THE AMERICAN MYTH OF THE WILDERNESS IN JACK KEROUAC'S *ON THE ROAD, THE DHARMA BUMS,* AND *DESOLATION ANGELS*

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As Benedict Anderson and others have shown, nations do not simply come into existence out of nothing. Rather, they are social constructs, "imagined communities," to borrow the term from Anderson's title, that evolve and exist in specific historical contexts. In their development as well as in their sustenance, these communities rely on a common array of (historical) narratives—a national mythology, so to say. This mythology provides the nation with a "usable past" (Brooks 339) that, as a point of orientation, serves as the lowest common denominator for what really is a diverse group of people.

Among the American national myths, the myth of the wilderness can be considered to be one of the most pervasive. Most famously, Frederick Jackson Turner, in his 1893 paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," argued that the frontier—which for him was a place where European civilization was stripped down in the wilderness and where through hardship and labor this same wilderness was then transformed into a new, American civilization—had been the defining factor in shaping the American people. Even though, from a contemporary historiographical point of view, Turner's hypothesis after more than a century cannot be but outdated, its continuing relevance must not be underestimated. In his landmark work of American studies, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*—itself now out-of-date—Henry Nash Smith comments on the significance of Turner's work:

> Brilliant and persuasive as Turner was, his contention that the frontier and the West had dominated American development could hardly have attained such universal acceptance if it had not found an echo in ideas and attitudes already current. . . . It concerns the image of themselves which many—perhaps most—Americans of the present day cherish, an image that defines what Americans think of their past, and therefore what they propose to make of themselves in the future. (4)

Smith's comment indicates that Turner by no means invented something that was not there. Of course, the wilderness beyond the frontier really was not just "an area of free land" (H. Smith 296); millions of Native Americans had been living there long before the first European settlers set foot on the continent. As Roderick Nash writes, "[t]he 'wild West' and the 'frontier' were products of the pioneer mind; so was the idea of wilderness" (xiii). Hence, the wilderness was (and still is) an imagined space; yet, this space was capable of influencing the American people. Note how, for example, Turner's thesis inspires Smith and other scholars, like Perry Miller, who does not only speak of the "uniqueness of the American experience" (ix) but also reasserts that "a basic conditioning factor was the frontier—the wilderness" (1). This in turn gives birth to another version of the same myth, only to be replaced later by new versions, and so forth. None of these myths, or versions of the same myth, can easily be placed in any empirical reality; and still, while they are all tied to their own historical contexts, it is the underlying myth that remains. It lives through changing times, manifests itself in diverse forms, and serves various functions for different actors while always maintaining its core structure. Hence, the myth matters.

One of the fields in which the myth of the wilderness has been particularly prevalent is American literature. While the considerations of the likes of Turner, Smith, and Miller assume a broader socio-cultural point of view, their ideas have been similarly transferred to literary studies. In

their introduction to *The Frontier Experience and the American Dream: Essays on American Literature*, Mark Busby, David Mogen, and Paul Bryant write:

> Though today an extensive tradition of criticism defines different aspects of the 'Americanness' of American literature, we still lack a comprehensive overview of the implicit theme of these studies—that we have a Great Tradition of American literature whose continuity fundamentally derives, not from European literary movements, but from the imaginative impact of the frontier experience. (5)

They argue that "historically the existence of a frontier of settlement, and of unsettled and even unknown lands beyond, has generated in the American literary imagination a set of images, attitudes, and assumptions that have shaped our literature into a peculiarly American mold" (3). Though certainly to be taken with a grain of salt, their main points seem valid in general; whether or not the frontier experience really shaped the character of either people or literature, ideas of wilderness undoubtedly spawned numerous and diverse literary engagements with it. Nash makes a similar but more convincing point as he moves away from the theme of the frontier to put a stronger focus on wilderness as such:

> So much effort in the early nineteenth century went into calling for and worrying about a national style. . . . New World themes were essential, and wilderness fulfilled this requirement. Romantics invested it with value while nationalists proclaimed its uniqueness. Creative minds soon found uses for wilderness in poetry, fiction, and painting. (74)

From the mythical romanticism of James Fenimore Cooper to the popular western of Owen Wister, from the transcendentalist visions of Henry David Thoreau to the darker naturalism of Jack London, from the female pioneer spirit of Willa Cather to the masculine imaginations of Ernest Hemingway, the list goes on and on. The myth of the wilderness can be found in countless works of American literature, regardless of their period, form, or genre. Most frequently, in these works, it is men in conflict—whether personal or interpersonal—who go into the wilderness, where they seek refuge, regeneration, or even rebirth.

