

**WANDERLUST:
ROOTLESSNESS AND RESTLESSNESS IN AMERICAN CULTURE, 1950-1970**

A Senior Honors Thesis

by

AMY LEPINE

Submitted to the Office of Honors Programs
& Academic Scholarships
Texas A&M University
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RESEARCH FELLOWS

April 2003

Group: Cultural Studies 2

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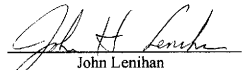
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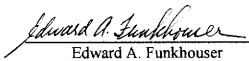
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ABSTRACT

Wanderlust:

Rootlessness and Restlessness in American Culture, 1950-1970. (April 2003)

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Historian Ray Billington, in arguing that the “migratory compulsion” in Americans is partly the result of the influence of the frontier on American history, claims: “If students of the American character can agree upon any one thing, it is that the compulsion to move about has created a nation of restless wanderers unlike any other in the world.” In this paper I explore manifestations of that “migratory compulsion,” a rootlessness and restlessness that I call “wanderlust,” in American movies, television, music, literature, and politics during the 1950s and 1960s. Wanderlust and the hero-wanderer were recurring cultural ideas during those years.

The hero-wanderer appeared in three similar but distinct guises during the period: as the aimless wanderer (Dean in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*), as the explorer-wanderer (for example, the astronaut sent to the moon), and as the observer-wanderer (John Steinbeck in *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*). All three display the desire for mobility and the disdain for rootedness that define wanderlust. The more

significant issue underlying their mobility and wanderlust is always the relationship between the individual and community. Manifestations of wanderlust reveal the way Americans from 1950-1970 valued the individual and the community.

Expressions of wanderlust did not change in any significant ways from the fifties to the sixties, and thus provide a constant theme for two decades that are usually viewed by historians as widely different. Ultimately, Americans during both decades displayed an ambivalent attitude toward wanderlust. The wandering, non-conformist hero is glorified during both decades, but never without reservations. While Americans tend to lionize strong non-conformist individuals in literature, film, music, and politics, they also recognize the limitations of such individualism.

This work is dedicated to my ancestors,
especially my great grandmother Nellie Stoddard Cross,
whose "gypsy-nomad" genes became my own.

*These all died in faith, not having received the promises,
but having seen them afar off were assured of them,
embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers
and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things
declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if
they had called to mind that country from which they had
come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But
now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country.
Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for
he has prepared a city for them. Hebrews 11:13-16*

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I am indebted also to Bob Lepine for brainstorming and editing. Jason den Hartog helped with the early stages of research and was always ready to offer irrelevant Marxist critiques. Thanks to Katherine Deming, Clarissa Hines, Anna Martin, and Mollie Richardson for reading drafts and putting up with stacks of books and papers and old black and white films.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

“(It is) a novel whose background is the recurrence of the pioneering instinct in American life and its expression in the migration of the present generation.”

Jack Kerouac, to his editor, about *On the Road* (1957)

“For I stand tonight facing west on what was once the last frontier. From the lands that stretch three thousand miles behind me, the pioneers of old gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build a new world here in the West... We stand today on the edge of a New Frontier – the frontier of the 1960s – a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils – a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and dreams.”

-John F. Kennedy, accepting the Democratic Party nomination for the Presidency of the United States (1960)

“Take to the highway
Won’t you lend me your name?
Your way and my way seem to be one and the same.
Mama don’t understand it
She wants to know where I been
I’d have to be some kind of natural born fool
To want to pass that way again
But you know I could feel it
On a country road.”

James Taylor, “Country Road” (1968)

(Opening scene: at a busy stoplight, a harried businessman turns to his left, where a young man is revving a motorcycle...)

“Taking a trip?”

“What’s that?”

“Taking a trip?”

“Yeah.”

“Where to?”

“Oh, I don’t know...wherever I end up, I guess.”

“Pal, I wish I was you.”

“Really? Well, hang in there.”

(The light changes, and the laconic motorcyclist speeds on...)

Intro to the 1969-1970 NBC series “Then Came Bronson”

What do novelist Kerouac, politician Kennedy, folk singer Taylor, and even the writers of a short-lived TV program have in common? In the nineteen-fifties and sixties, each of them captivated a portion of the American public by appealing to a sense of restlessness and a yearning for new horizons. The idea of exploring new frontiers had always been an important part of American rhetoric, and a desire for mobility and a disdain for rootedness were recurring themes in American culture in the fifties and sixties. For example, consider the chorus and first verse of “The Wayward Wind,” a song that topped the charts for eight weeks in 1956:

The wayward wind is a restless wind
 A restless wind that yearns to wander
 And he was born the next of kin
 The next of kin to the wayward wind

In a lonely shack by a railroad track
 He spent his younger days
 And I guess the sound of the outward bound
 Made him a slave to his wandering ways.¹

The “next of kin to the wayward wind,” though “lonely” and a “slave” to his wandering, is nonetheless a subject of wistful longing – the singer loses her heart to him. Song lyrics by Paul Simon, James Taylor, Bob Dylan, Hank Williams, Gordon Lightfoot, and many others also described a need for the “road” or the “highway”.

Similarly, Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* (1954), James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and Kirk Douglas in a run of films including *Man Without a Star* (1955)

¹ Gogi Grant, “The Wayward Wind,” rec. 1956, *Gogi Grant: Her Very Best*, Varese Records, 2002.

and *Lonely Are the Brave* (1962), played restless, loner heroes.² In a bar scene in *The Wild One*, a friendly girl asks Johnny (Brando), the leader of a motorcycle gang, “Where you going when you leave here?” After a moment of silence, she repeats, “Don’t you know?” Johnny answers ambiguously, “Man, we just go...you don’t go any one special place – you just go.”³ In these representative icons of American popular culture, restless mobility assumes heroic proportions.

Popular fiction centered around road trips in *On the Road* (1957); *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* (1962); *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968); *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974); and other popular works. The explosion of the science fiction genre pointed Americans to new frontiers and intergalactic road trips. The real-life “space race” with Russia to put a man on the moon revolved around the rhetoric of new frontiers, and the astronaut joined the cowboy as a national hero.

Popular TV shows featured restless characters with strong individuality; many of the so-called “adult” western shows that dominated the ratings in the late fifties, including *Maverick*, *Restless Gun*, and *Have Gun, Will Travel*, showcased men who traveled independently. They “saved the day” for a community without making a commitment to it, and in the next episodes they were found in new places. They were not idealistic crusaders for law and order like the Lone Ranger nor did they have a ranch

² Once quoted as saying “I’ve made a career of playing sons of bitches,” Kirk Douglas portrayed the non-conformist loner, rootless and often defiant of conventional norms, in a number of movies including *The Big Sky* (1952), *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* (1954), *The Racers* (1955), *Man Without A Star* (1955), *Indian Fighter* (1955), *Lust for Life* (1956), *Gunfight at the OK Corral* (1956), *The Vikings* (1958), *The Devil’s Disciple* (1959), *The Last Sunset* (1961), *Lonely Are the Brave* (1962), *The War Wagon* (1967).

³ *The Wild One*, dir. Laslo Benedek, perf. Marlon Brando, Mary Murphy, Robert Klein, Lee Marvin, Jay C. Flippen, RCA/Columbia 1953.

to return to, as did Hopalong Cassidy and most other B-Western film heroes. Rather, their mobility was intimately related to a need for independence without conventional ties to social communities.

William Inge's plays written and performed in the fifties often highlight characters who are anxious to be on the move to escape a life of "quiet desperation" in the community. In *Picnic*, when a train whistle blows, two sisters discuss their dreams of getting on the train and out of town. In the screen adaptation of Inge's *Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, the role of the dissatisfied traveling salesman went to Robert Preston, whose roving persona had been etched several years earlier in the hit Broadway musical *The Music Man*.

The themes of restlessness and mobility that recur in popular culture in the fifties and sixties had some basis in the experience of many Americans during those years. Physical mobility was characteristic of the post-war period. The 1950s saw one of the most astounding migrations in history as families resettled in newly formed suburban communities. Historian William Chafe points out: "At the height of the great European migration in the early twentieth century, 1.2 million new citizens came to America in a single year. During the 1950s the same number moved to the suburbs every year."⁴ Between 1940 and 1960, migration across county lines rose by fifty percent. Ray Billington notes that of the 176 million people living in the United States at the end of

⁴ William Chafe. *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 117.

the decade, only 30 million had lived in the same house for twenty years.⁵ John Steinbeck claimed in 1962 that, “the American family rarely stays in one place for more than five years.”⁶

The migration prospered under the blessing of a government that not only offered land cheaply to contractors in order to promote its development but also constructed a new network of roads. The Highway Act of 1956 authorized the use of \$32 billion to build 41,000 miles of highway. The boom in car sales went hand in hand with the highway construction. The number of cars produced in America increased by 133% from 1945 to 1960. American families took to the road for vacations, creating a new industry of domestic tourism. In the 1950s eight million people traveled abroad.⁷

But mobility did not always equal the freedom and individuality that the frontier myth had promised. In fact, social critics in the fifties began to worry about conformity and loss of individualism. Writer William Whyte highlighted the peril of the “Organization Man” who conformed to society to become a “market personality,” and in *The Lonely Crowd* David Riesman worried that individuals were becoming increasingly “other-directed” rather than “inner-directed”. As the economy became even more consumer-oriented, Riesman argued, the “social” could begin to swallow up the “self”.

Whyte, Riesman, and other writers like Erich Fromm and Betty Friedan pointed out resident discontent with invasions of privacy and loss of individual selfhood. In

⁵ Ray Billington. *America's Frontier Heritage*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966) 183.

⁶ John Steinbeck. *America and Americans and Selected Nonfiction*. Ed. Susan Shillinglaw and Jackson Benson. (New York: Penguin Books, 2002) 332.

⁷ Chafe 117-119.

many cases, their concern came to be symbolized by the suburbs. Much of the oft-cited mobility of the fifties involved a growing middle class movement in and out of newly developed suburbs. In the words of one historian, suburbia represented a “crabgrass frontier” that, like its nineteenth century namesake, promised a greater freedom to be had by settling a new plot of land.⁸ But social critics, including Whyte, who cited the smothering of individual privacy in the suburb of Park Forest, Illinois, argued that the communities formed within suburbia actually encouraged conformity and represented a blow to individuality and diversity.

