1995

Jack Kerouac: The Quest for Thoreau's West

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https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-hyr5-kr04

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JACK KEROUAC: THE QUEST FOR THOREAU'S WEST

A Thesis
Presented To
The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by Malcolm Lester
1995
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Approved, May 1995
Arthur Knight
Richard Lowry
Walter Wenska
DEDICATION

To Dr. Edward J. Sims - "Mens sana in corpore sano"
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks Allen Ginsberg and his personal secretary, Jacqueline Gens, for their correspondence and assistance with this project.

Gratitude is also bestowed upon Joy Walsh, editor of the Kerouac magazine Moody Street Irregulars; Christine Kravitz, founder of the Jack Kerouac Hotline; Mike D'Orso, author of the Sports Illustrated article "Saturday's Hero: A Beat," which provided the inspiration; and Springfield College professor Edward J. Sims, for consultation and sources.

Further appreciation is given to former William and Mary professor Scott Donaldson, who provided invaluable sources, including his critical edition of On The Road, and helped generate ideas in the genesis of the study. I am deeply grateful to the readers of this thesis: Arthur Knight; Walt Wenska, whose instruction in literary scholarship helped in developing themes and enhancing the scope of the paper; and advisor Rich Lowry, whose enthusiasm, support, criticism and close reading were highly beneficial and remain much appreciated.

A sizable thank you to Bonnie Chandler as well, for assistance and support.
ABSTRACT

Jack Kerouac was influenced by the works of Henry David Thoreau from a young age. This influence manifested itself in many areas of Kerouac's prose, perhaps most vividly in his portrayal of the West. Kerouac sought to recreate Thoreau's romantic, pristine western America, and he devoted many of his early works, especially On The Road, to fulfilling Thoreau's vision of a land of liberation and freedom in which man, buttressed by the West's natural resources, could achieve the consummate transcendent moment. After writing novels in which he implemented Thoreau's prescription for living, Kerouac found difficulty shaping the paradigm to fit 20th century life, mainly because Thoreau wrote of a metaphoric West whereby Kerouac's 1950s West had become geographic.

Holding to their grandiose Thoreauvian views, Kerouac's characters came face to face with the geographic West of expansion and industrialization. Kerouac gradually saw that some of Thoreau's theories had been eroded by time. Discarding certain Thoreauvian western dogma, Kerouac found merit in Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 claim that the frontier was exhausted, yet felt that this, too, was not entirely valid—or perhaps did not want to believe it was valid. In subsequent works Kerouac attempted to reconcile—not without difficulty—Thoreau's imaginative West with Turner's closed West, trying to locate and plausibly portray a land where transcendence could be attained by his characters. He ultimately created a contemporary West in which characters strive for epiphanies, but are frequently stifled by cities, man, and themselves. Transcendence, as Kerouac sees it in the 20th century West, is rare—and, when achieved, ephemeral.
JACK KEROUAC; THE QUEST FOR THOREAU'S WEST

Fly, scatter through the country, go to the Great West, anything rather than remain here - Horace Greeley

*  *  *

West is a country in the mind, and so eternal - Archibald MacLeish
INTRODUCTION

The West figures prominently in the works of Jack Kerouac, both as the site where most of the action occurs and as the "Promised Land" that the characters strive to reach. Kerouac's most famous novel, On The Road, delineates three cross-country trips from East to West. The Dharma Bums chronicles the adventures of two men who venture off in the Western woods in search of spiritual enlightenment via Zen Buddhism. Other works, such as Lonesome Traveler, Desolation Angels, and Big Sur, occur almost entirely in the West--usually California, Washington, or Colorado--with the narrator purposefully isolating himself in nature and repudiating mainstream civilization. For Kerouac's characters, the West serves as a land of opportunity and excitement and functions as the antithesis of the chaotic, urban East.

Henry David Thoreau also explored the West in his prose, using Western expansion as a backdrop for his critique of modern society. Because Thoreau believed that nature was the gateway to the spiritual world, the abundant, uncultivated land of the West held special significance to him. He believed the West to be the ideal place for transcendence, and he encouraged man to travel Westward--or
at least to make the symbolic, imaginative trek there.

Thoreau's argument for the West centered around two tenets: first, as he wrote in an 1856 letter, the West's resources provided man with significant "intellectual value" (Paul, The Shores of America 415); and second, as Roderick Nash notes, Thoreau believed the West's "wildness was the source of vigor, inspiration, and strength" (Nash 88).

Thoreau and Kerouac exhibit many commonalities in their prose vis-a-vis the West. They feel the West is the ideal environment for isolation and the appreciation of nature, both of which are necessary for transcendence--defined as intellectual and spiritual enlightenment. Kerouac's frequent references to "beatness," "beatific" and "beatitude" are extensions, or renamings, of transcendence. Both authors also used their (or their characters') retreat to nature as an opportunity to criticize urban society, while at the same time advocating the tenuous balance between exposure to wilderness and civilization.

Kerouac undoubtedly adopts some of Thoreau's themes and imitates him; however, Kerouac struggles with depicting a Thoreauvian West in a post-frontier world. Thus he is forced to rewrite Thoreau's West even as he puts many of Thoreau's pleas and edicts into action. Thoreau outlines a Westward road that will lead man to transcendence; Kerouac tries to find this road but realizes that the road is closed--echoing Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 claim that the frontier is
closed-- and that Thoreau's West is a construct of the past. Kerouac ultimately has to create his own road and restructure the West that Thoreau imagined.
CHAPTER I
KEROUAC: LITERARY INFLUENCES AND WESTERN PROCLIVITIES

In writing about the West, Kerouac was influenced by literature that became popular as Westward movement blossomed in the mid-1800s. Western themes were evident in the 19th century works of American writers such as James Fenimore Cooper, Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, Bret Harte, Walt Whitman, and Jack London (Taylor 8). Kerouac read most of these authors in his youth and was particularly enchanted with London (Lonesome Traveler v). But it was Thoreau who had the greatest impact on Kerouac's vision.

Just prior to enrolling at Columbia in 1940, Kerouac delved into the works of Thoreau for the first time and was fascinated by Thoreau's individualism, need for solitude, and detachment from society (Dardess 279). The exposure to Thoreau caused Kerouac to consider abandoning his football scholarship and college education and "living in the woods like Thoreau" in his hometown of Lowell, Massachusetts, less than 20 miles from Thoreau's Concord (Nicosia 75). Although his parents dissuaded him from hermitage, this would not be the last time Kerouac fantasized about adopting a Thoreauvian lifestyle. Until his death in 1969 at age 47, Kerouac frequently spoke and wrote about living like Thoreau by
isolating himself outdoors and becoming "a hermit in the mountains" (Johnson 114). Although he made occasional forays into the woods, these excursions were brief, and Kerouac failed to achieve the same peace in the wilderness that Thoreau claimed to. Yet he never abandoned his desire to "live life close to the bone" (Nicosia 421) and to become a "modern-day Thoreau" (Charters 113).