This paper examines how the myth plays itself out in three novels by Jack Kerouac. The analysis of *On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums*, and the first part of *Desolation Angels* will show how these works recreate and rely on the myth of the wilderness while they simultaneously carry the potential to question and undermine it.

Though much and heavily criticized—and often rightly so—for its various blind spots concerning race and gender, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* secured the author a position in the canon of post-WWII American fiction. More than fifty years after its first publication in 1957, *On the Road* can be found in practically every anthology of American literature as well as on college English curricula around the globe, and still new papers on the novel are published in academic journals or presented at conferences every year.[i] Moreover, the year 2012 finally saw a movie adaption, directed by Walter Salles and produced by the Coppolas' company American Zoetrope. Needless to say, the novel's status as a cult book for various subcultures as well as an inspiration for alienated youths around the world remains mostly unperturbed.

Nonetheless, Kerouac's numerous other novels have largely been left in the shadow of his opus magnum. Rod Phillips's assessment of the situation is spot-on:

> Too often, readers of Kerouac's fiction—from high school freshmen to established critics—have viewed his later novels as mere footnotes to a single great work. . . . Such a reading of Kerouac's fiction is a tremendous oversimplification, of course; there is much more to Jack Kerouac than meets the eyes of those readers who only venture as far as *On the Road* will take them. The 'Duluoz Legend,' as Kerouac came to call the body of fiction which chronicled his real life experiences, contains a variety

> of responses to American life which have gone unnoticed by critics because of their overemphasis on the author's role as progenitor of the 'psychedelic generation.' One such area long neglected by critical attention is Kerouac's extensive treatment of the subject of nature in such works as *Lonesome Traveler* (1960), *Desolation Angels* (1965), *Big Sur* (1962) and most importantly, *The Dharma Bums* (1958). (49-50)

Phillips's point is well taken, yet I chose to not turn away from *On the Road* completely. As Kerouac's most popular novel, it remains his most relevant one in the context of American literature and popular culture. Therefore, I think it is most productive to first unearth the manifestation of the myth of the wilderness in *On the Road* and to then relate it to those of his novels that deal more directly with the theme of wilderness in the form of nature. I picked *The Dharma Bums* and the first part of *Desolation Angels*—which in this paper will be viewed as a kind of appendix to the former—for a specific reason. Matthew Kelley writes that "[t]here are three ways to read Jack Kerouac chronologically: biographical order, compositional order, and order of publication" (499). The three novels I chose are very close together as far as the first two criteria are concerned and, with the exception of *Desolation Angels*, also regarding the third one. With their proximity in time—as products neither of Kerouac's early writing nor of his post-fame phase—but diversity in content and style, they lend themselves particularly well to a comparative analysis. Furthermore, as Kerouac created these novels as parts of one great narrative based on his own life and experiences, which he called "The Duluoz Legend," using the same characters in most of his novels, only with different names (*VoC*[ii], n. pag.), a comparative analysis of the novels' narrator-protagonists can be seen not as a comparison of different characters but as a comparison of different realizations of the same character.

First, *On the Road* will be analyzed on its own, then *The Dharma Bums* and *Desolation Angels* will be examined together. Finally, the results of both analyses will be compared and contrasted with each other to distill the essence of the myth of the wilderness in these novels.

The basic plot of *On the Road* is well known to anyone interested in American literature; it consists of a number of road trips by the protagonists Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty through the United States and Mexico and does not require further explanation. It seems helpful, however, to briefly go back to the myth of the wilderness in American literature in order to show the novel's relevance in this context. Three aspects are important here. Firstly, the two dominant and often connected orientations of the myth and its realization in literature are nature and the American West. Secondly—and this should be seen as an extension of rather than a contradiction with the previous sentence—starting with novels like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, the city has repeatedly been characterized as the new wilderness in the twentieth century. Lastly, some typical purposes are prevalent when (usually male) literary protagonists enter the wilderness: it can serve as a refuge and place for regeneration or even rebirth, as well as provide a means of self-discovery and/or spiritual enlightenment.

