

The Sixties Are Dead: Long Live Their Legacy: The Politics and Poetics of Counterculture¹

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The sixties was an era of great social and cultural upheaval. It was a period of mass mobilization that attempted to redefine “America” by addressing issues of racial exclusion, sexual subordination and nationalism. Opposing a predominantly materialist interpretation of the American dream and its master narrative of American exceptionalism, the 1960s generation sought a number of ways to convey the *zeitgeist* of the period. Rock music, radical activism, consciousness-raising groups, anti-disciplinary politics as well as alternative lifestyles that adopted willed poverty, communal living, drug experimentation and non-Western, non-Christian practices and beliefs created a powerful yet loosely organized cultural movement, known as the counterculture of the 1960s. While it is difficult to define a phenomenon which exhibited a variety of co-existing, and often conflicting, cultural practices, my focus in this paper is on the adversarial tendency of the sixties as it manifested itself in representative literary examples. I examine the fictional production of and about the sixties written during that turbulent period and the decades that succeeded it. Looking back in time and from the spatial (and cultural) distance of Europe, I argue that, while remaining critical with itself, countercultural fiction did not only run against the social mainstream of the day, it aimed a major blow at the discourse of American exceptionalism.

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1. I would like to express my gratitude to the Special Account for Research Grants of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens for its invaluable support.

American dream and its master narrative of American exceptionalism, the 1960s generation sought a number of ways to convey the *zeitgeist* of the period. Rock music, radical activism that included civil rights and anti-war demonstrations, consciousness-raising groups, anti-disciplinary politics as well as alternative lifestyles that adopted willed poverty, communal living, drug experimentation and non-Western, non-Christian practices and beliefs created a powerful yet loosely organized cultural movement, known as the *counterculture* of the 1960s.

It is difficult to define a phenomenon which exhibited such a variety of co-existing, and often conflicting, cultural practices, and which still dominates the social and cultural imaginaries of the U.S. in particular and the globe in general. The term counterculture (spelled *contraculture*) received wider public awareness in the early 1960s, through the work of the sociologist J. Milton Yinger. Yet, it was since Theodore Roszak's use of the term in his best-selling volume *The Making of a Counter-Culture* (1969) that "counterculture" became synonymous with the sixties version of cultural radicalism (Braunstein and Doyle 7). Within the various constellations of meanings that have been assigned to counterculture, I intend to concentrate on the sixties adversarial tendency as it is manifested in representative literary examples. Following this tendency, young Americans seem to have rejected the instrumental politics of the New Left, promoting instead a grassroots radicalism that primarily involved individual transformation and authenticity, and aimed at dismantling the official nationalistic discourse of American liberal democracy and international hegemony.

It is therefore my goal in this essay to delineate the social and cultural configurations of counterculture in an attempt to underline an innovative, often highly successful fusion of "politics" and "culture" that was generated during the cultural revolution of the 1960s. Looking back in time and from the spatial (and cultural) distance of Europe, I argue that counterculture in the U.S. did not only run against the social mainstream of the day, but it also attempted a fundamental recasting of the sociopolitical landscape by replacing traditional materialistic leftist methods with what Andrew Kopkind called "explosions and eruptions" (3). By exposing the limitations and pitfalls of American democracy, by challenging its orthodox liberalism and disclosing the state's imperialist schemes, by refusing to comply with the American way of life and to participate in the American dream, counterculture members made a collective effort to break down the barriers that circumscribed post-war America's ideological apparatus. However, as Norman Mailer knew only too well, as he argued in *Armies of the Night*

(1968), “revolutionary transformation” did not depend upon meaningful political change. Rather, “the new generation,” he declared, “had no respect whatsoever for the unassailable logic of the next step: belief was reserved for the revelatory mystery of the happening where you did not know what was going to happen next: that was what was good about it” (86).

In order to substantiate my claim that counterculture carried a sharper political edge than is usually attributed to it, I will examine the fictional production of and about the sixties written during that turbulent period and the decades that succeeded it. Though, according to Paul Gilroy, it was music that “became the principle affiliation to the movement” and musicians who “identified as the spiritual and moral guardians of the inner meanings of music and American culture as a whole” (171), the fiction that was produced during the 1960s and 1970s as well as the more recent literary representations of the decade show, beyond any doubt, that there was an attempt among counterculture practitioners to coalesce cultural and political aspirations, even when they seemed to reject traditional politics altogether. The desire for a qualitatively better way of life that underlay the youth rebellion of the era, whether this would be accomplished by free love, acts of individual authenticity, consciousness expansion or co-op movements, was the incentive that brought together cultural activists as diverse as the hippies, the San-Francisco Diggers, the Wobblies, the Yippies, the White Panthers, or revolutionary rock bands. An analysis of representative fictional texts belonging to different temporalities but having as its primary focus the social and cultural context of the 1960s will show that despite its apparent apolitical stance, counterculture acted out what is known in sociology as a form of “prefigurative politics,”² in its belief that the key to societal transformation lay in personal transformation. “Free your mind and the rest will follow” was one of the slogans that percolated through the counterculture of the 1960s. But it was followed by yet another slogan which also had gained wide popularity in the same period: “The revolution is our lives.” These two slogans combined together designate the collective attempt of cultural revolutionaries to contest, overturn and transcend oppressive societal norms by following a process that sought after the individual’s cultural reorientation and took several names, such as “deschooling,” “deconditioning,” “reimprinting,” or what Herbert Marcuse called “repressive desublimation” (qtd. in Braunstein and Doyle 15).