As a novelist, Kerouac often returned to the works of Thoreau for inspiration and philosophy, and the 19th-century author had an indelible effect on Kerouac (Charters 200). John Tytell points out that Kerouac and many of the Beat writers felt a kinship with Thoreau, finding a "spiritual ancestor" in Thoreau's "aggressive idealism, his essentially conservative distrust of machines and industry, his desire to return to the origins of man's relations to the land" (Tytell 314).

Some of Kerouac's works refer directly to Thoreau. His first novel, The Town and the City, features young Peter Martin, who goes on "long solitary walks through the woods with his copy of Thoreau in his back pocket" (p. 130). Scott Donaldson notes that Kerouac's second novel, On The Road, "calls for much the same kind of nonconformism advocated by Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman" (Donaldson xii). Thoreau introduced Kerouac to Zen Buddhism, which shaped The Dharma Bums (White 92). Thoreau's exploration of man's need for isolation in nature became a recurring theme in Kerouac's
writing, and in many novels Kerouac sought to recreate the view of nature and the West Thoreau depicted in Walden and "Walking." Kerouac and other Beat writers "in ways both actual and symbolic reopened the territory" of the West, a territory which Thoreau helped "open" 100 years earlier (Taylor 336).
CHAPTER II

THOREAU: WESTERN CURIOSITY IN A PROVINCIAL AMERICA

Henry David Thoreau fantasized about journeying West as much as Kerouac dreamed about emulating Thoreau's solitude. In an 1838 letter to his brother John, the 21-year old Thoreau, a recent graduate of Harvard, suggested they hitch on their knapsacks and "start in company for the West" in search of teaching positions (Lebeaux 76). But they never made the trip, choosing instead to stay home and teach at a Massachusetts private school. Until his death in 1862 at the age of 45, Thoreau longed to travel West but stayed East because of a strong attachment to his mother and his Massachusetts homeland, travelling only once as far West as Minnesota, one year before his death (Blair 341). Thoreau, however, advocated westward migration for others, and personally opted for the figurative and creative journey West, writing in his journal, "Let us migrate interiorly without intermission, and pitch our tents each day nearer the western horizon" (Lebeaux 106). Themes such as national expansion and transcendence in the open West occupied Thoreau and his writing until his death.

Thoreau believed the West provided the best environment for transcendence, and that Americans needed to utilize the
West's resources. He felt it was not simply enough for one to exist in nature, but, in accordance with Emerson's primary consideration for the American scholar's life, one had to establish a relationship with nature (Emerson 260). The communion with the wilderness would allow one to discover self-truths and communicate with the divine. Emerson and Thoreau viewed transcendence as elevating oneself above one's imperfect, unsatisfactory situation in life through awareness of an ideal state of being. They felt this ideal state was reflected most perfectly by nature and that after solitary immersion in the natural world, man would try to mirror nature's perfect state and thereby achieve transcendence (Scholnick). Thoreau develops the concept of communion with nature in Walden and stresses the need for man to be alone in the wilderness:

...I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object, even for the poor misanthrope and most melancholy man. There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of nature and has his senses still (p. 88).

While Thoreau experienced his "innocent and encouraging society" only in the East, he believed an even more sublime experience was feasible in the West.

This view of the West as a catalyst for transcendence was a singular one in the 1840s and 50s. Thoreau was one of
the first Americans to associate positive values with the wilderness, as Nash notes in Wilderness and the American Mind (Nash 86). Until the 1800s, the West and wilderness were primarily seen as "repugnant" and a "threat to man's survival"—an offshoot of the Puritan belief that a "frightening gulf existed between civilization and wildness" (Nash 23, 24, 40). The prevailing belief in Thoreau's day was that the more man travelled into the wilderness, the less civilized he became (Nash 30). Thoreau, however, preached that instead of remaining at home or in the city, man should travel into the wilderness, not as a means of escape, but in order to revitalize himself. He presented the atypical view that nature ameliorated man's civility because it improved his mental and spiritual state. He writes in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers: "Our lives need the relief of [the wilderness] where the pine flourishes and the jay still screams" (Week, Writings, I, 223). Thoreau's ideal man was one who exhibited a "perfect correspondence with nature" while maintaining an equilibrium with civilization (Harding 144).

While Thoreau advocated the migration and "Movement" westward, he opposed the vast destruction of trees and land, arguing that Americans needed to maintain "a certain sample of wild nature, a certain primitiveness" (Journal, XIV, 306). Thoreau's apparent contradiction—encouraging people to venture Westward while simultaneously advocating the
preservation of land—led many to oppose and misconstrue his views. Thoreau's essays and journal entries reveal that he had an undeniable affinity for the West. However, at least one critic, Van Wyck Brooks, felt that Thoreau viewed Western migration as "foolish" when a plethora of pristine land existed in New England (Brooks 379). What is often overlooked is that Thoreau supported those who went West to explore, but opposed those who went for commercial purposes. For example, Robert J. Schneider maintains that Thoreau deplored the Gold Rushers, because they exhibited "the grossest abuse of nature itself" in order "to satisfy the greed at the core of their own being" (Schneider 134).

Because Thoreau expressed contradictory—and unique—views and did not reconcile them, he was met with a sometimes caustic public. Critics wondered how Thoreau could encourage both Westward expansion and Westward preservation. Later in the century, however, John Muir and Frederick Jackson Turner recapitualated some of Thoreau's tenets dealing with the West and Westward migration and found a more receptive public (Nash 94).
CHAPTER III
"WALKING": AN APOTHEOSIS OF THE WEST

Thoreau's essay "Walking" most clearly delineates his romantic view of the West. The amount of time he spent rewriting the essay indicates his fascination with the region. He first presented the essay as a lecture entitled "The Wild" in 1851 (Nash 84) and revised it numerous times, including just before his death in 1862 (McIntosh 90). Thoreau's essay depicts the West as a budding, magnetic land where man can achieve his communion with the natural world (McIntosh 214). Thoreau criticizes man's ostensible ignorance of nature and urges him to realign himself with his surroundings.

Thoreau, in portraying the West as free and uninhibited and the East as crowded and stifling, proclaims the West as a territory of "absolute freedom and wildness," positing that "The West of which I speak is but another name for the wild" (p. 534). Thoreau suggests that the West is the land of the future, where nature roams undesecrated by industrialization, in contrast to the congested "jungles of the East" (p. 540). Because of mass industrialization and over-population in the East, Thoreau argues that man has lost sight of nature, having become dependent on machines and other people. He
posits that people do not know how to function in their natural environs and therefore fail to appreciate the wild: "While almost all men feel an attraction drawing them to society, few are attracted strongly to Nature...How little appreciation of the beauty of the landscape there is among us!" (p. 548).