Counter-cultural movements, beginning with the Beat generation of the fifties, expressed similar concerns about conformity. Beatnik literature explored individualism and the quest for identity. Beatnik heroes often expressed their individualism by leaving community and seeking the freedom of mobility, attempting to reject the conformity that they believed mainstream society required. Even popular culture mirrored the intellectuals’ discontent with modern life. The mainstream acceptance of films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *The Wild One* (1953) suggests that a large part of the American population in the fifties actually found the middle class prosperity and conformity less than fulfilling.

So, contrary to common characterizations of the fifties as simply a decade of apathy - a complacent *Ozzie and Harriet* or *Leave it to Beaver* society - leading intellectuals, an emerging counter-culture, and mainstream popular culture all displayed

⁸ Kenneth Jackson. *Crabgrass Frontier: the Suburbanization of the United States*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

discontent with conformity. In face of that conformity, romantic notions of freedom, individualism, and mobility were revived.

The underlying restlessness and discontent of the fifties became more pronounced in the sixties. Historian William Chafe writes, “The nation seemed to come apart...many Americans felt that the very fabric of their society was coming unraveled.”⁹ Political parties saw increased fragmentation, especially as the liberal center came under fire. The nation was buffeted by movements for Civil Rights, women’s liberation, student radicalism on college campuses, and intense controversy over the Vietnam War.

These changes were accompanied by widespread abandonment of cultural and spiritual moorings. In the migrations of disaffected young people to communes in San Francisco and New York City in 1967, and in the music festival at Woodstock (1969), young men and women appeared to be abandoning their roots and traditions, forging new paths by rebelling against whatever was old. If you weren’t moving in the 1960s, but instead were rooted, you were left behind; thus Bob Dylan could write, “Your old road is/ Rapidly agin’. / Please get out of the new one/ If you can’t lend your hand/ For the times they are a-changin’.”¹⁰ Whether the mobility was part of a search for something more, a search for something different, or just a need to keep moving, rootlessness and restlessness were important in the 1960s.

Popular culture studies, as historian Richard Slotkin suggests, can reveal “the popularity of certain kinds of productions” and so “provide a concrete index to their

⁹ Chafe 380.

¹⁰ Bob Dylan. “The Times They Are A-Changin’.” *Bob Dylan’s Greatest Hits*. New York: CBS Records, 1967.

importance for the culture that produces and purchases them."¹¹ This study is aimed at demonstrating the importance and implications of what I shall call wanderlust (and the hero-wanderer) as represented in American movies, television, music, literature, and politics in the fifties and sixties. Cultural manifestations of wanderlust and the hero-wanderer grew out of the frontier myth, and though a great deal of scholarship exists analyzing the frontier myth, none has looked at its variations in this time period. Yet, during the fifties and sixties, expressions of wanderlust and the wanderer-hero are common and emanate from both counter-cultural and mainstream groups. Every generation changes a myth to suit its needs. These generations attached strongly to that part of the frontier myth that emphasizes mobility and independence.

The bigger question underlying wanderlust is the relationship between the individual and community. In this study, I will look at manifestations of wanderlust as a way of understanding how the US culture in the fifties and sixties valued the individual and the community. While the fifties are commonly characterized as a decade of contented conformity in stark contrast to the rebellious freedom of the following decade, my study will challenge that assumption as I look at manifestations of popular culture in the fifties that display the same restlessness and desire for freedom, individuality, and mobility which are commonly ascribed to the sixties. In addition, my study will attempt to understand how Americans in the rapidly changing, increasingly industrialized and commercialized post-war society attempted to reconcile the frontier myth with those

¹¹ Richard Slotkin. *Fatal Environment: the myth of the frontier in the age of industrialization, 1800-1890*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994) 28.

changes. Cultural expressions of wanderlust in these decades recognize the fact that the old frontier hero was in some ways impotent in the modern society; but while admitting that fact, Americans continued to canonize him.

I want to begin my study with a look at the historical events and cultural mythologies related to America's frontier heritage. The desire for mobility and rootlessness symbolized by the hero-wanderer owes much to the myth of the frontier, particularly as it developed in the wake of what historian Frederick Jackson Turner declared was the closing of the America's geographical frontier in the 1890s.

CHAPTER II

THE FRONTIER IN HISTORY AND MYTH

The Beat Generation did not create the “road trip,” much as they might like to claim it. Paul Simon was not the first man to want to hop on a train to “look for America.” And the astronauts headed for the moon were not the first great explorers seeking new frontiers; they were following what was billed to them as a great American tradition. The mythic importance to Americans of mobility and frontiers had been recognized long before 1954.

Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893 was among the first to recognize the importance of the concept of the “frontier” in American history. In his essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Turner claimed that “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.”¹² Since American institutions had been forced to continually adapt and recreate themselves as they expanded with the frontier, they underwent a “continual beginning over again”. That process, argued Turner, created uniquely American people and institutions.

Turner’s hypothesis influenced an entire generation of historians, some of whom took Turner’s ideas farther than he ever did. The results of the widespread popularity of the frontier hypothesis were, as Ray Billington points out, both good and bad for this hypothesis. “Turner had not decreed an infallible new formula for the interpretation of the nation’s past; he had merely advanced an untested hypothesis for the consideration of

¹² Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc. 1920) 1.

his brethren. Unfortunately neither the general public nor his scholarly disciples shared his modesty or respect for the truth.”¹³ American historians rewrote their lectures to teach that the frontier was the sole force in shaping the American character – an argument Turner never advanced – and one critic noted that the American Historical Association had become, “One big Turner Verein.”¹⁴

The general public was equally as accepting of Turner’s hypothesis. Norman Foerster called for a reinterpretation of literature that would recognize the “frontier spirit” as Turner had defined it.¹⁵ Woodrow Wilson published several articles in popular journals in which he called the frontier “the central and determining fact of our national history.” Economists, geographers, and political scientists all began to study the effects of the frontier on their own disciplines. Politicians and diplomats also used Turner’s ideas to their own ends. For example, Franklin Roosevelt would later argue for increased governmental social services by pointing out the fact that there was no longer a “safety valve” in the form of the frontier to which those out of work could turn for a new start. Roosevelt’s opponents, though, also used the frontier hypothesis, arguing that rugged individualism as seen on the frontier was the American way of life, not to be undermined by government intervention.¹⁶

Shortly after Turner’s death in 1932, his hypothesis came under intense attack. The changing political and economic climate in the throes of the Depression seemed to

¹³ Billington 14.

¹⁴ Billington 14.

¹⁵ Norman Foerster, “American Literature,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, II (April 3, 1926) pp. 677-679.

¹⁶ Billington 13-15.

many critics to make Turner's hypothesis irrelevant. "An interpretation of the American past that stressed agrarianism rather than industrialism, rugged individualism rather than state planning, and optimistic nationalism rather than political internationalism seemed outmoded."¹⁷ Two main complaints emerged. First, critics argued that Turner used ambiguous language and methodology, never clearly defining the word "frontier" and ignoring factors that were equally important in America's formation. A second group of critics claimed that Turner's thesis was just clearly false – that the frontier had not fostered democracy, nationalism, mobility, or other "American" characteristics.

After World War II historians began again to defend Turner's hypothesis, securing its spot as one of the most influential theories of American history to date. Rather than taking it as gospel truth, as many of Turner's contemporaries had, or rejecting it absolutely, as later critics had, by the late 1940s historians began to test the hypothesis, accepting and rejecting different portions of it. Many of the strongest defenses were presented during the sixties. Frontier historian Ray Billington published *America's Frontier Heritage* in 1966, arguing that Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis was indeed true, and that the frontier was one – of several – important forces shaping a distinctly American way of life. "To the frontier," Turner had written, "the American intellect owes its striking characteristics." According to Billington, Americans differ from their European ancestors in work ethic, mobility, tendency to rebel against tradition, wastefulness, gender roles, materialism, optimism, naïve nationalism, rugged individualism, and democracy.

¹⁷ Billington 15.

In an essay entitled "The M-Factor in American History" (1970), historian George Pierson complicated Turner's ideas, claiming that not the frontier but the related "M-factor" of movement, migration, and mobility has defined the American people. Texas historian Walter Prescott Webb argued in 1956 that Turner's thesis did not apply uniquely to Americans; many nations had experienced national frontiers. However, Webb wrote, since the closing of the frontier had occurred in America, that event has uniquely shaped the American psyche. Since then, Americans have been searching for new frontiers to conquer:

The business man sees a new frontier in the customers he has not yet reached; the missionary sees a religious frontier among the souls he has not yet saved; the social worker sees a human frontier among the suffering people whose woes he has not yet alleviated; the educator of a sort sees the ignorance he is trying to dispel as a frontier to be taken; and the scientists permit us to believe that they are uncovering the real thing in a scientific frontier.¹⁸

Webb argued, though, that none of these frontiers was comparable in importance or impact to the one that had been lost.

Reinforcing the arguments of Webb and Pierson regarding the relevance of Turner's frontier thesis well beyond the actual closing of the geographical frontier in 1890 are cultural studies that speak to the power of the frontier myth. "Myths," according to Richard Slotkin, "are stories drawn from a society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral conscience – with all the complexities and contradictions that

¹⁸ Walter Prescott Webb. "The Frontier and the 400 Year Boom." *Turner Thesis Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History*. Ed. George Rogers Taylor. (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1956) 87-95.

consciousness may contain.”¹⁹ These stories are by nature vague, and their historical veracity is unimportant to their functional ability. Created to reconcile paradoxes, myths “give us a sense that the world is understandable and explicable. They lead us to believe that the manifest contradictions among our ideals, or between our ideals and the realities we see around us can be reconciled...And at the same time, they pose the problems and underline the polarities in American society which generate tensions in individuals and give the society its energy.”²⁰ Myths lead us to believe that our opposing values can be reconciled. Their power lies in the fact that as myths, they lie beyond the reach of critical demystification. Rather than appealing to reason, they invoke memory and nostalgia through metaphoric representations and our intuitive recognition.

