The Beat Goes On: Discourse, Power and Identity in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*

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*June 2010*

C-Essay, 15 credits
English Literature

English C
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A New Generation: The Beat Generation

In April 1951, Jack Kerouac sat down in his apartment in New York and wrote the entire novel *On the Road* in one stretch. It was published by Viking Press six years later. “The book voiced a new generation’s dreams of freedom – a freedom closely tied to the romance of the road and the need to move. We hacked ourselves away from our family roots and branched in new directions” (McKeen 40). The publication of *On the Road* became, more or less, a manifesto of a counterculture, namely the Beat Generation, and Kerouac was made a voice for this new American movement. The semi-autobiographical novel depicts the protagonists Sal Paradise and his friend Dean Moriarty’s (Kerouac and Neil Cassidy) vivid journey across the country, into the alternative and underground lifestyles of the late 1940s America. In *Through Roots and Routes: On the Road’s Portrayal of an Outsider’s Journey into the Meaning of America*, Karen E.H. Skinazi comments; “autobiographical in nature, *On the Road* focuses as much on an outsider – an unheroic character, a passenger on the road to the American Dream, as on the insider – a heroic figure” (86). In my interpretation of Skinazi, there is a duality in the representation of the protagonists; Sal Paradise narrates the story from a distance, painting a dreamscape wherein Dean Moriarty’s beatific heroism can fully bloom. Their relationship nurtures both spiritual contemplation and meaningful conversation, which in my opinion, together form the corpus of a new discourse. Through Kerouac’s *On the Road* and Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* and many other Beat artifacts, the authors’ different ideas reached out to a
new generation. In *Reconstructing the Beats*, Jennie Skerl explains how the Beat Generation’s message spread through the underground movements:

The Beat counterculture had its geography of bohemian neighborhoods in urban centers … its public social gathering and performance spaces (cafes, clubs, theaters, galleries, bookstores, city streets, and parks); its little magazines, alternative newspapers, and publishers; its alternative religious thought; its unconventional sexual mores and families; and an ideology of dissent that redefined the political and resisted censorship, police crackdowns, and media attacks with a collective response. (2)

The texts (either novels, poetry or basic verbal ideas of Kerouac, Cassidy, Ginsberg and other prominent Beat proponents) spread through various performance spaces, which can be seen as discursive practices. The consumption and processes of these texts within the discursive practices formed a new social practice that became the expression of the Beat Generation. “Through the creation of a subculture and their own public performance spaces, the Beats sought and reached an audience for their art outside established mainstream cultural institutions and thus recruited more members of their community” (Skerl 2). Because of its political, social and religious awareness, this new counter-culture community indirectly expressed a threat to the common order of things in mainstream society. In *When America Became Suburban*, Robert A Beauregard discusses the general view of the urban lifestyles:

Making the flight of youth to the cities even more appalling was the rural view of cities as threatening, sinful, and corrupting … [c]ities shattered the familial and religious bonds of an agrarian society of small towns and created innumerable opportunities for sin and exploitation. In the cities, barrooms, brothels, and gambling parlors, along with other amusements of the flesh, tempted those with frail morals. (74)

As Beauregard argues above, the dangers of the cities “tempted those with frail morals”, basically the youth of America; a generation that was supposed to line up for the duty of honorable labor, thus contributing to a bright and prosperous American future. Beauregard’s definition of rural life and Suburbia alongside the idea of the Beat Generation, could be
argued to outline two ideological attitudes that are positioned in stark contrast to each other. On the one hand, Suburbia wants to uphold a safe society where a strong government leads and protects its citizens. On the other hand, the Beat Generation strives for spiritual awareness and the right to lead one’s life in whichever way one sees fit without a society that dictates one’s choices. In other words, this is a matter of differing types of power. From a suburban perspective where power entails various kinds of financial engagements, such as loans and investments, and a belief in a government ready to defend its ideology with police forces and military arms, the Beat Generation’s ideological expressions, generally posed a mild challenge to mainstream society.

As mentioned above, the publication of *On the Road* made a generation erupt and bloom all over America’s larger urban cities; Sal and Dean inspired a generation to question contemporary society, which leads to the core aim of this essay which is to investigate Kerouac’s *On the Road* and find an answer to the question: What is there in the language use of the Beats in *On the Road* that poses a threat to Suburbia? What specific word use or word pattern indicate and signals a threat to the middleclass in 1950s America? In other words, what Beauregard refers to as “sinful, and corrupting”. In order to answer these questions an introduction of the Beat Generation and Suburbia will follow.

**The Dichotomy of Beats and Suburbia**

During the 20th century, there have been many controversial groups connected to a time-specific popular culture manifestation that challenge the masses, i.e. the majority. The Lost Generation, the Beat Generation, Generation X, Punk, Grunge, Goth etc, are all labelings of people that collectively have seen their specific contemporary era a bit differently than the majority of people at that time. It is my intention, in this section, to explain and account for the thoughts and notions of the Beat Generation, as well as for their counterpart, namely the 1950s phenomenon of Suburbia.

In Ann Charter’s *The Portable Jack Kerouac*, Kerouac himself contemplates the origin of the phenomenon of the Beat Generation:
[It] was a vision that we had, John Clellon Holmes and I, and Allen Ginsberg in an even wilder way, in the late Forties, of a generation of crazy, illuminated hipsters suddenly rising and roaming America, serious, curious, bumming and hitchhiking everywhere, ragged, beatific, beautiful in an ugly graceful new way – a vision gleaned from the way we had heard the word ‘beat’ spoken on streetcorners on Times Square and in the Village, in other cities in the downtown city night of postwar America – beat, meaning down and out but full of intense conviction. (559)

One interesting observation of Kerouac’s statement in this quote is the absence of pause; in fact, there are no final stops, when Kerouac describes his vision of what the Beat Generation entails. In my interpretation, it displays pure energy, vividly intense and eager to discover unexplored potentials, both spiritual and physical. But why is it that the Beatniks felt such urgent need for intensity? To be able to answer this question one needs to focus on its predecessor, namely the Lost Generation. According to Kerouac,