2. “This is a sociological term describing an effort by social visionaries to act out the ideal society toward which they are working” (qtd. in Rossinow 123).

However, this idealist dimension of American youth radicalism was not left without criticism. On the one hand, it was attacked by right wing conservatives as offensive to American values and a threat to the American nuclear family. On the other hand, it was denounced by radical politicians as lacking a concrete political vision and refusing any direct allegiance to the major social movements of the period. Both enthusiastic appraisals and harsh criticism found their artistic expression in the six novels to be examined in this paper. Writing out of personal experience or looking back in time, novelists seemed eager to assess counterculture as a period of aspiration to cultivate the best in human beings. At the same time, they were not unwilling to record the sordid deeds and multiple pathologies that followed in the wake of those aspirations. In their effort to represent the countercultural legacy, they produced a complex, mixed iconography which can help us search more accurately for the implications of this catalyzing decade and its impact on contemporary American culture and society. Their narratives enact this search not by fleeing into nostalgia for a lost past, but by actively reconstructing a coherent social world in direct confrontation with the elusive process of cultural change. This artistic endeavor to represent a generation dedicated to bringing into existence “creative forms of social life” amidst state and economic forces of antagonism is inspiring for ethical, political and scholarly reasons, given that, as Bruce Robbins so eloquently put it, “the creativity of these ‘creative forms’ is demonstrably continuous with the project of the Romantic imagination on which literary criticism was founded” (“Cosmopolitanism, America, and the Welfare System”).

My first dual set of novels is Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962) and Thomas Pynchon’s *Crying of Lot 49* (1966). As the novels’ years of publication indicate, they both belong to counterculture’s initial phase when the contestatory power of the movement was not yet fully formed. Yet, both texts serve as an immanent critique of the U.S. liberal state’s assimilationist mentality, celebrating the value of individual revolt against the stultifying forms of post-World War II and post-scarcity society. Proceeding to my second fictional duet, I will discuss two novels of the 1970s: E. L. Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel* (1971) and Robert Stone’s *Dog Soldiers* (1974). In these, Doctorow and Stone challenge leftist convictions of cultural politics that sought to become the chief means of pursuing revolutionary ends. Instead, for both fictional protagonists revolt is radically decentred as they engage themselves in individual and even armed opposition to the status quo. Yet, while Doctorow’s hero seeks historical

continuity in order to prevent the repetition of past errors, Stone's protagonist is a disillusioned leftist whose experience in Vietnam leaves him morally impotent and politically apathetic. My third set of narratives is Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1997) and T. C. Boyle's *Drop City* (2003). Published more than three decades later, these novels attempt to uncover the contests and contestations over interpretations of the 1960s. While Roth interrogates the mythic basis of the American dream, Boyle reassesses the tension between the individualist and communal ethos in the commune named Drop City. Both literary texts, however, join forces in their unrelentless attack on the U.S. liberal state's assimilationist mentality.

Thus, through an examination of the literary representational discourse of and about the sixties, this essay seeks to shed light on the oppositional orientation of counterculture. By valuing nonalignment with mainstream society, by challenging the normative scriptures of an oppressive system, counterculturalists became agents and actors of social change whose impact can even be traced in the current sociopolitical climate.

The Two Americas: Heterotopic Configurations

Heterotopias, as Michèle Foucault was writing in the mid-sixties, are "something like counter-sites, in which ... all other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" (24). Foucault goes on to call "heterotopias of deviation," those spaces, "in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed ... Cases of this are rest homes and psychiatric hospitals, and of course prisons..." (24). In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Kesey creates such an heterotopic site: set in a mental institution among patients and workers, the novel depicts the conflict between Randle Patrick McMurphy, the brawling, fun-loving, non-conformist new inmate and the authoritarian Big Nurse Ratched. Kesey engages his protagonist in a struggle for power with manipulative and dictatorial Nurse Ratched who runs the "Combine," a term which aims to stand for the "System" and its overt and/or indiscernible disciplinary methods. McMurphy's challenge of Nurse Ratched's coercive actions and authority and his courageous assertion of his individuality wins him "the hearts and minds" of the other inmates, but ultimately costs his life as the Big Nurse curtails his rebelliousness by subjecting him to a lobotomy. And yet, McMurphy's influence is the cause of "Chief" Bromden's escape from the ward and his decision to fight for the rights of his tribe. Despite its

ending, then, the novel's appeal to nonconformist individualism and to the possibility of an "authentic" culture for the indigenous population suggests "the most optimistically utopian vision of the nation's future to emanate from counterculture" (Gair 154).

