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Between Individual and Community: Industrial America and the Odyssey of Christopher McCandless

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In honour of Christopher McCandless

Table of Contents

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Resumo

Esta dissertação propõe uma análise da narrativa que tem sido construída à volta de Christopher McCandless em virtude do livro *Into the Wild* e a sua adaptação cinematográfica. Tentarei provar como a viagem em que embarcou no Oeste tem sido mitificada e tornada num símbolo para o americano comum que tenta encontrar a sua identidade num mundo pós-moderno. Refletindo nos paralelos estabelecidos entre McCandless e os transcendentalistas pelo autor do livro, Jon Krakauer, este projeto adota uma perspetiva holística do papel da natureza no rejuvenescimento da promessa americana, expondo desta forma as tensões entre vontade individual e responsabilidade comunitária. A tradição transcendentalista estabelecida por Ralph Waldo Emerson e Henry David Thoreau influenciou a criação de comunidades utópicas, independentes e autossustentáveis e movimentos de direitos civis ao longo dos séculos XIX e XX apesar da filosofia Emersoniana promover *self-reliance* e isolamento social. Considerando o facto de McCandless ter vivido durante um curto período de tempo numa comuna *hippie*, estabeleço continuidade entre a tradição transcendentalista e o movimento *hippie* dos anos 60. Para este propósito, comparo as críticas sociais dos *hippies* com as dos transcendentalistas e observo a intenção partilhada de recuperar um antigo conhecimento dos nativo-americanos a respeito de viver uma existência simples, deliberada e harmoniosa em comunhão com a natureza. Apelando a valores americanos que têm sido esquecidos numa sociedade progressivamente tecnocêntrica e demonstrando o encanto que a *wilderness* tem para a mente americana, a mitologização de Christopher McCandless imbui-o de simbolismo preso ao antigo *frontiersman* e ao *hippie* de mente aberta.

Palavras-chave: Christopher McCandless, Henry David Thoreau, Individualismo, Transcendentalismo, *hippies*

Abstract

This dissertation offers an analysis of the narrative that has been constructed around Christopher McCandless due to the book *Into the Wild* and its respective movie adaptation. I will attempt to prove how his journey westwards has been mythologized and turned into a symbol for the common American struggling to find his identity in a postmodern world. Reflecting on the parallels made between McCandless and the transcendentalists by the book's author, Jon Krakauer, this project will take a holistic view of the role nature plays in the rejuvenation of the American promise, thereby exposing the tensions between individual will and communal responsibility. The transcendental tradition established by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau influenced the creation of independent self-sustaining utopian communities and civil rights protests all throughout the 19th and 20th centuries in spite of the Emersonian philosophy advocating for self-reliance and isolation. Tackling the fact that McCandless had spent some time in a hippie commune, I will establish continuity between the individualistic transcendental tradition and the hippie communes of the 1960s. To this end, I compare the social critique of the hippies with that of the transcendentalists, and I point out the shared intention of recovering na ancient native American wisom in regards to living a simple, deliberate and harmonious existence in communion with nature. Appealing to American values that have been forgotten in na increasingly technocentric society, and demonstrating the charm wilderness has for the American mind, the mythologization of Christopher McCandless imbues him with symbolysm relating to the bygone frontiersman and the open-minded hippie.

Key-words: Christopher McCandless, Henry David Thoreau, Individualism, Transcendentalism, hippies

Introduction

Fleeing religious persecution from the European continent, the Puritan settlers brought to the New World their intensely Calvinistic perspectives on life. As illustrated in much of American literature, the settler faced nature, or rather, wilderness, as devilish, evil and Satanic, a wild manifestation of sin and maliciousness – and the Indian, who considered the wilderness his home, was a prime symbol of this evil. These perspectives were, of course, a result of Judeo-Christian indoctrination as well as a lingering archetypal trauma and fear of nature. Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence*, published in 2000, presents a deep history of the conflict with the Indians in American society. In his book, Slotkin attributes the Indian antagonism throughout American history to the Puritan consciousness in saying: "The strangeness of the Indian was a threat to the outer man and to Puritan society; the Indian's familiarity, his resemblance to the primitive inner man, was a threat to the Puritan's soul, his sense of himself as English, white, and Christian" (55). The Indian was simultaneously other, as well as familiar. The Puritans' complex customs and traditions contrasted heavily with the simpler and more primitive Indian, who seemed thusly symbolic of the innocent infancy of man, unpreoccupied, irresponsible and carefree. Living in the terrifying and dangerous wilderness, "[t]he Indians were emblems of external temptation to sin or of the human mind's dark impulses to sin" (40). As such, in the Indian cultures, "the Puritans saw a darkened and inverted mirror image of their own culture, of their own mind" (57). The Indian societies were, effectively, opposed to Winthrop's shining ideal, becoming "the devil's city on a hill" (57). Differentiating one's self from the Indian became the most important distinction the Anglo-American could make, and the Indian wars thus became "the unique national experience" (78).

The Puritan tradition influenced not only the prevalence of capitalism in American culture,[1] but it also gave credence to the tenets behind the concept of Manifest Destiny and the progressive conquering (and destruction) of the Frontier.

[1] Max Weber's work *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* studies the interdependent relationship between the Protestant ethic and the birth of modern capitalism. Calvinism and its respective branches, such as Puritanism, which all believed in predestination, cultivated a view that emphasized material gain and profit as a sign of God's blessing. According to Weber, this ethic sowed the seeds for modern capitalism to reap; when the latter came into existence, a lingering Puritan spirit helped bolster capitalism's grasp on the American continent. Weber argues, then, that today's American society, which views material wealth and social ascendancy within the capitalist framework as ideal, owes its existence to the Puritan tradition.

Slotkin puts it best when he argues that the colonist's fear of the wilderness and the Indian laid the foundation for a culture of violence and a myth of rebirth through violence: the first colonists saw in the newfound land "an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation", however, "the means to that regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience" (5).

As time passed, Enlightenment values seeped into the American continent, gradually displacing the fervent religiosity that took the continent by storm in the 17th century. Born in the cultural soup of the Enlightenment, America became enamoured with secular rationalism just as the Old World:

> The antimythologists of the American Age of Reason believed in the imminence of a rational republic of yeoman farmers and enlightened leaders, living amicably in the light of natural law and the Constitution. They were thereby left unprepared when the Jeffersonian republic was overcome by the Jacksonian Democracy of the western man-on-the-make […], when racist irrationalism and a falsely conceived economics prolonged and intensified slavery in the teeth of American idealism; and when like Davy Crockett became national heroes by defining national aspiration in terms of so many bears destroyed, so many land preempted, so many trees hacked down, so many Indians and Mexicans dead in the dust (5).

Slotkin here illustrates the tension between the two perspectives of progress that will be discussed later throughout this dissertation: the Enlightenment belief of the Jeffersonian republic and the technocratic belief of the Jacksonian Democracy. The Jeffersonian bureaucrat intellectual would naturally deride the frontiersman philosophy based on the survival of the fittest and uncontrolled plunder. Though he never came to saw Jacksonian Democracy or the full extent of the Frontier massacre with his own eyes, one can look at Crèvecouer perhaps as a good example of this disgust exhibited by the enlightened man. In his *Letters from an American Farmer*, specifically in the third letter, Crèvecouer would ask rhetorically: "What then is the American, this new man?" He then answers by anticipating Emerson in his call for foregoing the influences of Europe: "He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he

has embraced". Therefore, "[t]he American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions", arguing that the American farmer, the Jeffersonian yeoman, is the ideal American who embodies all the principles he had just mentioned. In the same breath, Crèvecouer would come to describe a different, utterly despisable type of American: the hunter, whom he juxtaposed with the ideal farmer. "Thus our bad people", he argues, "are those who are half cultivators and half hunters; and the worst of them are those who have degenerated altogether into the hunting state". The hunter would make even the Indian seem respectable, and his children "grow up a mongrel breed, half civilised, half savage".[2] The proximity to the wilderness has deprived the frontiersman of conventional morality and rendered him a violent savage. Even if the enlightened man claims to be bound by reason alone, he is nevertheless influenced by not only a Puritan tradition which associated the Indians with the devil but also with an archetypal fear of nature which dates back to the hunter-gatherer days of the *Homo sapiens*, as argued in Max Oelschlaeger's book *The Idea of Wilderness*, published in 1991. Crèvecouer's comparison of the hunter to the Indian is meant to be insulting on its own, but underlying it is a deep distrust of the wilderness and the Judeo-Christian desire to subdue it and transform it into farmland. Frontiersmen were no more than tools in the capitalistic pursuit of territory at the cost of human lives, but their fixation on pure wilderness represents a turning point in American history, away from the cultivated gardens and civilized farms. It is, of course, this wild man who would displace the yeoman farmer as the cultural icon of the Jacksonian Democracy as the West began to be conquered and the frontiersman lifestyle came to be romanticized. America thus gained a new appreciation for the wilderness that had come under attack ever since the fervorous evangelicals had first settled and colonized the new continent. Living in the frontier between civilization and wilderness was an experience that symbolized a journey of self-discovery and rebirth.

Frederick Jackson Turner's monumental essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" described the impact the closing of the *Frontier* in the closing decades of the 19th century had on the American imagination. With the closing of the physical frontier, Americans sought to find a new frontier to re-experience that same journey of rejuvenation. In 1960, John F. Kennedy, in his Democratic National

[2] St. John de Crèvecoeur, J. Hector. "Letters from an American Farmer." *The Avalon Project*, 1782, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/letter_03.asp [last accessed 27/07/2021].

Convention Nomination Acceptance Address, would coin the term "New Frontier", which he describes as such:

> For I stand here tonight facing west on what was once the last frontier. From the lands that stretch three thousand miles behind us, the pioneers gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build our new West. They were not the captives of their own doubts, nor the prisoners of their own price tags. They were determined to make the new world strong and free -- an example to the world, to overcome its hazards and its hardships, to conquer the enemies that threatened from within and without.
>
> Some would say that those struggles are all over, that all the horizons have been explored, that all the battles have been won, that there is no longer an American frontier. But I trust that no one in this assemblage would agree with that sentiment; for the problems are not all solved and the battles are not all won; and we stand today on the edge of a New Frontier -- the frontier of the 1960's, the frontier of unknown opportunities and perils, the frontier of unfilled hopes and unfilled threats.[3]

Kennedy's *New Frontier* was an effective rhetorical strategy to gather patriotic support for his domestic and foreign policy, but it is also emblematic of Americans' inherent desires to explore new frontiers as an opportunity to reconstruct the country following decades of war and poverty. With the physical frontier closed, the *New Frontier* became more ideological and abstract: advances in the sciences, social justice and the Space Race. In the 21st century, some consider the Internet a new frontier as well. But these abstract, intangible frontiers never sufficiently satisfy Americans' pursuit of rebirth. In the 1950s, the Beat Generation took to the road to the rediscover themselves in westward travels, and hippie communities followed soon afterwards, establishing themselves along much of the American West. Many Americans prefer this grounded approach to rejuvenation rooted in the country's tradition, and it is a worthwhile endeavour to analyse the reasons behind these retreats to more simplistic modes of existence and why Americans still seek a new physical frontier despite the emergence of these new frontiers. Since the 1800s, the last traditional physical frontier took shape in the form of Alaska, with many Americans migrating to the state in the hopes of reliving the same experience as their ancestors. Christopher McCandless is perhaps the

[3] Kennedy, John F. "The New Frontier." *American Rhetoric*, 1960, https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/jfk1960dnc.htm [last accessed 26/08/2021].

most well-known case in recent decades of an individual leaving society to live self-sufficiently in nature.

On September 6th 1992, the body of young Christopher McCandless was found decomposing on an abandoned bus, Bus 142, of the Alaskan Stampede Trail. McCandless had spent the last two years of his life tramping over the American West after taking up the moniker of Alexander Supertramp. Working low-paying jobs and surviving as a homeless man, he was gaining experience to embark in what he would call his "Alaskan odyssey", his attempt to migrate to the Alaskan bush and live simply off the land. Unfortunately, after 114 days of surviving through nothing but what he could scavenge, McCandless died; the precise cause of death is still a subject of debate.[4] The writer and journalist Jon Krakauer took an interest in the McCandless case, publishing an article on the young man in January of the following year. His interest persisted and by 1996 he had written a book biographing the young man's life, *Into the Wild*. By 2007, that same book had been adapted into the identically titled film by director Sean Penn.

In June of 2020, the peculiar Bus 142, otherwise known as the magic bus was deemed by authorities to be too dangerous to be left alone and was removed from its infamous spot in the Stampede Trail of the Alaskan wilderness. Before its removal, the hike to the magic bus had claimed two lives and forced the rescue of over fifteen more. Moved by the story of Chris McCandless reported in Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, some further overwhelmed by the powerful emotional message of Sean Penn's 2007 cinematic adaptation, pilgrims gathered seasonally around the bus in order to pay tribute to the fallen icon, the rebellious Alexander Supertramp. In 2013, Eva Holland reported on the engravings left in the bus in her article "Chasing Alexander Supertramp". One of many inside read as such: "I envy the ability you had to put this world aside and live out your dream"; a sentiment shared by many others who chose to engrave their thoughts on one of the walls of the bus or leave behind some written or artistic memento. A poem left in 2002 proclaims: "I came up here to get away / It's the last frontier they say / I came across this bus today / It's gorgeous here I think I'll

[4] While the authorities had declared officially that McCandless died of starvation, Krakauer's interest in the young boy's life led him to conduct his own investigations. In 2016, after commissioning an investigation, he concluded in his article "How Chris McCandless Died" that McCandless had died of mercury poisoning from potato seeds which McCandless' survival guidebook had neglected to mention (Krakauer, Jon. "How Chris McCandless Died." *Medium*, 2016, https://medium.com/galleys/how-chris-mccandless-died-992e6ce49410 [last accessed 26/08/2021]).

stay".[5] Those that undertook the same grand "Alaskan odyssey" did so in an attempt to discover themselves and that which could cure them of the same widespread societal ennui that McCandless himself also suffered from. But what, exactly, inspires this ritualistic pilgrimage? What about McCandless struck a chord with the hundreds risking their lives to hike to the magic bus, and with the millions that to a lesser extent emphasized with the book and movie?

McCandless' symbolic status owes a lot to Jon Krakauer and Sean Penn. The young man was merely someone who wished to take refuge from the society he felt was unnatural and oppressive, one that denied him freedom and control. In Thoreauvian fashion, he exalted the transcendental power of nature, believing that a journey to the Alaskan wilderness would permit him to find himself and grant him whichever closure he was seeking. Jon Krakauer's book *Into the Wild* tells the tale of young McCandless interspersed with not only similar stories of lone young males seeking an escape from the grasp of the capitalistic techno-industrial complex, but likewise his own experience as a young mountaineer. Krakauer takes the story and presents an allegedly unbiased report of the facts; however, through intertextuality and commentary, he managed to mythologize Christopher McCandless. Sean Penn's 2007 film goes a step beyond as the director fictionalizes his story completely through the performance of Emile Hirsch, and helps further engrave the myth of the McCandless odyssey into public consciousness. Without Krakauer and Penn, the young man would have perished in the Alaskan wilderness and remained anonymous for much of history, but through the book and the movie, Christopher McCandless has become a national name synonymous with the adventurous and self-destructive, thrill-seeking tramp who found himself lost in the wild that he cherished.

This romanticization wasn't exempt from criticism; those that criticize McCandless and his followers are not few in number. Many Alaskan locals ridiculed or pitied those undertaking the pilgrimage to the bus, especially considering the harsh terrain of the Stampede Trail. "Of all the places you could hike in Alaska…" a local had said to Eva Holland, shaking her head in disbelief. Chris' story invoked several visceral reactions from many Alaskans, especially rangers, hunters and other woodsmen. Peter Christian, a park ranger, accused him in his article "Chris McCandless from an Alaska Park Ranger's

[5] Holland, Eva. "Chasing Alexander Supertramp." *Atavist*, 2013, https://evaholland.atavist.com/chasingsupertramp [last accessed 30/09/2020].