The Lost Generation of the 20s believed in nothing so they went their rather cynical way putting everything down. That generation forms the corpus of our authority of today, and is looking with disfavor upon us, under beetling brows, at us who want to swing – in life, in art, in everything, in the confession of everything to everyone. The Lost Generation put it down; the Beat Generation is picking it all up again. (Charters 563)

In Kerouac’s understanding, after World War One, a sense of disillusionment and the abandonment of hope spread throughout America, which correlates with the great depression of the 1930s. The postwar generation, who identified themselves with the works of Hemingway amongst others, generally felt that nothing except a man’s honor matters, whereas the Beat Generation generally felt that everything matters. In the 1940s, the birth of the jazz genre Bebop put joy into its listeners’ with, namely the subculture called Hipsters: “The world of United States was tired of being poor and low and gloomy in a line. Swing erupted as the Depression began to crack” (Charters 558). The Hipsters were well dressed drug and sex liberated swing fans; during the 1940s and 1950s, Swing turned into Bebop as Hipsters turned into Beats. Unlike the Hipsters, the icons of the Beats were intellectuals with an ideological purpose, not articulated as either left or right, but different to its contemporary
establishment. Even though Kerouac did not want to label Beats as political left or right, one can however read into it that their different approach vividly contradicted the right-oriented political atmosphere in America at that time. However, Beat “never meant juvenile delinquents, it meant characters of a special spirituality … the subterranean heroes who’d finally turned from the ‘freedom’ machine of the West … prophesying a new style for American culture” (Charters 559). Turning from the freedom machine of the West may very well refer to the contemporary American foreign policy of converting communist countries to democracy and by doing so consequently giving them freedom.

The reason why the Beat Generation differs from its sub cultural predecessors is its silent insurrection against society. In 1952 John Clellon Holmes wrote an article that was published in the *New York Times Magazine* called “This Is The Beat Generation”. By doing so, Clellon Holmes forced the Beat message into the awareness of the public eye. In this article, Clellon Holmes distanced the Beats from the Lost Generation:

> No single comparison of one generation against another can accurately measure effects, but it seems obvious that a lost generation, occupied with disillusionment and trying to keep busy among the broken stones, is poetically moving, but not very dangerous. But a beat generation, driven by a desperate craving for belief and as yet unable to accept the moderations which are offered it, is quite another matter. (*New York Times Magazine* November 16, 1952)

Not only does this quote refer to a separation from earlier subculture generations, it states an awareness, a challenge, a display of new intelligence and a new moral idea. Clellon Holmes indirectly indicates that the Beat Generation is dangerous. But dangerous to whom and how? It is not dangerous as in posing a physical threat towards someone; it is rather a challenging of the mind above all. In Robert Holton’s *Kerouac Among the Fellahin: On the Road to the Postmodern*, Holton explains that to the Beats, this new moral idea displayed a more “real and vital space beyond the confines of a consumer culture which defined its subjects as those who ‘consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming’” (Holton 268). Thus, the Beats offer a completely different perspective on the architecture of life and lifestyle choices; but still only moral ideas rather than a direct imposition. Clellon Holmes argues that “[the] shock that older people feel at the sight of this Beat Generation is, at its deepest level, not so much repugnance at the facts, as it is distress at the attitudes which move
it” (Clellon Holmes). Figuratively, the Beat philosophy swarms into the monolithic society of postwar 1950s America, starting a hive-activity of emotions in a society previously used to a conformist lifestyle. This new generation however, is “the result of … [a] conviction – namely that the valueless abyss of modern life is unbearable” (ibid). If one defines the Beat Generation as a counterculture; what is it in fact counter to?

In the early 20th century, the urban population started to decrease as a result of people moving into suburban areas. Beauregard explains the housing situation of America’s most prosperous century:

Americans celebrated the wealth of consumer products, their scientific achievements, the stability and openness of their government, and the myriad opportunities available to them for personal advancement. The national mood was buoyant; a shared sense of accomplishment nurtured a federal government sure of its ability to overcome all obstacles, whether domestic or foreign. Except for paranoia about communism and the persistent challenge of race relations, Americans were satisfied with who they had become and with their prospects for the future. (18-19)

In my interpretation of Beauregard, American society, in general, took comfort in knowing that the government had everything under control; no one should stand out and challenge the system, which may correlate with the ideas of conformism. Even the “paranoia about communism” functions as a contractile force of peoples’ opinions; in order to protect its country’s virtue, conspiracy theories of alternative ideologies are encouraged. In *Empire of conspiracy: the culture of paranoia in postwar America*, Timothy Melley emphasizes that “conspiracies allow characters or authors to conceptualize the relation between individuals and larger social bodies…the conspiracy is often understood as a structure that curtails individuality, or that is antithetical to individualism” (60). In other words, alternative ideas and ideologies are a sort of otherness that is frowned upon since it entails a threat to the prosperity and freedom of America. Alternative ideas, counterculture, racial and sexual minorities, slum and bohemianism are connected to the urban areas, which is a reason why white producing/consuming middleclass Americans move out to suburban areas where they had economical opportunities to buy homes and feel “safe”.
The nation celebrated its suburban lifestyle, consumer products, and high wages. It also had to contend with pictures of boarded-up buildings, rioting African Americans, looted stores, burnt-out automobiles discarded on inner-city highways, and idle and abandoned factories. U.S. cities were perceived at home and abroad as free-falling into inescapable chaos. Consequently, the urban crisis spurred additional waves of suburbanization. For these reasons, the plight of the industrial cities, one of the major consequences of urbanization’s rupture after World War II, takes narrative and historical precedence. (Beauregard 21)