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest is a poignant indictment to the cold, instrumentalist and paralytic structure of carceral institutions. At the same time, as is the case with every heterotopic site, this heterotopia is meant to contest conformist American society and the coercive forms of discipline that suppress individual agency and self-assertion. In order to do so, Kesey makes use of the American archetypal binaries of nature, innocence and individualism vs. technology, experience and society, as reflected in both historical and literary metanarratives, only to expose the assimilationist, racist and expansionist assumptions of such discursive representations of the nation. Thus, while the Big Nurse is depicted as a "watchful robot" tending "her network with mechanical insect skill" and dreaming of "a world of precision, efficiency and tidiness" (27), McMurphy represents ideas of sexual freedom, liberation from oppressive social bonds and rearticulation of human relation to nature. Moreover, in adopting the narratological look of Bromden, Kesey gives voice to a member of the marginalized Native American community so as to counterattack the racialized hierarchies and capitalist exploitation of the land upon which depended the nationalistic discourse of liberal individualism. Through his fictional characters, Kesey not only celebrates "practical liberation" and individual rebellion against the principles of the "organization man" of the 1950s,³ but postulates the forging of a reconfiguration of American society and a refashioning of American national identity. As Kesey put it in one of his interviews, "[w]hat we hoped was that we could stop the coming end of the world" ("Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters").

As if to put into immediate praxis his "narrative of redemptive empowerment" (153), to cite Christopher Gair on the *Cuckoo's Nest*, Kesey founded at his homestead his own heterotopic site, a kind of countercombine of Merry Pranksters. Also, in the summer of 1964, repeating the American

3. William H. Whyte, Jr.'s *The Organization Man* (1956) takes us back to an economically secure, more benign America of the fifties when U.S. industry dominated global markets. It appeared that problems of production had been solved, that corporations had discovered the secret of creating unlimited wealth. All that was required to "man" the managerial roles of these companies (since most women were secretaries and clerks) were self-effacing, cooperative, loyal team players: organization men.

westward movement in reverse, Kesey and a dozen Pranksters took an infamous trip from California to New York and back in a psychedelically-painted school bus named *Further*, which was driven by no other than beat hero Neal Cassady. Immersing themselves in the LSD culture of the time in order to “unplug from the normal social circuits” and “freak freely,” the Pranksters set out to seize the moment and “change the world with exemplary acts” (Gitlin 206-7).⁴

The second novel under consideration that shifts to heterotopia’s contestatory power is Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*. Published in 1966, it is “arguably, the most emblematic novel of the American Sixties” in that it portrays “how it felt to live through that period of ‘transition’ ” (Petillon 126, 129). However, as is the case with *V.* (1963) and *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), this is a text, in many ways prototypically postmodern, in that it aborts all efforts of hermeneutical determinacy. While orthodox readings of *Lot 49* have emphasized the novel’s tendency to subvert hermeneutical practices and standard interpretations, I will offer a more assimilable reading of it, focusing on the unravelling of the alternative socio-spatial configurations the novel introduces to the cultural and political imaginary of America.

In *Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas is the questing protagonist, who, through the ruptures in the social and institutional structures, has a glimpse of the possibility of alternative realities or heterotopias. One set of heterotopias opens up for Oedipa through drugs, hedonism, and madness with each of these counter-sites represented by one dominant male character in the novel. A second heterotopic site operating as an inversion of the American reality is the clandestine mail-delivery system, known as the Trystero (Fedirka 608-23). In a characteristic Pynchonian manner, the novel never gives away whether the Trystero is real or the whole underground postal system is a projection of Oedipa’s desire to imagine alternative realities that would enable her escape from the banality of Californian life. Interestingly enough, in the beginning of the novel Oedipa is described as a typical housewife attending Tupperware shows. When she suddenly becomes the chosen executrix of the will of her now-deceased ex-boyfriend, Pierce Inverarity, her previously conventional lifestyle is totally destabilized. Her entanglement with what appears to be a vast underground conspiracy leads her to question her own sanity, or else she must believe the Trystero to be

4. The Pranksters’ escapades were chronicled by Tom Wolfe in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1967).

an intricate network of underground organizations independent of hegemonic institutions that might prevent the Republic from drifting toward “the glamorous prospect of annihilation” (107).

Sharing with many counterculturalists of the West Coast the dream of “calculated withdrawal from the life of the Republic, from its machinery” (86), Pynchon’s Oedipa speculates:

Either you have stumbled indeed, without the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids, on to a secret richness and concealed destiny of dream; on to a network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating whilst reserving their lies, recitations of routine, arid betrayals of spiritual poverty, for the official government delivery system; maybe even on to a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life, that harrows the head of everybody American you know, and you too, sweetie. Or you are hallucinating it. (117-18)

Indeed, the novel provides a lot more than a “social commentary about the loss of relevance of traditional values in contemporary life” (130), as Linda Hutcheon succinctly argues. Richard Poirier, however, in his review of *Lot 49* in the same year of the novel’s publication seems to have perceived Pynchon’s social preoccupations and artistic intentions with greater lucidity and precision when he reads this novel as “a patriotic lamentation, an elaborate effort not to believe the worst about the Republic” (“Embattled Underground”).

To be sure, writing in the early 1960s, both Kesey and Pynchon seem to suggest the possibility of cultural change by envisioning heterotopic realities that run against the limits of American liberal capitalism. The kind of attitude that Doctorow and Stone adopt in their narratives is going to be examined next.