Perspective" of being mentally ill, "stupid, tragic and inconsiderate" and of being "sadly ordinary in his disrespect for the land, the animals, the history, and the self-sufficiency ethos of Alaska, the Last Frontier".[6] His view is one shared by many Alaskans. Christian dubbed the journey that his imitators undergo as the McCandless Phenomenon: "[p]eople, nearly always young men, come to Alaska to challenge themselves against an unforgiving wilderness landscape where convenience of access and possibility of rescue are practically nonexistent". Christian's response was met with severe backlash from McCandless sympathizers, especially from director Sean Penn, who had some choice words to say to Supertramp's critics.[7] One of Christian's critics was another park ranger, Ken Ilgumas, who holds the belief in his article "Chris McCandless from Another Alaska Park Ranger's Perspective" that being severely underprepared for the Alaskan wilderness was precisely the point:

> Depriving himself of these conveniences was deliberate. McCandless knew that to travel with excessive technology is—sometimes—to not travel at all. […] McCandless wanted a test, a challenge, and—most of all—to immerse himself in nature, that one last refuge of the real in a paved-over, smoggy-skyed century.[8]

McCandless remains a very polarizing figure not only for Alaskans, but Americans in general. This is because Americans, of course, have always had a troubled relationship with wilderness. As a microcosm of this ideological tension, we can appropriately look at Alaska, wherein Alaskan citizens have long since settling tried to fight the federal government over control of the land, and to which degree the wild should be preserved or conquered.

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[6] Christian, Peter. "Chris McCandless from an Alaska Park Ranger's Perspective." 2006, http://nmge.gmu.edu/textandcommunity/2006/Peter_Christian_Response.pdf [last accessed 30/09/2020].

[7] As cited in Ken Ilgumas' article: "No, I don't object to a person who wears a brown shirt and a patch on their shoulder and follows instructions all day either. I'm not all that interested in what the park rangers have to say. I accept that there's an automatic instinct to judge those you envy and who have more courage than you do, and I think that while he (the ranger) rides around in his four-wheeler on a CB radio getting fat, Chris McCandless has spent 113 days fucking alone in the most unforgiving wilderness that God ever created" (Ilgumas, Ken. "Chris McCandless from Another Alaska Park Ranger's Perspective." *KenIlgumas.com*, 2009, http://www.kenilgunas.com/2009/10/chris-mccandless-from-another-park.html [last accessed 29/12/2020]).

[8] Ilgumas, Ken. "Chris McCandless from Another Alaska Park Ranger's Perspective." *KenIlgumas.com*, 2009, http://www.kenilgunas.com/2009/10/chris-mccandless-from-another-park.html [last accessed 29/12/2020].

In the 2014 book *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Roderick Nash describes how many Alaskans, the frontiersmen of the final frontier, feel that the dangerous and perilous wilderness should be conquered and turned into civilization, in opposition to the government which in recent decades has pushed for more environmentally conscious policies that cherish the preservation of the wild. This is precisely why the story of Christopher McCandless, an inexperienced, young outsider who explicitly rejected the idea that wilderness should be turned into civilization, struck a nerve with Alaskans, who saw his supposed disrespect of nature's merciless ferocity as an insult to Alaskan (and, more generally, American) pride; in *Into the Wild*, an Alaskan professor comments that "[…] there are plenty of other Alaskans who had a lot in common with McCandless when they first got here, too […]. Maybe McCandless reminds them a little too much of their former selves" (185), citing a perceived naïve idealism to "live off the land" that he embodied and Alaskans, or Americans in general, had long since forgotten.

Through these views we see the contrasting American perspectives not only towards McCandless but towards American nature itself: those that ruggedly face new frontiers in order to conquer them with humanity's ingenuity and technology think McCandless was foolish and reckless for allegedly being unprepared, and those that wish to return to a more peaceful and arguably primitive state of communion with the world find McCandless inspiring; either way, both mindsets represent a desire to escape from the perceived failure of modern industrial society and to start anew, and that is why many Americans have felt drawn to relocating towards uncharted and ungoverned areas throughout the country's history, either out of a desire to reshape them or to incorporate themselves into nature as it is.

In order to fully comprehend the importance of the McCandless journey to late 20th and early 21st century youth, one must journey to the past in order to analyse how Americans' views on nature have evolved, shaping the country's history, geography and politics. Then, we can look at the case of McCandless, who for all intents and purposes represents most isolated and alienated young Americans who claim to admire him, and realize how his outlook on life was shaped by a cultural tradition and debate spanning decades, one that will continue to influence many other youths seeking the same purpose in nature as he did if the cause of such alienation is not diagnosed and treated. McCandless, of course, was not the first nor the last of his kind, but owing to Krakauer and Penn's mythologization, he has become emblematic of the American condition in the postmodern world. Living in a heavily industrialized (and now, increasingly digital)

world preyed on by a capitalist superstructure that reduces human lives to commodities and third-order simulacra, recentring culture around meaningless productivity, it is no wonder many become alienated and seek a return to a perceived simpler, freer, more natural and less artificial mode of existence. Johan Raskin explains it best in his article "Calls of the Wild on the Page and Screen: From Jack London and Gary Snyder to Jon Krakauer and Sean Penn":

> Moreover, as the United States has become, increasingly, a land of malls, Prozac, and iPods, […] we need to reconnect to that sense of awe, wonder, and fear our earliest ancestors felt when they set foot on a continent that struck them as virgin wilderness (2).

Environmental critics have also shone a light on the necessity of community in order to face the problems of the world, and criticized the historical tension between individual and communal will and how individualistic and communitarian philosophies espouse different ideals for societal reform. Some Americans follow the transcendentalists and seek reform through self-improvement, hoping to espouse the same self-reliance as their idols; others, like the hippies, find comfort in coalition, and following the spiritual footsteps of farms like the Fruitlands and Brook Farm, form self-segregated communities, all utopian in essence yet widely different in approach, nevertheless united by comradery, a devotion to nature, a desire for reform and a rejection of modernity. McCandless is unique because, as an avid Thoreau follower, he had always set his goal on living self-reliantly by himself, yet nevertheless a good part of the McCandless narrative both in the book and in the film focuses on the communal experience, as despite his hermitic end, he was a sociable young man who even briefly lived in a hippie commune. As such, his experience appeals to a wide demographic of people who otherwise have radically different perspectives on the ideal mode of naturalistic living. It is important, however, to recognize and understand why communal experiments fail to capture the interest of the average American. Through McCandless, we look into a mirror that demonstrates how deeply certain individualistic views of nature are engraved into American culture and what kind of obstacles one must face if they wish to instil a communitarian spirit into the American psyche in order to face the contemporary climate crisis.

In this dissertation, I will first analyse the transcendentalist tradition and then showcase how McCandless has been fictionalized as a modern-day Henry David Thoreau. In the second chapter, drawing on the connection between McCandless and certain hippie communities, I will demonstrate how the hippie movement is the continuation of a certain strand of the transcendentalist tradition. To conclude, my aim with this dissertation is to diagnose the problems that lead Americans like McCandless to seek alternative ways of life rooted in simplistic and naturalistic living.

1. The Transcendentalism of the McCandless Phenomenon

As Krakauer himself states in his Author's Note, his book has come to tackle "the grip wilderness has on the American imagination [and] the allure high-risk activities hold for young men of a certain mind" (X), subjects which he muses over whilst reporting the story of young McCandless. The journalist argued that the journey stemmed from the lack of meaning in the youngster's life: "McCandless wasn't some feckless slacker, adrift and confused, racked by existential despair. […] His life brimmed with meaning and purpose", and he then continues, "[b]ut the meaning he wrested from existence lay beyond the comfortable path: McCandless distrusted the value of things that came easily. He demanded much of himself – more, in the end, than he could deliver" (183), because he possessed a "stubborn idealism that did not mesh readily with modern existence" (X). Krakauer has situated McCandless firmly within the transcendental tradition by describing him as a "latter-day adherent of Henry David Thoreau" (28), claiming he rode on a "giddy Emersonian high" (27) and saying he was in search of "raw, transcendent experience" (IX); he has turned the real-life figure into a symbol, one which he utilizes to establish a dialectical relationship between the way in which nature was experienced before and the way in which those like McCandless sought to (and perhaps are unable to) experience it. From the outset, Krakauer likens "dreamers and misfits, people who think the unsullied enormity of the Last Frontier will patch all the holes in their lives" (4) with the young tramp; he will repeatedly universalize the McCandless experience by converting the figure into a symbol of a tradition of idealistic dreamers with their eyes on nature.

While Krakauer aligns McCandless with both Emerson and Thoreau, I feel there's a significant difference between Transcendentalism's biggest icons that needs be addressed, a difference that leads me to more appropriately side McCandless with the Thoreauvian, rather than the Emersonian tradition. In order to make this distinction, I must first properly lay out the differences between the two philosophers alongside the significant disagreements in their modes of thought.

1.1. The Idea of Progress in the United States

Perhaps the most important clarification one needs to make in regards to Ralph Waldo Emerson, commonly seen as the founder of Transcendentalism, and his

philosophy is this: he saw nature not as God incarnate but as a gateway for introspection, for the betterment of the soul. Even though Emerson faced nature as an emanation of God, so too were human beings collectively divine through the Over-Soul. As Emerson says in "Nature": "I am part or particle of God". Many critics classify Emerson's Transcendentalism as pantheistic, but it is important to dispel this assessment. Emerson was, instead, panentheistic since he adds to the immanence of God a layer of transcendence; in other words, for Emerson, the "Supreme Being" can be both present in all things and sit atop the universe on a higher state of divinity. I point to the paternal role Emerson gives God in *Nature*, as well as the title of "Creator" he gives Him, signalling his belief in intelligent design: "we learn that man has access to the entire mind of the Creator, is himself the creator in the finite". Emerson, too, separates God from the world and "the body of man", calling them in the same breath "remoter and inferior incarnation[s] of God, a projection of God in the unconscious". In nature, humans can realize their own divinity and power of creation, witness to "the present expositor of the divine mind",[9] but God nonetheless transcends humanity's own potential for divinity. Emerson less believes that all is God and more that all is in God.

It is important to make this distinction because, while explicitly rejecting Christianity, Emerson functioned still within the Judaeo-Christian framework that had been established when the continent was settled by the Europeans[10]. The Puritan tradition would influence not only the growth of capitalism as mentioned before, but likewise the development of a quintessentially American literature, philosophy and culture. Emerson, as perhaps one of the first icons of this new independent and self-reliant America, was not free from the Judeo-Christian tradition brought to the New World from the old continent. The scholar believed the individual had a responsibility

[9] Emerson, Ralph W. "Nature". *The Project Gutenberg*, 1836, www.gutenberg.org/files/29433/29433-h/29433-h.htm [last accessed 28/07/2021].

[10] In his Divinity College speech, Emerson presents Jesus Christ as a symbol of the first and only transcendental man: "Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul. Drawn by its severe harmony, ravished with its beauty, he lived in it, and had his being there. Alone in all history, he estimated the greatness of man; One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me" (Emerson, Ralph W. "Divinity College Speech." *Short Stories and Classic Literature*, 1832, https://americanliterature.com/author/ralph-waldo-emerson/essay/divinity-college-speech [last accessed 28/07/2021]).

for self-reliance; once fully self-reliant, that individual should help lead society on a progressive path[11]. Nature was, for Emerson, the greatest teacher of all: "In view of the significance of nature, we arrive at once at a new fact, that nature is a discipline". Man could witness pure perfection within the nature setting, and analysing the "mechanical forces" could give him the "sincerest lessons".[12] Thoreau, on the other hand, was much more reserved and solitary. Retreating to the woods, Thoreau too rejected Christianity, and while his religious beliefs are harder to decipher[13], he held the intrinsic divinity of nature to a much higher degree than Emerson did. Likewise, Thoreau felt that the individual's will should supersede that of the state, as outlined in his essay, "Of Civil Disobedience". Both advocated for improving society and independence from the state, but whereas Emerson believed that the enlightened self-reliant individual must be proactive in fixing the community with one's own hands through leadership and lecture, Thoreau believed instead that society would naturally improve as a consequence of self-improvement achieved through solitary retreat. This is why the two fell into disagreement and why Emerson had criticized his friend on his

[11] While Emerson may have spoken up against industrialization and deforestation, he was still a firm believer in the idea of social progress through advancements in technology and science. In one of his speeches entitled "Progress of Culture" he would go on to ask rhetorically: "Who would live in the stone age, or the bronze, or the iron, or the lacustrine? Who does not prefer the age of steel, of gold, of coal, petroleum, cotton, steam, electricity, and the spectroscope?" (Emerson, Ralph W. "Progress of Culture." *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson – RWE.org*, 1867, https://www.rwe.org/progress-of-culture/ [last accessed 28/07/2021]).

[12] Emerson, Ralph W. "Nature." *The Project Gutenberg*, 1836, www.gutenberg.org/files/29433/29433-h/29433-h.htm [last accessed 28/07/2021].

[13] Like Emerson, Thoreau is quick to give God titles such as "Creator" but his overall view on the transcendence of God is a lot less clear than Emerson's. He is quicker to extol nature's intrinsic beauty than Emerson, who uses the beauty of nature as a catalyst for self-reflection. Referencing Emerson, Thoreau would also claim the two do not worship the same God in his 1851 journal (see below).

eulogy speech for resigning himself to a hermitic existence rather than use his talents for progress[14].

Progress, of course, is a nebulous concept, one that in the 19th century had been used to justify the Indian genocide and a continuous destruction of nature via the progressive industrialization of America's wilderness. Leo Marx in his article published in 1987, entitled "Does Improved Technology Mean Progress?", makes a distinction between two types of progress: the first, which he dubs the Enlightenment belief and aligns with men such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, he characterized as a goal-oriented advancement of science and technology for "the achievement of political and social liberation", not as "ends in themselves" (2). He cites Jefferson's 1813 letter to John Adams describing the progressive effects of science: "Science had liberated the ideas of those who read and reflect, and the American example had kindled feelings of right in the people. An insurrection has consequently begun, of science, talents, and courage, against rank and birth, which have fallen into contempt.... Science is progressive" (2). In all fairness to Emerson, I believe his vision of progress squarely fits within the more optimistic and practical enlightenment belief, but as Marx states, "the idea of history as endless progress did encourage extravagantly optimistic expectations" and ultimately "fostered some wildly improbable dreams of the 'perfectibility of Man' and of humanity's absolute

[14] Emerson would famously state in his eulogy to Thoreau: "[H]e seemed born for great enterprise and for command; and I so much regret the loss of his rare powers of action, that I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this, instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry party" (Emerson, Ralph W. "Thoreau." *The Atlantic*, 1862, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1862/08/thoreau/306418/ [last accessed 28/07/2021]). While generally good friends and close confidants, the two began to grow apart in later years due to differences in lifestyle. On October 10, 1851, Thoreau wrote on his "Journal: Volume III", as accessed in *The Walden Woods Project*: "Ah, I yearn toward thee, my friend, but I have not confidence in thee. We do not believe in the same God. I am not thou; thou art not I. We trust each other to-day, but we distrust to-morrow. Even when I meet thee unexpectedly, I part from thee with disappointment. Though I enjoy thee more than other men, yet I am more disappointed with thee than with others. I know a noble man; what is it hinders me from knowing him better? I know not how it is that our distrust, our hate, is stronger than our love. Here I have been on what the world would call friendly terms with one fourteen years, have pleased my imagination sometimes with loving him; and yet our hate is stronger than our love. Why are we related, yet thus unsatisfactorily? We almost are a sore to one another. Ah, I am afraid because thy relations are not my relations. Because I have experienced that in some respects were are strange to one another, strange as some wild creature. Ever and anon there will come the consciousness to mar our love that, change the theme but a hair's breadth, and we are tragically strange to one another. We do not know what hinders us from coming together. But when I consider what my friend's relations and acquaintances are, what his tastes and habits, then the difference between us gets named. I see that all these friends and acquaintances and tastes and habits are indeed my friend's self. In the first place, my friend is prouder than I am, - and I am very proud, perchance" (60-61). For a more in-depth analysis of Emerson and Thoreau's personal disagreements throughout life, see Sattelmeyer, Robert. "'When He Became My Enemy': Emerson and Thoreau." *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 62, no. 2, 1989, p. 187.

mastery of nature" (2) The Enlightenment belief laid the groundwork for the second type of progress Marx describes, the technocratic concept of progress. Industrial capitalism has led Americans to celebrate "the advance of science and technology with increasing fervor, but they began to detach the idea from the goal of social and political liberation" (3-4). As such, technological innovation is now seen as a goal in itself. With the radical enlightenment beliefs no longer structuring the concept of progress now allied to ruthless industrial capitalism, Marx argues that this "allowed the idea of technological progress to blend with other grandiose national aspirations" (4), such as conquering nature by juxtaposing European-American civilization with the savage and primitive Indian societies and wilderness, and embodying manifest destiny with a rhetoric of the technological sublime. The technocratic idea, thus, "is a belief in the sufficiency of scientific and technological innovation as the basis for general progress" (5). Opposed to the Jeffersonian ideal, it makes what was secondary to the enlightenment belief "fundamental to social progress, and relegates what formerly were considered primary, goalsetting values (justice, freedom, harmony, beauty, or self-fulfilment) to a secondary status" (5).