Thoreau argues that man can reestablish his lost kinship with nature in the West, portraying the area as the necessary realm for mental and spiritual enlightenment. Far removed from the banalities of industrialization, the western wilderness induces and encourages man to look outward, at his surroundings, and then inward, at his self. As Walter Harding and Michael Meyer note, "Thoreau kept his eye on the woods as a means of intensifying his experiences" (Harding 144). Thoreau's West in "Walking" is pure, with land that "seems more unexhausted and richer," allowing for new observations and discoveries (p. 528). Like the Western frontier, man's capabilities there are seemingly boundless:

I trust that [in the West] we shall be more imaginative, that our thoughts will be clearer, fresher, and more ethereal, as our sky--our understanding more comprehensive and broader, like our plains--our intellect generally on a grander scale, like our thunder and lightning, our rivers and mountains and forests...(p. 533)

It is crucial to note that Thoreau "trusted," rather than knew, the qualities of the West. Never having ventured West,
Thoreau relied on many of the same imaginative notions that Kerouac did before he first travelled West. Despite his unfamiliarity with the West, Thoreau felt the West's natural resources, which he called "the raw material of life," would create heightened imagination and intellectuality (p. 536). These resources collectively serve to lift and rejuvenate man: "There is something in the mountain air that feeds the spirit and inspires. Will not man grow to greater perfection intellectually as well as physically under these influences?" (p. 532-3).

While proponents for Westward expansion espoused the West's material resources, Thoreau extolled the area for the limitless spiritual resources it could provide to its explorers and inhabitants. He writes in "Walking," "Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps" (p. 536). The author saw the move West as the "way the nation is moving, and I may say that mankind progresses from east to west" (p. 529). Man travels West because he is controlled by an ineffable force, a "subtle magnetism in Nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright" (p. 527-8). Thoreau leaves no doubt to where the magnetic pull leads, noting that he himself feels the force: "I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe" (p. 527-8). Some have taken that and other related statements pertaining to the West to be figurative; however, Emerson, in
his obituary of Thoreau, argued that his peer had a sincere affinity for the region: "What he sought was the most energetic nature; and he wished to go to Oregon, not to London" (Emerson, "Thoreau" 270).

"Walking," according to Sherman Paul, details Thoreau's search "for a road where he could travel" (Paul, "Resolution at Walden" 339). Paul's wording is interesting: what could be more unnatural than Thoreau wanting a "road" amidst the wilderness? Despite Thoreau's contradictions, he made the West so appealing that Kerouac's Sal Paradise would search for that road nearly 100 years after Thoreau wrote "Walking."

In between, though, one historian argued that the road was closed, just decades after Thoreau's ebullient assertion that the West was "unexhausted" ("Walking" 528).
CHAPTER IV

FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER: THE CLOSING OF THE FRONTIER

In his 1893 essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History"—which Kenneth Knodt calls "the most important statement about the importance of the frontier"—Frederick Jackson Turner echoed Thoreau by stating that the movement West, to the "edge of free land," was the dominant issue in America (Knodt 196):

This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the great West... (Turner 7).

Turner's views were similar to Thoreau's on various levels. Writing at a time when Westward expansion had risen meteorically, Turner developed Thoreau's predictions and suppositions. Whereas Thoreau had written that the West had the potential to change Americans, Turner felt that this Western frontier had indeed shaped the American "character"—and as proof, he pointed to the plethora of Americans who had migrated West. Just as Thoreau's "Walking" outlined the West's potential for affecting man intellectually and
spiritually, Turner described the region's actual impact:

To the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind...that masterful grasp of material things...that restless nervous energy, that dominant individualism...these are the traits of the frontier...(Blair 156)

While Turner agreed with Thoreau and felt that the frontier was "a fertile field for investigation" and that it encouraged Americans to become more independent, he also felt there were many "problems" associated with the West (Turner 196). The primary problem, quite simply, was that the movement westward had filled up the land. Turner used as evidence the 1890 U.S. census report, which warned that previously uncultivated land was now densely populated. According to the report:

Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line (Turner 195).

Turner sided with the report and concluded that "the great supply of free lands which year after year has served to reinforce the democratic influences in the United States is exhausted" (Turner 197). According to Turner, the "wild" West that existed in Thoreau's day was permanently gone. Westward migration had destroyed the wilderness, the very
resource that Thoreau and Turner valued for shaping character and (for Turner) democracy.

The literal closing of the frontier led Turner to denounce the sense of possibility that Thoreau located in the West. Turner's essay took Thoreau's metaphorical evocation of a real West and altered it, marking a historical dividing line that separated Thoreau and 20th century authors. Turner's historical revision challenged modern writers like Kerouac to find another meaning for the West and to reconcile Thoreau's West of freedom and individual liberation with the West of the 1900s. Should Kerouac subscribe to Thoreau's glorified, quixotic view of the West or to Turner's realistic assessment? Kerouac vacillated between both points of view throughout his life. It was not until his final book on the West, Big Sur, that he branched from his two predecessors and created his own view.
CHAPTER V

ON THE ROAD: In Search of Transcendence

On The Road's narrator, Sal Paradise, is pulled from his New York base by a force beckoning him to Colorado and beyond. Paradise was not the first of Kerouac's characters to feel the Western "impulse," like Thoreau. The Town and the City's Joey Martin longs to break from his blue-collar New England town, pleading, "Out West, Pa! - I'd like to tear out to California and see what kind of work they got there!" (p. 93). He romanticizes the metaphoric West for its unknown qualities and job possibilities and ends up hitchhiking there. According to Thoreauvian doctrine, Joey Martin, like the Gold Rushers, goes West for the wrong reasons--for employment. It is no surprise then that he returns months later, disappointed and disenchanted. With Sal Paradise (a thinly-disguised Kerouac), Kerouac presents another character who longs to travel West, not for employment, but for more visionary reasons: Sal is in search of the transcendent, ineffable "It"--though he is unsure what "It" is.

Sal Paradise's journeys and romanticism of the West are manifestations of Thoreau's "Walking," with Sal believing in the same Western possibilities Thoreau discussed. Even Sal's last name--Paradise--serves as a metaphor for what he
believes the West to be. Sal exhibits numerous characteristics that Thoreau correlates with the West: he has the western "impulse" and he ventures West with a "spirit of adventure and enterprise" ("Walking" 531, 529). Sal travels in search of "kicks" and "It"—his versions of transcendence—and attains brief moments of enlightenment, but his trips and romantic visions collapse for three reasons: one, he makes no sincere, lengthy attempt at experiencing the mental and spiritual growth that Thoreau outlines, expecting "It" to come to him naturally; two, he doesn't spend time alone, as Thoreau advocates; three, Sal comes face-to-face with Thoreau's West and finds that it is entirely different from the West that he had imagined and that Thoreau had portrayed.