The sense of otherness connected with the urban areas was fueled by advertisement of the dangers of urban lifestyles, which nurtured a new discourse, namely that America’s urban decay is a potent threat to the new organized way of life found in suburbs. “Prosperity and global dominance permitted Americans - white Americans - to think of themselves as sharing a national destiny” (Beauregard 173). This new discourse of national destiny and freedom through prosperity, favored the middleclass since it correlated with the government’s blueprint of the American future. Thus, the middleclass suburban citizen constituted a powerful new identity. “The American identity seemed monolithic, built as it was on upward mobility and freedom. What America stood for and what it meant to be an American were relatively unquestioned. Dissent and deviance were ever present but were, nevertheless, pushed into the shadows” (Beauregard 173). The successful society of America thus depended on a loyal relationship between Suburbia and the Government and those with different opinions were accordingly “pushed into the shadows” (Beauregard 173). To differ from the exceptionalistic view of national supremacy basically meant an act of un-patriotic behavior, which so often meant an act of communistic behavior. Communism was the number one threat to the stability between Suburbia and the Government. Government officials such as FBI’s Jay Edgar Hoover and Senator Joseph McCarthy manifested this fear through the media into the homes of Suburbia. However, Melley stresses that:
If Americans are defined by their extraordinary individual autonomy, then why do they need powerful government protections from communism? The answer can only be that autonomy is precisely what they lack, since they are easily turned into ‘brainwashed’ communist dupes. It turns out that for all their putative individuality, Hoover’s Americans are deeply susceptible to ideological controls.” (76)

It is in this context, the powerful relationship between Suburbia and the Government that creates a monolithic structure of lifestyle, that the Beat Generation, among other minorities, have to face but at the same time object to. One can see it as a collision of radical extremes, which is bound to explode in some way. Or is it? Does the Beat ideology come with such power that it challenges the strong exceptional American society? To be able to answer this question, one needs to define the theories of power.

Discourse, Power and Identity

The theoretical approach in this essay is based on social constructivist theories regarding discourses. However, social constructivist theories and discourse theories, as a theoretical discipline, cover quite a wide range of theories and philosophies. It is therefore important to narrow down and account for what parts of discourse theory will be henceforth used in the analysis of On the Road. The theories presented below are based on Foucault’s thoughts and ideas regarding discourse.

The meaning of the term discourse according to Winther Jørgensen and Phillips is “one or several ideas regarding language as being structured in different patterns and that our statements follow those patterns when we act within different social domains” (7). For example, language in political discourse is structured differently compared to language in academic discourse. Further, significant words in the political discourse, e.g. solidarity, may signify high status within a certain social practice. It may not carry the same high valued connotations within a different social practice. To be more precise, “discourse is a manifested way of speaking of and understanding the world (or a part of the world)” (Winther Jørgensen

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1 As a background to this section on theory, I have as source of inspiration used a previous C-essay of my own, titled Talet om lärarrollen: diskursanalys av politikers tal om lärarrollen, 2009.
2 I have translated the quotes from Winther Jørgensen and Phillips’s Diskursanalys som teori och metod from Swedish into English.
and Phillips 7). On the other hand, certain words and/or word patterns, which are regarded as highly valued within a specific social practice, may be used within a completely different social practice, regardless of its origins. One example of this is the word *freedom*; it is used in political discourse as well as in academic discourse, and probably in many more. The word, freedom, may refer and allude to different subjects or opinions and since the word in modern western societies has come to play an important role, it is likely to be used carelessly. Still, the word has a fixed connotation; it conveys something important, thus making the subject and/or object important as well.

It is clear then that language is the core theme in discourse theory and correlates with the social constructivist way of seeing the world; “perception of reality must come through language” (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips 15). The connection between reality and language raises further interesting notions, namely the nexus of knowledge and social processes, and the nexus of knowledge and social actions. “Our way of understanding the world is constructed and maintained in social processes. Through social interaction comes knowledge, from where you create common truths and thereby a perception of what is true or false” (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips 12). This means that if a specific group of people has a fixed way of seeing the world, the fixation will favor some behaviors but rule out others. Consequently, the Beats as a group probably understand the world and society differently than average middle class Americans. This will be further addressed in the analysis section.

Language is a key to understanding and interpreting the world; language is equally a key to power. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, Foucault contemplates the significance of discourse:

[D]iscourse is, when it is manifested materially, as a written or spoken object; but also, uncertainty faced with a transitory existence, destined for oblivion – at any rate, not belonging to us; uncertainty at the suggestion of barely imaginable powers and dangers behind this activity, however humdrum and grey it may seem; uncertainty when we suspect the conflicts, triumphs, injuries, dominations and enslavements that lie behind these words, even when long use has chipped away their rough edges. (216)
One way of interpreting Foucault and illustrate his thoughts is to see discourse as a context; moving as an ocean wave, discourse pushes and pulls us back and forward, not necessarily to where we intended and are destined to go. Foucault points to the anxiety in the suggestion of what words may signify and how we relate to and act thereafter. Basically, if we dig deep into the sense and reference of words we might find many layers of knowledge covering the core foundation of the word; but what do we do with such knowledge? We either acknowledge and allow its meaning or treat it with prohibition. “In appearance, speech may well be of little account, but the prohibitions surrounding it soon reveal its links with desire and power” (Foucault 216). Either way, if one focuses on the word itself or the social circumstances of it, it is crucial to identify a causal connection. Why is it that some words are promoted in one discourse but denied in another? This matter will be further addressed in the analysis.

What is identity? In Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction, Jonathan Culler problematizes this question as “between a notion of identity as something given, an origin, and a notion of identity as something always in process, arising through contingent alliances and oppositions (an oppressed people gain identity from opposing the oppressors)” (115). In my opinion, the latter explanation, that identity is something processed, correlates with the above presented discourse theories. Discourse constructs and constitutes the social world, i.e. it shapes the world as we know it and furthermore its social identities and relations. Discourse may include identities or subjects, e.g. Beats or representatives of the government. These subjects, as actors in the discourse, are noticed in a certain way which brings forth and manifests social conventions. The discourse then changes due to its social precondition. Hence, discourse is, more or less, always open to change depending on different social patterns and conventions. Discourse and identity are not independent; if discourse changes so must the subjects and its identities and vice versa. To exemplify the construction of identities; the Beat Generation see themselves in a specific way (their politics, thoughts, spiritualism, ambitions, etc.). This may not correlate with another demographic group of peoples’ opinions; they therefore ascribe different attributes to the members of the Beat Generation. The stark contrast in the different ascribing attributes thus helps shape the identities of the Beat Generation. One could argue that this process testifies great forces of power. However, power needs to be further explained since it is such a complex phenomena.