Max Oelschlaeger in his book *The Idea of Wilderness* makes a clever distinction between "arcadian ecology", which he assigns to Thoreau (as well as Muir, Aldo Leopold and other prominent men at the birth of environmental criticism) and "imperial ecology", which he assigns to Emerson alongside most of the American cultural tradition. Imperial ecology refers to the philosophical beliefs behind the quest to conquer and subdue nature under the Judeo-Christian perspective – the belief that nature had been assigned by God to shape as mankind saw fit.[15] Imperial ecology aimed "to establish, through the exercise of reason and by hard work, man's dominion over nature" (103). It is this imperial perspective that motivates the industrialization of the 18th and 19th century along with much of the belief behind manifest destiny and the successive settlement of the frontier. On the other hand, arcadian ecology refers to a much more primitive (Oelschlaeger does not view this term negatively) perspective on nature, one tied to the native routes of the American continent, one that believes in a communal, harmonious relationship with nature. Arcadian (or pastoral) ecology

[15] Genesis 1:28 as per the King James Bible: "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth".

"advocated a simple, humble life for man with the aim of restoring him to a peaceful coexistence with other organisms" (103).

Thoreau, according to Oelschlaeger, "explicitly rejected the mechanistic rationalism that enslaved Emerson's view of nature" (132). This warrants explanation. The author characterizes Thoreau as a critic of Modernism; not the modernist artistic movement of the 20th century, but rather he describes Modernism as the cultural and scientific paradigm shift beginning with the Renaissance. Modernism represents the furthest "humanization of wild nature", a process initiated by the early agriculturists when they had stopped being hunter-gatherers (68). The classical view of nature as an organism (nature as a living entity feared and/or worshipped) would gradually be transformed into the modern view of nature as a mechanism. Modernism converted the wilderness into "material" nature, in the sense of turning it into an object of scientific investigation and simultaneously a means to further economic progress. The author of *The Idea of Wilderness* blames this change on the rise of humanist perspectives which had assumed that mankind possessed no limits, "the ideology of *man infinite* or the rise of *Lord Man*" (69). The scientific method, the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution would all subject nature to scientific inquiry, stripping it of the mythological, archetypal and even biblical symbology it had clothed itself under beforehand, and deem it submissive to man's whims and desires.[16] Yet despite this both scientific and religious perspectives[17] intertwined in order to cement this mechanistic view of nature, for "God was the cosmic clockmaker, and the divine plan was revealed through the knowable natural order that he had created. Science merely disclose the underlying regularities of the mechanism" (77). While some like Jean-Jacques Rosseau opposed the mechanistic view of nature, the average Enlightenment thinker believed "not in some return to a golden age or a Garden where human beings lived in harmony with the natural world but in taking a new path" (93), an almost religious fixation on absolute progress. In the world of Adam Smith, the world of capitalist enterprise and of "Homo Oeconomicus" as Oelschlaeger puts it, "qualities of nature experienced through empathetic awareness were now insignificant. Primary

[16] As Oelschlaeger points out the irony, the archetypal role of the "Great Mother of the Palaeolithic" nature once possessed has been forgotten and the only feminine qualities that nature now has are those of submission and mindlessness. She is a body subject to the structural whims of abuse and plunder (95).

[17] Here referring to the individual views of scientists and philosophers and some Protestant churches. The institutional Catholic Church remained sceptical and admonished scientific advancements with regularity.

attributes of nature alone remained – those capable of quantification through monetary value"; as such, the "line between civilization and wilderness was clearly drawn" (94). These forces, "the scientific, democratic, and industrial revolutions, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment" (95), gave birth to a new cultural paradigm, one which would only begin to be seriously challenged in the 19th century, yet nevertheless one which still prevails to this day, one which has reduced not only nature but humankind as well (though ecologists would claim there is no difference) to commodities imbued solely with market value.

As I said in the previous point, the prevailing mechanistic view of nature would only be challenged meaningfully in the 19th century, but before then, the Church, as well as some scientists, primitivist philosophers and pre-Romantic writers, nevertheless attempted a critique. Among them, perhaps the most influential of which was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. While he was not a complete primitivist, Rousseau argued that "modern man should incorporate primitive qualities into his presently distorted civilized life", as argued by Nash in *Wilderness and the American Mind* (49). Perhaps more importantly than Rousseau's acceptance and reputation in the continent[18] is his influence on American politics. Much has been written about the concept of *Civil Religion* coined by Rousseau, but for the purposes of this essay, his pseudo-primitivism[19] warrants deeper inspection. Rousseau was obsessed with freedom from societal control. As he once said in "The Social Contract", "Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains" (156); it is only expected that Rousseau's fixation with liberty would eventually strike a chord with the American intellectual, especially among the transcendentalists, as in fact it was Thoreau who would in a similar vein proclaim in "Life Without Principle": "What is it to be born free and not to live free?" (364). While not sharing the transcendentalist belief in the inherent holiness of nature,

[18] The French philosopher was a direct influence on many of the writers in the Romantic movement such as Wordsworth, but his reputation during his own time was dubious to say the least. In his article, "Rousseau and the European Roots of Environmentalism", LaFreniere outlines the influence of Rousseau on modern American environmentalism. As he says, "Rousseau's thought concerning progress was generally interpreted as anti-progressive or regressive prior to the 20th century" (47). Voltaire had famously mocked Rousseau for being a supposed primitivist who wished for a return to cave-dwelling.

[19] Rousseau was no primitivist, as Lovejoy's 1923 article "The Supposed Primitivism of Rousseau's 'Discourse on Inequality'" very eloquently argued, but he had been misconstrued as one in the years following his death. Considering the influence of the noble savage myth on Rousseau's writings, it is no surprise he could be misinterpreted as a primitivist, but he makes it clear that the typical pre-agriculture lifestyle, while possessing of noble qualities in its own right (he argues that man was undoubtedly happier at the time), is not the ideal mode of existence.

Rousseau nevertheless described nature as the optimal stage where the individual could feel himself most at freedom[20]. The best society for Rousseau is essentially thus, as explained by Susan Dunn in her introduction to Rousseau's "The Social Contract and the First and Second Discourses":

> [A] communitarian society in which the responsibilities and duties of citizenship outweigh individual rights and freedoms. Selflessly, citizens bind and commit themselves to the common good of all, willing to make sacrifices for their political community. Their virtue is richly rewarded. Through their devotion to their community, their self-discipline, and patriotism, they thrive as human beings, thus realizing their full rational and moral potential (9).

This descriptor is not too dissimilar from many other collectivist utopian (socialist, anarchist, even fascist and authoritarian) ideologies and societies that came before and after[21], so in order to accurately characterize Rousseau's ideal society, one must add the nature element. In Rousseau's "Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Mankind", he argues: "The example of savages, most of whom have been found in this condition, seems to confirm that mankind was formed ever to remain in it".[22] The state Rousseau refers to, maintaining "a just mean between the indolence of the primitive state and the petulant activity of egoism, must have been the happiest and most durable epoch" (128). More importantly, Rousseau believed that Man had the potential for goodness, but society's institutions had distorted his sense of good

[20] And it was Rousseau's descriptions of the mountains and wilderness of the Alps, going against the common trend of literature praising the tame and kempt garden, that would later inspire the Romantics, as Nash in *Wilderness and the American Mind* argues: "[Rousseau] heaped such praise on the sublimity of wilderness scenes in the Alps that it stimulated a generation of writers and artists to adopt the Romantic mode" (49).

[21] Citing David Pepper, LaFreniere in "Rousseau and the European Roots of Environmentalism" explains how some modern ideologies with fascistic tendencies tied to environmental concerns have their roots in Rousseau: "Having 'traced the roots of anarchist and ecocentric utopias back to Rousseau,' Pepper also suggests that Rousseau must bear responsibility for possible fascistic characteristics of ecotopia" (44). Far-right leaning ecologically-minded movements such as ecofascism have, likewise, their routes in Rousseau's societal remodelling and his social contract.

[22] It is worth pointing out that although the myth of the noble savage has been very associated with Rousseau throughout the ages, he never once mentions the term in his writings. Oelschlaeger, for instance, makes the argument in *The Idea of Wilderness* that Rousseau is a believer in the nobleness of the savage. The influence of the myth, as stated before, is clear, especially in this quote. However, Rousseau doesn't maintain an idealized or romanticized view of the savage, he recognizes even before Darwin a natural but violent struggle for existence between various tribes and peoples; as such, although Rousseau was a firm believer in the inherent goodness of man, he was not blind to the violence occurring in the primitive and savage state, he did not believe the savage creature lived in peace and harmony such as the myth dictates.

into something wicked. Moreover, he did not necessarily believe in a return to a primitive state, but a careful balance between his contemporary industrialized society and the primitive state of the past (a state, he says, the savages held in perfect harmony); he did not advocate for a return by regression or collapse, but rather by cooperation and reform. Rousseau's optimism and belief in human kindness would all be echoed by the Emersonians almost a century later.

In the book *In Search of the Common Good* published in 1977, Charles Erasmus writes that "Rousseau wanted a progress that would make more man more moral, as well as more rational; reason by itself could be downright immoral" (43). In essence, Rousseau believed not that progress was inherently negative, but that in conjunction with the emerging forces of capitalism and machinery would fuel immoral acts. For Rousseau, Man no longer lived in a "natural state", the secular state had replaced it and protected property above all else. As summarized by Oelschlaeger: "the human animal was naturally good and civilization was the distorting element that turned humans against one another" (111).

Rousseau would have tremendous influence on American Transcendentalism, but both Emerson and Thoreau would come to follow more closely the Romantic movement overseas. The Romantics, as established earlier, would be the first to seriously pose a challenge to the new mechanistic paradigm. Nancy L. Rosenblum in her article "Thoreau's Democratic Individualism" argued that the Romantic poets "articulated a unique set of discontents with bourgeois society and with the political arrangements of emerging constitutional democracy", ushering in a "glorification of self-sacrificing militarism against arrant, selfish materialism; the ecstasy of beauty and creativity against mundane happiness; the law of the heart against arid legalism; and utopian visions" (15). While it is worth noting that even among the Romantics, there was difference of opinion regarding the moral and practical value of the mechanistic approach (as for instance, Percy Bysshe Shelley and his wife, Mary Shelley, admired the sciences and the scientific method in spite of warnings against their misuse), in general, the Romantic mind would set its sights on nature and preach against the rapid industrialization and machinery of their time. Wordsworth famously despised the scientific method; in his words, "we murder to dissect".[23] Nature held paramount importance for the Romantics, preoccupied with feeling rather than cold logic. As

[23] Wordsworth, William. "The Tables Turned." *Poetry Foundation*, 1798, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45557/the-tables-turned [last accessed 07/08/2021].

Oelschlaeger argued, it was through an "aesthetic awareness of nature's beauty "that "God's presence was revealed" (99). Like Rousseau, the Romantics considered the city an oppressive place which restricted human beings' individuality, feeling and liberty. As such, many Romantic poets took a negative stance against the advancement of machinery. William Blake would lament about the state of England's green fields of yesteryear, now polluted by "dark satanic mills"[24] and Byron would champion the luddites as examples of his Byronic hero[25]. Above all, the Romantic individual cultivated, in Oelschlaeger's words, an "affective relationship to and bonding with the natural world (rather than an objective relation based on reason and logic)" (111). This response to the mechanistic approach served to recover a harmonious understanding of nature and God. For the Romantic, God expressed himself through the sublime, experienced by Man through nature. Romanticism attempted "to sustain the inherited cultural order against what to many writers seemed the imminence of chaos" and to "save what one could save of [Christianity's] experiential relevance and values" (112).

Perhaps the most important Romantic writer for the purposes of this dissertation is Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for his influence on American Transcendentalism via his proximity to Emerson. Samantha Harvey in her book entitled *Transatlantic Transcendentalism* draws comparisons between the two poets;

[24] Blake, William. "And Did Those Feet in Ancient Time." *Poetry Foundation*, 1804, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54684/jerusalem-and-did-those-feet-in-ancient-time {last accessed 07/08/2021].

[25] The Luddites have a very complex history which in its fullest extent is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but I will elaborate: the Luddites were a secret organization of English textile workers active between 1811 and 1817. They became famous as "an army of redressers" and for destroying textile machinery as a form of protest. "Neo-Luddite" is a term applied to people in the latter half of the 20th century and now in the 21st century who oppose most forms of modern technology. While used pejoratively, self-proclaimed "Luddites" also exist. The term has been used to describe not only peaceful environmental activists, but also terrorists, such as the American Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski. Originally an anonymous and minor collective, organized regionally, preoccupied with labour rights principally, the Luddites have now become associated with a worldwide anti-technology philosophy tied to individualistic convictions; they have been mythologized as primitive nature lovers. To an extent, they had mythologized themselves by crafting their own symbols, songs and festivals, but because much of their strikes had coincided with the Romantic movement, their mythology had been appropriated by the Romantic poets for the purposes of protesting against the continuous destruction of wildlife and rapid industrialization. As such, their names became synonymous with radical environmentalism from thereon. For a more extensive study on Luddite revolutionary activity, see Sale, Kirkpatrick. *Rebels Against the Future: The Luddites and their War on the Industrial Revolution: Lessons for the Computer Age*, Perseus Publishing, 1996; for a comprehensive analysis of Luddite subcultures, read Jones, Steven E. *Against Technology: From the Luddites to Neo-Luddism*, Routledge, 2006.

she argues that "Emerson turned to Coleridge's prose as a compendium of the best ideas of European Romanticism". And so:

> [Coleridge] taught Emerson to think – not what to think, but how to think. Coleridge's discriminating distinctions and definitions, his call for cultivating the art of reflection, and his dynamic intellectual method galvanized Emerson at a pivotal moment in his intellectual development. Coleridge was a role model for Emerson's new vocation as a public intellectual and his ideas fundamentally shaped the early lectures and addresses (2).

Coleridge himself remarked on his relevance to American philosophy in a letter to Monckton Milnes, disclosed by Thomas Reid in *The Life, Letters, and Friendships of Richard Monckton Milnes*: "I am a poor poet in England, but I am a great philosopher in America" (432). In Oelschlaeger's book, he explains that to Coleridge "the greatest threat of mechanistic materialism was its displacement of God from the center of existence: from the scientific purview, God was irrelevant". Coleridge, then, saw an "opening through which he might press an attack on mechanism, and so defend his faith; yet in defending his faith his most important philosophical accomplishment was in further working through the relation between mind and nature" (116). In essence, Coleridge made it clear that "nature was not alien but rather kindred to human spirit" (117). Responsible for importing much of the work by the German idealists, Coleridge also conceived of his own panentheistic version of God which sought to synthetize his Christian framework and upbringing with the verifiable empirical reality of the more scientifically based pantheism. In "Religious Musings", he describes the transcendental unity of the soul: "God its Identity: God all in all! / We and our Father one".[26] In "Rhime of the Ancient Mariner" he repeatedly juxtaposes nature's symbols with the divine (the albatross, the Sun, the sea), but nevertheless makes it clear the superiority and transcendence of God: "For the dear God who loveth us, / He made and loveth all".[27] It is clear that Coleridge's view of nature and God influenced Emerson and even Thoreau by proxy, though the latter, as previously stated, would

[26] Coleridge, Samuel T. "Religious Musings." *University of Saskatchewan*, https://www.usask.ca/english/barbauld/related_texts/religious_musings.html [last accessed 06/08/2021].

[27] Coleridge, Samuel T. "Rhime of the Ancient Mariner." *Poetry Foundation*, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43997/the-rime-of-the-ancient-mariner-text-of-1834 [last accessed 06/08/2021].

come to take a more arcadian and harmonious relationship with nature and develop an arguably more pantheistic philosophy.