From the onset of the book, Kerouac echoes Thoreau in depicting Sal as drawn to no specific geographic area but intrigued by the whole image of the West. The West that Sal knows is figurative; on his trip, he mentally transforms the people he meets so they fit his Western ideal. Sal's West consists of characters like Dean Moriarty, whom Sal, influenced by movies and mass media in his vision of the West, glorifies as a "young Gene Autry -- trim, thin-hipped, blue-eyed, with a real Oklahoma accent -- a sideburned hero of the snowy West" (p. 6). Dean's "Western" allure and Sal's impatience with the civilized East serve as driving forces which propel Sal West. Much like the pioneers and Gold Rushers of the 1800s, who headed West unsure but ambitious,
Sal leaves New Jersey. But whereas the Gold Rushers sojourned for economic gain, Sal leaves for some of the reasons Thoreau advocated: enlightenment and mental and spiritual advancement. He has no idea where he's going—or how he's going to get there—but the Western impulse forces him to move: "I could hear a new call and see a new horizon" (p. 11).

Sal and Thoreau both venture West in the same instinctive fashion, with Thoreau's journey being metaphorical and Sal's literal. Thoreau writes in "Walking": "I turn round and round irresolute sometimes for a quarter of an hour, until I decide, for a thousandth time, that I will walk into the southwest or west. Eastward I go only by force; but Westward I go free" (p. 528). Sal, meanwhile, focuses on the West of cowboys, bandits, and saloons. Orm Overland notes that Sal's territory is a "place...of the mind, a construct of the imagination fed by images of the West accumulated from the beginnings of American history" (Overland 452). Just as Thoreau encouraged man to traverse untouched land, it seems that Sal, too, wants to cross pristine terrain. What he does not realize until the end of his journey is that, as Turner asserted, virginal territory is extinct.

Sal's first journey illustrates his romanticization of the West and his inability to separate the metaphorical from the real. Sal's solo pilgrimage occurs in the spring, a time
of rebirth; he exhibits his naivete and blind Western enthusiasm when he attempts to hitchhike across the country on one road, Route 6:

...On the map was one long red line called Route 6 that led from the tip of Cape Cod clear to Ely, Nevada, and there dipped down to Los Angeles. I'll just stay on 6 all the way to Ely, I said to myself and confidently started (p. 12).

After ending up muddy and lost a few hours later because of convoluted, rural Route 6, Sal realizes that "It was my dream that screwed up, the stupid hearthside idea that it would be wonderful to follow one great red line across America instead of trying various roads and routes" (p. 13). During his trip—which takes place on the back of flatbed pick-up trucks and in the cab of tractor-trailers--Sal glorifies anything even remotely Western, his euphoria rising the further he gets across the country:

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 (p. 15-16).

This West that Sal describes is not the West of "wilderness," but the West of cowboys and pop culture. For Sal, the West only occasionally becomes the beautiful "wild" which elevates man; more frequently, it is the wildness of individuals which Sal associates with the West. Accordingly, he searches not
for nature, but for hedonistic highs.

Kerouac shows Sal traversing a land that is not liberated and free, as Thoreau depicted, but one that is populated and settled. Expansion and commercialism served to threaten the integrity of the metaphorical, idealized West. However, despite the historical changes, Sal adheres to his imaginative conception. In a sense, Thoreau prophesied—and some would say caused—Sal's dilemma by being such a booster for the West: he urged for expansion, yet wanted to maintain the wilderness. He told people to travel West, yet didn't want to ruin the land. Thoreau wanted to keep the symbolic value of western wildness from being contaminated, but he helped taint it with his incipient boosterism. Kerouac sensed this contradiction in Thoreau and through Sal shows that there is no way to reconcile the figurative West with the literal.

Sal's West is clearly mapped out for him in a way that Thoreau's never was, a sign of how developed and settled the region has become. As a result of this delineation, Sal pays keen attention to locale, always aware of his position on the map. For example, upon reaching Iowa, Sal comments, "I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future..." (p. 16). The West still remains an area of limitless possibility for Sal, who sticks to his Thoreauvian vision of the West despite facing the historical revisions that Turner detailed:
How that truck disposed of the Nebraska nub - the nub that sticks out over Colorado! And soon I realized I was actually at last over Colorado, though not officially in it, but looking southwest toward Denver itself a few hundred miles away. I yelled for joy. We passed the bottle. The great blazing stars came out, the far-receding sand hills got dim. I felt like an arrow that could shoot out all the way (p. 25).

Rather than abandoning his idealism as he travels West, Sal clings to his preconceived notions. Instead of abandoning the vision once he finds that the reality contradicts the illusion, Sal continues living in a fantasy land. For example, Sal turns momentarily disconsolate at finding the West more congested and chaotic than he imagined, yet he returns again...and again. In short, his experiences in the real West have little bearing on his mythic West, and he attempts to shape his experiences to fit the myth. For example, when Sal sees impoverished "Negroes" in Denver, walking aimlessly through the streets, he canonizes them, solely because they live in the West:

I walked...in the Denver colored section, wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music...I was only myself, Sal Paradise, sad, strolling in this violet dark, this unbearably sweet night, wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America (p. 148-9).

Gerard W. Waslam notes that Kerouac had a "vision of a
harmonious multi-racial society in the West"; interestingly, Thoreau also possessed a similarly grandiose view about the West's Native Americans (Lebaux 191). Sal clearly has been infused with the same idealism, believing that anything associated with the West is harmonious and carefree (Taylor 1017). When Sal runs across people and events that do not meet his Western expectations, he alters the reality, as with the "Negroes," to fit his vision.

Ann Charter notes that Kerouac "wrote with the same theme of idealism as Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman, reasserting the American dream of romantic individualism..." (Charters, "Jack Kerouac" 256). Yet Kerouac created characters who sought an unattainable Emersonian, Thoreauvian world. Sal, according to Nina Baym, has been influenced by Thoreau and others into believing his "myth of America" and subsequently finds himself on "an avowedly hopeless quest for unencumbered space" (Baym 1152). The myth, she maintains, suggests "that in this new land, untrammeled by history and social accident, a person will be able to achieve complete self-definition" (Baym 1152). But Sal fails to achieve "complete self-definition" (i.e. transcendence) on his quest primarily because he chases an illusion, that of the free, wide-open West.

A related reason why Sal does not achieve transcendence on this journey is that he does not stay in the wilderness, but rather travels towards cities. His goal at the beginning
is to reach Denver (p. 31), which is soon supplanted by San Francisco (p. 50). In the city, however, Sal becomes bored and displaced. Mike D'Orso maintains that one of Kerouac's main themes "is that man suffers when he loses contact with the pulse of nature" (D'Orso 9-10). Kerouac develops this trope through Sal, who occasionally communes with nature (or at least is aware of it) during his journey, but loses his grasp of the wilderness upon reaching friends in Colorado and California. As Emerson and Thoreau explained, isolation in nature is a significant part of the creative, transcendental process. Sal does not have enough solitary time for this metamorphosis to occur. After spending time in the city, he becomes disenchanted with the West and has to leave "or I'd go crazy" (p. 62). At the end of the journey, Sal laments, "Here I was at the end of America - no more land - and now there was nowhere to go but back" (p. 66). Sal discerns that his dream of the mystical West will never be realized, in part because cities pop up everywhere, but also because he learns that his original Western hero, Dean Moriarty, is not the mythic, heroic character he initially believed him to be. Once Sal realizes that his expectations cannot be met, the journey ends.