Nature takes on a minor role in *On the Road*, although, of course, there are several passages that show Sal marveling about the beauty of the landscape. Instead, the importance of the road indicates that the novel's focus lies elsewhere; this leitmotif links the book to the presumed spirit of the West, as "[f]or Kerouac, the free open road represented the promise of America as once envisioned by the pioneer enthusiasms of the past" (Tytell 169). The first of the trips described, which sets the mood for large parts of the novel, has Sal traveling—mostly by hitchhiking—all the way from New York City through Denver to San Francisco, embodying what Tim Hunt calls "perhaps the archetypal American tale: he flees the constrictions of the East hoping to find freedom and regeneration in the West" (32; cf. Busby 96). Sal openly links his own voyage to the history of the West when he describes how in preparation for the trip he does not only study road maps but also reads books about pioneers and wagon trails (*OtR* 15, 21). Inspired by Dean, Sal's enthusiasm in the beginning of *On the Road* recreates the pioneer spirit of the mythic West: "I promised myself to go the same way when

spring really bloomed and opened up the land" (*OtR* 13). The country is "opened up," implying that Sal is allowed access to whatever is out there and that it is out there for his perusal.[iii] His idea of what awaits him, however, remains rather vague: "Somewhere along the line I knew there'd be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me" (*OtR* 14). Sal is hoping to find something, some kind of meaning, even though he does not exactly know what it is; in this sense, he can be seen as going on a quest into the unknown—the wilderness (cf. Nash xii).

The outset of Sal's journey is marked by an unabashedly optimistic enthusiasm. He does not appear to spend any thought on what might actually really happen once he reaches his destination. What he has in mind when he is on the road are not specific, realistic ideas but mythical images of the West: "Now I could see Denver looming ahead of me like the Promised Land, way out there beneath the stars, across the prairie of Iowa and the plains of Nebraska, and I could see the greater vision of San Francisco beyond, like jewels in the night" (*OtR* 19). This sentence displays how his trip is not driven by reality but by myth; it is the myth of the West that attracts Sal. Nevertheless, the effect it has on him and his identity during his journey is real, as he becomes aware of in a hotel room in Des Moines:

> I woke up as the sun was reddening; and that was the one distinct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, when I didn't know who I was—I was far away from home, haunted and tired with travel, in a cheap hotel room I'd never seen, hearing the hiss of steam outside, and the creak of the old wood of the hotel, and footsteps upstairs, and all the sad sounds, and I looked at the cracked high ceiling and really didn't know who I was for about fifteen strange seconds. I wasn't scared; I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost. I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future, and maybe that's why it happened right there and then. . . . (*OtR* 19)

Here, the myth of the wilderness in form of the West plays itself out in two ways. For one thing, Sal finds his identity in crisis as he does not know who he is at that particular moment, which exemplifies the presumed transformation one goes through when going into the wilderness. The other aspect that is crucial in this passage's relation to the myth goes back to the myth's earliest forms. Sal writes that his "whole life," i.e., his life in the East, "was a haunted life." This recalls the early days of the American people, who, as the myth has it, were similarly haunted by their European ancestry and only to overcome this by going west into the wilderness and being stripped off the baggage of the past in order to become truly American (Turner 3-4). In this sense, *On the Road* could indeed be considered a "story of rebirth" (Richardson 221).

Interestingly, the passage also includes the first hint that the novel not only relies on and reinforces the myth but that it also subverts it. Before Sal mentions his "haunted life," he says that he was "some stranger." Of course, on the surface level this simply means that he does not recognize himself in that situation. On a deeper level this might also relate to the immigrant background of both protagonist and author—Sal is Italian, Kerouac French-Canadian (cf. Skinazi 87). Moreover, when viewed in light of the myth of the wilderness, Sal's remark carries another, more subtle meaning: as "some stranger," he does not really belong where he is. This can be read as a comment on the westward expansion, during which the settlers were also strangers in the land they occupied and thus, in a figurative sense, became the ghosts that haunted the lives of the native population. It is moments like this one, when "*On the Road* achieves, at times, a certain distance from its own enabling myths, quite as if it were holding them up for scrutiny even as it plays them out" (Richardson 218-19). The novel for a brief instance breaks out of the myth to allow the reader a glimpse behind the curtain, only to immediately be subjugated by it again. Scarce as they are, these moments of revelation recur throughout the novel; nevertheless, the myth clearly dominates *On the Road*.

Sal's conception of what and where the West is appears to be changing the further he travels in that direction, which is reminiscent of Turner's "waves" of civilization advancing the frontier (12). Already in Nebraska, Sal declares, "That's the West, here I am in the West" (*OtR* 23). But, of course, there are countless more miles to go in the West, so when he rolls into Colorado, his excitement grows: "And there in the blue air I saw for the first time, far off, the great snowy tops of the Rocky Mountains. . . . And here I am in Colorado! I kept thinking gleefully. Damn! damn! damn! I'm making it!" (*OtR* 37). Yet only shortly afterward, Colorado does not seem to be western enough, when after a night out in Denver, Sal describes how "[b]eyond the glittering street was darkness, and beyond the darkness the West. I had to go" (*OtR* 57). While *On the Road* indicates that the common image of *the* West is a generalization and oversimplification—for what is commonly called the West is a diverse and heterogeneous region—it still falls for the myth that the further west one goes, the brighter is the outlook. The novel thus evokes an entirely mythical enthusiasm about the freedom and supposedly endless opportunities in the West, where, in Sal's words, "there was nowhere to go but everywhere, keep rolling under the stars, generally the Western stars" (*OtR* 30).