For Emerson, Oelschlaeger describes, the wilderness odyssey is "an occasion for the individual mind first to discover a reflection of itself […] and then to confirm God's existence" (135). This is why Emerson in "Self-Reliance" states "Do not seek yourself outside of yourself".[28] As explained in The *Idea of Wilderness,* "[man] discovers the design of nature not through its inner unity and order but rather through the workings of the transcendental consciousness" (135). Nature is the vehicle through which one may indulge in deep introspection and therefore achieve the transcendence of the self and come closer to God. Inspired by German idealism and the English Romantics, the transcendental God may be panentheistic, but Emersonian philosophy functions clearly within the Judeo-Christian framework. Nature, for Emerson, had been created by God and bestowed upon man:

> Know then, that the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect… As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its greatest proportions. A correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit. So fast will disagreeable appearances, swine, spiders, snakes, pests, mad-houses, prisons, enemies, vanish; they are temporary and shall be no more seen…. The kingdom of man over nature, which cometh not with observation, - a dominion such as now is beyond his dream of God, - he shall enter without more wonder than the blind man feels who is gradually restored to perfect sight.[29]

Emerson's words subvert the biblical "kingdom of God" which the Puritans sought to establish in America and cements Emerson's imperialistic view: nature is meant to be conquered and moulded according to mankind's wishes. Emerson established a new panentheistic mythology in the American cultural consciousness, but he was nevertheless borrowing from the Judeo-Christian cultural tradition that had led the settlers to America. The Judeo-Christian spirit continued to permeate American culture all throughout the following centuries, culminating in the pioneer spirit and its

[28] Emerson, Ralph W. "Self-Reliance." *American Transcendentalism Web*, 1841, https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/selfreliance.html [last accessed 06/08/2021].

[29] Emerson, Ralph W. "Nature." *The Project Gutenberg*, 1836, www.gutenberg.org/files/29433/29433-h/29433-h.htm [last accessed 28/07/2021].

consequential Indian genocide. As Wallace Stegner put it succinctly in his 1987 book *The Ameican West as Living Space:* "Our very virtues as a pioneering people, the very genius of our industrial civilization, drove us to act as we did. God and Manifest Destiny spoke with one voice urging us to 'conquer' or 'win' the West" (46). Even in today's more environmentally-conscious society, a biblical religiosity keeps the imperial spirit alive and well in certain communities. Stegner cited a Mormon hierarch, John Widtsoe, who confirmed this sentiment by saying: "[t]he destiny of man is to possess the whole earth; the destiny of the earth is to be subject to man. There can be no full conquest of the earth, and no real satisfaction to humanity, if large portions of the earth remain beyond his highest control" (45). In self-segregated Christian and Jewish communities, such as the Mormon and the Amish, man under God still holds dominion over the Earth.

What Emerson attempted to do with his philosophy was recover the old Enlightenment belief in the idea of progress.[30] Emerson was very much a scholar; man of wilderness he was not, as evidently asserted by John Muir's disappointment when

[30] Gilmore in his book *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* suggests instead that "Emerson's affirmation of agrarian values indicates how close he is in some respects to his Jacksonian contemporaries" (21). As Emerson believed market forces interfered directly with the possibility for self-reliance, one may call him a critic of laissez-faire capitalism. However, Gilmore suggests that "the Jacksonians considered themselves heirs to the Jeffersonian tradition; they appealed to the yeoman ideals of the Old Republic in their war against the Bank of the United States, the institution that symbolized for them the emergent capitalist economy. Despite their pronouncements in favor of laissez faire, they were beset by fears of a world out of control; the actual workings of the market seemed incoherent to them rather than rational and orderly. Jackson himself, in denouncing the banking system as a threat to economic independence, repeatedly used language expressive of randomness and chaotic change" (21). While on paper the Jacksonians might have claimed to have been championing Jeffersonian ideals, Jacksonian Democracy nonetheless emphasized expansionism via *Manifest Destiny*, and Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Jefferson, by contrast, believed the Indians should be aided in developing beyond the savage state: he wrote to the Marquis de Chastellux that he considered Indians "to be, in body and mind, equal to the whiteman" and never advocated for the removal from their ancestral lands (Jefferson, Thomas. "The Letters of Thomas Jefferson: To Chastellux, Paris, June 7, 1785." *The Avalon Project*, 1785, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/let27.asp [last accessed 08/08/2021]). Emerson, too, as Gilmore argues, rid himself of the agrarian ideal with time and began to embrace the capitalistic framework that enveloped his society: "In 'Wealth' Emerson gives highest marks to the independence enjoyed by the rich man, not the husbandman, and he depicts as obsolete the ideal of self-sufficiency associated in 'Man the Reformer' with the farm" (30).

meeting the man and his circle.[31] In the words of Leo Marx, Emerson did not hold up "an idealized wilderness, a pre-industrial Eden, as preferable to the world [he] saw in the making. Nor did [he] dismiss the worth of material improvement as such. But [he] did regard the dominant view […] as dangerously shallow, materialistic, and onesided" (7). Emerson's Transcendentalism was based on the Enlightenment vision of progress, but by proxy of being a believer of the benefits of industrialization and a civilized man, he was nevertheless an imperial ecologist, which necessarily fuelled cultural delusions about man's absolute dominion over the wilderness (and the "devils" that inhabited it).

1.2. The Thoureauvian Individualism of Christopher McCandless

While Emerson may have been the progenitor of Transcendentalism, Thoreau is effectively as much of a face of the movement as he is, a surprising turn of events considering that although both share a love for nature and a fierce individualism, these are only superficial similarities; taking a deeper look at their work reveals the glaring differences between their respective philosophies. Thoreau would arguably become a much more inspiring symbol for the transcendentalists of the future than Emerson would. As Oelschlaeger aptly words it,

> Thoreau's ideas yet animate reflection on the human condition and are recognized as crucial to the birth of a distinctively American idea of wilderness. He was in the vanguard of the nineteenth-century criticism of Modernism, in some ways an American analogue to Schopenhauer, Marx and Nietzsche. More important, Thoreau had the brilliance to recognize, before Darwin published his theory of evolution, an organic connection between Homo Sapiens and nature – a natural world from which the species had come and to which it was bound. This evolutionary insight puts Thoreau on the leading edge of a postmodern view of the relation between humankind and nature (133).

[31] Despite revering Emerson as an idol, after he had met the man, he echoed Thoreau and expressed disappointment in Emerson's dependence on civilized life and his ignorant comrades: "His party, full of indoor philosophy, failed to see the natural beauty and fullness of promise of my wild plan, and laughed at it in good-natured ignorance, as if it were necessarily amusing to imagine that Boston people might be led to accept Sierra manifestations of God at the price of rough camping". After this incident, Muir declared it was "a sad commentary on culture and the glorious transcendentalism" (Muir, John. "The Forests of the Yosemite Park." *Sierra Club Vault*, 1901, https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/our_national_parks/chapter_4.aspx [last accessed 08/08/2021]).

To sum up the differences between the two, he argues: "In 'Nature' Emerson writes as a disembodied transcendental spectator who brings with him abstract principles to impose on nature. In 'Walden' Thoreau directly engages his subject" (170).

Opposed to the other transcendentals who believed the scientific method was an accurate platform through which one could reveal the eternal laws of nature and help confirm the existence of the *Over-Soul,* Thoreau rejects it in "Natural History of Massachusetts":

> "The true man of science will know nature better by his finer organization; he will smell, taste, see, hear, feel, better than other men. His will be a deeper and finer experience. We do not learn by inference and deduction and the application of mathematics to philosophy, but by direct intercourse and sympathy. It is with science as with ethics, - we cannot know truth by contrivance and method; the Baconian is as false as any other, and with all the helps of machinery and the arts, the most scientific will still be the healthiest and friendliest man, and possess a more perfect Indian wisdom" (26).

For Wallace Stegner, "Thoreau chose instead to stand up for wildness and the savage heart" (74). Thoreau clearly harkens back to the native American history of the United States, and rather than sing the praises of scientific progress and the potential of civilization like Emerson and his counterparts, he wishes to recover a sacred and primitive Indian wisdom. Thoreau questions the need for civilization at all, as well as the need for companionship; for Thoreau, wisdom comes not via deconstructing and reconstructing wilderness through the framework provided by industrialized society, but rather through the innate experience with nature itself. In *Walden,* Oelschlaeger concludes, Thoreau is trying to recreate "the economic condition of the savage, in search of the place where we took our false turning… [At *Walden*] Thoreau is being historically, as well as personally, reflexive; just as he is seeking the foundations of his own experience, he is seeking the foundations of the experience of his culture" (145). The author argues that Thoreau returned from Ktaadn with a new understanding:

> [A]n understanding of the fundamental untenability of the Emersonian stance toward wild nature, having learned that there was no easy equation between consciousness (psyche) and nature, between the cultural and natural, between humankind and the

> wilderness. To this point in life, including his experiences at Walden Pond, Thoreau's intercourse with wild nature had been pleasant, if occasionally uncomfortable, but never threatening. The Ktaadn experience excursion tested him, physically and psychically, in a new and radical way (145).

In *The Maine Woods,* Thoreau describes his helplessness before nature's ferocity and savagery; the experience was too radical a departure from the leisurely retreat at Walden Pond, "[n]ature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful […] Here was no man's garden" (63). And finally, he voices his ultimate realization in the form of despair: "Who *are* we? Where *are* we?" (64). At Ktaadn, as *The Idea of Wilderness* eloquently explains, Thoreau rekindled a "primal or Paleolithic coming-to-consciousness of human kind's naked rootedness in and absolute dependence upon nature" (149).

The fundamental difference between Thoureauvian and Emersonian views of natural entities lies, for Oelschlaeger, in the fact that "[f]or Thoreau, they exist in and for themselves, whereas for Emerson they are ultimately commodities, provided by a benevolent God for his most perfect creation" (150). What this means is that Thoreau recognizes nature as a group of self-sufficient entities; man is oblivious to this fact and does not understand that nature should be preserved. Thoreau takes such a stance in the chapter "Chesuncook" of *The Maine Woods:* "Every creature is better alive than dead, men and moose and pine-trees, and he who understands it aright will rather preserve its life than destroy it" (112). Oelschlaeger argues that for Thoreau the true meaning of wilderness "is rooted in the spirit of living nature and in the relation of human consciousness to that world, not in human categorization or use or both" (150).

Thoreau does away with the traditional fence between nature and civilization. He advocates in *Walden* a return to the wild away from the shackles of civilization by reintegrating human consciousness into nature:

> Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them… [The laboring man] has no time to be any thing but a machine. How can he remember well his ignorance – which his growth requires – who has so often to use his knowledge? … The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling (6).

Underneath the modern condition of man, the industrial and liberal secular state is to blame. "Most men," he says, "lead lives of quiet desperation" (8). If everyone lives self-reliantly in a leisurely retreat at a nature-setting, Thoreau argues, society would improve as a result of every man achieving his full potential and living life "deliberately". In "Walking" he discusses that any act, when done deliberately, will acquire spiritual or religious significance: "For every walk is a sort of crusade".[32]

In the "Economy" chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau lays out a financial plan for how one can live by his lonesome in the woods like himself. This chapter is important because Thoreau is attempting to challenge the capitalistic framework of industrial society, attempting to provide an alternative through naturalistic self-reliance.[33] It is no surprise that many Marxists later would follow from where Thoreau left off. As Brian Walker states in "Thoreau's Alternative Economics": "Thoreau's central theme is that working conditions in a market democracy can easily undermine liberty and erode autonomy". Thoreau's goal in *Walden* is to "set out strategies by which people can enact their freedom despite working conditions that are likely to threaten their autonomy and wellbeing" (40). The effect of the economy on the individual is paramount to Thoreau because, as *The Idea of Wilderness* states, "he believes that mainstream New England culture represents an untenable answer to an essentially simple problem – living a good life" (152). Anticipating the consumer society to follow, Thoreau notes in *Walden* that "most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more

[32] Thoreau, Henry David. "Walking." *The Project Gutenberg*, 1862, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1022/1022-h/1022-h.htm. [last accessed 07/08/2021].

[33] Though, as both Gilmore in *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* and Bercovitch in *American Jeremiad* have argued, Thoreau never really freed himself from the framework of capitalism entirely. Gilmore argues that Thoreau reflects the "laissez-faire individualist pursuing his private economic interest at the expense of the public welfare" (44), whereas Bercovitch with the same tone argues that "Walden embodies the myth of American laissez-faire individualism" through the belief that the "invisible hand" governs the nature market; Walden is organized as an attack on industrial capitalism through a "brilliant fusion of nature, economy, and the divine" (187). Thoreau was even so an ardent opponent of the marketplace, believing it breeds servility rather than interdependence (as Jefferson believed it did through the agrarian ideal, and so did Emerson in his earlier years as mentioned beforehand). Gilmore argues that according to Thoreau, "[t]he husbandmen of Concord, immortalized by Emerson for their stand 'by the rude bridge that arched the flood,' are now 'serfs of the soil' who spend their lives 'buying and selling' and have forgotten the meaning of self-reliance" (48). Thoreau appropriates the same agrarian husbandman ideal but strips it of the communal setting. According to Gilmore: "[w]hat Thoreau does affirm, and affirm consistently, is the possibility even in the nineteenth century of a way of life characterized by self-reliance and minimal involvement in exchange. Following the civic humanist tradition, he identifies this ideal with husbandry, and husbandry in turn supplies him with a metaphoric solution to the problems of the marketplace" (41).

simple and meagre life than the poor" (14). Further, Thoreau writes that "it is the luxurious and dissipated who set the fashions which the herd so diligently follow" (36). In essence, Thoreau rejects consumption for consumption's sake; beyond what is necessary for survival and self-sufficiency, consumption reduces man to the chains of materialism. As Oelschlaeger explains, "Thoreau thus rejects one of the cardinal presuppositions of Adam Smith – namely, that human well-being can be equated with the consumption of material goods" (153).

It is for these reasons that Thoreau struck a chord with McCandless (and those who identify with him, by proxy). As Brian Walker states, "*Walden* is filled with references to economic transformations that parallel those of our era in many ways," namely "a new interconnectedness brought about by the development of transportation infrastructure; diminished distances owing to the growth of railways, canals, and roadways; the rise of newspapers; the increasing power of large corporations; and the swift changes in working conditions brought about by the spread of factory labor" (40-41).

Critics like Rosenblum and George Kateb argue that Thoreau stands for a uniquely American democratic individualism, but Leigh Jenco in "Thoreau's Critique of Democracy" argues that although Thoreau does "embrace the liberal values he has come to symbolize for many—free expression, civil disobedience, the liberty to follow one's conscience", he nevertheless "provokes questions about the extent to which these values should or even can survive embedded within a democratic matrix" (69). As such, it is no surprise that Thoreau has been seen as some sort of anarchist by many critics. In his own words in "Slavery in Massachusetts": "My only thoughts are murder to the State" (188). Much like Emerson, Thoreau doubted the power of the State to reform society and instead argued that societal reform comes through self-reflection. However, as Leigh is quick to point out, Emerson did not oppose the state intrinsically; instead, "Emerson's concern is simply that democracy as it is now practiced does not penetrate the American consciousness as deeply nor motivate it as profoundly as it originally promised to do" (73). Thoreau, on the other hand, believes democracy is inherently flawed and is merely a step in realizing complete individual liberty and autonomy. For Thoreau, even voting is nothing more than gambling. As such, rather than legitimizing the democratic process, Thoreau refuses to participate, retreating instead to Walden to establish a "nearly anarchic" form of "self-rule" (88).

Thoreau illustrates his reason for his leisurely retreat at Walden Pond in the middle of the book:

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear, nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to 'glorify God and enjoy him forever (90-91).

