



GRAAT On-Line issue #10 October 2011

The Soft American, Jack Kerouac's Muscular Prose and Cold War Poetics in *Vanity of Duluo*

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Introduction

In the late 1950s, many social critics like Arthur Schlesinger or William H. Whyte deplored the lack of physical strength and athletic vigor in American men. At a time when the Cold War against communism dictated the American political agenda, many saw this softening of the American male as a threat to the nation's security¹. The fear that America was lagging behind in terms of military power (the "missile gap"²) was coupled with the fear that American men were not strong enough compared to their Soviet counterparts—which came to be perceived as a "muscle gap."³ It thus became urgent to revitalize American citizens and to regain the fitness that had made America a strong and powerful country.

Soon after his election as US President, John Fitzgerald Kennedy took the matter in hand. In the December 26, 1960 issue of *Sports Illustrated* he published an influential article in which he warned American citizens against the dangers caused by the loss of manly virtues like physical strength and athletic skills. Kennedy not only voiced out a masculine ethos that had a long history in American culture, dating back to Roosevelt's ideal of a "strenuous life," but he also formulated a political program that aimed at improving the physical condition of the nation and at regenerating the American male,

making it the responsibility of the Federal government, the department of Health, Education and Welfare, as well as the various States and their governors. “[T]he harsh fact of the matter,” Kennedy argued, resorting to the hard/soft rhetoric with which most Americans had become familiar, “is that there is also an increasingly large number of young Americans who are neglecting their bodies – whose physical fitness is not what it should be – who are getting soft,” adding most emphatically:

And such softness on the part of individual citizens can help to strip and destroy the vitality of a nation. For the physical vigor of our citizens is one of America’s most precious resources. If we waste and neglect this resource, if we allow it to dwindle and grow soft then we will destroy much of our ability to meet the great and vital challenges which confront our people. [...] Thus, in a very real and immediate sense, our growing softness, our increasing lack of physical fitness, is a menace to our security⁴.

If the soft American had become a fixture of Cold War politics, this archetypal counter-model of masculinity was also becoming a stock character in literary fiction, often depicted as a foil against which the hero could build himself as a real man.

Jack Kerouac, a sportsman, outdoorsman and man of letters, tried, throughout his semi-autobiographical cycle of fourteen novels entitled the “Legend of Duluoz,” to revitalize both American masculinity and literature along the same lines as Kennedy, bringing the war on effeminacy and softness into literature⁵. In *Vanity of Duluoz: An Adventurous Education 1935-1946* (1963) in particular, a novel he started writing two years after Kennedy’s article “The Soft American,” which he wrote “to redeem [himself] from the curse of being accused of slacking in the US war effort,”⁶ Kerouac appears to answer Kennedy’s call to toughen up the American male. Kerouac’s alter ego and narrator Jack Duluoz here narrates what he calls his “strong youth,” depicting his short-lived career as a football player, a sports journalist and a seaman from the point of view

of the man he had become in 1963. In this coming of age story, Kerouac retraces his growing up a man through various adventures and hardships, from the moment when he left his hometown of Lowell in Massachusetts to play football in New York to the time he served in the US Navy, eventually meeting those who would become the founding members of the Beats, William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg. In this neglected *Bildungsroman*, Kerouac outlines his ideal of athletic masculinity, staging himself as the antithesis of the “soft American” whom Kennedy despised.

Indeed, if Kerouac came back to those formative years in *Vanity of Duluoaz*, it is because, just like Kennedy a few years earlier, he lamented the softness of his contemporaries, their lack of energy and strength, as he makes clear in the incipit of the novel:

I can remember in 1935 when fullgrown men, hands deep in jacket pockets, used to go whistling down the street unnoticed by anybody and noticing no one themselves. And walking *fast*, too, to work or store or girlfriend. Nowadays, tell me, what is this slouching stroll people have? Is it because they're used to walking across parking-lots only? Has the automobile filled them with such vanity that they walk like a bunch of lounging hoodlums to no destination in particular? (VD 9).