Two other points that display the discrepancy between myth and reality in *On the Road* should be mentioned here. The first one regards the protagonists and their supposed analogy to the pioneers of the West. While the mythical (or even historical) pioneers usually left everything behind—their community, their homes, sometimes parts of their family, basically their whole former life—and started from scratch in the wilderness, with often only a very limited amount of seed capital, the characters in Kerouac's novel are different. Indeed, while on the road, they also repeatedly struggle to make enough money to afford the next trip and a decent meal, resulting in Sal and Dean taking on a number of different, very basic, low-skilled jobs throughout the novel. Furthermore, at first glance, one could think that, like the pioneers, they leave their old lives behind once they go on the road, just as Sal indicates it in the hotel room passage quoted before. However, it soon becomes clear that this is not the case. Dean, for example, frequently goes back to the girl he just abandoned, only to then return to the one for whom he abandoned her, who he later leaves as well, and so on. Sal, on the other hand, even retains his home and family in the East as a fix point in his life during the whole novel. Sal's remark near the end of the first part of *On the Road* exemplifies this: "I could feel the pull of my own life calling me back. I shot my aunt a penny postcard across the land and asked for another fifty" (*OtR* 94). Sal appears to be realizing that his life on the road cannot be his 'real' life, that he actually does not have the pioneer spirit, or if he has it, he does not have the endurance to keep on living that kind of life. Moreover, one can see how the wilderness Sal experiences in *On the Road* is in fact only a wilderness with a safety net. Like Henry David Thoreau, who, during the time when he was writing *Walden*, regularly returned to town—his cabin was only a few miles from his parents' home (Witherell and Dubrulle)—Sal is always able to rely on his aunt back home to send him money when he is broke.

The other aspect relating to the discrepancy between myth and reality in *On the Road* are those moments when the myth of the West is openly revealed as a myth. One such instance is when Sal and his fellow hitchhikers roll into Cheyenne:

> "Hell's bells, it's Wild West Week," said Slim. Big crowds of businessmen, fat businessmen in boots and ten-gallon hats, with their hefty wives in cowgirl attire, bustled and whoopeed on the wooden sidewalks of old Cheyenne; . . . Blank guns went off. The saloons were crowded to the sidewalk. I was amazed, and at the same time I felt it was ridiculous: in my first shot at the West I was seeing to what absurd devices it had fallen to keep its proud tradition. (*OtR* 34)

The quotation shows that even though the Old West is long dead, its myth survives. What is remembered and celebrated in Cheyenne's "Wild West Week" here are not the historical pioneers and their hardship and labor, let alone the native people the city was named after. No, the entity the West most relies on to "keep its proud tradition" is the cowboy: a real, historical occupation turned into a

mythical type reduced to attire, gunfights, and saloons. Yet, Sal is "amazed" despite his feeling that "it was ridiculous"; he still speaks of the West's "proud tradition." While the novel clearly unmasks the myth of the West here, its protagonist fails to go that far and rather appears to be merely putting off what he sees as an anomaly in his otherwise unshaken image—or even vision—of the West.

Another example is the introduction of Dean Moriarty. Generally, Dean seems to embody the classical western (anti-)hero: he is from the West (Oklahoma), a man of action, independent and free, and desired by women. When Sal meets Dean in person for the first time, his description of him immediately aligns him with the tradition of the western hero: "My first impression of Dean was of a young Gene Autry—trim, thin-hipped, blueeyed, with a real Oklahoma accent—a sideburned hero of the snowy West. In fact he'd just been working on a ranch, Ed Wall's in Colorado, before marrying Marylou and coming East" (*OtR* 8). Karen E.H. Skinazi convincingly explains how the myth is played out and implicitly exposed here: "The western hero of the western tradition . . . rings hollow here; it had already spawned simulacra of simulacra of simulacra in Hollywood's studios that were filled to the brim, by Kerouac's time, with Wells Fargo stagecoaches and wooden saloon sets. It is fitting, of course, that Dean does not resemble a cowboy as much as an actor who played one" (99). Dean cannot really be a western hero because all that is left of the West is its myth; therefore, he is nothing but a simulacrum, in a Baudrillardian sense a "representation produced by simulation, . . . a copy without an original" (R. Smith 199). Again, the novel, while relying on the myth, carries out its subversive potential here, yet its protagonist fails to pick up on the underlying meaning of his very own observations.