Thoreau came to Walden to experience a life different from the one he had known in the city, the so accursed quiet life of desperation. He came to recover an ancient and savage way of life and to learn primitive Indian wisdom. To say whether or not he was successful in his pursuit down at his cosy little cabin by the familiar Walden Pond is a point many critics raise, but I would argue that after the experience at Ktaadn, Thoreau has truly experienced the savagery of nature first-hand and feels he is able to recreate the same conditions for self-discovery at Walden. Or, as Rosenblum argues, both "Wordsworthian appreciation" for pristine nature and "hard primitivism" and awe of the savage, "vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature" are necessary for one's personal fulfilment (19). Thoreau aims to recover an ancient primitive consciousness and in so doing he has rejected the typical intellectual lifestyle and contemplation typical of Emerson and his circle. Unlike Emerson, who seeks to analyse and deconstruct wild nature, Thoreau on the other hand, according to Oelschlaeger, "empties his mind of conventional wisdom and prepares to receive life through primary experience" (157). Ultimately, the good life for Thoreau "involves living in harmony with nature and the essential laws of human existence, and knowledge of these essentials can be found only in the wilderness, away from the entangling vines of civilization" (154). He achieved a conscious unity with wild nature, "wilderness is neither an alien enemy to be conquered nor a resource to be exploited but the 'perennial source of life.' […] [A]ll

nature is alive, filled with kindred spirits, and he is at home in it" (158). As Thoreau asks rhetorically in *Walden,* "Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?" (138) He has achieved a pre-Darwinian understanding of the cycle of life and the evolutionary interconnectedness of nature. Oelschlaeger believes that Thoreau came to an understanding that "the essence of freedom resides not in culture but in nature, and the closer human beings live to nature, the more likely they are to realize their freedom. [S]ociety more often hinders than aids the actualization of freedom" (165). Thoreau became "a man of Indian wisdom, a person-in-contact with wild nature […]. His genius is not that he turned his back on civilization […] but that he affirms the reality of organic process and the vital importance of understanding that humankind, too, is part of this larger, enframing realm" (170-171). As Thoreau himself said in "Walking", "in Wildness is the preservation of the World".[34]

It is precisely this Thoureavian spirit that animates the odyssey of Christopher McCandless, who retired to the wild not unlike a young John Muir to discover this same primal Indian wisdom and transcendental epiphany that his idol did. Wallace Stegner argued in his book that the hunter and wild man that Crèvecouer had described, "the borderer emancipated into total freedom, first in eastern forests and then in the plains and mountains of the West, […] really fired our imaginations and still does […]. In real life, as Boone, Bridger, Jed Smith, Kit Carson, he appeals to us as having lived a life of heroic courage, skill, and self-reliance" (73). McCandless came to embody the "wild man" emancipated into freedom, such an ideal that many came to worship with almost religious fanaticism throughout the 19th, 20th and now 21st centuries. Stegner goes on to argue that the reason the wild man endured into cultural iconography was because he embodied the "impatience with all restraint, [and] freedom from the social responsibility that Crèvecouer admired in his citizen farmer" (74). Making use of Oelschlaeger's terminology, I don't think it would be unwise to call McCandless, alongside most of his fanatics, an arcadian ecologist, or a follower of Thoreau and Muir. Or, rather, I think whether McCandless was aware of it or not, he perhaps came into Alaska with the mindset of an Emersonian imperial ecologist – a man seeking to conquer nature – and discovered in the Alaskan wilderness the importance of *arcadian ecology* just as Thoreau did. The epigraph of chapter seventeen of *Into the Wild* cites Thoreau's *The Maine Woods:* "Nature was here something savage and awful, though

[34] Thoreau, Henry David. "Walking." *The Project Gutenberg*, 1862, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1022/1022-h/1022-h.htm. [last accessed 07/08/2021].

beautiful" which ends with a despairing realization over the insignificance of man: "Contact! Contact! Who *are* we? Where *are* we?" (171). Chapter seventeen, "The Stampede Trail," attempts to describe the kind of mindset one would need to attempt survival in the wild. Comparing McCandless to Muir and Thoreau, Krakauer argues that he went through the same experience and arrived at the same kind of epiphany as the two: "it is impossible to live off the land without developing both a subtle understanding of, and a strong emotional bond with, that land and all it holds" (182).

Emile Hirsch, who plays Christopher McCandless in the 2007 film adaptation, reads over the same The *Maine Woods* excerpt in a scene portraying McCandless' failure to conserve the meat of a moose he had just shot. Reading over Thoreau's book, he cites the following passage: "There was clearly felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. It was a place of heathenism and superstitious rites, - to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and to the wild animals than we" (63). Both the film and the book in their romanticization of the adventure make it a point to demonstrate how the experience of McCandless mirrors that of Thoreau and Muir. Like them, he transitioned from an imperial to an *arcadian ecologist* based on the actual experience of living and surviving in the wild; and like them, he came to acquire an ancient Indian knowledge about the harmonious bonds of nature. Like Thoreau, McCandless was dubious of communities, as despite his experience living amidst ecologically-minded hippie societies, he nevertheless chose to retreat to the cold and harsh wilderness in order to discover himself.

Jon Krakauer argued that his journey stemmed from the sense of meaning in the youngster's life: "McCandless wasn't some feckless slacker, adrift and confused, racked by existential despair. […] His life brimmed with meaning and purpose," and he then continues, "But the meaning he wrested from existence lay beyond the comfortable path: McCandless distrusted the value of things that came easily. He demanded much of himself – more, in the end, than he could deliver" (183), because he possessed a "stubborn idealism that did not mesh readily with modern existence" (X). He was someone unconcerned with government regulation: "How I feed myself is none of the government's business. Fuck their stupid rules" (6); these sentiments would later allow Krakauer to proclaim that the youngster was a follower of Thoreau's theory of *civil disobedience*: "he took as gospel the essay […] and thus considered it his moral responsibility to flaunt the laws of the state" (28). Krakauer clarifies through biblical

allusion that McCandless was not delusional, and rather than a Garden of Eden, it was wilderness what he fully expected to find:

> "He entertained no illusions that he was trekking into a land of milk and honey; peril, adversity, and Tolstoyan renunciation were precisely what he was seeking. And that is what he found, in abundance" (X-XI).

In fact, McCandless likewise confirmed that death was a possibility in one of his postcards: "If this adventure proves fatal and you don't ever hear from me again, I want you to know you're a great man. I now walk into the wild" (3). Krakauer is quick to dispel assumptions that McCandless was suicidal by equating him with his own experience: "I couldn't resist stealing up to the edge of doom and peering over the brink. The hint of what was concealed in those shadows terrified me, but I caught sight of something in the glimpse, some forbidden and elemental riddle" (154-155), and he then adds, "In my case – and I believe, in the case of Chris McCandless – that was a very different thing from wanting to die" (155). There is some unexplainable attraction to the danger of the wilderness, he argues, that pulls not suicidal men into its embrace, but idealistic and ambitious, albeit lost, men instead.

Nevertheless, Krakauer acknowledges the rebellious recklessness of McCandless, and despite his earlier comparisons to Emerson and Thoreau, he aligns him perhaps more decisively with John Muir, who he describes as "bold adventurer" (181) who "wouldn't have thought McCandless terribly odd or incomprehensible" (182). Regardless, the author makes an addendum to the Thoreau comparison, by claiming that "[e]ven staid, prissy Thoreau […] felt compelled to visit the more fearsome wilds of the nineteenth century" which "induced a giddy sort of awe" (182). In addition, Krakauer distinguishes between the two men and the youngster he is reporting on: "Unlike Muir and Thoreau, McCandless went into the wilderness not primarily to ponder nature or the world at large but, rather, to explore the inner country of his own soul"(182), though he is quick to add the following caveat in order to strengthen the relationship between the follower and his idols even more:

> "[h]e soon discovered, however, what Muir and Thoreau already knew: An extended stay in the wilderness inevitably directs one's attention outward as much as inward,

> and it is impossible to live off the land without developing both a subtle understanding of, and a strong emotional bond with, that land and all it holds" (182).

McCandless' journal lacks any kind of musings or abstractions of any kind about the beauty of wilderness. Instead, since his arrival in Alaska, the diary seemed solely dedicated to recording the plants he had foraged and game he had killed. On June 9th 1992, McCandless killed a "MOOSE!" even taking a photograph near the carcass for posterity. Inexperienced and unable to preserve the meat, he records days later on June 14th: "Maggots already! Smoking appears ineffective. Don't know, looks like disaster. I now wish I had never shot the moose. One of the greatest tragedies of my life" (166). Krakauer comments that despite McCandless being enough of a realist to be aware of the necessity of hunting animals, he still was ambivalent about killing unnecessarily because of his respect for the wild; hence, any wasted meat comes to him as a "tragedy". McCandless later that month would make parallels between his tragedy and Thoreau, highlighting in *Walden* the following passage: "when I had caught and cleaned and cooked and eaten my fish, they seemed not to have fed me essentially. It was insignificant and unnecessary, and cost more than it came to" (214). Thoreau would in the same passage claim that "the repugnance to animal food is not the effect of experience, but is an instinct", and those with higher poetic faculties were more inclined to abstain not only from meat but food more generally; following from this train of thought, he exalts the virtues of a "simple and clean diet" which does not "offend the imagination", coming to the conclusion that food should be eaten modestly and temperately, as "It is not worth the while to live by rich cookery" (214-215). McCandless would then come to his own conclusion, writing, "Consciousness of food. Eat and cook with concentration…. Holy Food" (167). Having an epiphany, he would finally declare:

> "I am reborn. This is my dawn. Real life has begun.
> Deliberate living: Conscious attention to the basics of life, and a constant attention to your immediate environment and its concerns, example - A job, a task, a book; anything requiring efficient concentration (Circumstance has no value. It is how one relates to the situation that has value. All true meaning resides in the personal relationship to a phenomenon, what it means to you.)
> The Great Holiness of **FOOD**, the Vital Heat.
> Positivism, the Insurpassable Joy of the Life Aesthetic.

> Absolute Truth and Honesty.
> Reality.
> Independence.
> Finality-Stability-Consistency" (167).

The grand sort of universal and idealistic aesthetic appreciation of nature of McCandless' transcendental sensibilities gave way to a more introspective awareness of the harmonious communal relationship between self, food and the land, an unconscious interiorization of Aldo Leopold's land ethic, a perspective in line with the ecologists of McCandless' time such as Douglas Burden, who declares in *Look to the Wilderness* that "we are part of a great continuum" (249), and Colin Fletcher, who claims in *Complete Walker* that acknowledging the "web of life" (599) leads to the abandonment of the "crass assumption that the world was made for man" (7). McCandless had retreated from society in order, like Thoreau, to live deliberately and not only had he lived and worked deliberately, he had also learned how to eat deliberately.

Far from his expected Thoreauvian leisure and intellectual contemplation, McCandless adopted a more nomadic mode of existence, which Krakauer appropriately, in his description of McCandless as a soul lost in a time where man has become too socialized to live in the wild by himself, likens to the Arabian Bedouins by citing ecologist Paul Shepard in *Into the Wild*:

> The nomadic Bedouin does not date on scenery, paint landscapes, or compile a nonutilitarian natural history… [H]is life is so profoundly in transaction with nature that there is no place for abstraction or esthetics or a "nature philosophy" which can be separated from the rest of his life… Nature and his relationship to it are a deadly-serious matter, prescribed by convention, mystery and danger. His personal leisure is aimed away from idle amusement or detached tampering with nature's processes. But built into his life is awareness of that presence, of the terrain, of the unpredictable weather, of the narrow margin by which he is sustained" (183).

Krakauer concludes, thus, that McCandless did not fail in appreciating the beauty of the country around him or was unmoved by the landscape but, rather, that he was much more immersed and directly aware of the land around him than ever before. As such, the author has managed to mythologize McCandless not only by

firmly situating him within the Transcendental canon, but also by describing the ways in which he diverged from his idols and more closely aligned himself, intentionally or not, with the ecologists of his time, who, of course, were influenced by the tradition of environmental concern kickstarted not only by Thoreau, Emerson and the like, but which in fact had its roots in the very conception of America.

As I've attempted to argue in this chapter, Humanity has always looked to the wilderness as a dark mirror of one self and as a gateway not only for self-discovery but for an arcadian-minded enlightenment, which, in the American continent, takes its form by recovering previously rejected and derided native-American wisdom based on harmony and communion with nature. McCandless sought refuge from society in the philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau but, perhaps unconsciously, aligned himself much more closely with the latter. In the following chapter, I propose to explore how the Transcendental tradition has influenced the birth of utopian communities with a focus on naturalistic living, as well as the hippie movement McCandless would end up identifying with.

2. McCandless in Slab City: A Look at The Hippie Movement

The extent the transcendentalists have influenced American culture following their epoch of intellectual significance is immense. While they are best remembered for their individualistic philosophy, by expanding on uniquely American themes and appealing to a respect and desire for the preservation of nature, they sowed the seeds for future utopian communities. Some of these experiments were contemporaneous with Emerson and were directly influenced by Transcendentalism, as in the case of Brooke Farm and Fruitlands. They would prove to be insufficient representations of the transcendentalist ideal, but this wouldn't be the end for naturalistic communities focused on simple living.

With the closing of the Frontier and nature conquered, Americans suddenly involved themselves even more with the preservation of the wilderness, heeding the words of men like John Muir, Aldo Leopold and the early environmentalists who recognized the importance of the wilderness for the American identity, breeding even more interest in the transcendentalist tradition. This interest in nature, in conjunction with the two World Wars, gave rise then to a restless generation, depressed and looking for a change from the neoliberal system that had wrought such doom. The generation of figures composed of Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and others, the Beat Generation, were the first to give a voice to the youthly dissatisfaction of the time, and they were promptly followed by the hippies, a wide cultural phenomenon that swept over every corner of America. With this chapter I propose to analyse how the hippie movement was influenced by a tradition spanning centuries and how the ideas of individualistic self-retreat and communitarian living have historically clashed when it comes to the proposal for reforming society.

Before he decidedly moved to Alaska, McCandless had spent two years tramping around the American West. In his travels, Supertramp met a hippie couple and briefly joined their self-sustaining commune made up of other hippies and their vans in Slab City. This simple way of life appealed to McCandless, who spent a considerable amount of time at the commune, fostering relationships with others, although he opposed perhaps the most defining characteristics of the hippie movement: the use of drugs, the liberalization of sex, and most importantly, he refused outright the communitarian ideal by leaving the commune and embarking on his solitary odyssey once more. Nevertheless, the fact that McCandless managed to ingratiate

himself into such a community is worth noting. One could argue that the hippie movement followed from the Transcendental tradition, albeit the hippies demonstrated considerable differences in general decorum and showcased a less ethnocentric perspective on religion. This chapter proposes to analyse the reasons behind how communitarian ideals of nature flourished following the transcendentalists.

In his 1979 book, *Cities of the American West,* John Reps challenges Frederick Jackson Turner's conception that the *Frontier* was shaped by hunters who transformed gradually into farmers and then entrepreneurs, shaping the *Frontier* into village or city settlements. For Reps, Turner "either did not know or failed to appreciate that, in much of the West, the founding of towns preceded rural settlement or took place at the same time that agricultural or range lands were being opened for faming or ranching" (IX). Reps argues that the "establishment of urban communities […] stimulated rather than followed the opening of the West to agriculture" (IX), citing Spanish pueblos, mining camps, railroad communities, Mormon settlements, speculative towns and military posts as examples of communities that morphed into large cities. "As vanguards of settlement", he continues, "towns led the way and shaped the structure of society rather than merely responding to the needs of an established agrarian population for markets and points of distribution". He concludes that rather than individualistic efforts, the frontier "thus had its origins in hundreds and thousands of planned communities" (X). Working within Reps' thesis, it is worth it to analyse how these utopian communities following the transcendental tradition have responded to the successive settlement of the *Frontier* and formed to oppose industrialization and the consequences it developed in the 20th century.