Counterculture and the Demise of “Radical Change”

In contradistinction to *Cuckoo’s Nest* and *Lot 49*, both of which articulate hopes framed within the heroic visions of alternative cultural realities, Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel* and Stone’s *Dog Soldiers* depict the withering faith in the subversive possibilities of popular political culture. By the early 1970s, there is already an obvious disillusionment—at least among literary radicals and intellectuals of the left—that the movement could provide realistic alternatives to the antinomies of liberal exploitation

and the rituals of conformity. However, though both texts respond to the call of the times for self-criticism, they also offer a kind of monstrous mirror of the national arrogance and dangerous imperialism that were responsible for the atrocities of the Vietnam War as well as for domestic brutality.

The Book of Daniel is apparently about the Rosenberg trial and their electrocution in 1953, as well as the traumas suffered by the children of the executed couple. But Doctorow is, in fact, using the Rosenberg case to explore a number of issues that especially concern America's historical left as well as the possibility of meaningful political action amidst counterculture's radical politics. Thus, *The Book of Daniel* reads as an open accusation of the American Communist Party and its unwitting complicity with the McCarthy era of political repression and intellectual censorship. At the same time, as the narrative is continually weaving back and forth between the 1950s and the 1960s, the reader is made aware of the indissoluble links that exist between these two ostensibly very different decades. To be sure, Doctorow is strongly critical of the New Left's tendency toward collective amnesia and its rejection of historical knowledge so as to prevent repetition of past errors. He remains equally critical toward artists, writers and cultural radicals, who, sharing the fundamental premises of the Yippies, put up law-breaking, media-covered theatrical acts in order to show their defiance to the establishment. But, despite his obvious disillusionment with past and present alternatives of political change, Doctorow's real target as well as the source of all domestic inequality and international social evil is unquestionably "the system."

In Doctorow's version of the story, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg become Paul and Rochelle Isaacson; Susan, their daughter, replaces one of the Rosenberg sons; and Ethel's betrayer/brother, David Greenglass, is transformed into Dr. Selig Mindish, family friend and dentist. While drawing obvious parallels with the historical events of the Rosenberg trial, Doctorow assumes considerable poetic license in his ideological interpretation of the case, treating it as an emblematic event in American history that many political forces attempted to appropriate for their own ideological agenda. In particular, by foregrounding the imaginative contemplation of the various discursive constructions of such a case, Doctorow juxtaposes the coherence of the master narrative of the Communist Party with the "seemingly more open, polymorphous micro-narratives of spontaneous revolt among some sixties' activists" (Reed 289).

As the novel opens on a spring day in 1968, the narrator of the book,

Daniel Issacson, is sitting in the library of Columbia University, supposedly working on his doctoral dissertation in literature, while his main concern revolves around issues of historical complicity and responsibility. Thus, he accuses his liberal foster father of being complicit with the system in seeking legal redress for the inconsistencies of the trial: “It is complicity in the system to be appalled with the moral structure of the system” (227), Daniel declares. In a similar manner, he holds his real father responsible for his inability to connect his abstract dialectical credo with material social practice. While Paul Issacson was capable of putting “together all the historic injustice and showing ... the pattern and how everything that had happened was inevitable according to Marxian analysis” (35), he was unable to “make the final connection between what he believed and how the world reacted” (32). The fact that Paul’s complicity lies in his overestimation of the American liberal justice is reinforced by the young countercultural radical, Artie Sternlicht, who tells Daniel: “Your folks didn’t know shit. The way they handled themselves at their trial was pathetic. I mean they played it by *their* rules. The government’s rules. ... The whole frame of reference brought them down because they acted like defendants at a trial” (151).

However, despite his disenchantment with the historical Old Left and its unintended complicity with the Cold War McCarthyite rhetoric, Doctorow remains also sceptical toward radical countercultural activism associated with the Young International Party (Yippies) and represented in the novel by Artie Sternlicht. Sternlicht propagates his belief in overthrowing “the United States with [television] images” (140) and guerrilla theatre tactics. His apocalyptic dream of revolution can dispense with history altogether, as the collage that covers his wall reveals. This piece of bricolage entitled “EVERYTHING THAT CAME BEFORE IS ALL THE SAME” (136) proclaims the abolition of historical memory and a disregard for individual responsibility that discredits it as a viable position in Daniel’s ideological meanderings. The fact that Sternlicht’s repudiation of history is deemed complicitous with the ideological state apparatus becomes clear in the affinities that Doctorow draws between the Yippie stance and Disneyland. In his visit to Disneyland in order to meet Mindish, the comrade who betrayed his parents, Daniel becomes aware of the triumph of capitalist technology over history and memory. Disneyland is for Daniel an “abbreviated shorthand culture for the masses” (289) that flattens historical reality to a depthless surface, to paraphrase Fredric Jameson, at the same time that it erases the possibility of future transformation. Daniel, who calls

himself “a small criminal of perception,” is able to perceive the dangers involved in this seemingly innocuous cultural artefact called Disneyland (31). In fact, Doctorow’s Disneyland has many affinities with Umberto Eco’s description of the same topographical site as “a place of absolute iconism, a place of total passivity” “whose visitors must agree to behave like robots” (45). Daniel cannot help noticing that Disneyland’s “real achievement” is “the handling of crowds.” “The problems of mass ingress and egress seem to have been solved here to a degree that would light admiration in the eyes of an SS transport officer” (289-90). In this regard, Disneyland’s ostensibly playful tactics of coercion become the flip side of a coin, the other side being the government’s authoritarian methods of repression, surveillance, indictments and imprisonment of radical revolutionaries. Daniel’s participation in the anti-war march to the Pentagon in the fall of 1967 makes him physically experience the skull-cracking reality of “the many helmeted beast” of the Police State Apparatus against dissenters (256).