Winther Jørgensen and Phillips explain Foucault’s theory on power:
Instead of seeing agents and structures as primary categories, Foucault puts power in center. Neither power, nor the discourse, belong to specific agents, for example predetermined individuals or the government or specific groups with specific interests. Through the Foucaultian perspective, power is not something that should be seen as conducted by certain agents in relation to passive subjects. Power permeates different social practices. One should not exclusively see power as oppressive, but productive: power constitutes discourses, knowledge, body and subjectivity. (20)

In my interpretation, power is the fuel that permeates our society and enables social interaction. For example, it is neither the government nor social groups nor individuals that possess power and knowledge about e.g. lifestyles. It is in fact through social practices that power and knowledge can exist. Thus, power consists of how the government, social groups and individual persons speak of different lifestyles. “Discourses enable us to create subjects and objects we can relate to” (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips 20-21). With this reasoning as background one might ask: what is real and what is truth? According to Foucault’s theories, there is no truth. What we know of and can relate to (objects) is discursively constructed, thus neither true nor false. Hence, truth is beyond discourse, which means that the analysis needs to focus upon the underlying discursive processes that govern the representation of truth.

To summarize this theory section, discourse theory offers many theoretical tools to analyze either written language or spoken language. It is my intention to identify and discuss the discourse of the Beat Generation; how are the thoughts and truths articulated by the Beats? To be able to answer such a question, one need to identify specific words and word patterns that appear to signify high status within the group. Finally, through these analytical steps, the ambition is to showcase the Beat Generation as something that gives one an identity and how it contrasts with middle class white America.

**Beats, IT, the Government and Suburbia**

As mentioned earlier, discourse theories often refer to spoken language. However, *On the Road* is a first person narration of Sal Paradise’s experience alongside Dean Moriarty’s beatific adventures. Even though the book is largely an autobiography and Sal accounts for their conversations, outspoken thoughts and expressions, it is still processed through Jack
Kerouac’s interpretation of his experiences during the late 1940s. *On the Road* gave a voice to a new generation and in a way; the book became a manifesto or guidebook for a new style of life. Therefore, the analysis of *On the Road* will focus both on the representation of spoken language as well as the representation of thoughts of the characters. The analysis of *On the Road* will be divided into four categories of quotes, namely the representation of Beats, IT, Suburbia and the Government. The first category to be analyzed is the representation of Beats.

**The Representation of Beats**

In the beginning of *On the Road*, Sal is working on a novel while Dean observes and comments his progress.

> Go ahead, everything you do is great. He watched over my shoulder as I wrote stories, yelling, ‘Yes! That’s right! Wow! Man! And Phew!’ and wiped his face with his handkerchief. ‘Man, wow, there’s so many things to do, so many things to write! How to even begin to get it all down and without modified restraints and all hung-up on like literary inhibitions and grammatical fears … (6)

This quote features many words and phrases that signify a type of spiritual awareness, energetic pace, overstepping boundaries as well as pure joy. All together, it showcases a curious and positive attitude towards life that the Beats collectively labeled as Beat. In Kerouac's view, “to be in a state of beatitude, [is] trying to love all life, trying to be utterly sincere with everyone, practicing endurance, kindness, cultivating joy of heart” (Charters 562-563). As Dean yells “Yes! That’s right! Wow! Man! And Phew!” it signifies a rapid movement or a tremendous amount of information that needs to be understood instantly; Dean confirms and encourages Sal to write it all and to write it all correlates with Kerouac’s “trying to love all life”. However, to be able to understand it all or love all life, means practicing it without the corrupting force of “literary inhibitions and grammatical fears” which alludes to a religious or spiritual discourse. In other words, it showcases a characteristic of spiritualism, that the way to the Truth must come through purity (meaning without sin). The meaning of purity may however differ between the views of the Beats and other conventional religions, e.g. Christianity and Islam. The meaning of purity to the Beats would certainly be considered as a sign of sin in a traditional religious discourse. Besides the spiritual connotations, “literary
inhibitions and grammatical fears” may also refer to the structure of society, i.e. a critique of the conventions forced upon people. Dean contemplates; “[h]ow to even begin to get it all down and without modified restraints”, which can be interpreted as in order to fit into a restrained society one is forced to modify one’s persona. Collectively, the Beats object to such forces of modification. In Cultural Politics: Radical Movements in Modern History, Paul S. George stresses the Romantic ideals of the Beats which include “the notion that every human’s potential should be allowed to develop freely; adoration of the ‘primitive’ … wanderlust and the lure of the exotic…the quest for intense experience” (190). These ideals underline Dean’s anxiety of “modified restraints” which signifies a critique of a conformist society but also a promotion of alternative spiritualism, thus more than a critique of linguistic inhibitions. In George’s Marxist view, the most evident ideal of the Beats is “living uncorrupted by bourgeois materialism and unrestrained by bourgeois convention” (George 190). Based on the Beat ideals, the Beat Generation is not a political movement as much as it is a spiritual movement. Nevertheless, Kerouac discusses the engagement of the Beat ideals: “How can this be done in our mad modern world of multiplicities and millions? By practicing a little solitude, going off by yourself once in a while to store up that most precious of golds: the vibrations of sincerity” (Charters 563). The Beat ideals, as presented above, are ever so evident throughout On the Road. In the following quote, Sal explains the background to Dean’s heroism:

But Dean’s intelligence was every bit as formal and shining and complete, without the tedious intellectualness. And his ‘criminality’ was not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy; it was a Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming (he only stole cars for joy rides). Besides, all my New York friends were in the negative nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychological reasons, but Dean just raced in society … A western kinsman of the sun, Dean. (9-10)