The Myth of the Frontier is perhaps the most enduring American myth, with “origins in the colonial period and a powerful continuing presence in contemporary culture.”²¹ As the frontier expanded, the West became not a place, but a set of ideas. Easterners, mostly writers and intellectuals, romanticized the West in a number of ways even while it was being settled. They ascribed contradictory characteristics to the West and its inhabitants. Frederick Jackson Turner himself had been attacked for claiming that the frontier had contradictory effects: “How, his attackers asked, could the frontier be responsible for nationalism and sectionalism, individualism and cooperation, materialism and idealism, innovation and conformity, coarseness of character and optimism, equalitarianism and upward social mobility? How could pioneers improve

¹⁹ Slotkin *Gunfighter Nation* 5.

²⁰ Robertson 8.

²¹ Slotkin *Fatal Environment* 15.

civilization by abandoning civilization?"²² Whether or not the frontier had caused all of these opposing ideals, in the Myth of the Frontier they are reconciled.

Ultimately, the frontier myth addresses and reconciles conflicting desires to fulfill both individual and communal needs: to pull up roots and explore new horizons, and at the same time to attend to the needs of the community. The hero of the Frontier Myth functions symbolically as an instrument to reconcile those desires. He can ride into town, save the day for a community, and then leave to continue taming the west on his own. Therefore, he fulfills a responsibility to community without actually committing to community. David Murdoch writes, "Out of the West ultimately came America's most durable heroes...It was the Western hero who found the widest appeal and showed the most consistent vitality." Morphing from Daniel Boone to Natty Bumpo, Davy Crockett, John Fremont, Kit Carson, and Buffalo Bill, the hero of the mythic frontier was "a self-made man succeeding through rugged individualism."²³ Fleeing civilization, he was unable to fit into normal society even while leading its advance. Ultimately, the cowboy became the lasting iconic hero of the Frontier Myth.

However important the cowboy has become as a mythic figure, it is important to recognize that the Myth of the Frontier takes many shapes and has evolved over the centuries to be useful to successive generations. The Myth of Wanderlust and the Wanderer-Hero are one part of, or offshoot of, the Frontier Myth. Billington recognizes wanderlust as one of the chief effects of the Frontier. In arguing that the "migratory compulsion" in Americans is partly the result of the influence of the frontier on

²² Billington 16.

²³ Murdoch 26, 40.

American history, he claims: "If students of the American character can agree upon any one thing, it is that the compulsion to move about has created a nation of restless wanderers unlike any other in the world."²⁴ Not only do Americans wander, but they are held rapt by images of wandering heroes restless as "the wayward wind".

As Jane Tompkins argues in *West of Everything*, the mythic frontier in novels and films was primarily a male world. Women are likewise absent in the cultural manifestations of wanderlust that are explored in this study. Media output in the fifties and sixties was dominated by certain stereotypes that precluded women being regularly cast as wanderer-heroes. Certainly there were exceptions; in the 1967 film *Bonnie and Clyde*, Bonnie displayed as much desire for the road as did Clyde. She wonders, "Now when and how am I ever gonna get out of here?" Betty Friedan's seminal work *The Feminine Mystique* (1962) showed that many women struggled with a similar feeling of being "stuck," but unlike Bonnie, let alone Daniel Boone, they were unable to break free. Friedan contrasts the confined women of her time with those who "went west with the wagon trains [and] shared the pioneering experience." "Why," she asks, "should women try to make housework 'something more' instead of moving on the frontiers of their own time?"²⁵ However, it would be years before mainstream, or even counter-cultural works would regularly attribute feelings of wanderlust to women. Wanderlust was simply not a socially acceptable response for most women.

Racial and ethnic minorities are likewise rarely represented as figures of wanderlust. Throughout the introduction and in the rest of this paper I often talk about

²⁴ Billington 181.

²⁵ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1984) 67.

the “American” character. In using that description, I am all too aware of the limitations in ascribing to women and minorities whatever inferences are drawn from cultural representations that are predominantly white male in subject and authorship.

The Wandering Hero appeared in three similar but distinct guises during the period: as the aimless wanderer (Dean in Kerouac’s *On the Road*), as the explorer-wanderer (for example, the astronaut sent to the moon), and as the observer-wanderer (Steinbeck in *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*). All three display the desire for mobility and/or the disdain for rootedness that define wanderlust.

The division between the aimless wanderer, the explorer-wanderer, and the observer-wanderer is not always a clean one, and there is some overlap among the three groups. Essentially, though, the observer-wanderer is mobile simply because he has a compulsion to move around and to understand the America around him. No deep desire to forge new paths motivates him; nor is he driven by philosophical angst. The observer-wanderer is “just looking;” he travels with an easygoing attitude and a love for the journey. The explorer-wanderer is a person who is looking for something more, for the next frontier. This person has a purpose and a goal, and often has political or nationalistic significance. The aimless wanderer is either in search for meaning or is wandering as a result of a lack of meaning in his life. He has no purpose in his journey, and often rejects mainstream values and displays a nihilistic worldview. Jack Kerouac’s character Dean is the classic aimless wanderer, and Kerouac purposefully styled him after the frontier heroes.

CHAPTER III

THE AIMLESS WANDERER: THE COWBOY CRASHING

Kerouac offers a qualified glorification of a wandering hero in *On the Road*, a book that immediately resonated with readers and made him an instant celebrity.

Frederick Feied, in his book *No Pie in the Sky: The Hobo as American Cultural Hero* (1964) argues that Kerouac's depiction of a wandering hero in *On the Road* reflects a broader cultural movement. He writes,

The hoboes of the 1940s and 1950s appeared as one of the first concrete manifestations of a movement of wholesale rejection of contemporary values, and Kerouac's use of the theme dramatized the sense of alienation of large numbers of his contemporaries. For although hoboes of the type he describes were few in number, their presence attested to the existence of a condition that was fairly widespread. They reflected a growing uneasiness in America, a gnawing sense that all was not well in the richest land in the world. Their frantic flights across the country, their rootless and disaffected behavior, but above all their profound sense of disaffiliation, testified to a growing spirit of discontent. In going on the road they gave expression, in the clearest and most direct way possible, to all of the repressed longings and vague dissatisfactions abroad in the populace at large.²⁶

Feied argues that the men who took to the road during these years, unlike the poverty-driven hoboes of the 1930s, were experimenting with alternatives to conventional forms of protest, and that their dissatisfactions were indicative of more widespread national emotions.

Kerouac's novel appeals to restlessness and the conflict between individual and community, and the novel makes its appeal using the language and themes of the frontier

²⁶Frederick Feied. *No Pie in the Sky: The Hobo as American Cultural Hero in the Works of Jack London, John Dos Passos, and Jack Kerouac*. (Lincoln, NE: Author's Choice Press, 1964) 58-59.

myth. Though Kerouac wrote *On the Road* in a three-week burst of writing, fueled by Benzedrine at the typewriter, he wrote deliberately. The result was as much a product of years of prewriting and cogitation as it was a product of Benzedrine and sweat. Kerouac had conceived the book as a “quest novel,” and was aware of the importance of frontier mythology in America.

Kerouac was personally drawn to new frontiers as well. He dropped out of college at 19 wanting to become “an adventurer, a lonesome traveler,” and his experiences traveling and interacting with the other Beats – Lucien Carr, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and Neal Cassady – form the basis for the plotline of *On the Road*.²⁷ Kerouac casts himself as the novel’s narrator, Sal Paradise, a young novelist-to-be living with his aunt in New Jersey. Sal longs for the road, and most of his college friends are out west already. He starts his first trip, from New York to San Francisco, hitchhiking alone, but meets his friend Dean Moriarty (based on Neal Cassady) in Denver. Sal idolizes Dean for his cowboy style, ease with women, and exuberance for life, and the two of them head west. The rest of the novel details their on-again off-again friendship and Sal’s journeys, alone or with Dean and other friends, crisscrossing the United States.

Throughout the novel Kerouac’s narrator describes his reason for traveling as a sort of incurable wanderlust – that “compulsion to move about” that Billington describes. On the very first page, Sal explains, “With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road. Before that I’d always

²⁷ Ann Charters. Introduction. *On the Road*. By Jack Kerouac. (New York: Penguin, 1991) x.

dreamed of going West to see the country, always vaguely planning and never taking off."²⁸ As they travel, in exuberance Sal and Dean see "the whole country like an oyster for us to open."²⁹ And at the end of a whirlwind trip from Sacramento to Denver, Sal states, "Our battered suitcases were piled on the sidewalk again; we had longer ways to go. But no matter, the road is life."³⁰ The open road has a kind of mystical draw for Sal.

Kerouac's wanderlust is distinct from some forms of rootlessness and mobility in the fifties by virtue of its sometimes-nihilistic outlook. Sal, Dean, and their friends have trouble finding or articulating meaning in their lives or in their road trips. While they experience moments of euphoria and joy, when asked about their purpose no one can find an answer. Carlo Marx (real-life Allen Ginsberg), when speaking with Dean and Sal, proclaims:

"I have an announcement to make.'

'Yes? Yes?'

'What is the meaning of this voyage to New York? What kind of sordid business are you on now? I mean, man, whither goest thou? Whither goest thou, America, in thy shiny car in the night?'

'Whither goest thou?' echoed Dean with his mouth open. We sat and didn't know what to say; there was nothing to talk about any more. The only thing to do was to go.³¹

Repeatedly throughout the book the characters claim to have no idea of why or where they are going. Sal even casts judgment on some of his friends concerning

²⁸ Jack Kerouac. *On the Road*. (New York: Penguin, 1991) 3.

²⁹ Kerouac 138.

³⁰ Kerouac 211.

³¹ Kerouac 119.

their lack of direction.³² Despite lack of direction, Sal and Dean feel compelled, like ancient frontier heroes, to keep moving.