While domestic upsurges become frequent in the late sixties and are met with increasing state violence, American global dominance after World War II is achieved through interventionist politics. In his brief treatise on Cold War politics, Daniel proffers: “A MESSAGE OF CONSOLATION TO MY GREEK BROTHERS IN THEIR PRISON CAMPS, AND TO MY HAITIAN BROTHERS AND NICARAGUAN BROTHERS AND BRAZILIAN BROTHERS AND DOMINICAN BROTHERS AND SOUTH AFRICAN BROTHERS AND SPANISH BROTHERS AND TO MY BROTHERS IN SOUTH VIETNAM, ALL IN THEIR PRISON CAMPS: YOU ARE IN THE FREE WORLD!” (236-7). What Daniel reminds us of with this message to the nations of the world is that the “free world” is all but an illusion and that the “truly free” are only those who are aware of the boundaries of their imprisonment. America’s bankruptcy of international leadership and betrayal of a national vision, the militarism and inequality in the U.S. society brought Doctorow’s embittered protagonist, as it did millions of young people, to the realization that no action due to the fear of complicity is in *itself* a form of complicity. Immersed in his thoughts as he is, Daniel is not aware of the ongoing revolt at Columbia University. One of his fellow-student activists urges him: “Time to leave, man, they’re closing the school down. ... Close the book, man, what’s the matter with you, don’t you know you’re liberated?” (302). Naïve as it may sound—considering Daniel’s own ponderings on history—this suggestion is what prompts him to act in the end, to give himself up to the historical moment, to “the theme, structure, diction and metaphor” of his times (257).

Whereas Daniel decides—albeit reluctantly—to abandon himself to the flow of revolutionary change, Stone’s liberal hero, John Converse, acts in futility, as if revolutionary and meaningful political action were impossible. Converse, however, had been a correspondent in the Vietnam War and had experienced the loss and trauma the U.S. had suffered due to its involvement in Southeast Asia.⁵ Early in the novel and while he is stationed in Saigon, Converse feels morally outraged and disillusioned with his country’s supremacist ideology and imperialist conduct. Undoubtedly, Nixon’s “Vietnamization” of the war and secret bombing of Cambodia in 1970 had ignited a firestorm of protests and anti-war confrontations with the police at home. But the absurdity and senselessness of the war, the blowing of children “out of sleep,” ought to give rise, according to the hero, to a more absolute and effective response than just “everybody’s” “moral objections” (40, 41). As an appalled eye-witness of the atrocities, Converse becomes aware of the declining value of human life, and shares with the soldiers the pervading “feeling that there were limits” which his government had overstepped. How, then, would a sensible human being react under such anti-rational, anti-humanist, unintelligible circumstances? Stone deliberately places his hero in a geographical (California) and intellectual (progressive) climate that undermines the credibility of America’s official narrative of a providentially ordained mission to fight the evil empire in the name of the free world. At the same time, Stone’s hero comes to question the very foundations of belief in coherent morality which ought to be the underlying premise for revolutionary action. Characteristically, Converse experiences his “last moral objection” “in the traditional manner”—as he puts it—after “the Great Elephant Zap,” during which elephants perceived as enemy agents were slaughtered by American air forces (41). Having lost his faith in left-wing politics as well as his moral earnestness, Converse decides that the most “real” thing he could do is bring drugs back from Vietnam. He says in his cynical way: “And as for dope ... if the world is going to contain elephants pursued by flying men, people are just naturally going to want to get high” (42). To this end, he arranges to

5. Like his protagonist, Robert Stone was sent in 1971 by the British bi-weekly *INK* to Vietnam as its correspondent. “The magazine soon folded but Stone remained for six weeks, his articles for *INK* appearing in the Manchester *Guardian*. More importantly, while in Vietnam Stone witnessed the dealings of Saigon’s heroin and gold black market. This underworld, predominately inhabited by foreign diplomats and journalists, became the backdrop for Stone’s second novel *Dog Soldiers*” (Stone, “Bibliographical Note”).

have three kilos of pure heroin smuggled to his wife in Berkeley. Stone is careful to specify the wife's left-wing family credentials. Marge, however, is addicted to drugs which have become her substitute for political commitment. The drugs are brought to California by an ex-marine named Ray Hicks, a character who combines features of "Natty Bumppo and a Vietcong guerrilla."⁶ Hicks shares with Converse the disregard for human life, but, unlike him, he is portrayed as a pseudo intellectual and a self-styled mystic. Hicks tries to sell the drugs to buyers all by himself but discovers that he is pursued by the corrupt Drug Enforcement Administration agents (DEA).⁷ With Marge being hooked on him for security and her dose, and the "regulatory agents" coming after him, he finds refuge in a southern California commune.⁸ In his book review Geoffrey Clark observes that in the shoot-out that follows Stone has Hicks suffer a sacrificial murder, while Converse is reunited with his wife and the heroin is left behind as a peace offering to the relentless, rapacious pursuers.