The discussion above of the restrained society as well as this resent quote shows ambivalence toward the definition of political awareness, notwithstanding the paradoxical relationship between action and consequence. On the one hand we have statements such as “the quest for intense experience”, “the vibrations of sincerity”, “cultivating joy of heart” etc. On the other
hand we have statements such as “without modified restraints”, “intelligence…without the tedious intellectualness”, “negative nightmare…of putting down society” etc. To argue for the action of Beat ideals, is a way to criticize society politically. Sal criticizes his New York friends because of them being “in the negative nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychological reasons” (ibid). In Sal’s mind, Dean is a shining star, the new icon of bottomless energy for intense experiences and sincerity; Dean embodies the role of a new Messiah to a new generation. Even though Sal criticizes his friends for putting down society; the Beat ideals (how they are articulated, i.e., the word use and what words signify) thus constitutes the discourse of a conformist society. Sal defends Dean’s car thievery with stressing that “he only stole cars for joy rides” and one can certainly sympathize with Dean due to his joyful, curious and energetic attributes. Be that as it may, car thievery is a crime, and therefore an overt challenge of the democratic system. But does it define Dean as a criminal? According to Sal “his ‘criminality’ was not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy; it was a Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming”. In my interpretation, the word “criminality” is relative, meaning that what it signals or points towards depends on who is judging. The intellectual snobbism or the producing/consuming lifestyle may be as criminal to the Beats as car thievery may be to the masses. Without generally justifying criminality, what really matters according to the Beat idealism is the reason behind one’s actions. Crime has always been a part of the Beat’s background and a way of living as seen in the following quote from On the Road.

It was a war with social overtones. Dean was the son of a wino…He used to plead in court at the age of six to have his father set free … Dean, who had the tremendous energy of a new kind of American saint, and Carlo were the underground monster of that season in Denver, together with the poolhall gang, and, symbolizing this most beautifully, Carlo had a basement apartment on Grant Street and we all met there many a night that went to dawn. (35)

In a socioeconomic perspective, the Beats were at the bottom of society, especially in the eye of the masses. Paul S. George explains: “The personal lives of the original Beats were marked by conflict, deprivation, failure, and disorder. They all suffered miserable early childhoods and, throughout life, found normal institutional regimentation an impossible burden to bear”
(198). What George argues, that the Beats grew up in a disorderly environment, correlates with the quote above. Dean, who spent his early teenage years in state penitentiaries, had to “plead in court at the age of six to have his father set free.” A childhood like Dean’s usually leads to continuous crime and jail time. On the contrary, On the Road depicts the Beat’s criminality being of a different sort than a criminality that leads to incarceration. What we see is evidence for a new type of “criminality”; in other words, a new type of intellectualism that consists of “tremendous energy of a new kind of American” ideals; where Dean is declared a saint and Carlo (Allen Ginsberg) a countercultural moderator. In On the Road, Sal contemplates “The night was getting more and more frantic. I wished Dean and Carlo were there then I realized they’d be out of place and unhappy. They were like the man with the dungeon stone and the gloom, rising from the underground, the sordid hipsters of America, a new beat generation I was slowly joining” (48). To label this new generation as a group of common hoodlums and see them as an everyday gang of criminals would be narrow sighted and misleading. To understand this new generation that Sal is slowly joining, we need to further analyze the language use of the Beats and define the meaning of “IT”.

The Representation of IT

Throughout On the Road, Dean is trying to explain the meaning of IT to Sal and why it is crucial to understand and live by it.

“That Rollo Greb is the greatest, most wonderful of all. That’s what I was trying to tell you – that’s what I want to be. I want to be like him. He’s never hung-up, he goes every direction, he lets it all out, he knows time, he has nothing to do but rock back and forth. Man he’s the end! You see, if you go like him all the time you’ll finally get it.” ‘Get what?’ ‘IT! IT! I’ll tell you’ (115)

Kerouac’s writing is highly influenced by the bebop jazz improvisation, which is most representative in the protagonist’s performative language. As seen in this quote, there is evidence for an energetic, impulsive and positive force that signifies movement or mobility in different directions. Dean is stressing that Rollo Greb (Alan Ansen) “goes every direction”, “he lets it all out”, “he knows time” (time should in this form be recognized as “time and space”), “rock back and forth”, etc. To Dean’s mind, this characterizes a man in possession of
IT. In *Reconstructing the Beats*, Richard Quinn argues that “Kerouac turns to ‘impulse’ not as a means of reviving individual value and excluding others but to discover the interpersonal force of affection that drives a life ‘full of loving’” (Skerl 163). In other words, IT may be seen as a result of denying restrictions and social traditions thus letting an impulsive force narrate one’s directions. Quinn continues, “[Kerouac] condemns ‘intellectuality’ as a form of posturing that hardens social boundaries, but he celebrates intellect as a tool for arranging ‘the things of this world’ into an order more conducive to mutual affection” (Skerl 163). The word “intellectuality” is charged with social values; it signifies a form of snobbism with socioeconomic and know-it-all imperatives, whereas “to use one’s intellect” is covertly prestigious among the Beats. This means that we can see evidence for a power struggle which, in the way of the intellectuals and the average middleclass, forms a fixated structure or in Quinn’s words; “as a form of posturing that hardens social boundaries” (ibid), whereas the Beat’s lifestyle articulates a challenge to such fixation. As argued above, many of Dean’s most prestigious words indicate impulse and mobility; it is a force that questions and consequently challenges the social structures of a conformist society. Aside from IT signifying impulse and energy, the word has other symbolic values as well. In the following quote Dean elaborates on the significance of IT in the context of a saxophonist.

Here’s a guy and everybody’s there, right? Up to him to put down what’s on everybody’s mind. He starts the first chorus, then lines up his ideas, people, yeah, yeah, but get it, and then he rises to his fate and has to blow equal to it. All of a sudden somewhere in the middle of the chorus he *gets it* – everybody looks up and knows; they listen; he picks it up and carries. Time stops. He’s filling empty space with the substance of our lives, confessions of his bellybottom strain, remembrance of ideas, rehashes of old blowing. He has to blow across bridges and come back and do it with such infinite feeling soul-exploratory for the tune of the moment that everybody knows it’s not the tune that counts but IT… (187-188)