2.1. The Hippies and Transcendentalism

It may be at first apt to describe how McCandless can be aligned with the hippies, despite being active two decades after the peak of the hippie movement and blatantly rejecting some of the ideals already mentioned in the last point. Through McCandless we can witness the inner workings of a frustrated and impotent upper middle class, the same frame of mind and conditions that led to the rise of the hippie movement in the 1960s. While the young hitchhiker's familial problems lay outside of the scope of this dissertation, it is impossible to deny that, much like the young hippies,

it was partly his discontent and disagreement with his parents that led to his rebellion[35]. The hippies, too, came to be as a response to the policies and cultural ethos put into place by their parents, the Greatest Generation. Psychoanalysis is, in itself, insufficient as a method of cultural analysis (and one which this dissertation does not attempt to dwell on for much longer), but it can be used to accurately pinpoint tendencies which lead me to describe McCandless as a unique kind of hippie. As the president of his college's Republican club, the liberal sentiment that animates much of the hippie movement seems to be lost on McCandless, but he was no doubt a firm believer in fighting for marginalized rights and social justice, showing great sympathy especially to the poor. Rather than adopt traditionally Republican aspirations for upward mobility, McCandless descended in the social hierarchy, becoming homeless, a hitchhiker and a tramp. Hippie communities are, as well, characterized by a trend of downward social mobility, looked down upon by a society and culture so eager to flaunt its possibility for upward mobility. In order to criticize the stigma surrounding poverty and simple living, many middle-class Americans created or integrated themselves into existing hippie communities carrying with them a high level of education and a non-confrontational attitude championing justice and tolerance, fruit of their peaceful and comfortable upbringing (contrasted with lower-income neighbourhoods, which in turn extol competitiveness and ruthlessness as those are the values that capitalist America appreciates). McCandless' higher education, love of literature, condemnation of social injustices and open-mindedness to new experiences are traits that he has in common with much of the hippie generation. In spite of his support for right-wing politics, these characteristics let him integrate into traditionally left-leaning hippie communities[36] very easily.

Incidentally, I need to make clear that the hippies were not a unified cultural movement. While I may have been working with individuals thus far, now I am tackling an entire movement of people, each with their own perspectives and disagreements. Because of the lackadaisical nature of hippiedom, documentation is scarce, and each commune had its own unique ideology with slight differences

[35] McCandless' sister, Carine McCandless, describes in her book *The Wild Truth* the psychological and physical abuse within the family. The movie adaptation of Sean Penn, likewise, goes over the issue, albeit in less detail.

[36] This is a broad generalization, as Preston Shire's compelling 2007 book *Hippies of the Religious Right* shines a spotlight on the hippie movement's right-leaning members, usually of evangelical backgrounds.

between each. This categorization is made difficult, also, by the fact that hippies lived in communes, but what exactly constitutes a commune is hard to define. The book *The 60s Communes* published by Timothy Miller in 1999 cites a communard from the 60s, Elaine Sundancer, who explained the ambiguity of the term:

> Each commune is different. There are communes that live on brow rice, and communes that have big gardens, and communes that buy white bread and frozen vegetables at the grocery store. There are communes with no schedule whatsoever (and no clocks); there is at least one commune where the entire day is divided into sections by bells, and each person states, at a planning meeting at 7 A.M. each morning, what work he intends to do that day. There are communes centered around a particular piece of land, like us, or travelling communes like the Hog Farm, or communes centered around a music trip or a political trip, like many of the city communes. This diversity raises certain questions. A piece of land that's simply thrown open to anyone who wants to live there, or a place where each family lives entirely in its own house but the land is owned jointly: shall we call these places "communes" or not? Communes differ greatly (XXII).

It is impossible to truly group hippies into one coherent and cohesive movement, but there are no doubt various tendencies which unite the broader hippie movement. The broader tendencies are recognized in an article by *Time* magazine during the Summer of Love (1967), as cited in Timothy Miller's 2011 book, *The Hippies and American Values*:

> If there were a hippie code, it would include these flexible guidelines:
> —Do your own thing, wherever you have to do it and whenever you want.
> —Drop out. Leave society as you have known it. Leave it utterly.
> —Blow the mind of every straight person you can reach. Turn them on, if not to drugs, then to beauty, love, honesty, fun (XV).

As I stated previously, the hippies belong to the cultural tradition of the Transcendental philosophers. This statement is not short of its controversy, of course. Paul Wild in his article "Flower Power" describes the controversy: "For today's bright youth, more curious, more skeptical, the transcendentalists offer a vision of the examined life purer and more solidly grounded than that of the drug-glazed hippie" (62). Even so,

it is possible to argue that the hippies' worship of nature and the natural definitely stems in part from a transcendental tradition, alongside their rejection of mainstream, industrialized society. In the immediate time following the American renaissance, visionaries believing in the transcendental ideal sought to establish communal utopian experiments, such as Fruitlands and Brook Farm, which can be seen as communities enacting this principle, predating the hippies attempting to live out the same ideal a century later. Joseph Thorndike describes Fruitlands as "the site of a Utopian community where Alcott and a select band of fellow spirits would put into practice the vague but lofty principles of Transcendentalism. Their purpose was to build a refuge against the gathering forces of industrial society and to live according to nature".[37] Fruitlands would eventually fail, devoid of support from transcendentalists who looked to Brook Farm as the more promising project. Brook Farm, on the other hand, enjoyed more moderate success, with Nathaniel Hawthorne as one of the original shareholders, and Emerson as a prominent visitor. Eventually, both writers as well as Thoreau would come to denounce the farm.[38] Utopian experiments, to varying degrees of success, were commonplace before and after these transcendentalist experiments, especially in America, but I believe it is possible to draw a line of continuity between Emerson's teachings, these experiments and the hippie movement based on ideological similarities.

In writing the Constitution, the Founding Fathers knew that having a centralized government would take power away from the people to the State and would lead to the average American becoming alienated from politics all together, thus making it so the states held power over their own populations. Jefferson was also aware of how city work

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[37] Thorndike Jr., Joseph J. "Fruitlands." *American Heritage*, 1986, https://www.americanheritage.com/fruitlands [last accessed 6/08/2021].

[38] The entry for March 3rd 1841 on Thoreau's "Journal: Volume I" writes, as accessed in *The Walden Woods Project*: "As for these communities, I think I had rather keep bachelor's hall in hell than go to board in heaven" (227); critics have deciphered this to be a critique of these farms. Emerson, despite being less of a recluse than Thoreau, also lost any interest in joining these communities as expressed in a letter to George Ripley, cited in *Political Writings:* "I am in many respects suitably placed, in an agreeable neighborhood, in a town which I have many reasons to love, & which has respected my freedom so far that I may presume it will indulge me farther if I need it" (97). Nathaniel Hawthorne was famously a founding member of Brook Farm but backed out of the experiment after six months following financial and ideological disputes. He would write about his experience in a letter to Miss Peabody, collected *in The Love Letters of Nathaniel Hawthorne to Miss Peabody*: "Even my Custom House experience was not such a thraldom and weariness; my heart and mind were freer. Oh; belovedest, labor is the curse of this world, and nobody can meddle with it, without becoming proportionably brutified. Dost thou think it a praiseworthy matter, that I have spent five golden months in providing food for cows and horses? Dearest, it is not so. Thank God, my soul is not utterly buried under a dung-heap" (12) Hawthorne would also base his 1852 novel, *The Blithedale Romance*, around the experience.

alienated Americans from their own labour, and thus emphasized yeomanry as ideal[39]. In *Transcendental Utopias*, Richard Francis makes the argument that Brook Farm (though I would extend this to every transcendental community) "represented a deliberate and consistent attempt to interweave democratic ideals into the very texture of social life" (49) and the decision to hold the experiment at a farm would hopefully guarantee that every inhabitant would feel connected to his labour. In the 20th century, the hippie communities functioned likewise as an attempt at recuperating the democratic process, unchaining themselves from a centralized American government not heeding the voice of the people who wanted civil justice and a stop to the war, and of returning to a more grounded understanding of work, distancing themselves from menial office jobs where each worker operates as a disposable cog.

George Ripley, Brook Farm's founder, became enamoured with the writings of French socialist philosopher, Charles Fourier. Attempting to follow Fourier's theories on societal organization, the Brook farmers began constructing a structure of Fourier's conception, a phalanstery. The building caught on fire and led to the eventual demise of the farm, which lasted six years. Fruitlands, on the other hand, failed almost immediately due to the farming inexperience of its members. The support for Brook Farm following the conversion to Fourierism dropped, as the transcendentalists argued that Ripley and the farmers rejected the belief that reforms comes from the individual, now adopting a philosophy which advocates institutional reform. In Fank Delano's book, *Brook Farm: A Dark Side of Utopia*, he describes how Charles Lane, founder of Fruitlands, was also a critic of Ripley's farm. Lane claimed the farmers were "playing away their youth and day-time in a miserably joyous frivolous manner" (119). George Ripley's response to his critics would be: "the attention of some good men is directed chiefly to individual evils; they wish to improve private character without attacking social principles which obstruct all improvement", referring to the transcendentalists; referring to himself and his farmers, he continues: "while the attention of other good men is directed to the evils of society; they think that private character suffers from public sins, and that, as we are placed in society by Providence, the advancement of society is our principal duty" (118). Because of this lackadaisical approach to life and more institutionally-minded attitude influenced by Marxist thought, Brook Farm is perhaps the transcendental experiment which best

[39] Partly for this reason, Thoreau emphasized husbandry and deliberate living. As he argued in "Walking", deliberate actions convey meaning. McCandless, as an astute follower of Thoreau, undertook working-class jobs with glee, deliberately engaging in them, thus preventing labour alienation to occur in his own life.

approximates the hippie communes of the following century. While I chose Brook Farm and Fruitlands as examples for this dissertation, let it be known that they were not the only transcendental experiments of the period; while perhaps the most prominent for their success and failure respectively, roughly sixty other communities were formed during the 1840s.

Additionally, the hippies have an almost inherent understanding of the Over-Soul. Owing to the influence of oriental mysticism and philosophy, the hippies did believe in an intrinsic and transcendental oneness uniting all human beings, but most rejected the Judeo-Christian framework of Emerson's philosophy. Emerson may have been critical of organized and institutionalized religion, but references to a Judeo-Christian "God" were scarce in hippie writings, while omnipresent in Emerson's. The transcendentalist Over-Soul shares similarities with Platonic thought as well as Oriental mysticism. Despite broader American racism toward Asian immigrants, we can find in the transcendental tradition sentiments of openness and inclusivity toward Asian culture. Emerson praised the flow of Asian immigrants to the West Coast in his "Speech at Banquet in Honor of Chinese Ambassy", saying thusly: "The immigrants from Asia come in crowds. Their power of continuous labor, their versatility in adapting themselves to new conditions, their stoical economy, are unlooked-for virtues".[40] Emerson clearly respected the commitment the new migrants made to integrate into the competitive capitalist framework that his society functioned under. The transcendentalist was also aware of the oriental philosophers and took the time in his speech to compliment Confucius for predating Socrates, Marcus Aurelius and Jesus Christ in their monumental teachings. Emerson owned Confucian books (which Thoreau perused), so there is no question that he appropriated Confucianism, which also defends the unity of the self with Heaven, in order to formulate his idea of nature and the Over-Soul. This intellectual tradition would then be appropriated by the hippies who borrowed even more heavily from Oriental mysticism than Emerson did,[41] nonetheless keeping in line with the essential tenet of the oneness of being.

[40] Emerson, Ralph W. "XXVI. Speech at Banquet in Honor of Chinese Embassy." *Bartleby*, 1860, https://www.bartleby.com/90/1126.html [last accessed 06/08/2021].

[41] The conversions to Buddhism and other oriental religions, the use of the term "spiritual" (substituting the term "religious") and the search for a "guru", a spiritual leader, are all aspects that showcase the hippie movement's infatuation with oriental mysticism. The hippies also tried to recover native American and African symbols through their aesthetics and clothing in an effort to appear more inclusive and combat WASP cultural norms.

The Beat Generation is often seen as the intellectual precursors to the hippie movement. Made up of minds such as Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac and others, who diagnosed the ills of modern industrial capitalism and sought refuge in the kind of isolationist self-reliance that animated the philosophy of Emerson and Thoreau. The hippies were the culmination of the cultural shift beginning with the Lost and Beat generations. As Paul Wild argues in "Flower Power", what differentiates the beats and the hippies are their comparative passion: "[e]cstacy is what makes the hippie movement important, despite the seeming irresponsibility of their acts, for with ecstasy they have overcome the apathy or constraint of previous generations. The 'cool' of the beats has been replaced by the hippies' passionate intensity, and that is no small achievement" (68). Both the hippies and the beats emerged from what Mark Lytle called the "Era of Consensus" as cited by Issitt in *Hippies: a Guide to an American Subculture*. The author of the book explains:

> In the 1950s, as Cold War hysteria swept across America, the social environment became increasingly conservative and repressive, including government censorship of literature, speech, and other forms of expression. In addition, there was a rise in 'consumerism' in America, a complex social phenomenon marked by a popular obsession with material gain. These and other related factors gave rise to a rebellious youth movement known as the Beat Generation, a group that the popular media later called 'Beatniks'" (1).

Anti-capitalism is a big component of beatific thought, one which the hippies would borrow. In *American Scream*, Johan Raskin cites Allen Ginsberg's words at a poetry reading: "[i]t's not like the Cold War of the 1940s and 1950s. The CIA doesn't do the dirty work anymore, the corporations do" (XII). It is worth to keep in mind that Allen Ginsberg was perhaps one of the more conspiratorial minds of the beat generation, but it was precisely that which enabled him to make the most scathing critiques of the society following the war. As Raskin explained, "Ginsberg turned the atom bomb into an all-inclusive metaphor. Everywhere he looked he saw apocalypse and atomization" (XIV). In essence, Ginsberg served as perhaps the loudest voice of the generation, "[transforming] the American avant-garde, and the angry alienation of the Beats, into something altogether more cheerful and benign" (XVIII). The beats would also partake in the use of drugs, mainly psychedelics. Kerouac's *On The Road*, also appropriately

nicknamed the Beat Bible, would become emblematic of beatific nonchalance and self-discovery. As argued by Miller in *The Huppies and American Values*, the bohemians and the beats were the immediate predecessors of the hippies, delineating afterwards the progression from beat to hippie: "the beats of the 1950s advocated dropping out of society, promoted new forms of art and literature, smoked marijuana, listened to unorthodox music (jazz), rejected traditional sexual norms, and even popularized the word 'hip'" (XVI).

However, aside from the beatific influence, the hippie movement was born as a result of the cultural "melting pot" of America in-tandem with the political controversies that assaulted the sixties. Issitt recounts the environment that led to the birth of the hippie generation:

> The political environment of 1960 America informed and inspired many teenaged Americans to join the hippie rebellion. The civil rights movement was gaining steam, America had officially sent thousands of troops to Vietnam, and the antinuclear movement was building in response to ongoing Cold War tensions. The cultural environment was also changing. Beat literature had found its way to colleges and universities and was influencing a new generation of students. Disc jockeys around the country were furthering the racial integration of popular culture by introducing white audiences to ''race music,'' and the folk revival of the late 1950s was blending into the doo-wop rock of the early 1960s (3).

Both the hippies and the beats became synonymous with counterculture. As defined by *The Hippies and American Values*: "The counterculture was a romantic social movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, mainly populated by teenagers and persons in their early twenties who through their flamboyant lifestyle expressed their alienation from mainstream American life." (XVI).

In spite of their relative lack of intellectualism, the hippies nevertheless instinctively diagnosed the wrongs of society and sought to escape from it. As Miller puts it, "[w]idespread mental illness and compulsive violence showed that there was a deep-running malaise in the culture; the rational alternative, as the hippies saw it, was simply to drop out" (XVIII). The intellectual parallel to the hippies was the New Left, defined by a constant ambiguity towards the former. Hippies were generally uninterested in politics, despite being sympathetic to the New Left. The two groups, however, shared the

same cultural values of “peace, racial harmony, and equality”, “smoking marijuana, engaging in liberated sex, and often living communally” (XX). Miller argues that despite their shared discontent with society and its decadent hypocrisy, the two were separate groups. Even so, hippies and the New Left allied against contemporary American society and championed the belief that it could be reformed. In his monumental 1969 book, *The Making of a Counterculture*, commonly considered the manifesto of the hippie generation, Theodore Roszak argues that hippies are a pragmatic manifestation of New Left’s intellectual diagnosis of societal malaise:

> We grasp the underlying unity of the countercultural variety, then, if we see beat-hip bohemianism as an effort to work out the personality structure and total life style that follow from New Left social criticism. At their best, these young bohemians are the would-be utopian pioneers of the world that lies beyond intellectual rejection of the Great Society. They seek to invent a cultural base for New Left politics, to discover new types of community, new family patterns, new sexual mores, new kinds of livelihood, new esthetic forms, new personal identities on the far side of power politics, the bourgeois home, and the consumer society (66).