Finally, the last important aspect of the myth of the wilderness in *On the Road* that should be taken into account here is the city. As indicated before, the novel is less focused on nature. Rather, the city is the wilderness where the characters seek their freedom, try to find meaning, and satisfy their lust for life. Whether it is Denver, San Francisco, or Mexico City, the cities in *On the Road* are wild and full of sex, drugs, and music. Just as Norman Mailer described the hipster in his controversial essay "The White Negro," each of the male protagonists becomes "a frontiersman in the Wild West of American night life" (n. pag.). Already during his first stay in San Francisco, Sal realizes that he is not apt for this wilderness: "The time was coming for me to leave Frisco or I'd go crazy" (71). Nonetheless he keeps being drawn to this kind of life, to its characters and situations. Despite the continuing enthusiasm to see new places and make new experiences, however, the tone of the novel seems to get more sober the longer it goes; its optimism wears off, but its excitement about the wilderness of America and its yearning for those mythical heroes remains until the closing paragraph:

> So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it, and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry, and tonight the stars'll be out, and don't you know that God is Pooh Bear? the evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in, and nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty. (*OtR* 291)

Even though by the end of the novel Sal has had enough of Dean and of the wild, crazy life on the road, the wilderness of "all that raw land" is still on his mind and so is Dean Moriarty, the novel's western hero. Hence, in *On the Road*, the myth outlives the experience of reality.

Kerouac's follow-up *The Dharma Bums* tells the story of Ray Smith and his friend Japhy Ryder, two Buddhists who seek spiritual enlightenment and look to find it not only through meditation

but also through leaving behind society and spending time in the undisturbed nature of the mountains of the American west coast. The first part of *Desolation Angels* can be seen as an extension of *The Dharma Bums* because it features in more detail an episode told near the end of *The Dharma Bums*, when Ray Smith (Jack Duluoz in *Desolation Angels*) spends a summer in solitude as a fire lookout on Desolation Peak in the state of Washington.

Like its predecessor *On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums* also presents a western hero. Narrator Ray Smith introduces Japhy Ryder, who

> was a kid from eastern Oregon brought up in a log cabin deep in the woods with his father and mother and sister, from the beginning a woods boy, an axman, farmer, interested in animals and Indian lore so that when he finally got to college by hook or crook he was already well equipped for his early studies in anthropology and later in Indian myth and in the actual texts of Indian mythology. (*DB* 5-6)

Contrary to Dean Moriarty, who resembles a western actor and therefore merely the idealized image of a cowboy, Japhy Ryder seems to be endowed with the features of actual pioneers. "[B]rought up in a log cabin deep in the woods" and "from the beginnings a woods boy, an axman, [and] farmer," Japhy embodies lifelong experience in the wilderness and the practical knowledge necessary to make a living independent from society. Taking into account both similarities and differences between the two heroes, John Tytell reads Japhy as "a fulfilled version of Dean Moriarty," who is able to focus his energies and use them in a constructive way creating calm and balance instead of just roaming around with no direction and leaving behind chaos (170). Furthermore, the focus on Japhy rather than a type like Dean—who has a short appearance in *The Dharma Bums* under the name Cody Pomeray—is crucial for the novel's relation to and conception of wilderness. As Phillips remarks,

> Kerouac moves away from the fast-paced, urban way of life which Dean Moriarty represents, and embraces the much more balanced, nature-centered world of Ryder. . . . In announcing that 'Japhy Ryder is a great new hero of American culture' [*DB* 23], Kerouac signals a change from the souped-up automobile to the simple backpack, a sharp turn off the road and onto the mountain hiking trail. (53)

Therefore, the hero alone already indicates that, indeed, *The Dharma Bums* features a more traditional kind of wilderness.

While the novel also features wild frenzies of drinks and sex, reminiscent of *On the Road* but at times disguised as spiritual ceremonies, its focus lies on the soothing and invigorating quality of nature. During their ascent of Matterhorn mountain, Ray expresses his gratitude toward Japhy for introducing him to another way of life: "Japhy I'm glad I met you. I'm gonna learn all about how to pack rucksacks and what to do and hide in these mountains when I'm sick of civilization. In fact I'm grateful I met you" (*DB* 41). Shortly after, Japhy provides his thoughts on the matter: "There's nothing wrong with you Ray, your only trouble is you never learned to get out to spots like this, you've let the world drown you in its horseshit and you've been vexed . . . but what we're sayin now is true" (51). The wilderness thus becomes a refuge and the locus of catharsis and enlightenment.