According to William V. Spanos, "in this resonant 'American' novel, the 'errand' of the idealist American frontier hero (Ray Hicks) ... is reduced to drug running against a decadent America symbolized by a corrupt F.B.I. agent and his criminal deputies" (251). In an ironic manner, Hicks brings the war back home—from the Vietnamese East to the American West. To topple the irony, just before his death he comes to see himself as a Vietcong fighting against "the massive American war machine":

I'm the little man in the boonies now, he thought.

The thing would be to have one of their Sg mortars. He was conceiving a passionate hatred for the truck—its bulk and mass—and for the man inside it.

The right side for a change. (296)

6. For an insightful interpretation of *Dog Soldiers* (1974) as "a deliberately staged symbolic reversal of westward American narrative" see Spanos 251-52n23.

7. The Drug Enforcement Administration was founded in 1973 during Richard Nixon's presidency. It proposed the creation of a single federal agency to enforce the federal drug laws and coordinate the government's drug control activities ("Drug Enforcement Administration").

8. The hippie commune in which Ray Hicks finds refuge is reminiscent of Ken Kesey's home in La Honda, California, where Kesey and his friends—known as the Merry Pranksters—famously wired the surrounding woods with lights and sound equipment to enhance their experiments with LSD. Furthermore, Stone had a lifelong friendship with Kesey; he regularly consumed hallucinogenics and narcotics, and crossed the country with Kesey's group of Merry Pranksters.

Through his depiction of decadent leftists or self-deluding revolutionaries, Stone condemns radical ideological systems for their failure. At the same time, the author denounces officials for their depravity and exploitation of drug-use as a pretext for the “public burning” of countercultural activists. Nevertheless, his arch enemy and source of disillusionment remains the U.S. brutal conduct in the Vietnam War.⁹ As one critic has claimed, for Stone, “Vietnam summarized a generation’s confusion, marking the end of a racist, imperialist era on one hand, and the breakdown of moral order on the other” (Fredrikson 319).

The specter of Vietnam and the bitter political and cultural controversies that surrounded the war almost brought the nation to its dissolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Todd Gitlin, an eloquent spokesman of the 1960s, explains in his account of the critical period between 1968 and 1971, that the more the anti-war movement gained power the more “the radical analysis” according to which “the Vietnam War was the linchpin of the entire imperialist order” gained credibility. He also shows how the New Left, pulled apart by “cannibal factions,” gave rise to apocalyptic rhetoric and militant group violence which were met by state repression, surveillance and other counterintelligence programs (380). Doctorow’s *The Book of Daniel* articulates this sense of desperation pervading the late-sixties activist movement. However, in *Dog Soldiers* the sweet and wild dreams of the sixties have turned into “a nightmare.” Corruption, cynicism, harshness, frustration and futility occupy the center of Stone’s novel. Evidently, the artistic production of the 1970s depicts American society in conflict, torn by violence both at home and abroad. Armed with temporal distance and psychological disengagement from the 1960s, Roth and Boyle will creatively revisit this turbulent decade in order to re-assess its successes and failures.

National Memory and the Fashioning of a “Proper” American Past

In his book *America’s Shadow: An Anatomy of Empire* (2000), Spanos delineates a provocative genealogy of western imperialism whose founding

9. Such reading of the novel seems to be in accordance with the author’s most recent autobiographical revisiting of the 1960s entitled *Prime Green: Remembering the Sixties*. In his usual tone of sober disenchantment, Stone probes the selfishness and naïveté that underwrote America’s youth culture of the 1960s, while doing honor to the powerful allure of charismatic personalities, like Kesey, and their noble aspirations.

ideas, as the author claims, have also informed America's exceptionalist national self-image from the Puritans' "errand into the wilderness," to the myth of Manifest Destiny. Spanos places Vietnam at the center of his analysis but, as the "New Americanist" project has persuasively shown,¹⁰ the myth has saturated the cultural discourse of America since its origins. It is this (liberal) myth of the American dream itself that the anti-authoritarian sixties had attempted to dismantle, as I have tried to show in the course of my analysis of the literary representations of the period. But, the decades that followed witnessed a reinvigoration of Republican conservatism which carried the culture wars of the 1960s forward to a new generation that had to reach its own understandings and produce its own interpretations of the turbulent era.

With his *American Pastoral*, Roth offers a counternarrative of the 1960s as a challenge to the official narrative of American exceptionalism and the liberal consensus myth.¹¹ At the center of *American Pastoral* is Swede Levoy, a Jewish American liberal during the post-scarcity, Cold War era of U.S. hegemony. Roth pits Swede Levoy as a true believer in "the benign national myth" of the American dream against his 16-year-old daughter Merry, a militant radical who articulates what Roth describes as the "counterpastoral" impulse. Encapsulating this struggle in a private family romance, Roth examines the sixties' assault against a consensus liberalism that propagated the American mythic ideal, reflected in both historical and literary metanarratives. Drawing from key archetypal images,¹² these metanarratives reinforced the exceptionalist vision of an American Adam entering the vast and "empty" American pastoral landscape in order to appropriate and invest the land with social and cultural meaning.