The hippie movement swept over all America, sparking peaceful protests and utopian communities all over the country. While the exact number of communes is difficult to accurately pinpoint, but estimates vary in the thousands, with potentially millions of inhabitants. With the surge in popularity, hippie culture became increasingly commercialized. Imitators of the movement popped up with no concern over the ethics that were broadly preached. As such, the hippies began to cannibalize themselves, accusing others of inauthenticity. In the end, hippie culture was consumed by the same consumerist society it had tried to distance itself from. Another aspect that led to the downfall of the hippie movement was, ironically, their insistence in maintaining their individualism. Lack of coordination and an unconscious reliance on societal norms (such as having women take care of cooking and other chores) destroyed many of the communes. Even so, small pocketed communities persisted, now striking a more careful balance between individual and communal need, and having a more acute awareness of systemic imbalances and how to combat them.

Due to the vague nature of hippie communes, it may be seen as difficult to extrapolate from them some form of broader cultural analysis, but as I hoped to showcase

in this chapter, there are characteristics which unify the movement, through which one is able to come to an understanding of the importance of the hippie movement not only for its time, but also for the subsequent youth who would become hippies as well, such as those who choose to settle in Slab City.

2.1. Finding a Compromise Between Individual and Community

I have attempted thus far to establish a dichotomy between two modes of simple American living, communal utopian experiments and the individualistic survivalist. With the respective exceptions already mentioned and elaborated upon to the point where the following statement seems less reductive, I think it is possible to allocate the aforementioned perspectives within the wings of the highly polarized current American political climate. The hippies of course, barring the religious hippies alluded to previously, were notoriously left-wing, while the stereotypical frontiersman nowadays perhaps reborn in the image of the southwestern and Alaskan man can more fittingly be aligned with the right.[42] It is the typical Republican politician that upholds values such as American exceptionalism and manifest destiny, ideas directly tied to the idea that Man holds dominion over nature. Red states are larger and less urbanized; nature engulfs much of the civilization constructed within it, therefore breeding an environment where solitary getaways are possible whether for hunting or outback living. Blue states correspond to highly metropolitan and industrialized areas, where naturally the idea of nature preservation has to take shape in a refuge from industrial society and an increased emphasis on the wellbeing of the collective. The left-wing has bred strains of anarchism

[42] What I mean is that the conditions of rural America best assimilate those found in the frontier. While not necessarily completely synonymous with the danger and spirit of rejuvenation of the frontier, the abundant nature, scattered urban centres and more intertwined communities help bolster a feeling of continuity between the stereotypical modern outdoorsman and the frontiersmen of old. The unique position of Alaska as the last frontier will be elaborated upon later, but as it pertains to Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and southern California specifically (as the north is culturally divergent and politically opposite), the experience at the border with Mexican immigrants aids in a self-perception these Americans have as modern-day frontiersmen. In regards to political alignment, most of the western and southern states are typically described as “red states” for their undying allegiance to the Republican party.

(although anarcho-primitivism in its current state seems rather bipartisan),[43] as well as popularizing the idea of vegetarianism and veganism, modes of consumption they perceive as the most ethical, whereas the far-right has been associated with eco-terrorists such as the Unabomber, Theodore Kaczynski. The current day far-right seems to be striving for a return to golden day suburbia, there are strains which exhibit survivalist tendencies and seek a return to a lost Eden.[44] What this political analysis attempts to showcase is that despite nature preservation being an afterthought in mainstream Republican discourse, the concept still holds influence over specific strands of the political spectrum.[45] The difference between the two sides lies in self-identification: left-wing nature preservationists advocate for broader interconnected communities living in harmony with nature, integrating progressing technology in a safe and responsible way, whereas right-wing nature preservationists often advocate for individual integration into wilderness (which can extend to one's family and sometimes local community, but hardly ever beyond that), sometimes supporting the use of modern tools and small technology but otherwise rejecting larger-scale technological structures. Whereas left-wing preservationists believe that it was the mishandling of technology and oppressive capitalism that dismantled society, right-wing outdoorsmen typically believe that large-scale society itself is the issue. Transplanted to the realm of electoral politics, we can see this tendency reflected in the Right's insistence on state rights over federal rights. This dissertation will not dwell on the minutiae of the previous claims as I hold them to be

[43] Prominent anarcho-primitivist thinkers, such as John Zerzan, are undoubtedly leftist, while the followers of Theodore Kaczynski, for instance, can be aligned with the far-right. Kaczynski himself rejected the left-right binary and made scathing criticisms of both sides in his manifesto *Industrial Society and Its Future*, as well as criticizing the anarcho-primitivist ideology for being too naïve; he was not an anarcho-primitivist as he believed a cautious degree of modern tools and knowledge, and small-scale hierarchal communities were ideal. For the purposes of this dissertation, however, Kaczynski will be aligned with the right because of his followers' reactionary tendencies.

[44] Modern far-right populists such as Donald Trump and his followers seek a return to an American aesthetic close to the 1950s or even the Raegan years, characterized by homogeneous middle-class suburban neighbourhoods of white picket fences. Far-right accelerationists, on the other hand, seek the collapse of society and a return to pre-industrial times.

[45] The political binary has been thought of by political theorists as severely outdated and inappropriate for the kind of complexity and nuance that contemporary geopolitics requires, but as American culture subdivides itself along party lines, then I am using the Republican-Democrat political spectrum as a reflection of identity issues.

self-evident;[46] these are, in essence, some broader observations I have noticed working within the American binary political spectrum, which has become increasingly polarized. The tension between individual will and communal responsibility has, much like everything else in recent years, become further and further polarized, and this is true even in the field of nature studies.

Before we can approach this binary distinction between communitarianism and individualism, one must look more closely at the transcendentalists once again (more specifically, the ones I've chosen to analyse: Emerson and, more importantly, Thoreau) and their views on community. Let us begin with Thoreau's views on political matters. In his article "How to Mind Your Own Business: Thoreau on Political Indifference", Jonathan McKenzie outlines his problems with Thoreau scholars' interpretations of the intellectual's work and explains the apparent discrepancy in Thoreau's desire to live in isolation and his advocacy against slavery in his Massachusetts address. As Thoreau said in his "Journal VI" on June 1854: "Politicians! I have looked into the eyes of two or three of them— but I saw nothing there to satisfy me" (370). Thoreau's distaste and distrust of the government would be best elaborated upon on his famous "Of Civil Disobedience" essay. McKenzie argues that Thoreau's philosophy can be best summed up with a quote from *Walden*: "Let everyone mind his own business [and be what he was made to be]" (326), the "business" being defined by McKenzie as the cultivation of a "serene inner self in defiance of one's neighbors', and the nation's, busyness" (423). Thoreau, as such, argues in favour of a distancing from political matters, in turn advocating preoccupation with one's own self-reliance.

However, Thoreau could not distance himself entirely from political matters. Like Emerson, who felt slavery was encroaching on his rights and thus compelled himself to speak out against it, Thoreau would also come to see the state as an agent impeding his freedom and speak against that hideous blot. Because of this, his philosophy on civil disobedience served as inspiration for political theorists of the 1960s, among them Martin

[46] The intricacies of American political discourse, while interesting in their own right, are not of much greater interest for the purposes of this dissertation. The American left (especially the recent democratic-socialist left) often advocates in the mainstream media for combating climate change and repurposing our technology and knowledge to create a more environmentally-friendly society. The mainstream conservative, however, does not believe in man-made climate change and often supports outdated notions of industrial progress and nature appropriation. One must look into the more obscure strands of the American right in order to substantiate my argument as, for example, in the writings of Theodore Kaczynski, right-wing outdoorsmen and anarcho-primitivists and, curiously, modern day Internet culture, where primitivist ideas of a return to pre-industrial civilizations have gained notoriety in the form of satiric memes (the substance of which would require another dissertation in itself to analyse properly).

Luther King Jr. and other activists of the civil rights movement. Perhaps fittingly, this new Thoreau renaissance of the 1960s coincided with the naissance of the hippie movement. Nevertheless, in the introduction to *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau,* Jack Turner explains that critics have reinterpreted Thoreau's refusal to pay tax in protest of the Mexican War "as a private act of conscientious refusal aimed at preserving his integrity rather than as a public act of civil disobedience aimed at transforming public policy" (2). Other critics have shared a similar interpretation in regards to Thoreau's apparently contradictory feelings towards slavery, arguing that although Thoreau opposed slavery from a moral standpoint, and his ideals disavowed his silence, the writer backed the abolitionist that would least grant the government power, only sprung forth into activism after the sight of slavery encroached on his backyard, and afterwards descended into obscurity as fast as he could.[47] Critics like George Kateb in his essay "Democratic Individuality and the Claims of Politics" have argued that Thoreau, above all, cherishes democracy as a means to uphold individual liberty and rights, and for this reason, Kateb criticizes the following statement in "Of Civil Disobedience": "It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; […] but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it" (151-152), arguing that it is an "unfortunate" advocation, considering "the real motive of disengagement is to take a stand in order to encourage others to do so as well" (342). Kateb considers Thoreau a political agent responsible for advocating for freedom, self-reliance and, more importantly, civil disobedience, thus his statement makes sense when one reads Thoreau through that lens, but the transcendentalist's reclusive tendencies cannot be reconciled with his brief spurts of political engagement. Above all, Thoreau wants to be left alone and will only preoccupy himself with worldly matters when they intrude upon his conscience: "I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad" (155). Or, as Hannah Arendt argues in *Crises of the Republic,* "Thoreau did not pretend that a man's washing his hands of it would make the world better or that a man had any obligation to do so. […] Here, as elsewhere, conscience is unpolitical" (60). As stated in chapter 1, Thoreau's political indifference

[47] For instance, Nancy Rosenblum argues in "Thoreau's Democratic Individulism" that "[c]hattel slavery may be an enormous evil, but it becomes [Thoreau's] affair only when it reminds him of 'slavery of all kinds' and the need for self-emancipation, or when government tries to make him an agent of injustice—when it is forcibly impressed on him that southern slavery entails slavery in Massachusetts. Not even great political questions are permitted to eclipse his personal perspective on events. no action is right, regardless of whether it is commonly deemed moral, if it is not expressive" (26).

would disappoint Emerson tremendously, who used his voice to advocate for the causes he believed in and thought Thoreau should do the same. Much like Thoreau.[48] McCandless couldn't and can't be tied to one specific aisle of the increasingly polarized American political spectrum. Thoreau and McCandless have been associated both with primitivist tendencies and imperialistic ambitions (mainly by deep ecologists) but that would be inaccurate descriptions. They are, instead, naturalists with a love for high culture and a desire to escape a decadent society. As Cristopher A. Dustin elaborates in "Thoreau's Religion", there is a dualism "between a 'higher life' and the freedom associated with 'wildness and adventure'" that Thoreau seems to strive for, but although "he marks the difference between them, it is not their separateness that he emphasizes. as he says, he reverences them both" (270).

America is unique in its fierce individualism, and that is a trait that still carries on into today's world. Robert Bellah in his recent book *Habits of the Heart* has outlined the history of American individualism, beginning with Winthrop and the Puritan settlers, passing through Emerson and the transcendentalists, and finally arriving at the modern day, where American individualism adapted to the techno-industrial age has manifested itself in a refusal to adopt certain leftist and socialist policies for the common good. Bellah's analysis is apt and elaborate, strikes at the heart of many concerns in contemporary American society about the role and importance of the individual versus the good of the collective, and illustrates how this fierce individualism has bolstered a selfish and uncompassionate sentiment for the community at large. Among the various kinds of individualism that Bellah elaborates upon, he argues that Americans have always been drawn to religious individualism, beginning with the very specific strand of Protestantism in the form of Puritanism, continuing with the various churches that popped up along the states, and the deserters of said churches such as the transcendentalists; in modern times, he argues, this religious individualism has taken to the East to find its expression, adopting eastern religions such as Buddhism. The new religious individualists have ditched the term "religious" and prefer the term "spiritual". I would argue that this trend was popularized during the 1960s counterculture movement (with a precedent in the Beat Generation, with figures such as Gary Snyder interested in Asian mysticism,

[48] As pontificated over by Chaloupka in "Thoreau's Apolitical Legacy for American Environmentalism", Thoreau was appropriated by both the left and the right: Thoreau's *civil disobedience* and his environmentalism aligned him to many activists on the left, but at the same time, "[if] not for the political Right's need to make alliances with the corporate world, Thoreau could have been perceived as a conservative, with his gestural anti-government stance, ruralism, individualism, and pastoralism" (213).

even converting to Buddhism), with the hippies being notoriously religiously "spiritual". But as Bellah accurately observed, the contemporary religious individualists are searching for a certain "oneness" of being, a concept codified in America by the transcendentalists. Thoreau was a pioneer in recovering this ancient oriental (and even western) wisdom. He says in *Walden* that the "ancient philosophers, Chinese, Hindoo, Persian and Greek, were a class than which none has been poorer in outward riches, none so rich in inward" (14). Besides the oneness inherent to the ancient philosophies, Thoreau admires their "voluntary poverty". As he says, "To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust" (14-15).[49] In the United States, this kind of simple living was experienced by the native Americans, which Thoreau admires. As Brian Walker states in "Thoreau's Alternative Economics", "Throughout *Walden*, native Americans exemplify a population living in relation to the New England climate in a way that allows them to maintain their freedom and happiness without the problems Thoreau sees his fellow countrymen facing" (53). It is precisely this kind of life of simplicity and voluntary poverty that the hippies will hope to recover, and the kind of life that McCandless, too, will experience during the two years he had spent tramping.

Before his trip to Alaska, McCandless took to the road to discover himself. Thoreau himself shares in "Walking" his fascination with the West: "Every sunset which I witness inspires me with the desire to go to a West as distant and as fair as that into which the sun goes down. He appears to migrate westward daily, and tempt us to follow him. He is the Great Western Pioneer whom the nations follow".[50] Thoreau titled himself a Saunterer, whereas McCandless called himself a Tramp; either way, they, like all Americans, were fascinated by the journey westwards. McCandless' trip is more reminiscent of a young Jack Kerouac or a Sal Paradise, however. It is interesting that Krakauer doesn't make that comparison himself in his book, considering the similarities

[49] Thoreau echoes his mentor's thoughts, as written in "The Over-Soul": "But the soul that ascends to worship the great God is plain and true; has no rose-color, no fine friends, no chivalry, no adventures; does not want admiration; dwells in the hour that now is, in the earnest experience of the common day" (Emerson, Ralph W. "The Over-Soul." *American Transcendentalism Web*, 1841, https://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/transcendentalism/authors/emerson/essays/oversoul.html [last accessed 06/08/2021].

[50] Thoreau, Henry David. "Walking." *The Project Gutenberg*, 1862, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1022/1022-h/1022-h.htm. [last accessed 07/08/2021].

between the two journeys and how the Beat Generation served as a spiritual precursor to the hippies which McCandless would come to interact and coexist with. Halting his tramping, McCandless chose to squat in a Californian self-sustaining community near the Salton Sea by the name of Slab City, self-entitled the "last free place" on Earth. Bry and Rissolo in their article "Slab City: Squatters' Paradise" give a succinct history of the community, highlighting the fact that California historically had bypassed the frontier land settlement which characterized most of American expansion.[51] Squatters in the late 19th century were evicted and killed since they were seen as lawless settlers, so the fact that a community such as Slab City managed to establish itself in Californian lands is a testament to the individual will of the people inhabiting such a seemingly desolate place. In Slab City, there is an "unwritten code of behavior for residents" (708) which safeguards that one's personal property and privacy aren't violated. Before its modern-day inhabitants, that same land had been inhabited at points by native Americans, afterwards it was appropriated as a zone for educational purposes and by WWII it had been turned into a training camp. Following the war, it became an attractive site for snowbirds, hippie families, migrant farm laborers, the homeless and, recently, tourists. A shared characteristic many articles on Slab City have is describing it as a fiercely individualistic community.[52] Charlie Hailey argues in *Camp(site)* (2003) that "it is the layering of places within the site, rather than spatial juxtaposition, that effectively makes Slab City and its spaces" (312). Slab City's individualism is demonstrated by a successive "series of appropriations" within one location which, to Hailey, are "incompatible" (312-313). He also draws a binary between the low-income settlers and the retirees and vacationers, arguing, however, that this split in the colony is not necessarily incompatible. "In Slab City," Bry and Rissolo conclude, "people are free to do as they wish as long as it does not interfere with the liberty of others. These, of course, are basic themes of democracy with

[51] The article cites Carey McWilliams' book *California: The Great Exception,* wherein she argues: "One of the most striking respects in which California differs from other western states consists in the manner by which it skipped or omitted the frontier phase of land settlement. California began with land monopoly and, in this respect, it is an exception to the rule of frontier settlement" (100). She goes on to argue that California is exceptional in that it partook in the same American agrarian tradition of the other states; instead, it developed a mining tradition of its own.