This enlightenment is of a spiritual kind, linking the novel to a tradition that occupies a central place in the myth of the wilderness. As Laura Feldt explains, "[p]eople go to the wilderness to meet themselves, their demons, and their gods; it is simultaneously framed as a refuge, paradise, waste land, and hell; it is where you can be lead astray, into idolatry or death, or where you can discover a new subjectivity, where you may find the deepest wisdom or great ignorance" (1). In the American context, Nash identifies how the supposed connection to divinity was usable to set the American wilderness apart from European nature:

> Clearly 'nature' was not enough; an attribute unique to nature in the New World had to be found. The search led to the wilderness. In the early nineteenth century American nationalists began to understand that it was in the *wilderness* of its nature

> that their country was unmatched. While other nations might have an occasional wild peak or patch of heath, there was no equivalent of a wild continent. And if, as many suspected, wilderness was the medium through which God spoke most clearly, then America had a distinct moral advantage over Europe. . . . (69)

Hence, the spiritual quality of nature has always played a crucial role in the American myth of the wilderness, utilized to mark the American continent as special.

Adhering to Buddhist beliefs, the protagonists in *The Dharma Bums* experience the wilderness as embodying the qualities of a Buddha. Japhy says, "Yeah man, you know to me a mountain is a Buddha. Think of the patience, hundreds of thousands of years just sittin there bein perfectly perfectly silent and like praying for all living creatures in that silence and just waitin for us to stop all our frettin and foolin" (*DB* 50). Thus, wilderness does not only inspire spiritual insight but embodies the divine itself. Furthermore, the wilderness featured in *The Dharma Bums* is capable of providing a feeling of rebirth, a recurring motif in the myth of the wilderness. "And I promised myself that I would begin a new life" (*DB* 58), Ray recounts and shortly after his first great experience in the wilderness of the Sierra Nevada declares, "I felt like a new man" (*DB* 81). The wilderness is presented as capable of transforming man into a new, better version of himself. Moreover, the invigorating and enlightening feeling goes so far as to provide the protagonists with almost superhuman abilities, a kind of perceived invincibility. Near the peak of Matterhorn, Ray describes how he

> saw Japhy *running down the mountain* in huge twenty-foot leaps, running, leaping, landing with a great drive of his booted heels, bouncing five feet or so, running, then taking another long crazy yelling yodelaying sail down the sides of the world and in that flash I realized *it's impossible to fall off mountains you fool* and with a yodel of my own I suddenly got up and began running down the mountain after him doing exactly the same huge leaps, the same fantastic runs and jumps. . . . Whether you *can* fall off a mountain or not I don't know, but I had learned that you can't. That was the way it struck me. (*DB* 64-65)

As a man endowed by nature with a new life and new insights into both the tangible and intangible world, Ray appears to view Japhy and himself as detached from the regular world, with established rules and restraints no longer applying to them.

The spiritual enlightenment, however, is inextricably connected to nature (cf. Leer 83). "I couldn't meditate indoors any more like Japhy had just done," Ray writes, "after all that winter in the woods of night I had to hear the little sounds of animals and birds and feel the cold sighing earth under me before I could rightly get to feel a kinship with all living things as being empty and awake and saved already" (*DB* 129). The wilderness becomes so dominant that the protagonist depends on it because he already sees himself as part of it. This reinforces the common motif of the myth of the wilderness that requires men to go into the wilderness—usually alone—in order to find the meaning they are looking for.

Interestingly, the part of the novel the quotation above is taken from also includes one of the few moments of disenchantment in *The Dharma Bums*. Ray spends time with his family in North Carolina and much of this time he spends meditating alone outside in the pine forest behind his mother's house. Ray himself unmasks this 'wilderness' when he comments: "I wasn't exactly unconscious of the fact that I had a good warm fire to return to after these midnight meditations, provided kindly for me by my brother-in-law, who was getting a little sick and tired of my hanging around not working" (*DB* 105). Again, this embodies the image of wilderness with a safety net.

We also find a sort of safety net in that episode of the plot that is featured in both *The Dharma Bums* and *Desolation Angels*. Ray (or Jack, as he is called in *Desolation Angels*) volunteers as a fire lookout on Desolation Peak and spends two months alone in a cabin there, regularly provided with new supplies dropped from planes. However, it is not the safety aspect that makes the episode

interesting with regard to the myth of the wilderness. Rather, the portrayal of solitude appears to be most fertile here

Solitude is a crucial component of the myth of the wilderness in American literature; men who seek refuge, rebirth, or revelation frequently go into the wild alone. Ray/Jack is a prime example. In *The Dharma Bums*, Ray portrays his time in solitude as absolutely blissful and says, "And suddenly I realized I was truly alone and had nothing to do but feed myself and rest and amuse myself, and nobody could criticize. . . . I was feeling happier than in years and years, since childhood, I felt deliberate and glad and solitary" (*DB* 180). The reader is not provided with many details of Ray's stay on the mountaintop but the few pages spent on this episode reinforce the feeling of enlightenment and rebirth through nature (cf. Phillips 61-62).