For him just like for the president-elect, this decline of masculinity was to be blamed on modern comfort and economic prosperity, embodied by cars and television sets that had transformed men into overcivilized and dull weaklings: “They aint got men in America any more; they just sit there and eat pizzas before the late show,”⁷ he wrote. This description of spineless men sprawling in armchairs watching television, as flabby and soft as the pizza they are gorging themselves on, accurately sums up Kerouac’s vision of the decline of American masculinity, again echoing Kennedy’s criticism of American softness a few years earlier: “A single look at the packed parking lot of the average

school will tell us what has happened to the traditional hike to school that helped build young bodies. The television set, the movies and the myriad conveniences and distractions of modern life all lure our young people away from the strenuous physical activity that is the basis of fitness in youth and in later life." (Kennedy 17) Modern technologies, leisure activities and economic prosperity had transformed the tough, rugged individuals of old pioneer days into effete soft men.

Kerouac saw literature as a battlefield where the Cold War was continued by other means, as a 1957 letter to his agent suggests: "[Allen Ginsberg] says the Soviets are looking for raw stories about the real America. The claim that we are softies certainly wouldn't stand up in the suffering and endurances of Dean Moriarty."⁸ Kerouac did not only try to toughen up the "soft American" through the subject matter of his narratives and characters like Dean Moriarty, *On the Road's* protagonist, whom Kerouac described as "the archetypal American man"; he also attempted to embody its counterpoint in his performance of writing, creating a poetics of masculinity and a personal myth of manliness embedded in strength and hardiness. By the early 1960s, masculinity was felt to have become invisible. In *Vanity of Duluoaz*, Kerouac made it his duty to bring it to light again in a narrative embedded in an ideal vision of the male body as hard and muscular. In contrast with Michael Kimmel's claim about the invisibility of the male body in Kerouac's novels—Kimmel speaks of "an image of Kerouac that lacks a vital dimension: the dimension of the body,"⁹ I want to show how the latter built up a masculine poetics in which the author shows off his muscles in an athletic performance of writing.

Jack Kerouac: Sportsman or Man of Letters?

Kerouac's entire "Legend of Duluoaz" can be read as an autobiographical portrait of the male writer as a sportsman. Even *On the Road* (1957), which seems little related with his concern to show off as an athlete, is in his eyes "not the story of two beatniks, it's the story an ex-football player,"¹⁰ as he insists in a late interview. *Vanity of Duluoaz*

and *Maggie Cassidy* (1959) present him in his high school days, when he was a fast track champion and the darling of the Sunday crowd that would gather to watch him play football for his hometown High School of Lowell in New England, then at Columbia University into which he got on a football scholarship, becoming one of the rising football stars of his generation, breaking many records and winning various titles for his team. *The Dharma Bums* (1958) and *Desolation Angels* (1965) narrate the time he spent in the mountains in the mid-fifties, picturing himself on the footsteps of John Muir, Henry David Thoreau and Jack London, either hiking and mountaineering with Gary Snyder in the Sierra Nevada or by himself working as a fire lookout in the North Cascades National Park. Sport provided Kerouac with an almost exclusively male arena in which he could publicly prove his masculinity in various challenges and competitions that function as so many rites of passage¹¹.

In *Vanity of Duluoaz*, Kerouac portrays himself as a high school football champion, then a college football star. Football is not just any sport, but a rough one that requires hardiness and courage. When asked what sport he had practiced, Kerouac tellingly answered “all of them, except tennis, lacrosse or scull” (LT 8). Those three sports could be labeled “soft sports” that do not provide as many possibilities of proving one’s strength through physical contact as football and certainly too British to be deemed manly sports by Kerouac. His alter ego and narrator in *Vanity of Duluoaz* often flaunts to be “the only big one in the football sense of bigness, i.e., thick legs and heavy body” (VD 11). Scores and statistics allow him to show off as an outstanding athlete, as the antithesis of the soft man he despises and fears. Also, football offers its virile performance to the public eye of the crowd composed of schoolmates and girlfriends to impress, mothers and fathers to make proud, all cheering and supporting the players, as the following passage suggests:

