

## Summers in the Skagit:

### Gary Snyder, Jack Kerouac, and the Language of the Lookout

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During the summers of 1952 and 1953, Gary Snyder spent over 120 days as a Forest Service fire lookout on remote peaks in the Skagit wilderness of the northern Cascades. In 1956, Snyder, blacklisted from government work, encouraged his new friend Jack Kerouac to take advantage of the same Forest Service opportunity, and as Snyder set out to study Buddhism in Japan, Kerouac climbed to his lookout perch on Desolation Peak. Both men kept journals and published accounts of their time atop the peaks. Kerouac recorded his adventures with Snyder in *The Dharma Bums* (1958), a text whose literary and cultural significance has been widely underestimated. The novel ends with a celebratory account of his time on Desolation. Kerouac reprised his lookout experience to markedly different effect in the first part *Desolation Angels*. Entitled “Desolation in Solitude,” this version was written contemporaneously with *The Dharma Bums*, but remained unpublished until 1965. Four years later, Snyder published edited versions of his own lookout journals in *Earth House Hold* (1969). John Suiter’s recent *Poets on the Peaks* (2002), which includes Philip Whalen in its scope, is the only major study to date that treats these authors’ lookout experiences in detail. Suiter’s work is primarily biographical and historical, laying an important foundation for further inquiry into the aesthetic and philosophical significance of the time that these authors spent alone on mountaintops. This paper focuses on three of Kerouac and Snyder’s published representations of their lookout experiences, examining the relationship between their aesthetics and their environmental politics.<sup>i</sup>

Gary Snyder's work is cited in so many studies of ecopoetry as to be foundational to the field. It seems a notable oversight, then, that Jack Kerouac's work has not received a thorough investigation of its own ecocritical interpretive possibilities, given his relationship with Snyder relatively early in his career and his fictionalization of their adventures.<sup>ii</sup> This paper argues that Snyder's essays and lookout journals in *Earth House Hold* and Kerouac's representation of his lookout experience in *Desolation Angels* can productively be read as an intertextual continuation of the dialogue between the two authors' fictional avatars in *The Dharma Bums*. Taken together, these three texts produce a prescient conversation about the proper relationship between humans and the natural world, the poetic, practical, and political functions of language, and the psychological and philosophical possibilities of extended periods of human solitude in "wilderness" space.

Considering the composition and publication history of the three texts in question reveals some possible dynamics for this conversation. Kerouac wrote and published *The Dharma Bums* within two years of his time with Snyder and his summer on Desolation. Written in the afterglow of his backcountry experiences and his conversations with Snyder, the novel reflects Kerouac's idealism in the new counterculture—a sustainable, Buddhist, ecological lifestyle—that he saw and heard articulated by Gary Snyder. In *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac condenses his lookout experience into roughly twenty-one pages, which serve as the conclusion and climax of the novel. Kerouac represents Ray Smith's time on Desolation as an enlightenment experience and successful Walden-esque experiment: "I was feeling happier than in years and years, since childhood, I felt deliberate and glad and solitary" (DB, 236). In *Desolation Angels*, however, Kerouac represents the same experience as far more conflicted, the encounter of a desperate idealist with his inner demons. There is ecstasy, to be sure, but in the first seventy-two pages of

*Desolation Angels*, there is more attention paid to the inner turmoil of a lonely man in withdrawal from his addictions, losing hold of his stable conceptions of reality and his confidence in the adequacy of language. Much of the idealism and ecological concern of *The Dharma Bums* is lost to the revelation of this psychological conflict. Kerouac wrote “Desolation in Solitude,” contemporaneously with his composition of *The Dharma Bums*; indeed, he composed large portions of it during his time on Desolation Peak itself, but this version wasn’t published in novel form until 1965. The differences between Kerouac’s two versions of his Desolation lookout experience reveal *The Dharma Bums* to be a more political project than it is customarily understood to be. *The Dharma Bums* captures, and in a way even invents, Kerouac’s short-lived optimism about the transformative possibilities of an American Buddhist worldview. A formal reconsideration of *The Dharma Bums* also reveals the profound influence of Snyder’s poetic sensibility on Kerouac’s artistic vision in *The Dharma Bums*, which exhibits formal characteristics that break from his other work.

Snyder’s publication of *Earth House Hold* in 1969 represents one of his earliest book-length publications and marks his (re)entry onto the American literary scene upon his return from Japan in the late sixties. *Earth House Hold* collects essays written by Snyder during the previous decade, along with edited versions of his lookout journals from Sourdough and Crater mountains. The book’s subtitle—*Technical Notes and Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries*—reveals Snyder’s basic project: a revival of the *revolutionary* potential of *The Dharma Bums*. *Earth House Hold* keeps alive the conversation between Ray and Japhy, offering another perspective on the lookout experience—this time an insight into the possibility of psychological wholeness constructed through a respect for the value of silence and an increasingly complex non-linguistic relationship to the non-human natural world.