This quote frames the core meaning of the word IT and the way to IT, how to reach IT and how to relate to IT. At the end of the quote, Dean states that “it’s not the tune that counts but IT”. In my interpretation, the word *tune* signals something hollow without meaning, without necessarily having a negative connotation, while IT represents the Truth. In an almost seductive way, Dean’s way of describing the crescendo of reaching IT consists of a language
use filled with vivid imagery and a pace inspired by bebop solos. Once over the threshold in the progress of understanding and reaching IT, “Time stops … [one is] filling empty space with the substance of our lives, confessions of [our] bellybottom strain[s], remembrance of ideas”. This outlines the discovery of the Self in relation to our history of our experiences, or as Quinn explains: “Kerouac describes the hipster as he would like to envision himself, ‘full of hope’ and embodying originality, yet with profound historical connections to ‘that same old human soul’” (Skerl 171). In my interpretation of Quinn, the core essence of IT is as much a discovery of one’s Self as it is a discovery of the Self in relation to other people’s Self. It is therefore not a question of “where to?” as it is a question of “how to?”. To some extent, these two questions might contrast what has been argued above, that many of the Beat words signal some form of mobility. However, it is a question of mobility of mind, a soul exploration, rather than someone physically moving. Sal explains that “the car was swaying as Dean and I both swayed to the rhythm and the IT of our final excited joy in talking and living to the blank tanked end of all innumerable riotous angelic particulars that had been lurking in our souls all our lives” (189). Materially, both Sal and Dean are living their lives “to the blank tanked end” in a quest for a spiritual fix or a sensation of “soul-exploratory” bliss. Sal and Dean’s use of words signals neither financial stability, homeland security nor core family values. Rather, it signals euphoria or some sort of high, which resembles being high on drugs or some sort of spiritual trance. Thus, in the Beat discourse, the emphasis is not put on the responsibility of material objects or the system as it emphasizes the importance of the Self and the responsibility of one’s mental health (in a spiritual way).

The Representation of the Government

In On the Road, the critique or mistrust of the Government is divided into different areas, such as the machinery of war, consumerism and police warfare. In the following quote, Sal and Dean reflect and comment on Harry S. Truman’s military arsenal.
We arrived in Washington at dawn. It was the day of Harry Truman’s inauguration for his second term. Great displays of war might were lined along Pennsylvania Avenue as we rolled by in our battered boat. There were … 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?’ (122)

In 1949, postwar America was in a different kind of warfare than it had been during World War II. At this time, America turned its attention towards its own citizens by hunting American communists. Alongside the internal red hunt, America promoted its potent war machinery with “all kinds of war material that looked murderous” as a threat towards its archenemy Soviet. While passing this military spectacle, Dean asks: “What are these people up to?” In my understanding, this question relates to two different questions as in; why so many weapons when we are currently not engaged in combat? Should not America display something more virtuous than tools of murder? As Dean shakes his head in awe and questions the Government, it signals a distance between the Beats and the Government. In Reds: McCarthyism in Twentieth-Century America, Ted Morgan states that “Truman found himself in a postwar quandary that was far more complex than wartime, when you knew who your enemy was and you fought him openly, with full support at home” (296). Different organizations such as the House Un-American Activities Committee, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Senator Joseph McCarty’s hearings investigated Americans accused of being communists. A new anti-communist rhetoric spread through the media into the homes of Americans and thus constructed a new political discourse wherein all countercultural activities seemed to fit, including the Beats’. According to George, “Beats insisted that all political parties used lies and manipulation … the Beats were not just apolitical but ‘anti-political’” (221). The reason for this sensation of anti-political values consists of the Beat ideals, meaning that “[a]s Romantics, most Beats did not believe it possible for one person to represent another” (ibid). In a Mao inspired spiritual discussion, Dean celebrates the life of a bum rather than participating in the current political game of warfare and its rhetoric.
You spend a whole life of non-interference with the wishes of others, including politicians and the rich, and nobody bothers you and you cut along and make it your own way… I’ll tell you, Sal, straight, no matter where I live, my trunk’s always sticking out from under the bed, I’m ready to leave or get thrown out. (229)

This quote showcases a part of the Beat discourse, namely a romantic viewpoint that asks: What is so dangerous in having a different opinion or a different goal in life? In my interpretation, the Beat discourse constantly, in a covert manner, questions the general perception of freedom. In Dean’s mind, he does not interfere with neither the Government, nor the middleclass, but somehow his identity as a Beat displays disobedience toward the American Dream as a misfit in the prosperous society. Through a modern perspective, one might say that 1950s America was divided into several political orientations ranging from neo-fascism to red-fearing democrats. Ted Morgan examines Joseph McCarthy’s political career. According to Morgan, McCarthy sent a copy of a radio speech to the Chicago Tribune commenting the trails of former SS-officers.

You will note that I did not touch on the question of our trying the German leaders, whose only crime was attempting to win the war. I could well have made the comparison of our methodical terror bombing of refugee-crowded cities in Germany and compared the men responsible for that practice with the so-called German war criminals. However, I decided to restrict myself to a condemnation of the treatment of the clearly innocent GI Joes of the German army. (363)

McCarthy may represent a hyper right-orientated political standpoint; nevertheless, in this quote McCarthy shows sympathy for the Nazi leaders and equates American war heroes with the German army. In my mind, this form of rhetoric showcases the measures of what political advocators will undergo to make the masses aware of how threatening communism (as a counterculture) is to the American way of life. McCarthy does not reflect upon the genocide of Jewish people; it is the political agenda of a Soviet-hating Germany that he celebrates. This sort of official rhetoric constructs a political discourse that is constituted by the masses it reaches. It breeds on the fear of a common enemy. However, reluctant to participate in the political rhetoric, the Beats’ anti-political standpoint also constitutes such a discourse; their
mistrust of the Government is a statement of un-patriotic ideals. In *On the Road*, Old Bull Lee (William S. Burroughs) reflects on this issue and comments that “[t]he bastards right now are only interested in seeing if they can blow up the world” (139). Old Bull Lee refers to the Government as “bastards” and how they measure responsibility and accountability in how their engineering has provided the biggest (and thereby most vicious) bomb. The Beats articulate a sense of hopelessness and a mistrust toward the Government, or as Dean responds “our holy American slopjaws in Washington are planning fur-ther inconveniences – ah-hem!” (104). Besides basic human rights and constitutional rights, the Beats do not directly articulate counter-political statements. If anything they express a degree of dismay over how the Government is treating its people. However, Sal, Dean and their Beat friends do not directly interact with the Government apart from their problems with the police force.