The first part of *Desolation Angels*—written roughly around the same time as *The Dharma Bums* (Johnson 46)—however, paints a more complicated picture. Already in the opening pages, Jack admits how the reality of his stay differs from his expectations:

> Yes, for I'd thought, in June, hitch hiking up there to the Skagit Valley in northwest Washington for my fire lookout job "When I get to the top of Desolation Peak and everybody leaves on mules an I'm alone I will come face to face with God or Tathagata and find out once and for all what is the meaning of all this existence and suffering and going to and fro in vain" but instead I'd come face to face with myself. . . . (*DA* 4)

This alone, of course, does not divert too much from the tradition of the myth as although Jack does not find God, he at least finds himself, an objective of "male solo explorer[s]" until today (Tuttle). And, indeed, he describes the familiar feeling of rebirth: "I come back into the house a new man" (*DA* 6). The wilderness has an effect on the protagonist that can certainly described as positive. However, the solitude that comes with it does not. Jack reminisces about "days long ago when I could have simply walked up and kissed either my mother or my father and say 'I like you because someday I'll be an old bum in desolation and I'll be alone and sad" (*DA* 7), and says that "the trouble with Desolation, is, no characters, alone, isolated. . . ." (*DA* 14). The solitude that makes Ray Smith happy thus turns into loneliness that breeds sadness in Jack Duluoz. While nature can soothe and invigorate the protagonist in *Desolation Angels*, solitude cannot. Hence, the novel uncovers an inherent flaw in the myth of the wilderness as it shows the unlikeliness of finding happiness in leaving behind human companionship.

Jack's disillusionment continues to grow throughout the novel and he starts to doubt the superiority of his life in the wilderness: "I sit there wondering if my own travels down the Coast to Frisco and Mexico wont be just as sad and mad—but by bejesus j Christ it'll be bettern hangin around *this* rock" (*DA* 35). He frequently yearns for the comforts and temptations of city life, daydreaming "If I were in Frisco now" (*DA* 28), sighing "I wish I had an ice cream soda and a sirloin steak!" (*DA* 39), and crying out "enough of rocks and trees and yalloping y-birds! I wanta go where there's lamps and telephones and rumpled couches with women on them, where there're rich thick rugs for toes, where the drama rages unthinking. . . ." (*DA* 69). Though the protagonist in many passages is certainly fascinated with nature, the lines quoted above shatter the idealized, mythical image of the wilderness. The first part of *Desolation Angels* deconstructs the myth by revealing its shortcomings as it points out the advantages of modern civilization and therefore the disadvantages of a solitary life in nature, making a "move from a state of romantic innocence concerning nature to a terrified and uncomfortable vision of its reality" (Phillips 56).

The final comments on the stay on Desolation Peak by the protagonists in both novels display the ambivalence of this episode with regard to the myth of the wilderness. Descending the mountain, Ray Smith glows with enthusiasm and the spirit of a new man:

> "Japhy," I said out loud, "I don't know when we'll meet again or what'll happen in the future, but Desolation, Desolation, I owe so much to Desolation, thank you forever for guiding me to the place where I learned all. Now comes the sadness of coming back to cities. . . ." Down on the lake rosy reflections of celestial vapor appeared, and I said "God, I love you" and looked up to the sky and really meant it. (*DB* 186)

Jack Duluoz, on the other hand, draws on a comparison that explains his entirely contrary feelings about solitude in the wilderness: "It is my last afternoon, I sit thinking that, wondering what prisoners have felt like on their last afternoons after 20-year imprisonments" (*DA* 70). The whole episode thus embodies a highly ambivalent stance on wilderness when *The Dharma Bums* and *Desolation Angels* are considered together.