In *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac's poetics represents stylistically the achievement of spiritual insight. The incorporation of short, haiku-like images into his prose marks a break from Kerouac's poetics of spontaneous bop-prosody, exemplified in *On the Road*. In that earlier novel, Kerouac's long, rhythmic, confessional sentences offer insight into the creative exuberance of an artist trying to catch up with his own inspiration. The effect is at once gripping and exhausting. In *The Dharma Bums*, on the other hand, Kerouac's signature sentence construction still dominates much of the text, but as the story progresses, long sentences give way more and more to moments of pause, creating a space of mental clarity in which to consider a particularly striking image. This experimentation with short sentences and a minimalist, imagist aesthetic results from Kerouac's conversations with Snyder, and it represents his desire to find an appropriate form through which to express his insights into Buddhism and his new experiences with the non-human natural world. Upon Ray's return from North Carolina to California, Japhy remarks, "I don't wanta hear all your word descriptions of words words words you made up all winter, man I wanta be enlightened by actions" (TDB 169). Japhy's insistence upon the importance of action over "words words words" has poetic as well as political ramifications, and accurately reflects Gary Snyder's own poetics, which strives for an action-oriented record of physical encounters with the non-human natural world, characterized by what Leonard Scigaj calls Snyder's "recovery of silence."

Snyder achieves this effect in his own writing largely through a combination of active verb constructions and a minimalist aesthetic that emphasizes the empty spaces on the page, the pauses in the mind, as much as the words of the text. Kerouac's interest in and use of haiku in *The Dharma Bums* results from Snyder's influence, and he represents it as such in the text. Japhy even critiques Ray's attempts at haiku, offering examples and advice. When Ray makes

his first try at spontaneous haiku during their hike up Matterhorn, suggesting, “Rocks on the side of the cliff...why don’t they tumble down?,” Japhy responds:

‘Maybe that’s a haiku, maybe not, it might be a little too complicated,’ said Japhy. ‘a real haiku’s gotta be as simple as porridge and yet make you see the real thing, like the greatest haiku of them all probably is the one that goes ‘The sparrow hops along the veranda, with wet feet.’ By Shiki. You see the wet footprints like a vision in your mind and yet in those few words you also see all the rain that’s been falling that day and almost smell the wet pine needles. (DB, 59)

Japhy points to Ray’s questioning “why” the rocks don’t fall as the element of his haiku that complicates his image, imposing a metaphysical question on top of what should be the simple record of an encounter with the material world. Japhy suggests the appropriateness of haiku as a poetic form for representing engagement with the natural world, and more importantly, for prompting in the reader a more-than-intellectual encounter with the poem itself. Kerouac represents Ray’s increasing understanding of haiku as the result not only of his conversations with Japhy, importantly, but also as an organic product of his engagement with a particular landscape: “Walking in this country you could understand the perfect gems of haikus the Oriental poets had written, never getting drunk in the mountains or anything but just going along as fresh as children writing down what they saw without literary devices or fanciness of expression. We made up haikus as we climbed, winding up and up on the slopes of brush” (TDB, 59). Kerouac’s stylistic shift towards haiku and away from “bop prosody” represents Ray’s changing conception of the natural world and his attainment, in the fictional world of *The Dharma Bums*, of Buddhist insight.

In the final chapter of *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac describes his last days atop Desolation peak:

My hair was long, my eyes pure blue in the mirror, my skin tanned and happy... I exulted to hear Burnie Byers over the radio telling all his lookouts to come down that very day. The season was over.... Sixty sunsets had I seen revolve on that perpendicular hill. The vision of the freedom of eternity was mine forever. The chipmunk ran into the rocks and a butterfly came out. It was as simple as that. Birds flew over the shack rejoicing; they had a mile long patch of sweet blueberries all the way down to the timberline. For the last time I went out to the edge of Lightning Gorge where the little outhouse was built right on the precipice of a steep gulch. Here, sitting every day for sixty days, in fog or in moonlight or in sunny day or in darkest night, I had always seen the little twisted gnarly trees that seemed to grow right out of midair rock (243).

This passage offers Kerouac's account of Ray at the end of his lookout experience, full of the insight garnered over sixty days and nights of solitary retreat and Buddhist meditation. He presents Ray as physically healthy and happy, with an intimate appreciation of his mountaintop ecosystem. His language is playful throughout the passage, utilizing puns—the chipmunk as “nutty lord” of all he surveys, and, importantly, alternating his signature breath-sentences with short, haiku-style images: “the chipmunk ran into the rocks and a butterfly came out.” Kerouac's narrator insists upon the sufficiency of these images, suggesting that Ray has realized the insights of Japhy's explanation of haiku and Buddhism during their hike up Matterhorn.