As has been argued above, the Beats’ search for IT has led them to cross the restrictions put up by the conformist society. The Beats’ anxiety manifests in their interaction with the American police force. In this quote, Sal contemplates how they are positioned in stark contrast to the rest of America.

> We were on the roof of America and all we could do was yell, I guess – across the night, eastward over the Plains, where somewhere an old man with white hair was probably walking toward us with the Word, and would arrive any minute and makes us silent. (49)

There is a desire in the Beats to communicate with other souls, to trade experiences and to manifest the cultivating joy of heart. In my interpretation, to yell “across the night, eastward over the Plains” signals the importance of knowing history, the history of America, how men have communicated through time which, throughout history has constituted understanding and knowledge. This quote however showcases an anxiety over how such a virtue lacks importance in a modern society. The “old man with white hair” signifies the society (e.g. the Government and the masses) and how he is a manufacturer and protector of conformist values; His “Word” signifies silence and stigmata, thus the exact opposite of the Beats’ “Truth”. The most evident protector of conformist values in *On the Road* is the police force.
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. (123)

In Sal’s view, America acknowledges people with money and bureaucratic knowledge. The social minorities such as the Beats are therefore more or less defenseless against a corrupt police force. It is not an overprotective society as it is an over-accusing society where the sensation of monitoring the citizens “peers out of musty windows and wants to inquire about everything”. In Cultural Politics, Paul S. George comments on the matter of police brutality on the Beats:

Public outcry led to police raids on Beat hangouts. Many were arrested on charges of drunkenness and vagrancy. When some protested that they were being denied their constitutional rights, they were slapped with additional charges of ‘obscenity,’ ‘resisting arrest,’ or ‘interfering with justice.’ Several arrests were accomplished by name-calling, shoving, handcuffing, and brutality. (222-223)

George highlights the police forces’ hunt on the marginalized and their subjective attitude toward law and order. This correlates with police corruption in On the Road, where Sal observes that the police “can make crimes if the crimes don’t exist to its satisfaction”. In my interpretation of both Kerouac and George, police forces are advocators of fear with a purpose of silencing those with different opinions in life. Sal articulates a frustration over the police mentality: “[i]t was horrible crew of men, men with cop-souls, [we were] only trying to make a living…but these men wanted to make arrests and get compliments from the chief of police in town” (57- 58). The police brutality showcases not only injustice toward a specific group of people; it signals a discourse wherein there is confusion and ignorance. America’s outspoken fear and hate toward communism has infected other countercultural minorities. Thus, the confusion exists of the intermixing of discourses which, in the approach of the Government and the police force affects the public eye. The difference may in fact be significant, but due to a new discourse every opposing attitude against the American way is automatically labeled as a case of un-American activity. Such activities create a public hate that harbors a fear of communism. According to Clinton M. Starr “[a] police officer asked a North Beach restaurant
owner, ‘Why do you allow so many Commies and jigs to patronize this place? After all, if you give ’em an inch, they’ll take a mile’” (Skerl 56). This restaurant owner was a well known organizer of Beat poetry readings and was harassed for hosting Beat gatherings and therefore seen as a supporter of un-Americanism. However, Sal’s observation contrasts this overall conception of a monolithic society. “This is the story of America. Everybody’s doing what they think they’re supposed to do. So what if a bunch of men talk in loud voices and drink the night?” (61). Here Sal articulates a critique of the autonomous American; the average American tends not to reflect upon the political reality he is living in. It is a distorted representation of truth which affects the general opinion of the masses.

**Representation of Suburbia**

In *On the Road*, the representation of Suburbia is rather dormant. However, at the time of the novel, the “Americans disliked and even hated the cities. They not only noted the flight to the suburbs but also admitted into evidence polling data that found that numerous city residents would prefer to avoid the city’s congestion, noise, crime, and high prices” (Beauregard 72). In the 1950s, the status of rural life was decreasing and the general view of rural life was constituted by the promotion of consumerism and the benefits of the suburban lifestyle. In other words, the middle-class supported the Government’s political ambitions of a consumer society. “Central to all of this was the association of middle-class values with a specific understanding of what family life meant in the suburbs. To be middle-class meant more than aspiring to a college education and a white-collar job” (Beauregard 124). To be middle-class also meant supporting the core family values which indirectly challenged and suppressed alternative lifestyles. In the following quote, Beauregard comments on the contrast between Suburbia and Bohemians.
Stereotypically, the bohemian lifestyle consisted of intermittent work, long hours spent talking in coffeehouses, and often a disdain for conformity and upward mobility, qualities that were incongruous with the suburbs. Such people were living against the grain of postwar prosperity and the mass consumption that it encouraged. Personal relations were more fluid, and life was less acquisitive. Accomplishment was valued, but never unequivocally celebrated. (135)

In Beauregard’s view, the Bohemians and the middle-class contrast each other extensively; they have very different views on status, prestige, freedom, etc. The major critique of the Bohemian lifestyle is that it does not contribute to the prosperous progress of America. In my interpretation, the suburban view of a counterculture is that it is a parasite or tumor on the American Dream. The Beats’ critique of Suburbia is the same yet exactly the opposite. During a New York festivity, Sal reflects upon the pressures and expectations placed upon him by his girlfriend Lucille.

She wanted me to be her way. She was married to a longshoreman who treated her badly. I was willing to marry her and take her baby daughter and all if she divorced the husband; but there wasn’t even enough money to get a divorce and the whole thing was hopeless, besides which Lucille would never understand me because I like too many things and get all confused and hung-up running from one falling star to another till I drop. This is the night, what it does to you. I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion. (113)

In my interpretation, “her way” is not just evidence of Lucille’s subjective desire for a normal life; it echoes a desire for a new way of domestic structure, i.e. the suburban structure. Sal opposes this as he comments that “there wasn’t even enough money to get a divorce” and “Lucille would never understand me” which signifies a socioeconomic paradox. Through a social perspective, the Beats cannot fit into the suburban life structure because they “like too many things and get all confused and hung-up running from one falling star to another”. In the suburban discourse, words such as mortgages, modern household, car commuting, etc., carry high status and prestige. Whereas in the Beat discourse it does not. Thus, Suburbia requires a social and economical standard that the Beats do not qualify for. Beauregard comments on this social exclusion of minorities.
Of course, suburban prosperity was not available to all people; African Americans in particular were denied access. Suburbanization…was mainly for white households…Urban ghettos were reserved for African Americans and other minorities; suburbs were to remain lily white…The fruits of national growth…fell unevenly across the racial divide. The white majority benefited and, not surprisingly, the suburban image came to dominate the history of the period.