[T]here they are looming over me, the Tome ends who’ve come barreling down the field to nab me, I dart to the right laughing and go scooting

along past their outstretched hands and come up to the sidelines where I see my chums cheering: Bill Keresky, Gene Mackstoll, Jimmy Winchel (more about them later) and I yell: "Hey Bill! Hey Gene!" and seeing a guy from Tome is coming up to bump me into the crowd I reverse, that is, *reverse* is too slow a word, I *jack off* to the left, leaving everybody ("Jack be Nimble, Jack be Quick!" said the little picture Ma had hung on my bedroom wall in Lowell) and there I am sweeping into the whole gang in midfield. I've caught the punt on my own 28-yard line, I'm now at midfield. They're all there. Lebreon throws a block across a Tome guy so I jack right again and sprint to the sidelines again. Once again a Tome guy. I jack off left again, leave him there, another downfield block by Hartmann, another by DeLucia, another by Theodore, even Quiffy Quinlan is rolling around some guy's legs; I see that all I have to do is keep my eyes open and slant right in another 30 yards as fast as I can. I get to the 5-yard line, am in trouble with a cluster of three Tome men, come right up on them staring right at them like I'm going to try to bust head on into their midst and scatter them, which they laugh to think impossible, being big, but brainy suddenly jack off right again, leaving them there doing the minuet, and we win the game 6-0, another big upset in the prep school east in 1939 (VD 47).

I will come back to the style of the passage in detail in the following section. What matters for now is the way in which Kerouac portrays himself as the only player on the field, scoring almost single-handedly, nonchalantly greeting his friends, heroically running across the entire field, moving swiftly between players without ever being threatened in what turns out to be a fantasy of athletic showmanship. The surprising term "jack off" that commonly refers to male masturbation, here used to convey the speed of the narrator's race, is a clear-cut sexual metaphor of "hard" masculinity. By contrast, the opponents are left bemused and crestfallen, with arms dangling, their pitiful performance compared to an effeminate dance.

Yet, Kerouac does not simply portray himself as an outstanding sportsman, but also as a man of thought (as the term “brainy” suggests), an ideal of masculinity contained in the Roman adage *mens sana in corpore sano* (although Kerouac will get the Latin phrase wrong), a Western ideal of masculinity that is also explicitly referred to in John Kennedy’s *The Soft American*: “physical fitness is not only one of the most important keys to a healthy body; it is the basis of dynamic and creative intellectual activity. [...] we do know what the Greeks knew: that intelligence and skill can only function at the peak of their capacity when the body is healthy and strong; that hardy spirits and tough minds usually inhabit sound bodies” (Kennedy 17). At one point in the narrative, Kerouac’s narrator boastfully remarks how he embodies an ideal balance between physical strength and great intellect. While visiting his friend Jonathan in New York, the latter’s father compares his puny son to Jack: “Jonathan, why aren’t you like your friend Jack here? He is, as we say in Latin, *mens sana et mens corpora*, healthy mind and healthy body. He combines all the excellence of a Greek, that is, the brain of an Athenian and the brawn of a Spartan. And you, look at you” (VD 35). Kerouac’s first person narrator thus fits perfectly with Kennedy’s ideal of masculinity, while his friend Jonathan, whom the narrator describes as a “nonathletic Jewish kid,” embodies the soft, intellectual American condemned by the president-elect.