Sal's trip back East illustrates Kerouac's (and Thoreau's) belief that isolation is necessary to appreciate and commune with nature. Alone on a bus en route to Bakersfield, Sal soaks up the beauty: "Soon it got dusk, a
grapy dusk, a purple dusk over tangerine groves and long melon fields; the sun the color of pressed grapes, slashed and burgundy red, the fields the color of love and Spanish mysteries" (p. 67-8). However, these moments of contemplation and communion with nature are all too rare during Sal's trip, and he is unable to uncover self-truths and develop fully. As a result, he becomes disillusioned with the West, his friends, and himself, and returns home depressed.

On the same journey back East, Sal makes one of many references to his breathing process. On numerous occasions, Sal, in surveying his surroundings, becomes so ecstatic that he seemingly chokes, which seems to be a clever parody of Thoreau, who "wanted more than contact with nature, he wanted the deepest immersion" (Matthiessen 88). In "Walking," Thoreau writes that those who enter the city often become "oppressed" and "suffocated," and end up saying that "the air seemed to fail us, and we felt every moment as if about to die of asphyxia" (p. 537). Sal echoes those words. In the city--or near it--his breathing is frantic and frenetic. In the country, appreciating his environs, he still gulps air, but does so peacefully. For example, while soaking up the fields, dusk, and sun on the way to Bakersfield, Sal remarks, "I stuck my head out the window and took deep breaths of fragrant air. It was the most beautiful of moments" (p. 68). Kerouac depicts Sal as desperate for the air of inspiration,
but unable to find it and therefore ending up short on respiration. It is as if Sal attempts to imitate Thoreau and "live deep and suck out all the marrow of life" but fails—almost comically so (Walden 61). This scenario recurs often.

The second Westward journey occurs when "the bug was on me again" and Sal sets off with high hopes and grand visions (p. 96). The primary lesson of the first trip—that the frontier is closed—has left Sal, and his memory convinces him that the first journey was blissful. Desperate to repeat the highs of the first sojourn, Sal leaves for the excitement of "one more magnificent trip to the West Coast" (p. 107). While Sal was alone for much of his first trip, allowing for an awareness of nature, his second trip takes place with Dean Moriarty. The two place more emphasis on picking up hitchhikers and "making" women than on growth or transcendence. There are few moments of reflection, awareness of nature, and revelation.

With Dean, Sal is unable to uncover America or his inner being. Instead of going West to find himself, Sal appears to use the journey as an escape. While Thoreau urged man to go away, he differentiated between "escapism and transcendence" (Harding 144) and wrote that one should travel outwardly in order to grow inwardly: "Think of the consummate folly of attempting to get away from here! When the constant endeavor should be to get nearer and nearer here" (Journal, XI, 275). Sal sadly realizes his mistake in not adventuring
alone at the end of his trip: "What I accomplished by coming to Frisco I don't know...It was the end; I wanted to get out" (p. 147).

The second trip illustrates Sal's main obstacle to finding peace in the West: he fails to isolate himself. The first trip stumbled primarily because Sal was living in the metaphorical West, and his visions failed to live up to the geographic reality. During the second trip, he has essentially abandoned his metaphoric vision, yet he fails to sequester himself. Sal entangles himself with too many people and abandons his original plans of utilizing the West for relaxation and enlightenment. He then sees the area not for its beauty or what it can potentially add to his "character," but for its maddening effect on him: "What was I, a stranger, doing on the West Coast this fair night? I recoiled from the thought" (p. 161). Sal realizes that with Dean, his trip is a waste, and sublime moments like the Bakersfield bus ride are impossible:

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I hated to leave; my stay had lasted sixty-odd hours. With frantic Dean I was rushing through the world without a chance to see it. In the afternoon we were buzzing toward Sacramento and eastward again (p. 170).
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While Sal undoubtedly has many joyous moments during his three cross-country trips, they are short-lived. He becomes more melancholy and pessimistic with each journey. Had Sal
travelled alone and remained in isolation, his chances of finding mental and spiritual fulfillment—and not just physical highs—would have improved. He fails to do this in any of his three western trips (his third trip is as stilted as the second) and gets more distraught and disillusioned with each trip until what was once the grand, romantic West to Sal eventually becomes no greater than the East Coast. Sal's Western disillusionment eventually creates a complete retrogression of his character: in his third trip, he apotheosizes the East, with New York—not San Francisco or Denver—being "the great and final city of America" (p. 203).

Given Turner's prognosis, Sal's "findings" are no surprise. Because the West of which he dreamt went the way of the horse and buggy, it is difficult for him to acquire the necessary isolation for enlightenment and solitude. Kerouac's later characters (and Kerouac himself) work at trying to find a suitable West, a tenable environment for transcendence that recognize the realities of twentieth-century life rather than merely embrace movie illusions and cliches. Sal, however, finds a West that "offers him no home" because he doesn't commune with it and never fully meshes Thoreau's frontier with Turner's (Hunt, Kerouac's Crooked Road 58). Even in a crowded, settled West, it would be possible for Sal to create some isolation and appreciation of nature. But since Sal is so preoccupied with "restless movement," his cognizance of his surroundings is limited and
he does not attempt to imitate nature's perfection (Blair 257). No growth or advancement occurs for Sal and he ends each journey demoralized.

While Sal went awry largely because he adhered to outdated Thoreauvian dogma regarding the West, he could have benefitted from Thoreau's counsel pertaining to traveling. Thoreau writes in "Walking" that he uses his walks, his road time, to align himself with nature, and warns against traveling too fast down the roads:

Roads are made for horses and men of business. I do not travel in them much, comparatively because I am not in a hurry to get to any tavern or grocery or livery-stable to which they lead (p. 525).

By Sal's time roads are used by more than "horses and men of business;" he nevertheless does not heed the message to use the roads as a gateway to spiritual pleasure and advancement. During his trips, fleeting moments of enlightenment take place, but they dissipate and vanish like Sal and Dean zipping down Route 66.
Kerouac's autobiographical story "Alone on a Mountaintop," one of eight "traveling" narratives which comprise Lonesome Traveler (1960), builds upon Sal's search for peace in the West. The story comes three years after On The Road, and Kerouac develops some of the themes presented in that novel. Kerouac mirrors Walden and illustrates how isolation in nature can bolster an individual. At the same time that Kerouac supports Thoreau's view of the "wild" West, he also adheres to Turner's belief that the frontier is closed. He bridges these antithetical paradigms by positing that man has to carve his own frontier, that there are isolated pockets of unexhausted territory. Much like Thoreau, who presented his plan for action in "Walking" and lived it out in Walden, Kerouac attempted westward transcendence in On The Road, failed, and corrected the formula by undergoing a western-induced revelation in "Alone On A Mountaintop."

The place of Kerouac's transcendence is Washington state: he gets a summer job near Seattle as a fire lookout in the Cascade Mountains. His reasons for isolation are twofold--he wants to escape the harried East, and realizes the best place to simplify his life is the West:
...I came to the point where I needed solitude and just stop the machine of 'thinking' and 'enjoying' what they call 'living,' I just wanted to live in the grass and look at the clouds -

They say, too, in ancient scripture: - 'Wisdom can only be obtained from the viewpoint of solitude.'

And anyway I was sick and tired of all the ships and railroads and Times Squares of all time - (p. 118).

In a letter to Carolyn Cassady, Kerouac was even more enthusiastic about the prospect of spending 63 days atop the mountain:

O boy, O boy, O here I go, I got the offer for the job watching fires on top of the mountains in the Cascade country in Northwest...and I told the Forest Ranger I hoped he'd take me back next year, and the next, and all my life. It will be my life work, in my hut there... (Cassady 279).

According to Kerouac companion Joyce Johnson, whose memoir Minor Characters details her relationship with the Beat writer, the setting was ideal for Kerouac: "...On Desolation Peak, there was the great unpeopled silence of nature; the city was behind him. Only wilderness to fill his vision" (Johnson 113). Furthermore, Kerouac saw himself—instead of a character he created—living out Thoreau's prescription for living. In "Walking," Thoreau urges man to rise above simply living on the land: "We hug the earth - how rarely we
mount! Methinks we might elevate ourselves a little more. We might climb a tree, at least" (p. 551). One could argue that Thoreau's plea for man to "elevate" himself could be figurative and that he is beseeching man to elevate his mind; Kerouac nevertheless follows Thoreau's wishes by elevating himself above a 6,000-foot mountain.

Kerouac evolves past the stage of Sal Paradise. While Sal realizes that isolation is necessary for him to enjoy the West, he never makes the step toward it. Kerouac, on the other hand, recognizes his need for isolation and acts accordingly: "I was looking forward to an experience men seldom earn in this modern world: complete and comfortable solitude in the wilderness, day and night..." (p. 121-2). Sal travels West expecting ready-made "paradises" to abound everywhere and finds there are none; Kerouac realizes that in the overpopulated West he must create his haven and thus selects his location.

Kerouac's foray is successful because he strips his life to the bare essence of existence. His life atop the mountain is purposefully simplistic: he eats, looks for fires, and sleeps. These actions parallel Thoreau, who wrote in Walden:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, to discover that I had not lived (p. 61).
Thoreau admonishes extravagence and superfluities: "Our life is frittered away by detail...simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!" (Walden 61). Kerouac accordingly grows his own food, feeds the surrounding animals, and prospers with nominal possessions. The experience in the Western wilderness, as Thoreau and Turner had predicted, bolsters Kerouac and builds his "character" by imbuing him with independence, stimulation, and heightened self-awareness. Furthermore, he comprehends the worth of his exile and sounds Thoreauvian in deeming his plan as the plan for living: "No man should go through life without once experiencing healthy, even bored solitude in the wilderness, finding himself depending solely on himself and thereby learning his true and hidden strength" (p. 128).

Kerouac stays at Desolation Peak for the full nine weeks, conversing with the objects around him, and communing with the land. He focuses deeply on his surroundings and becomes uplifted by their beauty:

Sixty-three sunsets I saw revolve on
that perpendicular hill - mad raging
sunsets pouring in sea foams of cloud...
with every rose-tint of hope beyond,
making you feel just like them,
brilliant and bleak beyond words (p. 129).

Nature communicates back to him and allows Kerouac to look inwardly: "I just lay on the mountain meadowside in the moonlight, head to grass, and heard the silent recognition of my temporary woes" (p. 132). By observing, appreciating, and
acquiescing to nature, Kerouac reaches a peace that Sal could not find in On The Road. Sal headed cross-country to escape the pressures of the East and to receive Western "kicks." However, with no master plan as to how he was going to find "It" in the West, Sal found that his pressures and worries were exacerbated once he reached that region. Kerouac, though, has more aim in "Alone on a Mountaintop" and uses his trip for escape as well as for reflection. Being alone on the mountain, according to friend Johnson, helped him

...to grapple once and for all with the sense of mortality that overwhelmed him periodically, the awful knowledge we're-all-gonna-die which could not be corded out by movement or sex or wine or the frantic conviviality of poets and intellectuals in cities (Johnson 112).

Before long, Kerouac's solitude, coupled with the beauty of nature, inspire him to mirror in his behavior and disposition what he sees everyday:

I was amazed and overjoyed to see a clear blue sunny sky and down below, like a radiant pure snow sea, the clouds making a marshmallow cover for all the world and all the lake while I abided in warm sunshine among hundreds of miles of snow-white peaks. - I brewed coffee and sang...(p. 126)

Nature's radiance is matched by Kerouac's ebullience, and the author portrays himself gradually getting cleansed--mentally, physically, and spiritually--by his surroundings and awareness of them.
The result of Kerouac's isolation, simple living, and observation of nature is paradoxical: it causes him to conclude that he doesn't need isolation. He resolves that solitude is a state of mind which he is capable of experiencing at any venue: "And I realize that no matter where I am, whether in a little room full of thought, or in this endless universe of stars and mountains, it's all in my mind. There's no need for solitude" (p. 137). However, it takes a trip to nature for him to figure this out and Kerouac concludes that isolation is necessary before one can exist peacefully in civilization. After the solitude, Kerouac deems himself prepared to return to society, exemplifying Thoreau's proposed balance between the wild and the cultivated. Kerouac writes, "I didn't have to hide myself in desolation but could accept society for better or for worse, like a wife" (p. 132). He returns to settled society clear-minded and less critical, planning "to keep my mind clear in the midst of murky human ideas" (p. 133).

In "Alone on a Mountaintop," Kerouac learns what Sal never does—that you carve your own solitude. The whole excursion becomes a vast transcendent moment of what Kerouac calls "Nirvana Bliss" (p. 132). Because of Kerouac's aim and modus operandi at achieving the blissful state, it is entirely different from Sal and Dean's mad, desultory pursuit of "It."

"Alone on a Mountaintop" advances beyond On The Road's
conclusion that Thoreau's West is anachronistic by reconciling many of Sal's Western dilemmas. Kerouac's prescription at merging Thoreau and Turner's views--find a place where everyone else isn't--seems simple enough, yet appears almost too obvious. It is no surprise then that Kerouac restructured this story in his final, definitive, western work.
CHAPTER VII

BIG SUR: KEROUAC'S TRUE WEST

**Big Sur** (1962), one of Kerouac's last novels, is Kerouac's final work that takes place exclusively in the West. Likewise, it is the work which merges his two previous views and creates a distinctive Kerouacian West. While Kerouac's earlier works waffle between adopting and refuting Thoreau and Turner, **Big Sur** solidifies Kerouac's implicit conclusion in "Alone on a Mountaintop": that man is capable of experiencing fleeting transcendence in the West, but, ultimately, Thoreau's West has been spoiled by industrialization and human expansion. Therefore, Kerouac reasons that Thoreauvain transcendence in a post-Turner world is unachievable.

The two other Kerouac works discussed here clearly lead to the pivotal **Big Sur**. In **On the Road**, Kerouac tries to follow Thoreau's "Walking" road but finds it shut; a few years later, in "Alone on a Mountaintop," he attempts to find that road again--and does--by mirroring **Walden**. With **Big Sur**, he refutes parts of **On The Road** and "Alone on a Mountaintop" and reinforces others. In **Big Sur** Kerouac recognizes Turner's closed frontier, and thus distances himself from Sal's and Thoreau's western romanticism. Kerouac simultaneously
complies—albeit with some reservation—with Thoreau's belief that man can create his own Walden. He recreates (and indirectly criticizes) "Alone on a Mountaintop" by creating a similar plot (man alone in nature) and landscape (Western wilderness) in *Big Sur* but altering the final results. In the short-story, Kerouac blithely suggests that transcendence is easy to attain, given the proper resources. *Big Sur* conversely illustrates that one can attain transcendence in the West, but concludes that external factors make lasting enlightenment and peace impossible.

*Big Sur* features a narrator, Jack Dulouoz, approaching 40, who journeys from New York to California via train to immerse himself in nature for a short time. Much like Thoreau's sojourn to Walden and Kerouac's trip to Desolation Peak, Dulouoz rushes to Big Sur to flee the chaotic East and be "alone and undisturbed" in the Western woods (p. 3). Sherman Paul notes that Thoreau went to Walden "primarily to immerse himself with the laws of Nature, and to humanize this experience...There, free from external references, he could purify himself and live a sympathetic existence, alive to the currents of being" (Paul, "Resolution at Walden " 338). For Dulouoz, the reasons for seclusion are similar. He realized he "had to get away to solitude again or die" and feels only the West which will provide the means for peace, because of (what he believes to be) its unencumbered, free territory (p. 5). This, of course, is part of the old illusion. While Sal
Paradise travels West to satisfy his visions and hankerings, Duluo佐 goes there to soothe his soul. Sal naively sees the West as the realization of his dreams, while Duluo佐 optimistically sees it as the answer to his problems.

Kerouac portrays Duluo佐 in three venues, each of which are emblematic of his mental and spiritual state: 1) alone at Big Sur; 2) with others in the city; and 3) with others at Big Sur. Duluo佐 alternates between the three locales, and the discrepancy in his behavior in these scenarios is telling. Duluo佐 behaves (and thinks) nearly identically in the latter two scenarios. The most profound difference, however, occurs when Duluo佐 isolates himself at Big Sur.

Alone in a cabin by the sea at Big Sur, Duluo佐 is content, remarking shortly after arrival that he finds bliss from "the simplicity of just being happy in the woods, conforming to nobody's idea about what to do, what should be done" (p. 30). Similar to Desolation Peak's effect on Kerouac, the wilderness provides peace and relaxation for the narrator in Big Sur, as Duluo佐 appreciates what's around him: bluejays, raccoons, fog, woods, owls, flowers, redwood logs, and even spiders (p. 37-39). However, Duluo佐's conflict arises when, on numerous occasions, he returns to the city or is invaded by city people at Big Sur.

In the city--or with urban people in the country--Duluo佐 relinquishes his mental peace and succumbs to the frenetic world of drugs and alcohol. Away from his mecca,
he is displaced and "trapped" (p. 70). The city's one
redeeming effect on Duluoz is that it enables him to
further appreciate the wild. In the urban West, Duluoz
remembers Big Sur "with a clear piercing love" and feels
that it will cure the angst brought upon by people, alcohol,
chaos and industrialization (p. 55). However, while he
recognizes his need to be alone, he fails to take the
necessary physical steps to insure his solitude.

Duluoz appears most distraught not in the city, but
when he is with others at Big Sur. Inundated with throngs
of hedonists, Duluoz feels that his haven is being violated:

I feel excited to be with the gang but
there's a hidden sadness too and which
is expressed later by Monsanto when he
says 'This is the kind of place where a
person should really be alone, you know?
when you bring a big gang here it somehow
descrates it...'-Which is just the way
I feel too (p. 94).

The presence of friends suffocates Duluoz, forcing his
attention to shift from the self to the others. Duluoz
seeks simplicity at Big Sur but his plans and hopes are
constantly uprooted. As a result of Duluoz's failure
to sequester himself, he loses his individuality and his
focus.

The influx of people at Big Sur separates Duluoz
from nature, driving him to the precipice of madness. Although still physically a part of the wilderness, he becomes mentally and spiritually estranged from it, mainly because those around him place no importance on the outdoors. Duluoz's friends view him as eccentric for his nature reverence, and ultimately he adopts their view, thinking he's insane and a "nut" for "wandering in and out from cabin to creek" (p. 196). In the presence of the others, Duluoz becomes so displaced that he believes nature is evil, working against him and no longer an ally:

I'm just plumb sick and tired...of the whole nervewracking scene bad enough as it is always pivoting back to this poor haunted canyon which again gives me the willies...I turn around and notice how the wind is just harrying [the leaves] off trees and into the sea, just hurrying them as it were to death - In my condition they look human trembling to the brink...(p. 181-2).

His detachment from nature causes him to undergo extreme psychosis and he feels his friends are conspiring to kill him (p. 204).

There are only three occasions when Duluoz rises above the chaos and could be viewed as attaining transcendent moments. Each occasion occurs when he is alone, and nature is the revitalizing agent in all three of the rebirths. First, desperately seeking seclusion, Duluoz tells a friend to go to the city without him. Immediately after the
friend's departure, Duluoz becomes enlightened:

'No I'll stay here and get better—I gotta be alone,' which is true, because as soon as he's gone and has yelled one final hoot from the canyon road directly above and gone on, and I've sat in the sun alone on the porch, fed my birds finally again...stared silently at the trees, soon as the sun goes down I swear on my arm I'm as well as I ever was: just like that suddenly (p. 115).

Left alone, Duluoz is forced to focus on his environs and himself. Previously, his discomfort and mania had been caused by his separation from his natural surroundings. But when Duluoz regains the wilderness, he regains himself. Richard Hipkiss contends that Big Sur's wilderness "offers no lasting relief...it is blind and uncaring" (Hipkiss 134). A close study of the text provides a different reading. As soon as the friend departed Duluoz "stared silently at the trees" and concentrates on the birds, the sun, and other natural objects, which in turn rejuvenated Duluoz. Hipkiss maintains that "nature is neither purposeful nor caring, and the age-old geologic formations of Big Sur seem cold and indifferent entirely to man's fate and to their own" (Hipkiss 52). On the surface, his view contains merit. Nature does not welcome Duluoz; however, it stimulates him and forces him to be self-analytical. Through these processes, transcendence occurs for Duluoz. For example, the sight of the blazing sun reminds Duluoz of his own mortality and
conjures up images of previous generations:

At high noon the sun always coming out at last, strong, beating down on my nice high porch...I thought about the ancient Indians who must have inhabited this canyon for thousands of years...We will pass just as quietly through life...only with a little more noise and a few bridges and dams and bombs that won't even last a million years (p. 35).

Nature is the catalyst by which Duluoz undergoes his realizations about both himself and the world around him.

The second satori occurs in a San Francisco park. Just as Sal's "gasping" for air mirrors Thoreau, Duluoz's city park reverie is reminiscent of Emerson's "transparent eyeball" moment on Boston Commons. Both Emerson's and Duluoz's moments indicate that the "wilderness" is not the only place for transcendence. Kerouac and Emerson show that urban transcendence can occur if certain components--isolation, reflection, natural surroundings--are in place. Although Duluoz is in the city, and all he does at the park is sleep, he nonetheless experiences supreme tranquility, largely because he isolates himself and is surrounded by trees and grass:

I feel good because I've had my sleep but mainly I feel good because somehow old Ben (my age) has blessed me by sitting over my sleep all day...It's been the only peaceful day I've had in California, in fact, except alone in the woods, which I tell him and he says 'Well, who said you weren't alone now?' (p. 164)
Ironically, the city serves as an ally to Duluoz, similar to Big Sur. By situating the protagonist in a city park, Kerouac emphasizes the importance of isolation in nature. Unlike Duluoz's previous chaotic immersions in city life, which serve to demoralize and depress him, here he cloisters himself in a natural environment and subsequently enhances his demeanor and outlook.

The final epiphany, by far the most profound, occurs when Duluoz alienates himself at Big Sur. A religious vision, ostensibly triggered by Duluoz's pastoral setting, plays crucial role in this resurrection, as Duluoz remarks, "Suddenly as clear as anything I ever saw in my life, I see the cross" (p. 204). Although religion has hitherto played a minor role, its presence is logical when one considers Emersonian transcendental doctrine. Emerson would argue that natural objects serve for Duluoz as symbols of spiritual facts; thus, Duluoz's communion with nature leads him to the religious revival (Scholnick). The recovery fittingly occurs with Duluoz outdoors:

Blessed relief has come to me from that minute - Everything has washed away - I'm perfectly normal again - Dave Wain is down the road looking at fields and flowers - I'm sitting smiling in the sun, the birds sing again, all's well again. I still can't understand it... Just a golden wash of goodness has spread all over my body and mind (p. 215-6).
After this "golden and eternal" awakening, Duluoz is able to return permanently to civilization, as Thoreau did in *Walden* (p. 216).

As grand as Duluoz's awakenings appear, none are lasting. Each time Duluoz undergoes a revelation, he falls back down--the exception being the final enlightenment, which, because it occurs at the end of the novel, is not followed by a descent. The reader is led to believe that when Duluoz returns to the city, as he plans, malaise and disenchantedness will again set in. Even Duluoz "can't understand" his revival, and Kerouac's purposeful implication is that the madness could recur at any moment (p. 216). Hipkiss accurately points out that "**Big Sur** is the novel that sums up the futility of the Beat existence" (Hipkiss 135). That statement could be amended to read: **Big Sur** sums up the futility, or impossibility, of permanent transcendence.

In **Big Sur**, Duluoz finds no clear road to solitude. His road becomes clogged with obstacles. Through Duluoz, who journeys to a cabin by the sea in search of peace, Kerouac conveys the message that one cannot go off to the cabin, mountain, or pond anymore, like Thoreau, because there are countless hindrances to halt one's quest. As Kerouac wrote in "The Vanishing American Hobo," the story which ends *Lonesome Traveler*: "...You cant [sic] even be alone any more in the primitive wilderenss" (p. 182). People crowd one's space, bringing noise, waste, and
corruption; the city looms near, with its pollution, industrialization, noise, and fast pace. Duluoz goes to the edge of land in search of his frontier, but finds that even scarcely-populated Big Sur, California, has become—to use Turner's word—"exhausted."
CONCLUSION

Jack Kerouac strives to reconcile the western beliefs and contradictions that Henry David Thoreau presented in some of his writings. Kerouac embraces Thoreau, tries to relive him, and ultimately refutes him. *On The Road* is a failed attempt at living out "Walking" and uncovering the romantic, metaphorical West that Thoreau depicted. Undeterred, Kerouac seeks to repeat the Thoreauvian experience once again in "Alone on a Mountaintop," which uses *Walden* as its model. Both of these works glorify Thoreau's paradigm of the West as the ideal location for transcendence. While Kerouac believes he's found the Thoreauvian prescription for living in "Alone on a Mountaintop," in time he learns that such existence is temporal and nearly impossible. That story appears to be simply an upbeat attempt at validating Thoreau's tenets. Kerouac's true experience on Desolation Peak was nothing like what was depicted. Carolyn Cassady notes in *Off The Road* that Kerouac found anything but peace on Desolation Peak:

The solitude affected him just as much as we had predicted. Although there were moments he cherished, he nearly went mad with loneliness and boredom, and he knew he'd never go back. He was further disillusioned at having to face this truth about himself (Cassady 279).
Having realized that Thoreau's paradigm for living is incapable of being imitated in the twentieth century, Kerouac writes *Big Sur* to set the record straight. He refutes his two previous works and rebukes Thoreau, rewriting his West and Thoreau's West. He shows that because the geographical West is closed, so, too, is the spiritual and metaphysical West. The West, Kerouac illustrates, has changed so drastically that one venturing there has to make a concerted effort at achieving solitude. With Thoreau, solitude appeared ready-made—all one had to do was travel a short distance and create his own space. Kerouac, however, shows that the twentieth century West contains few Walden Ponds; rather, the geographic West is a West of expansion and commercialism and no longer a metaphorical West of freedom and individual liberation. Westward transcendence is still possible in small doses, Kerouac posits, but it is not as simple as hitching on one's knapsack and going West, as Thoreau proposed (Lebaux 76).
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VITA

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Born in New York, New York, on July 12, 1967, Malcolm Coltrane Lester grew up in Amherst, Massachusetts. He graduated Magna Cum Laude in 1989 from Springfield College, where he was an All-American and Academic All-American in lacrosse. A recipient of a NCAA Post-Graduate Scholarship, Lester entered the Master's English program at William and Mary in September, 1989, where he served as a teaching assistant for Professor David Jenkins and was the managing editor of the departmental newsletter, The Phoenix.

After completing his graduate course work in 1991, Lester began teaching at St. Albans School in Washington, D.C., where he is currently in his fourth year as an Upper School English teacher and the Head Varsity Lacrosse Coach. In 1994, he was selected as a Klingenstein Teaching Fellow for a summer program at Columbia University.