The prosperous suburban lifestyle of the 1950s America with its dominating discourse, manifest an iniquitous process that oppresses social minorities. In On the Road, Sal objects to this injustice.

Who did they think they were, yaahing at somebody on the road just because they were little high-school punks and their parents carved the roast beef on Sunday afternoons? Who did they think they were, making fun of a girl reduced to poor circumstances with a man who wanted to belove? (80)

In this quote, Sal objects to the vulgarity of the rich. Being a part of the financially prosperous machinery that is the suburban lifestyle does not justify a right on their part to oppress those who do not conform to this way of life. However, one could argue that the Beats do not live as they learn concerning the acceptance of other people’s choices. By stealing cars for joyrides and doing drugs, the Beats oppose mainstream society. The clash between these two value systems takes place because of two different ways of practicing the same core values. A poignant example of which is their perceptions of love (or “belove” as it is mentioned in the above quote). In my interpretation, in the Beat discourse love is spontaneous, impulsive and free from material connections. Whereas in the suburban discourse, love is an investment in social security. With this in mind, the evidence from the analysis will make up the basis for the discussion in the following section.
Conclusion

The core aim of this essay has been to investigate Kerouac’s *On the Road* and find an answer to the question: What is there in the language use of the Beats in *On the Road* that poses a threat to Suburbia? As has been mentioned in the analysis, the representation of Suburbia is rather latent. Yet, when juxtaposing *On the Road* with the research of Beauregard’s and Morgan’s in the analysis above, the clash between the two historically important lifestyle phenomena become rather vivid.

The Beat discourse primarily consists of a spiritual awareness. They articulate a desire to cultivate joy of heart and partake in soul-exploration. It could be argued that a part of this positive sensation derives out of the shadow of World War II. The energetic will of the Beats articulates as IT, which signals a sort of Nirvana or a total control of the Self, in this discourse. The Self-control entails that everything is possible or should at least be possible. However, in the context of society, the identity of the Beats shifts from an innocent spiritualism to an anti-political identity. This shift or change in the Beat identity is therefore discursively constructed. As shown in the analysis, the practical consequence of the Beat spiritualism is rejected by society. Whether it is Lucille’s “her way” or the psychological warfare of the police, or the Government’s producing/consuming ideology, the social practice of the Beats is treated with prohibition rather than acceptance. It is thus argued in this essay that the identity of the Beats is marginalized in the dominating discourse of Suburbia and the Government. In “Low Life in American Art: From Mark Twain to Steven Hartman”, Marko Modiano emphasizes the vulnerability of bohemian protagonists in a dominating discourse as argued above.

It could be argued that the male dominated experience in low life literature is itself a proclamation of dismay over the marginalization of the misunderstood and economically disadvantaged boy/man who invariably confronts the life-denying penal system and the unbearable pressures of life in a world where the expectations placed on men in general lead to anxiety and alienation. (30)

In my opinion, *On the Road* voiced a new generation’s desire to explore the soul and reach IT in a society that demanded prosperous progress which, as Modiano emphasizes, thus can be seen as “a proclamation of dismay over the marginalization of the misunderstood and
economically disadvantaged” youth. As has been argued in the section on theory, all discourse is always open to change. The common knowledge of the Beat identity is, through the social practice of the Government and Suburbia, constituted by the rhetoric of un-Americanism. Thus, anti-communism and the rejection of countercultures intermix in the same discourse. It has throughout this essay been argued that the Beats are apolitical, notwithstanding their articulated mistrust toward the system. One should not interpret the language use of the Beats as communistic rhetoric; in the same way one would not automatically presume that a Stalin critical Russian is a Nazi. However, to use words that signify the extremes helps manifest one's position in the dominating discourse. Therefore, the process of ascribing different features to the Beats is proof of how powerful discourse is in its way of making us perceive the world. One could argue that it is a matter of a display of great ignorance on behalf of Suburbia. However, in *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, Henry Miller brings forward his own interpretation of the prohibition process concerning the exclusion of bohemian lifestyles in the dominating discourse.

The poor can think of nothing but food and rent problems; the rich can amuse themselves by collecting safe investments furnished them by ghouls who traffic in the sweat and blood of artists; the middle classes pay admission to gape and criticize, vain about the half-baked knowledge of art and too timid to champion the men whom in their hearts they fear, knowing that the real enemy is not the man above, whom they must toady to, but the rebel who exposes in word or paint the rottenness of the edifice which they, the spineless middle class, are obliged to support. (132)

In my interpretation of this quote, the “rottenness” signifies the producing/consuming attitude of Suburbia, in which they are the prime advocates. Suburbia’s ignorance is a way of defending their suburban values. Being a part of the masses, the dominating discourse of Suburbia will undermine the power of counter-culture, bohemianism, Beats or anything that is ascribed un-Americanism through the social practice of Suburbia.

In conclusion, apolitical articulations, drug abuse, criminality and promiscuity are the most obvious examples of how the Beats oppose Suburbia. However, these lifestyle choices are just consequences of what really drives them forward. I would argue that it is the significance of IT that is the most poignant evidence of the Beats’ attack on Suburbia. IT
signifies movement, mobility, impulsive energy in spontaneous directions, whereas suburban values dictate stability, fixation and order. Sal acknowledges the core issue of what is wrong with America: “This is the story of America. Everybody’s doing what they think they’re supposed to do.” The conformed 1950s America does not approve of alternative lifestyles, anything opposing the dominating discourse is seen as unacceptable. However, no matter how stagnant the suburban discourse attempts to be, minority discourses will always challenge what is considered the norm. And so, the Beat goes on.
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