In “Desolation in Solitude,” Kerouac develops a more complex account of his experiences and thoughts during the summer of 1956. He constructs “Desolation in Solitude” as

a series of 47 short chapters, in a stylized evocation of journal entries. These passages are revised and rewritten from a retrospective narrative position, however, with early entries displaying knowledge of the entire experience, rather than mimetically representing the experiences in strict chronological order. Although still interspersed with haiku, Duluoz's entries in *Desolation Angels* largely abandon the imagist aesthetic that characterized *The Dharma Bums* in favor of a return to bop prosody. Applying the long, exhaustive sentences of bop prosody to his experiences on Desolation Peak ultimately sends Kerouac swimming in the sea of "words words words" that Japhy warned Ray about in *The Dharma Bums*. While this immersion in the non-referential and poetic qualities of language results in pyrotechnic moments of linguistic brilliance, the account that emerges depicts Jack Duluoz as increasingly frustrated by the inadequacy of language to express his experiences or even to hold his attention. He is uncomfortable with the silence so crucial to both Buddhist and ecocritical understanding, and he lacks interest in forging a meaningful non-linguistic relationship with the natural world around him. Kerouac over-aestheticizes the natural world in *Desolation Angels*, pointing away from the primacy and independence of the natural world itself and towards language instead, shifting the focus away from ecological understanding or physical engagement and towards a more symbolic and abstracted appreciation of nature's aesthetic value and its subordination to language.

In his 44<sup>th</sup> entry, Kerouac summarizes the lessons learned during his summer in the Skagit:

What did I learn on Gwaddawackamblack? I learned that I hate myself because by myself I am only myself and not even that and how monotonous it is to be monotonous—  
ponous—purt—pi tariant—hor por por—I learned to disappreciate things themselves  
and hanshan man mad me mop I dont want it – I learned learn learned no learning

nothing—A I K—I go mad one afternoon thinking like this, only one week to go and I dont know what to do with myself, five straight days of heavy rain and cold, I want to come down RIGHT AWAY because the smell of onions on my hand as I bring blueberries to my lips on the mountainside suddenly reminds me of the smell of hamburgers and raw onions and coffee and dishwater in lunchcarts of the World to which I want to return at once, sitting at a stool with a hamburger, lighting a butt with coffee, let there be rain on redbrick walls and I got a place to go and poems to write about hearts not just rocks—Desolation Adventure finds me finding at the bottom of myself abysmal nothingness worse than no illusion even—my mind’s in rags—(68)

Kerouac represents Duluoz’s loss of control over language in the middle of this passage as a symptom of his psychological fragmentation during his solitude on Desolation Peak. He fails to develop a meaningful relationship to the non-human world—longing to write poems “about hearts not just rocks”—and he craves instead the distractions of human conversation and the smells and conveniences of the industrial city—cigarettes, coffee, dishwater. Kerouac’s last two entries pessimistically describe his legacy on Desolation Peak. In the first, he recalls throwing aluminum cans over the ledge beyond his lookout, thinking of his contribution to “the great dump of cans down there of 15 years of Lookouts” (71). In his final entry, Kerouac begins by calculating that “in 63 days I left a column of feces about the height and size of a baby” and in the final lines of “Desolation in Solitude,” Kerouac concludes with frustration: “Ah fuck, man, I’m tired of trying to figure out what to say; it doesn’t matter anyway” (71 – 72).

Although Kerouac wrote much of *Desolation Angels* at the same time as *The Dharma Bums*, Snyder spent most of the intervening years in Japan, and quite likely encountered the



novels in order of their publication. Upon his return to the States, Snyder published edited versions of his own Cascades lookout journals in *Earth House Hold: Notes and Queries to Fellow Dharma Revolutionaries*, offering yet another perspective on the experience of the fire lookout and attempting to revive the political and ecological projects of Kerouac's earlier novel. In *Earth House Hold*, Snyder overtly maintains the form of journal entries; he includes the month, day and year for each entry, organized chronologically, and the style is characteristic of Snyder's writing: a minimalist aesthetic marked by haiku-style poetry and a thematic emphasis on the "real work" of his daily life in the woods. In his entry for the 28<sup>th</sup> of July on Crater Peak, Snyder reflects on a recent hike to Ross Lake: "Three days walking. Strange how unmoved this place leaves one; neither articulate or worshipful; rather the pressing need to look within and adjust the mechanism of perception" (4). Compared to Kerouac's Duluoz, Snyder's narrative persona demonstrates a spatially and ecologically aware presence in the moment. Snyder's journals articulate experiments in reattuning his poetic perception of the world to an ecological order, tapping into the richness of an ethically, phenomenologically, and ecologically attuned subjectivity.

For Leonard Scigaj, sustainable eco-poetry displays three distinctive characteristics: "(1) reaching a self-reflexive acknowledgement of the limits of language, (2) referring one's perceptions beyond the printed page to nature, to the referential origin of all language, and (3) in most cases achieving an atonement or at-one-ment with nature" (38). Snyder's journal entries in *Earth House Hold* display these characteristics. In his short entry for August 3, 1952, Snyder reproduces the radio banter between fire lookouts, poses a philosophical question central to environmental considerations, presents several concrete observations, and records his daily schedule:

Higgins L.O. reads the news:

“flying saucer with a revolving black band

drouth in the south.

Are other worlds watching us?”

The rock alive, not barren.

flowers lichen pinus albicaulis chipmunks

mice even grass,

--first I turn on the radio

--then make tea & eat breakfast

--study Chinese until eleven

--make lunch, go chop snow to melt for water,

read Chaucer in the early afternoon. (6)

Snyder responds to the question “are there other worlds watching us” with a list of the potentially-sentient natural communities that coexist in the alpine ecosystem of his Crater Peak lookout, moving the focus away from an anthropocentric point of view and towards an ecological perspective, grounded in particular observations and experiences in the world. Snyder’s emphasis on the details of his daily schedule offers the impression of psychological stability, a sense of wholeness constructed from an increased attention to the seemingly mundane aspects of daily living.

One finds in both *Earth House Hold* and *Desolation Angels* a postmodern attention to the meta-significance of language, but in Snyder’s journals this attention takes the aesthetic

minimalism of haiku and imagist poetry as its guide. As a response to Kerouac's representation of his lookout experience in *Desolation Angels*, Snyder's text advocates a return to the forms, themes, and techniques of Kerouac's earlier novel. Snyder includes several essays in *Earth House Hold* that reinvigorate the aesthetic and ethical conversations between Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder in *The Dharma Bums*. Snyder's essays repoliticize the countercultural possibilities of an ecological, Buddhist worldview with which Kerouac seems to have become disillusioned in *Desolation Angels*. In *Earth House Hold*, Snyder's narrative persona functions to intertextually engage Kerouac's narrators in *The Dharma Bums* and *Desolation Angels*. Snyder wrestles control of his fictionalization as Japhy Ryder to develop further the political implications of the worldview espoused by his character in the novel. Snyder's attempt to recover the political potential of Kerouac's novel – to turn dharma bums into dharma revolutionaries – highlights his distinctive aesthetic contributions to Kerouac's style in *The Dharma Bums* and points to the initial optimism with which Kerouac approached both Buddhism and the wilderness of the Skagit. Furthermore, Snyder's text opens the door to a better understanding of Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* as a collaborative work.

Scigaj suggests literature's role in the construction of an environmentally sustainable, postmodern consciousness: "one maintains ethical health by balancing the textual and the referential, the imaginative needs of humans for pleasure and enlightenment and the referential survival needs of life on earth." Sustainable poetry, according to Scigaj, "maintains a healthy balance between these textual and referential needs. It presents nature as a separate and at least equal other and offers exemplary models of biocentric perception and behavior" (79). The intertextual conversation that takes place between *The Dharma Bums*, *Desolation Angels*, and *Earth House Hold* articulates the struggle to maintain this balance between textual and

referential needs. Kerouac and Snyder enact a central ecocritical dialogue about two fundamentally different poststructural understandings of the relationship between language and the natural world. While the narrator of *The Dharma Bums* finds contentment in solitude and learns a reverence for silence, Kerouac's cynicism in *Desolation Angels* and his move away from the referential world prompt Snyder's intervention. *Earth House Hold* presents an ecopoetic account of the wilderness experience and insists upon the ecological and political significance of an American Buddhist worldview. Taken together, these works record a dialogically constructed countercultural movement in progress: Kerouac and Snyder move us several steps forward along the path towards a viable, ecological consciousness carefully tailored to respond to the specific social and environmental problems of our post-industrial society.

### Notes

1. It should be noted that Kerouac also published another account of his lookout experience—"Alone on a Mountaintop"—in his collection of short stories and prose pieces, *Lonesome Traveler* (1960). He was clearly inspired by his experience in the Skagit, reworking it over and over, exploring how best to represent it, how to incorporate it into the Duluoz legend. In a longer format, it would be worthwhile to broaden the scope of ecocritical analysis to include all of the Kerouac mountain texts as well as Whalen's lookout writings.

2. Rod Phillips' *Forest Beatniks and Urban Thoreaus* (2001), which includes Lew Welch and Michael McClure in its analysis, is a notable exception to this trend and lays important groundwork for an ecocritical reconsideration of the Beats. Phillips correctly argues that the Beats were central to the development of the environmental movement that ultimately took shape in the 1970s.

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