[52] Bry and Rissolo argue: "The apparent absence of rules regulating behavior and the freedom to create a community based on individuality play a large role in the popularity of living at Slab City" (704). John-Alder and Op't Hof argue also in their article: "Yet in spite, or perhaps because of their championship of individual freedom, inhabitants of Slab City adhere to a set of informal rules that are governed, as one outside observer noted, by 'social affinity and word of mouth'" (30):

which most Americans would agree. However, the residents of Slab City suggest that their practice of democracy is a reality, not just an ideal" (713). As one resident proudly explained, "Here I'm my own boss, with no one telling me what to do" (713). In "Discovering the last free place" John-Alder and Op't Hof expose how Slab City is also welcoming of new residents and tourists, reinforcing a "socially tolerant collective identity for the community, and thus an inclusive counterculture image defined by fluid territorial boundaries and spatial claims" (37). Charles Erasmus outlines in his book Rousseau's requirements for a true democracy: small size, simple and unsophisticated culture, social and economic equality, and living without luxury[53] (115). Rousseau himself would state in "The Social Contract" that "a true democracy has never existed, and never will" since it "is contrary to the natural order that the majority should govern and the minority should be governed" (201), however, Bry and Rissolo argue that Slab City has met the standard. "The residents of Slab City did not plan to create a community based on Utopian idealism. Their pursuit of personal liberty led to the organic growth of a community based on the tenets of democracy" (714). Certainly, Slab City fits all four of Rousseau's requirements but in spite of its internal lawlessness, the territory is still under the jurisdiction of the Californian and larger American government. Despite rarely being troubled by the police, Slab City still has to deal with its own problems. Even though the community relies on a self-understood code of conduct, theft and other minor crime has not been eradicated. The covid-19 pandemic has also heightened Slab City's problems with basic hygiene and dependence on the government and health care system[54]. While Krakauer's book doesn't describe McCandless' time in Slab City, Sean Penn's movie adaptation dedicates a good chunk of its runtime to this brief intermission in the adventure. As such, Slab City has inevitably attracted tourists and residents inspired by McCandless' stay at the community, though it was a common tourist site even before

[53] In Rousseau's own words: "First, a very small State, in which the people may be readily assembled, and in which every citizen can easily know all the others; secondly, great simplicity of customs and morals, which prevents a multiplicity of issues and thorny debates; next, considerable equality in class and fortune, without which equality in rights and authority could not long survive; lastly, little or no luxury, for luxury is either the result of wealth or makes it necessary; luxury corrupts simultaneously the rich and the poor, the former by ownership, the latter by coveting; it betrays the country to indolence and vanity; it deprives the State of all its citizens in order to enslave them to one to another, and all to opinion" (201).

[54] For more, read Rapa, Patrick. "Fear of the Pandemic Reaches California's Slab City, an off-the-Grid Desert Community." *The Washington Post*, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/fear-of-the-pandemic-reaches-californias-slab-city-an-off-the-grid-desert-community/2020/06/05/789a1de4-9b72-11ea-ad09-8da7ec214672_story.html [last accessed 07/08/2021].

then. In “Discovering the Last Free Place”, John-Alder and Op’t Hof report that “[s]everal new residents who were negatively impacted by the financial crisis of 2008 have cited the film as the reason they now live on the slabs”. While *Into the Wild* may have been an inspiration for many, the movie is not the only justification given by the residents, as “some choose to move to Slab City to live in solitude, or to pursue artistic or sustainable living goals, while others are driven there by poverty, or the fact they ‘have nowhere else to go’”. To many of these new inhabitants, inspired by *Into the Wild* or not, living in the community is “preferable to life outside the community’s protective physical and social boundaries” (34).

Slab City distinguishes itself from a typical neighbourhood community in that everyone of its inhabitants share a similar ideological perspective on social reclusion, and it likewise distinguishes itself from the transcendentalist experiments and most hippie communes because it was brought about as an improvised settlement initially rather than a planned project; however, with time it has turned into a self-regulating community that has even become accustoming tourist visits. Hailey goes farther and states that Slab City proves Reps’ argument that planned communities serve as “the catalyst for operations (in this case, tourism along with dwelling) in the ‘frontier’” (324).

Slab City describes itself as “the last frontier left in America”, since there are not “many places are left in this country where a person can just pick a spot and park indefinitely... This is one the last few undisturbed places left in the United States where a person can feel totally free” (Hailey, 322). Hailey argues that with the closing of the frontier, Slab City breeds, rather than a physical frontier needing to be conquered, a subjective, personal frontier represented by its inhabitants’ campsites. McCandless saw Slab City as yet another not yet final space in his personal re-enactment of the frontier settlement and the westward movement. The transcendentalist experiments and the hippie communes sought to solve the gap between individual and community to varying degrees of success, but fierce individualists like Thoreau and McCandless in spite of this still sought solitude. McCandless didn’t acknowledge Slab City as the final frontier that it advertises itself as being; rather than squat, he chose to tramp onward to Alaska, his personal final frontier. But why did McCandless reject Slab City’s promise of self-discovery and individual expression? A reason for this may be found in +’s critique of America. Citing French writer Guillaume Faye, Baudrillard echoes the thought that “[California] is the world centre of the inauthentic”, adding: “that is what gives it its originality and power” (104). Authenticity is a big component of hippie culture, one that

Slab City strived toward in its decoration and inhabitants' lifestyle and art. But in its accommodation of tourist visits and its performative authenticity, Slab City has become perhaps too inauthentic – hyperreal, as Baudrillard would put it – much like hippie culture itself eventually became. Certainly, the Slab City aesthetic and its performative authenticity would appeal to many who followed McCandless' story, as they would be drawn to symbology to begin with. McCandless himself, however, like any other American on the road, sought to discover his real self, to discover what is authentic about him. In part, this journey of his was also performative, an attempt at mythologizing himself, considering his fixation on writing down his journey, the fact that he picked up an alter-ego, kept books with him in the magic bus desired to return to civilization eventually; his desires, however, were rooted in naïve idealism. Failing to reconcile his intrinsic sociability with his belief that society was irreversibly inauthentic, he took his journey for self-discovery to the final frontier.

Conclusion

Alaska motivates American imagination since the 1870s. John Muir was one of the first Americans to appreciate its beauty. Since then, Alaska's wilderness and savagery has been appealing to men. McCandless was an avid reader of Jack London who published *The Call of the Wild* detailing his experience on the Yukon River. There is no doubt that just as Thoreau motivated McCandless' retreat from society, Muir and London narrowed that choice down to Alaska. It is not so much that Alaska is inherently special, but that it was made special by necessity; it represents the last uncharted, uncontrolled wilderness of America. As cited by *Nash in Wilderness and the American Mind* conservationist John Kauffmann once argued in a 1980 Senate debate that "Alaska is our ultimate wilderness, the last remnant of what the New World used to be. If we lose the freshness and the beauty there, something essential to North America will have died out forever" (308). Alaska is unique: migrants fled to Alaska to escape civilization, however, now with the conscious awareness to preserve the new land as it was, gained through failed previous frontier settlements. This sentiment contrasts with the pioneering spirit of the last century; the pioneers fled civilization in order to build a new one, one that would eventually become like the rest, forcing the process to repeat itself. Roderick Nash declares that "[Alaskans] did not want Alaska to become like the rest of the United States. Almost the opposite sentiment motivated pioneers on earlier American frontiers" (279).

Many critics have pointed out how ethnocentric the concept of wilderness in America is. Anthropologist William Brown states in regards to Alaska that wilderness there is "ethnocentric to the point of being insulting", as cited in *Wilderness and the American Mind* (277). He is correct in his assessment, as most Alaskan migrants tend to be white Americans wanting to relive a 19th century frontier experience, and McCandless was no exception. Despite his higher education and love of literature, McCandless was unaware of how his retreat to Alaska signals an ethnocentrism that plays into the systematic erasure of native experience at the frontier. This is a criticism some scholars often make of the McCandless phenomenon. While one could argue that McCandless attempted a recovery of the native American way of life, like his idol Thoreau, the fact that he brought with him a gun, modern tools and lived on an abandoned bus for all of his time in the bush points to an inherent dependence on Western civilization and an unwillingness or inability to break free from the framework of WASP society and fully harmonize with the land. This is a criticism that must be levied at him and his followers.

Baudrillard would claim that "America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality. It is a hyperreality because it is a Utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved" (28). America since its inception has believed that it was "Utopia achieved" (77). America is hyperreal because it "is built on the idea that it is the realization of everything the others have dreamt of - justice, plenty, rule of law, wealth, freedom: it knows this, it believes in it, and in the end, the others have come to believe in it too" (77). Baudrillard claims that America has no identity problems, because it is unconcerned with origins, however I would disagree. America's identity problems are uncovered when the illusion of utopia is shattered. In the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the Vietnam protests, that illusion was shattered slightly. Before then, it was *manifest destiny* and the Indian genocide. Many Americans began to question if America had delivered on its promises. That journey of self-reflection took shape in pilgrimages, utopian communities and solitary retreats. It is because America's identity is built on its performativity that America refuses to confront its past – should it acknowledge that it is not the land of justice and freedom, the American collective identity would fall in disarray. McCandless was aware of the lack of justice and representation in American democracy, the lack of freedom imposed on him by technocratic capitalism, and the inauthenticity of American society; through his mythologization, many Americans have also become aware of this.

Charles Erasmus in his book divides human development into three stages: the multiecological, dating from the early hominids to the industrial revolution refers to Man evolving "biologically in response to planning opportunities while adapting culturally to an expanding range of physical environments"; the supraecological, starting with the industrial revolution and continuing to present day, with Man now having "dominion over ecological differences as he learns to 'carry his environment with him'"; and the monoecological, which he claims for the time being refers to the realm of science-fiction. Whereas in the multiecological stage, Man is environmentally-determined, and in the second he is technologically determined, it is in the final stage of human development that Man becomes master of his own fate by controlling technology rather than being a slave to it (11). Erasmus clarifies, as well, that the stage of supraecological Man started a bit before the industrial revolution, with the notion of progress, an awareness of the "upward curve of material development" (23). Erasmus argues that posterity took on a religious connotation, and that "science, capitalism, and the belief in progress have been close companions during most of the supraecological stage" (25). The demand for capital

lead necessarily to cost-effective advancements in the field of mathematics and science. As such, science and capitalism in tandem become the "force for the 'rationalization' of human behavior" (26). Due to the competitiveness and hierarchical structure of capitalist society, Erasmus concludes that "[n]owhere do we find a collective good maintained without self-interest. Nowhere, in other words, do we find 'altruism' without some form of individual reinforcement" (330).

Americans find themselves at an impasse when it comes to the future. In order to live sustainably and ecologically, they must necessarily free themselves of the competitive and individualistic capitalist framework which breeds technological innovation at the cost of the environment and the lives of others. But a tradition of self-reliance and self-interest has been ingrained into the American mind. Americans must begin dismantling the structures in place, and rethink and retool such ideas in order to survive the future.

It is undeniable the effect the discourse surrounding climate change has had on young minds throughout the 20th and 21st centuries on both sides of the political spectrum. In recent times, new alternative food sources have been sought to ameliorate the climate crisis, for example, the case of the vegan diet and the proposition of insect-based foods. There are those, such as Wendel Berry, that stick to a traditional meat-based diet but emphasize that food consumption must be a personal endeavour deeply tied to a tangible experience. He echoes the thoughts of naturalists before and after him, namely Thoreau, and McCandless once again, who sought, as well, to get in touch with nature via strengthening the connection to the way they prepare their food. McCandless, as mentioned in chapter 1, had at first a very imperialistic view of food consumption, but as he spent more time in Alaska, he gradually came to an understanding of Leopold's land ethic. Gifted with bountiful nature, Americans are in a unique position to understand and incorporate the land ethic into their lifestyles. Perhaps with a complete understanding of Leopold's concept, Americans will find a new perspective to not only combat crisis but solve the less discussed issue of alimentary alienation. In all corners of American society there is alienation: labour alienation, political alienation, food alienation and alienation from the self. It is no wonder that Americans seek an escape to rediscover themselves. In *Into the Wild*, Krakauer establishes a parallel between his mountaineering escapades and McCandless' story. Not only that, he interrupts his narration of McCandless to give an account of other men who retreated into harsh nature but whose stories were not lucky enough to gain the notoriety of McCandless' narrative. Following the release of the book

and the movie, imitators have taken to Alaska to re-enact McCandless' journey, but many other Americans have ventured into the wilderness before and after McCandless outside of his influence. The allure of the wilderness motivates the American imagination to this day.

In the closing scenes of the movie adaptation, McCandless met an old veteran called Ron Franz. McCandless animated his life, as he did many others, bringing the old man joy and wonder after the death of his family. Atop a mountain cliff, Franz imparts on McCandless a piece of wisdom: "When you forgive, you love. And when you love, God's light shines on you". In the last scene of the movie, as McCandless lays on the magic bus dying of starvation, he looks up at the cloudy sky and hallucinates a reunion with his parents, asking rhetorically: "What if I were smiling and running into your arms, would you see then what I see now?" Looking up at the sky and realizing it was still cloudy while in this hallucination, he frowns. As he pronounces "what I see now", the subsequent scene shows McCandless back in reality, and when he looks up at the sky once more, the sun shines on him before he takes his last breath. McCandless may have forgiven his parents, but "God's light" only shone on him once he had retreated from his imagination and returned to the Alaskan reality. The same sentiment is conveyed by Thoreau's closing lines in "Walking": "So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bank-side in Autumn".[55] The motif of God acting through the sun's light, shining on those that live their lives without regrets, is common to both "Walking" and *Into the Wild*. This is often overlooked as a couple of minutes beforehand, McCandless has come to a revelation, writing in his version of *Family Happiness*, "Happiness only real when shared". However, McCandless was at peace with himself and the decisions that had brought him death, so much so that the last signed message he leaves is "I have had a happy life and thank the Lord. Goodbye and may God bless all!" Reading over *Doctor Zhivago* in that same scene, McCandless says "to call each thing by its right name" as the camera pans over to the signature reading Christopher McCandless, as opposed to Alexander Supertramp, the alias he had been using his whole journey. At the end of his life, McCandless had begun to discover the land ethic, had come to terms with his own identity and died fulfilled and happy. This idealistic romanticization reveals

[55] Thoreau, Henry David. "Walking." *The Project Gutenberg*, 1862, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1022/1022-h/1022-h.htm. [last accessed 07/08/2021].

what bountiful optimism Americans have in nature as the place for self-discovery, inner peace and harmony. Despite obvious artistic liberties, the movie has inspired many to take devout and religious pilgrimages to Alaska because superficially and aesthetically, the hyperreality of the McCandless myth appeals to the American struggle for individual identity. In McCandless, Americans see themselves, attempting to navigate the disillusions of modern society and trying to experience every possible alternative to metropolitan life; if an alternative, counterculture lifestyle is insufficient to appease the restless soul, then the wilderness has always the American's last resort for self-rejuvenation.

This dissertation has hopefully managed to synthesize various dichotomies. I have gone over how America's fierce individualism has led to a distrust of communitarian living and a distance from societal responsibility, and touched upon how these conflicting ideas have manifested within the American political spectrum; I have elaborated on how the presence of nature was crucial to American identity and how the consequences of industrialization and ruthless laissez-faire capitalism, brought about by a belief in progress, resulted in alienation for the common American, your average Joe. Hoping to reconcile these antagonistic forces, utopian communities focused on simplistic and naturalistic lifestyles with an emphasis on maintaining individual identity sprung up from an intellectual tradition commencing perhaps not with the transcendentalists, though one certainly heavily influenced by them, but an element of performativity and inauthenticity has prevented them from gaining traction with those seeking real self-reflection. Among those affected by the societal ennui that has continuously gained strength over the years, Christopher McCandless, or Alexander Supertramp, stands symbolically due to his mythologization in *Into the Wild* as an icon of the anachronistic westward journey to rediscover the American self in a time where identity has become fragmented and distorted.

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