This masculine ideal, however, cracks up amidst the horrors of war. As his narrator remarks solemnly, “As we binged and banged in dusty bloody fields, we didn’t even dream we’d all end up in World War II, some of us killed, some of wounded, the rest of us eviscerated of 1930’s innocent ambition” (VD 16). A football field is nothing like a battlefield. And if during the early football games of his youth, “the blood my dear flew like in a Homeric battle those Saturday mornings” (VD 15) he recalls, there is nothing Homeric nor heroic in the way he hides in his cabin fearing a German attack while on a ship bound for England, taking “the opportunity to fantasize, or that is, to relieve myself of the horror of masculinity” (VD 161). And seeing a doctor after spending some time in the psychiatry ward of the boat, he finally acknowledges his

inherent softness: "This is what I am, was, and will be! Not a warrior, Doctor, please, but a coward intellectual [...] because certainly, I AM yellow [...]. I'm too much of a nut, and a man of letters" (VD 162), before adding to himself "I was just about the least military guy you ever saw and shoulda been shot against a Cuban wall" (VD 163). Looking out the window from the psychiatry ward, he then sadly contemplates "that little winding dirt road going west to [his] lost dream of being a real American Man" (VD 167).

Besides, this ideal of masculinity has a price. A couple of years later, in a game against St Benedict, Jack gets two defensive backs around his ankles, twists his whole body to undo their grip and breaks his tibia, though his coach and trainers just diagnose a sprained ankle. "That entire week," Jack recalls, "they told me I was a softy and to get going and run around and stop limping" (VD 72). Unable to keep up with his ideal of "hard" masculinity and accused of being a soft male for the pain he feels, Jack abandons football and decides to become a writer, finding in writing what he has lost on the football field.

Against Soft Poetics: Jack Kerouac's Muscular Prose

Soon after, in early 1942, after writing articles about local sporting events in the morning, Kerouac would work on *Vanity of Duluo*, a novel that he will finish more than 25 years later: "It was at this time that the phrase "Vanity of Duluo" occurred to me and was made the title of a novel that I began writing at my sports desk at about noon every day, because from nine till noon was all it took me to do my whole day's work. I could write fast and type fast and just kept feeding that copy all over the place on fast feet" (VD 105). Writing functions as a literary substitute for football: Kerouac's call for a "real muscular prose" and "a virile sentence"¹² enables him to go on being a sportsman while becoming a man of letters without risking to be identified as a "soft writer."

Speed was a virtue for this former fast track runner, and a masculine one at that. He liked to boast that he had written *On the Road* in 28 days in April 1951, *The Dharma*

Bums in 2 weeks in November 1957 and *The Subterraneans* in 3 days in October 1953. "Writing the Subs in three nights was really a fantastic athletic feat as well as mental," Kerouac comments in a late interview, "you shoulda seen me after I was done... I was pale as a sheet and had lost fifteen pounds and looked strange in the mirror."¹³ In order to go on writing day and night without stopping, he would type on long scrolls of paper that would spare him the time to change sheets, and used coffee, amphetamines and Benzedrine just as many athletes use dope to enhance their performance. Writing fast was for him a proof of his physical fitness and literary virtuosity, a mark of endurance and courage—in other words, a masculinity test. Kerouac often flaunted that he never revised his manuscripts, that "the performance is once (like a footrace)."¹⁴ His very conception of writing was marked by his passion for sport, and writing a novel was in his eyes an athletic confrontation with the typewriter. In an entry of one of his numerous diaries, dated February 18th, 1960, he resorts to the metaphor of football to describe his work: "I want to overtake and tackle that goddam halfback novel before he loses me over the goal line—ATHLETE" (NYPL 57.3). The way Kerouac personified his novel, referring to it as "he" and labeling it with a football position, is quite revealing of the way he engaged in writing as he would on a football field; and putting the last full stop to it, bringing it to an end, was like scoring a goal. For him, literature was first and foremost a matter of blood, sweat and tears. Kerouac wrote first and foremost with his body, and he tried to inscribe that body in the very style of his prose. It is, as such, "muscular prose," a male-centered metaphor for a style that Michael McLure, one of Kerouac's fellow Beats, says "comes from the body—it is the action of the senses, of what is heard, seen, tasted, touched, and smelled as well as what is imagined and reasoned—it is the voice's athletic action on the page and in the world."¹⁵