Their conclusion, “The only thing to do was to go,” mirrors a scene in the 1950s motorcycle movie *The Wild One*, starring Marlon Brando. In the movie, Brando plays Johnny, the head of a motorcycle gang that gets into trouble in a small country town. In the town bar, he strikes up a conversation with the beautiful daughter of the police chief. She asks, “Where are you going when you leave here? Don't you know?” Scoffing, Johnny answers, “Oh man, we just gonna go...you don't go any one special place. That's cornball style. You just go. (He snaps his fingers.) A bunch gets together after all week it builds up, you just...the idea is to have a ball.” Later in the movie Kathie expresses the same desire to get out of town, to leave, and the film opens and closes with a shot of the empty road. Both Kerouac's characters and the movie characters held some deep belief that “just going” held the answers to all their questions.

However, Kerouac questions the mythical belief that frontiers are endless as he describes Sal's wanderlust. At the end of his first trip, frustrated in San Francisco, Sal fears that “everything is falling apart...Here I was at the end of America – no more land – and now there was nowhere to go but back. I determined at least to make the trip a circular one...”³³ While the traditional frontier myth describes endless frontier, Kerouac emphasizes the fact that (as Turner had pointed out sixty years earlier) the frontier has closed, and ceaseless mobility and restlessness force one to move in circles. This same conclusion is hinted at in one of the last of the motorcycle movies, 1969's *Easy Rider*,

³² For example, p. 123.

³³ Kerouac 78.

which won Best Film by a New Director at the Cannes Film Festival. Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper play buddies who drive across America with only a vague sense of direction or purpose. The film ends when the two of them die meaningless deaths on the side of the road, suggesting that their searching too lacked significance.

Kerouac consciously uses the language of the frontier myth to describe himself and his friends, but particularly Dean, as western heroes. Sal's first impression of Dean is "of a young Gene Autry – trim, slim-hipped, blue-eyed, with a real Oklahoma accent – a sideburned hero of the snowy West."³⁴ He also describes Dean early on as a "western kinsman of the sun," and after they have been traveling together, the two of them are "broken-down heroes of the Western night."³⁵ Sal's conclusions at the end of the book about Dean are ambiguous. Sal is disillusioned regarding Dean's mythic importance and regarding the power of myth to reconcile contradictory ideals.

In the typical frontier myth, the hero is able to resolve the paradox between individual and community values; he can save the day for a community and then ride off into the sunset. Dean, a more nihilistic hero, has no specific purpose inside or outside of community. While *On the Road* uses the language of frontier mythology, it is not the classic frontier myth; it does not portray the conflict between individual and communal ideals as mystically resolvable. Instead, Kerouac emphasizes the conflict.

The reader can see in Sal the internal conflict between wanting the freedom of mobility and the security of community. Sal experiences euphoria as he travels freely with Dean from city to city, visiting jazz bars and women, but he also experiences

³⁴ Kerouac 5.

³⁵ Kerouac 10, 190.

betrayal and let down in his relationship with Dean, who, for example, leaves him feverish in Mexico. At times Sal displays a strong urge to settle in community.

On his first trip, he meets Terry, a sweet Mexican girl in a migrant farming family in Southern California, and lives with her for a couple of months. The life is enticing; he says, "I forgot all about the East and all about Dean and Carlo and the bloody road...I was a man of the earth, precisely as I had dreamed I would be."³⁶ Again, his approval of the farming life is mirrored in a scene in *Easy Rider* in which Fonda and Hopper meet a family of Mexican-American farmers. Approvingly, Fonda says, "It's not every man that can live off the land. You do your own thing in your own time – that's something to be proud of."

Although eventually Sal leaves Terry, the impulse to settle stays with him, and he later says to Dean, "I want to marry a girl...so I can rest my soul with her till we both get old. This can't go on all the time – all this franticness and jumping around. We've got to go someplace, find something."³⁷ Dean's response, while not mocking, does imply that Sal's ideals are at least naïve and idealistic; he says, "Ah now, man...I've been digging you for years about the *home* and marriage and all those fine wonderful things about your soul."³⁷ Perhaps both of them know that community and relationships are difficult to balance with the individual freedom and mobility they enjoy.

Ultimately, Sal's journeys were in part a search for community; but the community he found on the road, in its transience, was unfulfilling. He chooses community over individuality in the end, settling with a "girl with the pure and innocent

³⁶ Kerouac 97.

³⁷ Kerouac 116.

eyes that I had always searched for and for so long,” and waving goodbye to Dean.³⁸ Dean, riding back into the sunset, is a more tragic and nihilistic frontier hero than the traditional frontier hero. Sal has chosen community and Dean, the reader infers, won't ever really change in his need for freedom and the open road; their paths will not cross. As Feied observes, Sal and Dean had gone on the road “seeking escape – escape not only from the threats of a hostile society, but escape from their own inadequate personalities and unsatisfactory human relationships.”³⁹ Sal concludes that such escape on the road is impossible, and instead he settles in community, in attempt to begin satisfactory, adult relationships. Dean, on the other hand, continues his incessant “escape” on the road.

Historian John Diggins offers an all too common misreading of Kerouac in his book *The Proud Decades*, stating that, “The writings of Jack Kerouac made it clear that being on the road is better than being at home.”⁴⁰ Upon closer examination, *On the Road* is ultimately a critique of escapist behavior. As literary critic Carole Vopat writes, “Implicit in Kerouac’s portrayal of the beat generation is his criticism of it, a criticism that anticipates the charges of his most hostile critics.”⁴¹ *On the Road* ends with a rejection of Dean’s beat life that is always “making logics where there is nothing but inestimable sorrowful sweats.”⁴² Sal’s emphasis, as Vopat points out, shifts from moving to staying, and from the road to home.

³⁸ Kerouac 306.

³⁹ Feied 72.

⁴⁰ John Diggins. *The Proud Decades*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988) 216.

⁴¹ Carole Gottlieb Vopat. “Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*: A Reevaluation.” *The Midwest Quarterly* XIV.4 (1973): 385.

⁴² Kerouac 305.

Poet Gary Snyder described Kerouac's portrayal of Dean Moriarty as a compelling depiction of "the energy of the archetypal west, the energy of the frontier, still coming down. Cassady [the character Dean's real-life counterpart] is the cowboy crashing."⁴³ Kerouac deliberately uses the language and themes of the frontier myth in order to challenge the conclusions of the frontier myth and the dreams that it causes – dreams of unlimited freedom and endless frontiers. Dean is indeed the cowboy "crashing"; his restless mobility leads to circular travel and lack of community, which even the sympathetic narrator Sal judges to be unfulfilling. Kerouac, as a Beat, has rejected the conformity of community in the 1950s, but in his portrayal of Dean he also seems to reject rebellious individualism; Dean's magnetic personality, though appealing, is ultimately meaningless.

Ironically, Kerouac uses mainstream mythology and comes to mainstream conclusions. The classic expression of the Beat Generation, *On the Road* is a novel about a group of Americans who have rejected mainstream American values and are in search of their own. But the novel relies on mainstream American myth and invokes the American dream of mobility to make its point. Even the Beats, a counter-cultural group, expressed their restlessness in terms of the frontier myth. The choices of the two protagonists reflect society's ambivalence in the community vs. individual debate; Sal chose to settle and Dean kept wandering.

⁴³ Charters xxix.

CHAPTER IV

THE EXPLORER-WANDERER: TO INFINITY AND BEYOND

Americans searching for new frontiers in the mid twentieth century found that outer space fit the bill. It was an outlet for adventurous spirit, but claimed ultimately domestic goals; it highlighted individuals, but for the good of the community; it was worldly success for the improvement of ordinary life. Beyond that, it provided an unexplored and unconquered place for America to explore and conquer. From the beginning, the very rhetoric surrounding space exploration capitalized on the power of the frontier myth; outer space became the "space frontier," a frontier that was described as "final," "unlimited," and "endless."

Efforts to cross the frontiers of space began in earnest in the late 1950s when, in response to the launch of the Soviet satellite *Sputnik*, President Eisenhower established the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to develop a space program. But it was President Kennedy who made the most effective use of the power of the frontier myth in motivating the American people. He benefited from it politically, tapping into what was at the heart of the American spirit, and using it to raise support for his campaign. In his nomination acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in 1960, Kennedy used frontier rhetoric to appeal to and to challenge Americans:

For I stand tonight facing west on what was once the last frontier. From the lands that stretch three thousand miles behind me, the pioneers of old gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build a new world here in the West. They were not the captives of their own doubts, the prisoners of their own price tags. Their motto was not "every man for himself"--but "all for the common cause." They were determined

to make that new world strong and free, to overcome its hazards and its hardships, to conquer the enemies that threatened from without and within...

But I tell you the New Frontier is here, whether we seek it or not. Beyond that frontier are the uncharted areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered pockets of ignorance and prejudice, unanswered questions of poverty and surplus. It would be easier to shrink back from that frontier, to look to the safe mediocrity of the past, to be lulled by good intentions and high rhetoric--and those who prefer that course should not cast their votes for me, regardless of party.⁴⁴

Theodore Sorenson, JFK's number one policy advisor during his eight years in the Senate and three in the White House, has collected some of Kennedy's speeches and writings in his book "*Let the Word Go Forth*". In his section entitled "The New Frontier," Sorenson presents statements dealing with the restoration of economic growth, the exploration of space, the fight for civil rights, and the promotion of the arts. Certainly Kennedy's vision of the New Frontier, as he described it in the previous excerpt, encompassed all of these subjects. However, after his acceptance speech, Kennedy only used the frontier metaphor explicitly when talking about "the uncharted areas of science and space."

Although the Cold War provided the most impetus for the space program, Kennedy's rhetoric also helped gain support for the space program. Kennedy often spoke about the program using the language of the frontier myth, using the power of mythological language to help gain the support of the American public for his expensive agenda. As Kennedy himself pointed out, the space budget tripled in the 18 months

⁴⁴John F. Kennedy. Address Accepting the Democratic Party Nomination for the Presidency of the United States. Memorial Coliseum, Los Angeles. July 15, 1960.

from Jan 1961 to September 1962, and at that point it was greater than the space budget of the previous eight years combined.⁴⁵ Speaking at Rice University in Houston in 1962, President Kennedy described the space frontier as “the vast stretches of the unknown and the unanswered and the unfinished...the opening vistas...one of the greatest adventures of all time.” He reminded his listeners of their heroic ancestors who forged the new frontiers in America: “But this city of Houston, the state of Texas, this country of the United States, were not built by those who waited and rested and wished to look behind them. This country was conquered by those who moved forward – and so will space {sic}.”⁴⁶

While Kennedy mentioned many benefits of space exploration, among the most compelling motivations in his mind seemed to be influence, power, and bragging rights. He argues:

Yet the vows of this nation can only be fulfilled if we in this nation are first, and therefore, we intend to be first...and to become the world's leading space-faring nation.

But why, some say, the moon? ...And they may well ask, why climb the highest mountain? Why, thirty-five years ago, fly the Atlantic? Why does Rice play Texas?

We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade, and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard...

Many years ago the great British explorer George Mallory, who was to die on Mount Everest, was asked why did he want to climb it. He said, “Because it's there.”

Well, space is there, and we're going to climb it, and the moon and the planets are there, and new hopes for knowledge and peace are there. And therefore, as we set sail, we ask God's blessing on the most

⁴⁵Theodore Sorenson. “Let the Word Go Forth” – The Speeches, Statements, and Writings of John F. Kennedy 1947-1963. (NY: Delacorte Press, 1988) 179.

⁴⁶Sorenson, 176-177.

hazardous and dangerous and the greatest adventure on which man has ever embarked.⁴⁷

Kennedy's hyperbole and reinvention of manifest destiny clearly evoked yearnings associated with America's frontier heritage. Indeed, he liked especially to use frontier rhetoric when speaking to Texans. In his remarks at the dedication of the Aerospace Medical Health Center in San Antonio, President Kennedy began by defining the new frontier as, "this nation's place in history...It is a time for pathfinders and pioneers. I have come to Texas today to salute an outstanding group of pioneers...And in the new frontier of outer space, while headlines may be made by others in other places, history is being made every day by the men and women of the Aerospace Medical Center."⁴⁸ And in remarks drafted for delivery to the Texas Democratic State Committee in the Municipal Auditorium of Austin on November 22, 1963, Kennedy wrote, "The United States has no intention of finishing second in outer space...This is still a daring and dangerous frontier; and there are those who would prefer to turn back or to take a more timid stance. But Texans have stood their ground on embattled frontiers before, and I know you will help us see this battle through..."⁴⁹ By casting Americans who furthered the goals of the space program as the archetypal frontier heroes, Kennedy validated their roles and gave them mythical importance.

Though Kennedy honored the "behind-the-scenes" people as heroes, the nation as a whole was caught up in hero-worship of the astronauts. Often skeptical about the

⁴⁷ Sorenson, 178-180.

⁴⁸ John F. Kennedy. Remarks at the Dedication of the Aerospace Medical Health Center. San Antonio. November 21, 1963.

⁴⁹ John F. Kennedy. Remarks Intended for Delivery to the Texas Democratic State Committee. Municipal Auditorium, Austin. November 22, 1963.

reality of UFOs or Martians, Americans did take their astronauts seriously. Boy Scouts in the 1960s, for example, received autographed pictures of astronauts along with their merit badges. In *The Right Stuff* (1979) Tom Wolfe describes the inner world of the early astronauts. His engaging narrative details the beginning of the space program through the last of the Mercury flights in the mid-1960s, and pointedly emphasizes the less positive aspects of space training that the media at the time neglected to portray. The training program took the men away from their families almost completely. The early astronauts were elevated to hero-status more by virtue of their public relations skills than because of superior mastery of flight and navigation.

Wolfe describes the camaraderie at the navy base in Jacksonville, Florida, where many of the astronauts were trained to fly before the birth of the space program, as intimate and competitive. To make it to the top of the class required “the right stuff,” an unspeakable mixture of courage, moxie, and “righteousness”. “The idea was to prove at every foot of the way up that pyramid that you were one of the elected and anointed ones who had *the right stuff* and could move higher and higher and even –ultimately, God willing, one day, – that you might be able to join that special few at the very top, that elite who had the capacity to bring tears to men’s eyes, the very Brotherhood of the Right Stuff itself.”⁵⁰ For a career Navy pilot, there was a 23% probability of death in an aircraft accident and a 56% probability of at some point being ejected and parachuted down, a dangerous procedure often resulting in serious injury.

⁵⁰ Tom Wolfe. *The Right Stuff*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979) 24.

The same sort of unspoken code existed among the new astronauts, but they had to learn all new rules for climbing to the top of the pyramid. Now, more than courage and skill in flight, it was patriotism, religious devotion, psychological health, and skill at press conferences that were required. Many of the top pilots decided against volunteering for the space program at the beginning of Project Mercury because they believed it would be “a ridiculous waste of talent; they would just become ‘Spam in a can’”.⁵¹ And in fact, the much-celebrated first Mercury flight, with Alan Shepard on board but not behind the controls, was a repeat of a flight that had been accomplished a few weeks earlier with a monkey, and it was less of a breakthrough than the Russians’ most recent orbital flight. Regardless, Shepard was an instant national hero on par with Lindbergh, and his successful flight inspired Kennedy with confidence in the space program. Twenty days after Shepard’s flight, Kennedy announced to Congress his goal, “before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth”.⁵² Wolfe suggests, “The truth was that the fellows had now become the personal symbols not only of America’s Cold War struggle with the Soviets but also of Kennedy’s own political comeback. They had become *the* pioneers of the New Frontier”.⁵³ Like the old pioneers, they often had to leave their families behind.

The training may have been more grueling for the families of the astronauts than for the men themselves. The women, military wives, were accustomed to being uprooted and to the unofficial “Military Wife’s Compact,” which included all kinds of

⁵¹ Wolfe 78.

⁵² Wolfe 272.

⁵³ Wolfe 275.

sacrifice. In addition to bravely handling death and the constant possibility of death, wives accepted long periods of separation. While the first seven astronauts were in training, they usually spent their weekends at the Cape, unaccompanied by family. Weekends at the Cape, after 10-12 hours of “flying” in the simulator, would consist of “Drinking and Driving,” and “young juicy girls with stand-up jugs and full sprung thighs...”⁵⁴ Turning a blind eye to these activities was just another part of the wives’ unspoken contract.

Pulitzer Prize winner Susan Faludi reflects on the role of the astronaut as hero, providing a concise description of what Wolfe goes to great detail to portray in his book:

The astronaut served as an emblem in many matters preoccupying cold-war America: beating the Russians, demonstrating national mastery, wedding technology to progress, proving the power of man over machine. But paramount among his symbolic roles, he was to be the masculine avatar for a strange and distinctly new realm on earth...The astronauts were billed as reincarnations of Daniel Boone, setting out across a new wilderness to inhabit virgin lands. But their manifest destiny, it seems, was to travel in media space and open up a new entertainment age.⁵⁵

The astronauts, little more than passengers and posterboys, were the heroes of America’s new frontier.

Twenty-four billion dollars and eight years after Kennedy’s first proclamation of the goal to reach the moon, the goal was achieved. The US reached the moon having achieved some real practical benefits from this expanded scientific knowledge. But perhaps more importantly, the nation had accomplished what Kennedy set out to do in

⁵⁴ Wolfe 164, 167.

⁵⁵Susan Faludi. *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1999) 452.

the first place -- to conquer for conquering's sake and to feed the national need for adventure and heroes. It is true that the moon-landing project also served as a stimulus for the faltering economy, and that it provided substantial benefits to the military and national defense efforts. However, other projects could have made different, perhaps better, use of the twenty-four billion in improving the economy and military strategy; only putting an American on the moon satisfied our national pride and our need for adventure. We could not bear to watch the Soviets play what we believed was our role; we (not the Soviets) were the nation of cowboy/astronauts who individually explored and conquered all new frontiers for the good of the community. Over and over again, frontier rhetoric was used to motivate Americans to back the space program. Landing men on the moon fulfilled the needs that the frontier myth recognized: exploration, independence, and community.

So, in effect, the changes wrought on American culture by the space race were also indirect effects of the frontier myth. Americans had a need for heroes through whom they could vicariously satisfy the lust for adventure and exploration -- heroes who could reassure them that the goals of individuality and community were not, after all, at odds with each other. In the same way that the new heroes of the space frontier were more iconic than actual, the space frontier itself was more symbolic than practical. The country stroked its national pride, but didn't actually set up any settlements on the moon. Clearly, the western frontier was actually much more important in the shaping of America than the "endless" frontier of outer space has so far proved to be.

Even if the astronauts, more important as heroes of the media than as conquering heroes, were not far different from Whyte's Organization man, President Kennedy knew that the nation needed strong individual heroes. Though he often used frontier rhetoric to unify the nation as a community with one goal ("This is a daring and dangerous frontier... Let us stand together with renewed confidence in our cause..."), Kennedy recognized the importance of individualism.⁵⁶ In his book *Profiles in Courage* (1956), Kennedy values the individual over the community, and casts that strong individual in the same role that the frontier hero often played; the individual departs with community for the good of the community, and breaks new ground.

In *Profiles in Courage*, Kennedy clearly states that strong individualism is necessary for the survival of the community. He offers sketches of men who had the courage, on matters of personal principle, to defy overwhelming majorities of voters and risk censure. For example, he praises Lucius Lamar, the southerner who took the first step of reconciliation between North and South, and John Quincy Adams and Edmund Ross, both of whom broke with their parties to fight for broader principles. He argues that the courageous and moral politician is not the politician who follows party principle or the wishes of his constituents, and neither is it the politician concerned about the "public good." Rather surprisingly, the courageous politician is the one who is motivated by his own self-love. As Kennedy explains it:

What then caused the statesmen mentioned in the preceding pages to act as they did? It was not because they "loved the public better than

⁵⁶ John F. Kennedy. Remarks Intended for Delivery to the Texas Democratic State Committee. Municipal Auditorium, Austin. November 22, 1963.

themselves.” On the contrary it was precisely because they did *love themselves* – because each one’s need to maintain his own respect for himself was more important to him than his popularity with others...because his faith that *his* course was the best one, and would ultimately be vindicated, outweighed his fear of public reprisal.⁵⁷

It’s fairly surprising to find that Kennedy, writing in the fifties, casts as heroes men who valued individualism over community. Americans in the nineteen fifties are generally characterized as striving more to fit in than to stand out, but Kennedy honors the non-conformists. These men, Kennedy suggests, by their uncompromising individualism, broke new ground politically and morally for the country.

Whether the explorer-wanderer of the space frontier had the “right stuff” of those honored in *Profiles in Courage* or were little more than Faludi’s “space-age equivalent of pinup girls,” they proved captivating symbols of Kennedy’s promise of a “new frontier”. Like the mythical heroes of the old west, the astronauts served to reconcile the American desire for unfettered individualism and the cause of national unity.

⁵⁷ John F. Kennedy. *Profiles in Courage* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956) 250-251.

CHAPTER V

THE OBSERVER-WANDERER: LOOKING FOR AMERICA

While Kerouac had challenged the optimistic conclusions of the frontier myth, Kennedy's rhetoric called to mind the most classic and positive version of the frontier myth. Other writers in the fifties and sixties fell somewhere in between Kerouac and Kennedy, displaying an ambivalent attitude towards wanderlust. Though proud of their insatiable wanderlust, many of these writers also recognized the sacrifices that wanderlust requires, including a disconnectedness from community.

In the memoirs and other writings of men like Mark Edmonds, Peter Jenkins, Charles Kuralt, William Least Heat Moon, Robert Pirsig, and John Steinbeck, wanderlust is described in its purest form, as a simple but strong longing for the road. They attribute different causes to their restlessness, but all of them describe a desire to "see" America, or to know America. Their sentiment is reminiscent of the lover's words in Simon and Garfunkle's song "America":

"Cathy," I said as we boarded a greyhound in Pittsburgh
 "Michigan seems like a dream to me now.
 It took me four days to hitchhike from Saginaw
 I've gone to look for America."

These men's experiences traveling, looking for America, also poignantly reveal truths about themselves. As they search for the true nature of the country, they also search for their own identities and attempt to find a balance between the individual and communal values. Their findings often reflect the same sadness that the last verse of the Simon and Garfunkle song suggests:

“Cathy, I’m lost,” I said, though I knew she was sleeping.
 “I’m empty and aching and I don’t know why
 Counting the cars on the New Jersey Turnpike
 They’ve all gone to look for America.”⁵⁸

Unlike the explorer-wanderer looking for the next national frontier, or the aimless wanderer who had often given up on a search for meaning, the observer-wanderer is looking for meaning. He wants to see what is there, and understand it, and these desires along with wanderlust compel him to keep moving.

One of the most colorful wanderers, Mark “Tiger” Edmonds is now a professor of English at St. Leo College in Florida. In 1988 he released a cassette called “Gather ‘Round Me Riders” with four of his “epic highway motorcycle poems”. Whitehorse Press describes him as a Homer of the Highway. The poems chronicle motorcycle rides from the nineteen sixties on. In them, he describes his motivation as “migration/or just the need for goin’” and explains

The highway calls and the distance beckons.
 I chase ancient memories,
 pursue primeval passions.
 It’s gypsy nomad wanderlust,
 all in a scooter-trash fashion.⁵⁹

Edmonds also published a book, *Longrider: A Tale of Just Passing Through*, which details his experiences on the road, from his first motorcycle in 1951 to his present-day rides. Writing in a conversational, informal style, Edmonds explains, “People who ride motorcycles are, for the most part, pretty individualistic...most of

⁵⁸ Paul Simon and Art Garfunkle, “America.” Rec.1968. *Simon and Garfunkel Collected Works* (Columbia Records, 1990)

⁵⁹ Mark K. Tiger Edmonds, “Literature of the American Road.” www.billdudley.com/litroad.html March 21 2003.

them are loners of one kind or another.”⁶⁰ Edmond’s restlessness keeps him from remaining in any community for too long. When he does go home, he doesn’t go happily. “An hour later I was back home. I had come to the end of my journey, but my soul still longed to fly. And as I unloaded my ride in the soft moonlight, I was real glad I was by myself so no one could see me cry. Some of us belong to be nomads, allowed to run wild and free.”⁶¹ Though his journeys are strongly individualistic, he writes for a community of readers, and on his website he writes, “Literature of the American Road is about America over the years and along the way.”⁶² His suggestion that understanding America is related to understanding the road is an oft-repeated one.

When Peter Jenkins graduated from college and separated from his wife in 1973, he wanted to buy a motorcycle and ride it from the northern tip of Alaska to the southernmost tip of South America. After exploring his options, he decided instead to walk across America with his dog Cooper, explaining to the curious that he wanted “To get to know the country.”⁶³ He wrote and published the first part of his story a few years later in *A Walk Across America*. Following the advice of an editor at National Geographic who said “The more time you spend with the people out there, the better you will get to know them and America,” Jenkins moved slowly across the country.⁶⁴

His goals were more complex than just getting to know the country – although certainly that would be complex enough in itself. Seeking to fill up a “hollowness”

⁶⁰ Mark K. Edmonds. *Longrider*. (Livingston, AL: Livingston Press, 1998) 11.

⁶¹ Edmonds, *Longrider* 161.

⁶² Edmonds, “Literature of the American Road.”

⁶³ Peter Jenkins. *A Walk Across America*. (NY: William Morrow and Co., 1979) 12.

⁶⁴ Jenkins 52.

inside of him, Jenkins decided, “It was up to me to search and sift out the answers that I was now so determined to find.”⁶⁵ His search for meaning had led to separation, and eventually, divorce, from his wife, and his desire to be alone seemed founded in a belief that he had to make his discoveries on his own.

Several times Jenkins links true freedom with being alone and independent. After leaving his family, he says, “The elation of finally being alone was total. We [Jenkins and Cooper] walked straight west. I had everything I needed in the world resting on my shoulders, and the entire country waiting to be discovered” (55). Jenkins seems to believe that finding personal life meaning is an individualistic process; for him, it is inextricably linked to understanding America and to understanding it through the road. Though he speaks slightly cynically about his generation’s belief that they were “space-age pioneers, forming our own world, and didn’t need help from anyone,” the description actually fits his vision of himself quite well.⁶⁶

Charles Kuralt’s travels spanned not just North America, but the whole world. He explains that his main motivation for taking the job CBS offered him as a correspondent in 1957 was the promise of travel. His wanderlust (“I was drunk with travel,” he writes, “dizzy with the import of it”) led eventually to a broken marriage, but at the time the thing he valued most was the green air travel card that let him go anywhere in the world.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Jenkins 16.

⁶⁶ Jenkins 19.

⁶⁷ Charles Kuralt. *A Life on the Road*. (NY: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1990) 63.

Kuralt's wanderlust began early. "Before I was born, I went on the road," he writes, and at the age of fifteen he took off with a buddy on his first road trip across the States, driving with a fake license. It wasn't until years later that he realized that his individualistic need to travel had forced him to sacrifice other things. He writes,

There is no contentment on the road, and little enough fulfillment. I know that know. I am acquainted with people who live settled lives and find deep gratification in family and home. I know what I have missed, the birthdays and anniversaries, the generations together at the table, the pleasures of kinship, the rituals of the hearth.

And still I wander, seeking compensation in unforeseen encounters and unexpected sights, in sunsets, storms, and passing fancies. I long ago exasperated those closest to me. I beg their forgiveness for all the experiences we didn't have at home together. It's too late for me to put down roots and join the rotary.⁶⁸

Apologetic but unrepentant, Kuralt still loves the road, even at the sacrifice of community.

Characters on popular television shows took to the road too. In CBS's hour long "Route 66," which played from 1960-1964, two young men drove around the U.S. in a 1960 Corvette convertible looking for adventure and enlightenment, and hoping to discover America. "Then Came Bronson," which aired on NBC from 1969-1970, starred Michael Parks as motorcyclist Jim Bronson. Bronson was an ex-newspaperman who, after witnessing the suicide of a friend, decided to quit the rat race, simplify, see the country, and reevaluate his own life. These are only two of several popular shows during the fifties and sixties that highlighted male characters who traveled rootlessly.

Probably the most well known chronicler of America as seen on the road in the sixties is John Steinbeck. With few exceptions, reviews and criticisms of Steinbeck's

⁶⁸ Kuralt 11.

late works, *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962) and *America and Americans* (1966), have been negative or dismissive.⁶⁹ Such assessments underlie a bigger premise that during the last decades of Steinbeck's life his creative work steadily declined. Subsequently, some scholars have defended not only the importance of these works, but also their literary significance.⁷⁰ Steinbeck's two studies of America are of supreme importance in understanding the importance of mobility to Americans in the sixties. *Travels with Charley* recounts Steinbeck's three-month, ten thousand mile, thirty-four state tour of America, and his impressions of the country and its people. One of his many purposes for the journey was to re-acquaint himself with a country he felt he had lost touch with living in New York city. *America and Americans*, in many ways a pastiche of Steinbeck's thoughts over the years about the nation, is a series of essays that often say explicitly what was hinted at in *Travels with Charley*.

Steinbeck's conclusions in *Travels with Charley* are sometimes contradictory. He states boldly, "The American identity is an exact and provable thing."⁷¹ However, when he gets around to explaining that identity he is at a loss, saying, "I came on this trip to try to learn something of America. Am I learning anything? If I am, I don't know what it is," and "But the more I inspected this American image, the less sure I became of what it is. It appeared to me increasingly paradoxical..."⁷² One of the most important paradoxes he examines is the relationship between mobility and rootedness. He

⁶⁹ For example, see Peter Lisca's *The Wide World of John Steinbeck*. (1958)

⁷⁰ For example, see Roy S. Simmonds.

⁷¹ John Steinbeck. *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*. (NY: Penguin Press, 1962) 210.

⁷² Steinbeck, *Travels* 139, 244.

examines the conflicting impulses in himself, in the people he meets, in cultural trends, and as an historic heritage.

The book begins with an eloquent description of wanderlust, his lifelong “itch” discouraged by more “mature” people. Steinbeck writes:

Four hoarse blasts of a ship’s whistle still raise the hair on my neck and set my feet to tapping. The sound of a jet, an engine warming up, even the clopping of shod hooves on pavement brings on the ancient shudder, the dry mouth and vacant eye, the hot palms and the churn of stomach high up under the rib cage. In other words, I don’t improve; in further words, once a bum always a bum. I fear the disease is incurable. I set this matter down not to instruct others but to inform myself.

When the virus of restlessness begins to take possession of a wayward man, and the road away from Here seems broad and straight and sweet, the victim must first find in himself a good and sufficient reason for going...⁷³

Writing about wanderlust as a “virus,” Steinbeck seems little inclined to seek a cure.

Later in his travels Steinbeck affirms, “I was born lost and take no pleasure in being found.”⁷⁴ At the same time he openly admits to a desire for home, and at points on his journey his restless excitement melts into loneliness. Even before leaving, Steinbeck admits, “my warm bed and comfortable house grew increasingly desirable and my dear wife incalculably precious.”⁷⁵ And before he makes his way home, in his exhaustion and homesickness the road becomes “an endless stone ribbon, the hills obstructions, the trees green blurs, the people simply moving figures with heads but no faces.”⁷⁶

⁷³ Steinbeck, *Travels* 3-4.

⁷⁴ Steinbeck, *Travels* 70.

⁷⁵ Steinbeck, *Travels* 19.

⁷⁶ Steinbeck, *Travels* 275.

Steinbeck travels in Rocinante, a made to order and specially equipped truck named after Don Quixote's horse. He travels with Charley, an aging French poodle. The unique truck and the dog both serve as conversation starters in many of his interactions with the people he meets on the road. One storeowner who helped stock Rocinante with drinks, on seeing the truck asked,

"You going in that?"

"Sure."

"Where?"

"All over."

And then I saw what I was to see so many times on the journey – a look of longing. "Lord! I wish I could go."

"Don't you like it here?"

"Sure. It's all right, but I wish I could go."

"You don't even know where I'm going."

"I don't care. I'd like to go anywhere."⁷⁷

Steinbeck describes similar encounters that occurred even before he left New York. When neighbors came to say good-bye, they looked enviously at Rocinante. One neighbor boy pleaded with Steinbeck to let him go along, offering to cook or do dishes in return. Steinbeck states boldly, conclusively, "I saw in their eyes something I was to see over and over in every part of the nation – a burning desire to go, to move, to get underway, anyplace, away from Here. They spoke quietly of how they wanted to go someday, to move about, free and unanchored, not toward something but away from something. I saw this look and heard this yearning everywhere in every state I visited.

⁷⁷ Steinbeck, *Travels* 25.

Nearly every American hungers to move."⁷⁸ Steinbeck's overwhelming impression of Americans is one of restlessness.

Steinbeck lists restlessness and rootlessness as causes in the growing popularity of mobile homes. Almost identical passages in *Travels with Charley* and *America and Americans* discuss mobile homes. In *America and Americans* Steinbeck writes eloquently about the importance of "home" to Americans:

On inspection, it is found that the {American} dream has little to do with reality in American life. Consider the dream of and the hunger for home. The very word can reduce nearly all of my compatriots to tears...The dream home is a permanent seat, not rented but owned...Many thousands of these homes are built every year; built, planted, advertised, and sold – and yet, the American family rarely stays in one place for more than five years...Right away the house is not big enough, or in the proper neighborhood. Or perhaps suburban life palls, and the family moves to the city, where excitement and convenience beckon.

Some of these movements back and forth seem to me a result of just pure restlessness...⁷⁹

Mobile homes, Steinbeck concludes, have flourished because they offer "the symbol home and mobility at the same time."⁸⁰ In mobile homes, one of the paradoxes of the American dream is, ostensibly, solved. *Travels with Charley* offers specific stories that support Steinbeck's broad premise about mobile homes.

In Maine, Steinbeck spoke with a several proud owners of mobile homes. He questioned one father intently. Was he worried about his children growing up rootless? The father laughed his question off: "'How many people today have what you are

⁷⁸ Steinbeck, *Travels* 10.

⁷⁹ John Steinbeck. *America and Americans and Selected Nonfiction*. Ed. Susan Shillinglaw and Jackson Benson. (NY: Penguin Books, 2002) 332-333.

⁸⁰ Steinbeck, *America* 334.

talking about? What roots are there in an apartment twelve floors up?"⁸¹ He goes on to compare the concept of "roots" in America to the concept of roots that his Italian ancestors had, who lived in the same house for "maybe a thousand years." His father cut those roots to come to America in hopes of a more prosperous life. "'Don't you miss some kind of permanence?'" Steinbeck asked, and again the father claimed that in modern America, permanence is almost completely extinguished for everyone.

Mulling over this conversation, Steinbeck concludes that mobility is a part of America's history and heritage. He asks,

Could it be that Americans are a restless people, a mobile people, never satisfied with where they are as a matter of selection? The pioneers, the immigrants who peopled the continent, were the restless ones in Europe. The steady rooted ones stayed home and are still there. But every one of us, except the Negroes forced here as slaves, are descended from the restless ones, the wayward ones who were not content to stay at home.⁸² Wouldn't it be unusual if we had not inherited this tendency? And the fact is that we have.⁸³

In his meditations, Steinbeck ultimately concludes that, not just for Americans, but perhaps for all humans, the deep psychic need for roots is actually not as strong as the hunger to be somewhere else.

Steinbeck views American mobility not as a negative characteristic, but as a redemptive characteristic. At the end of *America and Americans*, Steinbeck claims that

⁸¹ Steinbeck, *Travels* 100.

⁸² Steinbeck's exclusion of the slaves from the genetic American restlessness is affirmed by cultural output from other sources. Alex Haley's *Roots* (1974) deals with blacks forcefully uprooted from their African homes. Black luminaries like W.E.B. DuBois and Stokely Carmichael chose to spend their final years in the African homeland. Sidney Portier's directorial debut, *Buck and the Preacher* (1972), tells the story of freed slaves seeking a new home in which to settle in the west.

⁸³ Steinbeck, *Travels* 103-104.

despite the problems that plague the nation, a restless desire for change will lead Americans to their salvation. He concludes, "Far larger experiences are open to our restlessness – the fascinating unknown is everywhere. How will Americans act and react to a new set of circumstances for which new rules must be made?...I believe that our history, our experience in America, has endowed us for the change that is coming. We have never sat still for long; we have never been content with a place, a building – or with ourselves."⁸⁴ Restlessness that leads to change, Steinbeck believes, is a good thing.

In *Travels with Charley*, Steinbeck is concerned by the lack of strong individual convictions among those he meets. He berates standardization, mass production, sameness, and the plastic and sterile quality of almost everything he encounters. Just as food and hotel rooms are tasteless and without character, he fears many people have lost their individuality. His findings reflect those of William Whyte, whose "Organization man" loses individuality in order to become like the other businessmen who surround him. For example, Steinbeck describes a waitress with a "sponge off apron" who is neither happy nor unhappy; "she wasn't anything," he says.⁸⁵ In an uncleaned but unoccupied hotel room he examines the remains of a visitor he names "Lonesome Harry," who is "not unique," but rather, a member of a large class of Americans.⁸⁶ Lonesome Harry, he concludes, was on a business trip, and was insecure, joyless, lonesome, and predictable.

⁸⁴ Steinbeck, *America* 402.

⁸⁵ Steinbeck, *Travels* 46.

⁸⁶ Steinbeck, *Travels* 117.

Steinbeck refers to discussing these concerns with a friend, a “highly respected political reporter.” Steinbeck’s friend opines that the lack of personality and character in Americans relates to a lack of courage. “If anywhere in your travels you come on a man with guts, mark the place,” his friend says. “I want to go see him. I haven’t seen anything but cowardice and expediency. This used to be a nation of giants. Where have they gone? You can’t defend a nation with a board of directors. That takes men. Where are they?”⁸⁷ Echoing Kennedy in *Profiles in Courage*, Steinbeck concludes that convictions must accompany restlessness for positive change to occur.

In summary, many people hit the road in the fifties and sixties in order to see America and to learn about themselves. The fact that so many people seem to assume that the best way to know America is to set off individually to travel across the States by foot, motorcycle, car, or bus rather than by settling in a community and understanding it, suggests that many Americans held a romanticized notion of the wanderer. The wanderers themselves, as Kuralt admitted, often found that their lack of rootedness required sacrifices; but as Steinbeck pointed out, for many Americans the freedom of mobility held out glorious promises.

⁸⁷ Steinbeck, *Travels* 168.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS: STILL WANDERING

Recently *U.S. News and World Report* described the discovery of a new gene potentially linked to restlessness in humans. “A gene variant linked to ADHD is also the most common in people whose ancestors migrated long distances,” the article states, calling the gene variant the “rambling gene”.⁸⁸

Author Dave Eggers, whose first novel was a national bestseller, recently published his second work, *You Shall Know Our Velocity* (2002).⁸⁹ It tells the story of two young men who travel around the world after the death of a close friend, trying to find meaning for their lives in mobility.

And a few weeks ago the space shuttle *Columbia* disintegrated in space minutes away from its return to earth, and the seven astronauts it carried were killed. The cause of the event is still unknown. In President George W. Bush’s address at the memorial for the *Columbia*’s crew, he affirmed the fact that the space program will continue. “To leave behind earth and air and gravity is an ancient dream of humanity,” he stated. “This cause of exploration and discovery is not an option we choose.”⁹⁰

Clearly, the appeal of wanderlust hasn’t diminished much for Americans since the fifties and sixties. Restlessness, rootlessness, and the conflict between individual and community values remain important themes for Americans. The impact of the frontier

⁸⁸ Emily Sohn. “The gene that wouldn’t sit still.” *U.S. News & World Report*. August 19 2002. 50-51.

⁸⁹ Dave Eggers. *You Shall Know Our Velocity*. (San Francisco: McSweeney’s, 2002)

⁹⁰ George W. Bush. Address at the Memorial for the crew of the *Columbia*. February 5 2002.

on American history has, as Frederick Jackson Turner claimed, been great, and Americans continue to seek new frontiers. The frontier myth still leads them to explore with the hope of reconciling seemingly irreconcilable goals of the individual and community.

In the fifties and sixties, one of the ways the frontier myth played out was in a glorification of the wandering hero. Kerouac challenged the frontier myth, showing that the conflict between community and individual is not mystically resolvable. His wandering hero, Dean, was both glorified and critiqued for his wandering. The narrator Sal, styled after Kerouac himself, ultimately chose community while the aimless wanderer Dean continued to live out his alienation from that same community. Frontier rhetoric was used to describe the first astronauts as frontier heroes, turning them into larger than life characters. And despite the demonstrated impotence and the sometimes-cyclical travel of the wandering hero, many Americans, as Steinbeck showed, still held a romanticized notion of the wanderer, believing that truth about their world and themselves could be found on the road.

Studying expressions of wanderlust in the fifties and sixties reveals that none of the new frontiers explored in those decades was equal in scope or import to the original western frontier, and there was a corresponding difference in the importance of the frontier hero. While Americans still glorified the wandering hero, like Kerouac's Dean, they also recognized a regrettable aspect to his disconnectedness from community. Gogi Grant's recording of the song "The Wayward Wind," #1 on the charts for eight weeks in 1956, describes a man who is "next of kin to the wayward wind." He is a "slave" to his

wandering, and has left the singer with a broken heart.⁹¹ Gordon Lightfoot's recording of "Carefree Highway" (1974) looked to the road for fulfillment: "I guess it must be wanderlust or trying to get free./ From the good old faithful feeling we once knew./ Carefree highway, let me slip away on you./ Carefree highway, you've seen better days."⁹² Though the lyrics still romanticized the road, they also recognize that being on the road means a disconnect from community, and the lyrics even point out that the glorified road has seen better days.

This change in attitude is even more clearly illustrated by comparing the wandering heroes in two movies: *Cimarron* (1931) and the *Lonely Are the Brave* (1962). *Cimarron*, based on Edna Ferber's best-selling novel (1930), tells the story of the pioneering couple Yancey and Sabra Cravat, who settle in 1889 in the newly opened Indian territory in Oklahoma. Yancey wants to keep moving, and exclaims to his wife, "Five years in one place? That's the longest stretch I've ever done!" When the Kid, a rootless outlaw Yancey used to ride with, shows up in town, Yancey is forced to enforce the law and kill him. However, the run-in reminds Yancey of a life that he misses. Meanwhile, Mrs. Cravat has started a woman's club in town. But when the Cherokee land opens in 1893, Yancey leaves her, arguing that every new place is "a new empire...a chance of a lifetime. Sugar, if we all took root and squatted there'd never be any new country."

⁹¹ Gogi Grant. "The Wayward Wind," rec. 1956. *Gogi Grant: Her Very Best*. Varese Records, 2002.

⁹² Lightfoot, Gordon. "Carefree Highway." From *Sundown*. Reprise Records, 1974.

Five years later, Mrs. Cravat has had no word from Yancey, but her friend Levi assures her, "It's men like him that build the world." When Yancey does return, he likens himself to the heroic Odysseus and runs for governor. Then, a few years later, the film titles inform the viewer that, "With the fading glory of the pioneering days...Yancey, again stirred by wanderlust, had ridden away to newer fields, while Sabra carried on her work, alone." By 1929 the United States has a coast-to-coast air rail and Sabra is still out of touch with Yancey. She, actively involved in her community as always, has become a member of Congress. In the final scenes of the movie she learns that Yancey has died, sacrificing his life to save others at an oil field. On the field, a co-worker describes him as "just an old drifter." Finally, we see a memorial statue of Yancey being raised, honoring his pioneering work.

No aspect of Yancey's wanderlust in *Cimarron* is portrayed as regrettable or sad. His wife, though she misses him, recognizes the value and necessity of what he is doing, and has no resentment. Yancey is honored for his pioneering work across the nation. In the movie, his work has even more value, apparently, than Sabra's commitment to her community; it is a statue of Yancey, the restless wanderer, not Sabra, the committed servant, that is erected.

The wandering hero Kirk Douglas plays in *Lonely Are the Brave* experiences the same compulsion to wander that Yancey does. However, in the post-frontier life his wandering has less purpose, and he acknowledges his limitations. Yancey helped build communities and then left them; the Kirk Douglas character, Jack, just leaves. The movie opens with a shot of a vast wilderness. Jets fly across the empty sky, and then

Jack says to his horse, "It's time we took off too." The story revolves around his visit with an old flame whose husband, Paul, has just been jailed for helping illegal immigrants. He complains to her about all the fences going up across the west, and she says, "The world that you and Paul lived in doesn't exist. Maybe it never did. Out there is the real world and it has real borders and real fences...and you either go by the rules or you lose." She calls his reckless attitude immaturity.

Then, in a tender scene she admits that she still misses him, and that things didn't work out because he wanted too much. He counters,

"I didn't want enough. I didn't want a house, didn't want all those pots and pans. I didn't want anything but you. It's a good thing I didn't get you."

"Why?"

"Cause I'm a loner, kid, down deep to my very guts... A loner's a born cripple. He's crippled because the only person he can live with is himself. It's his life, the way he wants it. It's all for him. A loner can't love a woman like you – not the way you want to be loved, not the way you are loved."

In the ending scene, Jack and his horse are hit by a car crossing the road on a stormy night. An ambulance arrives, and the camera centers on Jack's cowboy hat where it has fallen in the rain on the road.

Lonely Are the Brave poignantly expresses the limitations of wanderlust and the cowboy in the modern world. Like the wandering charlatan Burt Lancaster plays in *The Rainmaker* (1956), the wandering hero chases dreams that he knows can't come true, and he doesn't know how to fit into community. The film struggles to reconcile the frontier myth with a changing world. Significantly, though the movie recognizes the limitations of the wandering hero, Kirk Douglas is clearly still the mythic hero of the

film. This struggle to fit the mythically heroic status of the wanderer into modern reality is the same struggle that Kerouac addressed in the character of Dean in *On the Road*, and even parallels the astronaut experience. The astronauts, put on just as much of a pedestal as the cowboys before them, were more darlings of the media than rugged individual explorers. Despite the struggle to fit the frontier myth into modern life, the myth is, as these examples and Steinbeck's writings show, still very much alive.

Surprisingly, expressions of wanderlust do not change in any discernible patterns from the 1950s to the 1960s. Though historians normally characterize the two decades as polar opposites, cultural output from both expresses rootless and restless sentiments, questioning the standards of the settled communities, and canonizing its wandering heroes. One of the clearest comparisons can be made between the films *The Wild One* (1953) and *Easy Rider* (1969). Both were big name motorcycle movies.

The Wild One, starring Marlon Brando as Johnny, the head of a motorcycle gang, tells the story of the gang's experience over a couple of days stuck in small town middle America. After being accused of causing a car wreck, they are detained, but decide to stay an extra day because of Brando's interest in a local girl, Kathie. He expresses his wanderlust in a conversation he has with her. She asks, "Where are you going when you leave here? Don't you know?" He answers, "Oh, man, we just gotta go...You don't go any one special place...You just go." Envious of his ability to move on whenever he wishes, Kathie tells him she knows what he means: "My father was going to take me on a fishing trip to Canada once...We didn't go."

The film presents a sympathetic picture of the disillusioned, searching motorcycle gang members, and critiques many of the small town residents. Kathie's life has been one of stultifying, small-town repression, denial, and restriction. Her father, the local sheriff, is a fake, ruled by social convention and the fear of failure or losing his job. The town as a whole is stuck in the past; the bartender doesn't know what television is. Kathie's interaction with Johnny makes her wish she was "going someplace," and could "get away."

In the final scenes of the movie the townsmen, in fear of the gang members, resort to violence to force them to leave. The sheriff, aware but afraid to interfere, sits in his office drinking. His inaction suggests the ultimate futility of the organization man, of social convention and of law. Finally the motorcycle gang roars out of town.

Easy Rider, starring Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper, and featuring Jack Nicholson in an early role, won "Best Film by a New Director" (Hopper) at the Cannes Film Festival in 1969. The plotline revolves loosely around Fonda and Hopper's characters driving motorcycles across the country with a vague goal of reaching Mardi Gras. Their interactions with people on the way critique the same kind of small-mindedness and conformity that *The Wild One* critiqued. For example, when smoking out with a hitchhiker they've picked up, they ask where he is from. "The city," he replies. "Doesn't make any difference what city. All cities are alike. That's why I'm out here."

Similarly, an alcoholic lawyer they meet (Nicholson) is angry about conformity and conservatism. He joins them and learns how to smoke grass. In a hostile diner the

next day, he explains, “They [people in the diner] aren’t scared of you. They’re scared of what you represent to them...what you represent to them is freedom...It’s real hard to be free when you are bought and sold in the marketplace.” These scared townspeople, like those in *The Wild One*, also resort to violence.

After a stoned orgy at Mardi Gras, Fonda and Hopper are back on the road, but in the country Fonda is inexplicably shot by a truckload of hicks. Hopper goes for help, but his motorcycle runs off the road. The credits roll over the scene of the empty road and smoking motorcycles. *The Wild One* and *Easy Rider*, significantly, display the same wanderlust, the same struggle to fit wandering heroes into modern society, and the same rebellion against the conformity and fear that appear to characterize the majority of Americans.

Studying wanderlust in the fifties and sixties, then, counters the generalization that the fifties were a period of contented conformity. Cultural output in both decades expresses dissatisfaction with conformity and a desire to be on the move. The post-war society, undergoing rapid change, did not let go of America’s traditional frontier mythology, but attempted to resolve it within the increasingly industrialized, mechanized, commercialized society. Despite the recognition that the old frontier hero was in some ways impotent in the new society – that his “rugged individualism” achieved no great gains for the community like the settling of the western frontier – he remained a mythically heroic figure, and can still be seen today wandering through American movies, television, music, rhetoric, and literature.

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