10. Emerging in the 1980s, the "New Americanists" have attempted a radical shift in American Studies. Their work aims to reposition the discipline by giving increasing weight to notions of class and social-inequality. In particular, Donald E. Pease, a leading "New Americanist," focuses on revising the idea of American exceptionalism and criticizing its service to imperialism. See Pease and Kaplan, *Cultures of U.S. Imperialism, New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon, Futures of American Studies*.

11. For a more detailed reading of the novel as a challenge to American exceptionalist teleology, see Stanley.

12. Concepts such as Adamic innocence vs. experience, pastoral utopia vs. technology, and so on, belong to the founding movement of American Studies, "the myth and symbol school" and can be located in classic mid-century texts, such as Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950), R. W. B. Lewis' *The American Adam* (1955) and Leo Marx's *The Machine and the Garden* (1964).

In his characteristically ironic manner, Roth entitles the three sections of the novel as “Paradise Remembered,” “The Fall,” and “Paradise Lost,” echoing both *Genesis* and John Milton’s epic. The novel introduces us to the legendary Swede who, with his fair complexion and athletic prowess, becomes a “symbol of hope” in the Jewish neighborhood. By his individual embracing of a Puritan work ethic and his climbing of the ladder of capitalistic success, this Jewish-American Adam manages to achieve “his version of paradise” (86). Yet, Roth exposes the “ritual postimmigrant struggle for success” story (86) as an ideological construct whose demise lies in the mythic foundations of such a tradition. Swede’s unapologetic embrace of a consumer society and its assimilationist values has obfuscated the long-standing white racism and inequality inherent in such a project.¹³ His wishful abandonment of his Jewish values and tradition which entails his alienation of his ethnic identity, his marrying into an Irish-Catholic family, as well as his moving into Old Rimrock, an upper-class Protestant enclave, all suggest Swede’s unconditional surrender to the homogeneity of the WASP middle-class mold, that is to the mold of hegemonic American culture.

At the heart of the narrative lies the question that haunts Swede Levov: “How did Merry become the ‘angriest kid in America?’ ” (279). Such a question could be answered successfully only if he interpreted Merry’s militant activism as a manifestation of solidarity for the class and racial tensions that the myth of liberal consensus had imperfectly concealed. Though initially Merry’s anger takes the self-punishing form of speech stuttering, it reaches its dangerous peak when she joins in political insurgency and blows up the Old Rimrock post office.¹⁴ The bombing marks the beginning of Swede’s fall from a privileged Eden and “transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the indigenous American berserk” (86). As he tries to find an explanation as to

13. Sandra Kumamoto Stanley is right to refer to Charles Taylor’s observation of “blind” liberalism (in *Multiculturalism and “The Politics of Recognition”* [1992]), which promotes “universal, difference-blind principles,” ignoring the fact that no homogenous mold is truly neutral, for such a “universal mold” inevitably reflects the values of a particular hegemonic culture, thus resulting in “a particularism masquerading as the universal” (8).

14. The post office building is signifier for both Swede Levov’s pastoral home and an intelligible system of communication. Interestingly enough, in *Crying of Lot 49* (1966) there is an attempt to replace rather than destroy the repressive official postal system by an underground one.

why “the daughter and the decade blast[ed] to smithereens his particular form of utopian thinking” (86), Swede is forced to realize that history does not represent the triumphant coherent march of liberalism toward the “utopia of rational existence,” but it can take unexpected, unpredictable turns: “He had been admitted into a mystery more bewildering even than Merry’s stuttering: there was no fluency anywhere. It was *all* stuttering” (93, emphasis in original).

Merry’s counter-hegemonic, anti-pastoral violent acts are meant to challenge ideologically her father’s “benign national myth” (qtd. in Stanley 14) and unfettered optimism of his liberal ideology. However, Boyle’s denizens of a hippie commune, named Drop City, seek different ways to prevent their appropriation from mainstream society. Set in the 1970s, *Drop City* portrays communal living and its hardships in one of the thousand upon thousands of enclaves in the period that rejected the materialism of a hegemonic culture in favor of collective values and a back-to-the-land ethic.¹⁵ The commune operates according to what its charismatic founder, Norm Sender, calls “Voluntary Primitivism” and promises an open-door policy on residency or as he says, Land Access to Which Is Denied No One (LATWIDNO).¹⁶ To be sure, attuned to the lifestyle of her times, Star, a middle-class girl from upstate New York, expects, as she puts it, “a life of peace and tranquillity, of love and meditation and faith in the ordinary, no pretence, no games, no plastic yearning after the almighty dollar” (11). Like many sixties hip communes, Drop City easily tolerated nudity, free love and psychedelic drugs. Its communitarian ideals, however, quickly collapsed in a host of problems, some ideological, like intolerance to racial diversity and gender inequality, and some practical like sewage disposal, zoning laws, and hassles from the local government. Though authorities, citing health code violations, managed to shut the place down, these urban communitarians decided to leave the city and move to Alaska. “Flower power on the tundra!” proclaimed their enthusiastic leader (187). Like the Merry Pranksters, they glided across the Canadian border to their

15. According to Timothy Miller, a community called Drop City was founded in May 1965 near Trinidad, Colorado, by Gene Bernofsky, Jo Ann Bernofsky, and Clark Richert, all students at the University of Kansas (331-33).