The growing distance Kerouac took with Marcel Proust for instance, though one of his major influences, is eloquent in that regard; while avowing that he wanted to write a grand cycle of novel like the French modernist author, he added "except that my remembrances are written on the run, not afterwards in a sick bed."¹⁶ And if he tried to

write “without Proustian myriadness of prose, just the axe gist,” it is because of what Kerouac perceives as Proust’s softness, his physical weakness and moral decadence. “Proust had asthma and was lying around writing and eating in bed,”¹⁷ he remarks in a 1962 interview. Such softness did not, needless to say, fit with his athletic ideal. In the long passage that I quoted earlier, Kerouac displays many of the athletic qualities that made his prose muscular in his eyes. The many verbs of movement – “dart,” “scooting,” “come up,” “reverse,” “sweeping,” “sprint,” “slant,” “bust” – convey a physical sense of action to the point of dizziness. Long fluid sentences alternate with much shorter ones written as if he were breathless. Each sentence, he said, had to come down “like a fist coming down on the table – BANG!”¹⁸ The reader had to feel the body and movements of the writer, his breathing hard, his rushing towards the next idea, his tendons, muscles and sinews. This is particularly obvious in the way he used punctuation. He tried to avoid periods or semi-colons and favored dashes and colons which he saw as his personal trademark: they were like hurdles that gave rhythm to his writing without stopping the race he was running.¹⁹

Yet, *Vanity of Duluo* does not belong to Kerouac’s most athletic writings. By 1963, the year he started reworking the 1942 manuscript with the same title, Kerouac had become an old man according to his own standards. Depressive, alcoholic and sick as he was, he could no longer write the way he had in his youth, and suffered acutely both from physical pain and lack of endurance. In his diaries and letters from the 1960s, Kerouac frequently complained about his loss of athletic virtuosity on the typewriter. It took him four years to complete *Vanity of Duluo*, and the last, slim volume of his “Legend,” *Satori in Paris*, lacks the nerve and energy that had made his literary fame. He had actually become soft and even started a fitness program to get back into shape. On his thirty-eighth birthday, March 12 1960, Kerouac realized that he had become the soft man that he abhorred: “My birthday=38! The old athlete can’t play any more” (NYPL 57.3). And two days later he added: “Feeling okay – starting sit-up and leg-up exercises for my fat nervous belly – Doing daily pushes at 25 now, 32 is too much for me at my

age which is the age when athletes retire.” His hand lacked the vitality that had allowed him to write page after page from top to bottom in his youth. Two months later, he noticed how alcohol and various sicknesses had rendered him a crippled athlete and writer: “My hand, my writing hand, look how it’s shaking—I can’t write any more” (NYPL 57.5). A few months before starting the final version of *Vanity of Duluo*, Kerouac realized that he, too, had become a soft American, in spite of his efforts to regain his strength: “I’m resuming 30 pushups a day—or at least 28—How soft I got since 1957!” (NYPL 57.17). When Kerouac decided to come back to his “strong youth” in 1963, he thus seemed to be making up for his lack of athleticism at the typewriter, boasting about his past glory as a football player for fear of passing for a softie.

This personal mythology of athleticism is a fictional construct that has evidently little bearing with reality. Kerouac did revise his novels, as the comparison between the original scroll and the published version of *On the Road* clearly shows. This image of the author writing his novels on the go as he put it, inside cars going full speed or on freight trains zipping through California, reveals to be the result of self-fictionalization. Most of his novels he wrote at home, where he lived with his mother and cats. Besides, Kerouac did not write as spontaneously and as fast as he pretended, but used the many diaries in which he took notes day by day to reconstruct his real life stories after the event. The literary race against time or the physical confrontation with the typewriter is a construct that allowed him to avoid being identified as one of the soft intellectual men Kennedy condemned. The athletic ideology that pervaded the Cold War rhetoric shaped his conception of novel writing in an indelible way, a conception at odds with what he considered to be the “soft” poetics of writers like Marcel Proust or Truman Capote.²⁰

The Queer Tale of an Athletic Writer

Near the end of the novel, after justifying the absence of women and the homosocial nature of his narrative on the ground that it deals with “football and war,” Kerouac’s narrator in *Vanity of Duluo* adds: “but when I say ