traditional values in *On the Road* prompted the social transformation yet unseen in American history, and his critique on consumer culture shaped the mindset of the politically aware young generation, who expressed their individuality through art, music and activism.

## 6. ON THE ROAD: LITERARY LEGACY

Apart from its social influence, *On the Road* had a large impact on a number of poets, musicians, and filmmakers, providing a sense of modern-age escapism, just like Thoreau did a hundred years prior in *Walden*. Many of the postmodern literary works owe their roots to the experimental writing techniques introduced during the 1950s, which is why Kerouac and other members of the Beat Generation are considered to be some of the most influential writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Publishing many of their most acclaimed work years after the journeys described in *On the Road*, Ginsberg and Burroughs remained dominant authors in the American counterculture.

In 1964, inspired by Kerouac's novel, author Ken Kesey and his group of friends known as The Merry Pranksters, made a cross-country journey in an old school bus, with Neal Cassady behind the wheel. The footage of the trip filmed on 16 mm cameras remained unseen until 2011, when a documentary film called *Magic Trip* was released.

Additionally, *On the Road* provided the template for the genre of *road* literature and films, starting in the 1970s and continuing to the present day. It set the scene for cult films such as *Thelma and Louise*, *Easy Rider* and *Paris, Texas*, keeping the romance between the road and the postmodernist man alive.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Romanticizing the vagabond lifestyle, *On the Road* is a frenetic love letter to America and its diverse geography, culture, people and spirit. At its core, the novel is an exploration of youth culture of post-war America and a melancholic ode to jazz music and mid-century Americana. However, apart from celebrating its culture in a juvenile extasy, *On the Road* aims to emphasize America's obsession with consumerism and militant rivalry, while problems of inequality, underdevelopment and redistribution of the goods remain present in society. Engaging in a countercultural pilgrimage, Kerouac gave voice to those marked as undesirable, whose spirit continued to live on somewhere along the road. Although he pointed out that the characters of his friends and himself are merely a fictionalized figures, the cultural impact they had on American youth and society was immense, conveying a message that there is the truth about the excitement of the essence of life, that is worth chasing after. Publishing their literary works during some of the most important decades of the modern era, writers of the Beat Generation are responsible for shaping the thoughts of thousands of politically aware young people, who were ready for society to change in order to be a better place for all, regardless of their race, gender, socio-economic status or sexual preference.

## 8. REFERENCES

### Primary source:

Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. Penguin Modern Classics, 2011, ISBN 9780141182674

### Secondary sources:

Belgrad, Daniel. "The Transnational Counterculture: Beat-Mexican Intersections", *Reconstructing the Beats*, Macmillan US, 2004, pp. 27-41

Dittman, Michael. *Jack Kerouac: A Biography*, Greenwood, 2004, ISBN 0313328366

Duncan, Russell. *The Summer of Love and Protest: Transatlantic Counterculture in the 1960s in The Transatlantic Sixties: Europe and the United States in the Counterculture Decade*. edited by Grzegorz Kosc, et al., Transcript Verlag, 2013, ISBN 3837622169

Ginsberg, Allen. *The Best Minds of My Generation: A Literary History of the Beats*. Edited by Bill Morgan, Grove Press, 2017, ISBN 0802126499

Hirschman, Charles, et al. *Vietnamese Casualties During the American War: A New Estimate*. *Population and Development Review*, vol. 21, no. 4, 1995, *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/2137774](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2137774). Accessed 21 April 2021.

Kerouac, Jack. *Essentials of Spontaneous Prose*, *The Evergreen Review*, Vol 2, No.5, 1958. pp. 72, 73. *UK Essays*, <https://www.ukessays.com/essays/english-literature/jack-kerouac-and-the-spontaneous-prose-english-literature-essay.php?vref=1>. Accessed 19 April 2021.

Kerouac, Jack. *Big Sur*, Penguin Classics, 2018, ISBN 9780241348086

Langguth, Arthur John. *Our Vietnam: The War 1954 – 1975*. Simon & Schuster, 2002, ISBN 0743212312

Miles, Barry. *William Burroughs: El Hombre Invisible*. Virgin Books, 2011, ISBN 0753507072

Misiroglu, Gina. *American Countercultures: An Encyclopedia of Nonconformists, Alternative Lifestyles, and Radical Ideas in U.S. History*. Routledge, 2009, ISBN 0765680602



Skinazi, Karen. "Through Roots and Routes: On the Road's Portrayal of an Outsider's Journey into the Meaning of America", *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2009, Project MUSE, [muse.jhu.edu/article/266751](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/266751). Accessed 21 April 2021

Spangler, Jason. "We're On A Road To Nowhere: Steinbeck, Kerouac, And The Legacy Of The Great Depression." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2008, pp. 308–327. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/29533876](https://www.jstor.org/stable/29533876). Accessed 23 May 2021

Yinger, J. Milton. "Contraculture and Subculture." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 25, no. 5, 1960, pp. 625–635. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/2090136](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2090136). Accessed 23 May 2021.

### **Electronic sources:**

Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. *Roman à clef*. Encyclopedia Britannica, [www.britannica.com/art/roman-a-clef](https://www.britannica.com/art/roman-a-clef). Accessed 20 April 2021.

Blair, W., et al. *American literature: Literary and social criticism*. Encyclopedia Britannica. Edited from 1999 – 2020. [www.britannica.com/art/American-literature/Literary-and-social-criticism](https://www.britannica.com/art/American-literature/Literary-and-social-criticism). Accessed 19 April 2021.

*Mann Act*. Legal Information Institute. [www.law.cornell.edu/wex/mann\\_act](https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/mann_act). Accessed 27 June 2021.

*Popular culture and mass media in the 1950s*. Khan Academy. [www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/postwarera/1950s-america/a/popular-culture-and-mass-media-cnx](https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/postwarera/1950s-america/a/popular-culture-and-mass-media-cnx). Accessed 19 April 2021.

### **Documentary films:**

*The Sixties – The Years That Shaped a Generation*. Dir. David Davis, Stephen Talbot. PBS. 2005.