16. Norm Sender is portrayed after Lou Gottlieb, founder of the Morning Star Ranch commune in Sonoma County. Gottlieb invited all comers to join him on his 32-acre spread on Graton Road. People living there built their own shelters, dug toilets, grew food, and engaged in open drug use. Local authorities eventually came in and leveled Morning Star’s tents and cabins.

new communitarian experiment in their drug-laden 1963 school bus by convincing the wide-eyed guards that they were the Grateful Dead on tour. But Alaska, “the last truly free place on this whole continent” (207), as Star eloquently puts it, is not California. It requires a life-style defined by self-discipline, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and a great amount of labor in order to survive in its cruelly indifferent environment. Having to struggle through the winter and being unable to cope with internal tensions, many of Drop City’s members drifted away but the most committed ones stayed on to fulfill their communal vision. Despite a chilling out of naïve communal optimism that Boyle’s grim portrayal conveys, it nevertheless supports communitarianism’s basic tenet which is the hunger for contact and interpersonal bonding.

Had Boyle’s account on communal living ended here, it would have formed another conventional narrative commemorating the cultural legacy of the sixties’ communes. But Boyle complicates his vision by intertwining life in a commune with the story of Sess Harder, an Alaskan fur trapper, who experiences with his new wife a Thoreauvian lifestyle of isolation and daily hardship. In his ardent desire for individualism and autonomy, Sess perceives an American belief as old as the nation itself as well as a major value of the 1960s culture. The contrast between the hippie culture and the native Alaskan life is glaringly evident: in the eyes of Sess, Drop City’s communitarians are “starry-eyed and simplistic” and behave “like children, utterly confident and utterly ignorant” (375), while they envy Sess’ independence due to “working hard and taking what the land gives you” (336). Yet, despite the startling differences, they share their rebellion against the established order which is dominated by greed and materialism as well as their “quixotic” (281) desire to construct new lives in simplicity, harmony and isolation.

Conclusion

In this essay, I hope to have shown, through the examination of three sets of novels, that the countercultural movement of the 1960s caused a radical displacement of the implementation of instrumental American reason and of a liberal supremacist ideology. This was achieved despite the counter-subversive rhetoric that has persistently and deliberately attempted to distort the image of the 1960s generation within the public imagination by making it appear as an orchestrated effort of an irresponsible and frivolous bunch of spoiled middle-class-white youth who attempted to bring down the ideals of

American family and community. Though counter-culture eventually died out for several different reasons—the deaths of notable counterculture figures, the end of the Civil Rights Movement, the internationalization of the economic marketplace and the advent of consumerism, it marked a decisive turning point, a shift in the history of oppositional politics in the U.S. Despite accusations of its “transcendent nature” which rendered the future “a blank or unpredictable utopia” (Varon 230), or perhaps precisely because of its unrealistic expectations, performative inspiration and invocation of the “symbolic,” counterculture opened alternative ways of radical dissent that might help circumvent the dead end of contemporary cultural politics. What is more, the defiant questioning of the rhetoric of American identity initiated a struggle for cultural justice during the 1960s which in turn enabled the demotion of the liberal state’s assimilationist mentality. This made possible the introduction of the supplementary cultural and political imaginaries of social formations, such as that of Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, to American society. With such decisive and phenomenal interventions to the American political and cultural imaginary, countercultural revolutionary discourse can no longer be contained within the official nationalist discourse, let alone be silenced or suppressed by contemporary conservative state ideologies.

What, then, the study of the literature of and about the sixties demonstrates is that this period of conflict and contestation has irrecoverably underwritten the prevailing modes of national representation. A revisioning of the turbulent decade through its literary representations studied here reveals a severe rupture in the western world’s romance with America and its ideals.¹⁷ To paraphrase Roland Barthes, the sixties has forced us to a reevaluation of our “lover’s discourse” with America. Rather than simply putting into question our adoration, affirmation and declaration of love with America, or turning us into bitter and unrelenting anti-Americanists, a position that would broaden America’s grasp and further its totality, the 1960s has forced us to become radically unfaithful Americanists. Perhaps from this new critical position of filtering, sifting, criticizing, and choosing, we can receive the inheritance of the sixties, though without ever having its contradictions resolved (Derrida 16). As Jacques Derrida and Elizabeth Roudinesco would have it, fidelity to the legacy involves a certain kind of infidelity, not simply accepting the legacy but recasting it otherwise and

17. Many thanks to Winfried Fluck for his inspirational lecture on “The Romance with America.”

keeping it alive (3). To do so, we cannot expect the sixties legacy to repeat itself, to be made present when we inherit it here and now. Rather, as Derrida claimed in *Specters of Marx* (1994): “Inheritance is never a given, it is always a task. It remains before us” (54). It is therefore our task to keep the inheritance of the sixties alive as something which is of the future, which belongs to a time of promise, and therefore is indefinitely perfectible.

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