As was shown, all three novels by Jack Kerouac discussed in this paper are strongly influenced by the myth of the wilderness in its different forms. Whereas *On the Road* is marked by a fascination for the West and its heroes but also has its protagonists indulge in the wilderness of the modern American city, *The Dharma Bums* and book one of *Desolation Angels* feature a turn to nature as the place of rebirth and enlightenment. Phillips rightly points out how

> *The Dharma Bums* was a dramatic departure from Kerouac's major work, *On The Road*, but in many ways the novel's major themes are the same as the earlier book's: a quest for freedom, a quest for the self, and a search for new (and sometimes old) alternatives in post-war America. . . . *The Dharma Bums* represents Jack Kerouac's effort to place himself in this lineage [of Whitman, Muir, and Thoreau], and to enter into one of the oldest of these "models and myths" in American literature; that of the writer's quest for meaning in the natural world. (66-67)

At first glance, Kerouac's novels are therefore prime examples for the myth of the wilderness in American literature.

Nonetheless, when analyzed in comparison, the picture gets more complicated. As described before, *On the Road* features its own moments in which the myth is undermined and exposed as merely a myth. Additionally, the happiness provided by the West and by the wilderness of the city is frequently exhausted by the protagonists to the point where they have to at least temporarily leave that kind of lifestyle behind and either return to the safe havens of traditional society or, as in *The Dharma Bums*, seek refuge and rebirth in nature. As the analysis of the first part of *Desolation Angels* revealed, however, this supposedly healing kind of wilderness does not embody the perfect idyll as promoted by its myth, either. Thus, Kerouac's relation to the myth of the wilderness in the novels examined here in a way appears as a paradox. When viewed as one successive plot starting with *On the Road*, continuing in *The Dharma Bums*, and ending with the first book of *Desolation Angels*, one can find an almost circular development: the need to get out of traditional society and go west and into the modern wilderness of the American city turns into dissatisfaction therewith, which finds an outlet in a turn to the traditional wilderness in nature, only to then transform into a renewed yearning for that same civilization the protagonists wanted to leave behind in the first place. All this time, the point of gravitation is the myth of the wilderness in one form or the other.

Kerouac's novels rely on this myth; it reverberates strongly in his fiction. Simultaneously, however, his works frequently seem to subvert the myth before they are again eaten up by it (cf. Skinazi 91; Cresswell 259-60). This ambivalence makes it difficult to assess whether Kerouac's fiction "believes, and in what sense believes, in the mythology of America on which it depends" (Richardson 218). Especially in *On the Road*, but also in *The Dharma Bums* and *Desolation Angels*, we find characters almost blindly drawn to these myths, looking and even yearning "for a place that never was" (Richardson 230), even though the novels they are part of repeatedly question the validity of these myths. Kerouac, it seems, is aware of the myth and of the fact that it is nothing but a myth

whereas his protagonists are not; aware or not, however, both author—whose sincerity is something even his strongest critics such as James Baldwin accord him (Richardson 230)—and characters finally fall prey to the myth.

To sum it up, the American myth of the wilderness is simultaneously reinforced and subverted in different forms in *On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums*, and *Desolation Angels*. Each of the novels highlights its own aspects of the myth, either supporting or unmasking it. Strikingly, despite the subversive potential of Kerouac's fiction, the myth at the end of the day always retains the upper hand. Likewise, it is no coincidence that the one book he is often reduced to—as lamented earlier by Phillips—is the one that most obviously radiates a sort of mythical aura itself. *On the Road* outshines Kerouac's other works just as the exuberant enthusiasm featured in large parts of the novel outshines the moments when it allows the reader a peek behind the curtain, a glimpse at reality and realization. As so often in American literature, the myth of the wilderness prevails. It appears as if the reporter in John Ford's classic western *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* was right in his iconic line: "This is the West, Sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

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[i] Even the notorious Harold Bloom, who "can locate no literary value whatsoever in *On the Road*" ("Introduction" 1), dedicates an issue of his Modern Critical Interpretations to the novel. He opens his introduction with the following lines: "I had not reread *On the Road* during the near half-century since its first publication, and I am not happy at encountering it again. The book has many admirers, including Thomas Pynchon, but I hardly understand what he, and others, discover in this rather drab narrative. And yet I remain fascinated by the phenomenon of Period Pieces, and by the sad truth that literary Period Pieces, unlike visual ones, in time become rubbish" (1).

[ii] For the sake of better readability, I leave out Kerouac's name when I cite his novels and only use the following abbreviations of the titles in parenthetical references: *On the Road = OtR*; *The Dharma Bums = DB*; *Desolation Angels = DA*; *Visions of Cody = VoC*.

[iii] From a psychoanalytic point of view, and in the tradition of works like Annette Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and*

Letters, this could also be read as representing the wilderness as a perceived female body that is conquered and penetrated. Later in the novel, Sal's remark that he "suddenly saw the whole country like an oyster for us to open; and the pearl was there, the pearl was there" (*OtR* 131) appears as an allusion to the vagina, with "the pearl" symbolizing the clitoris.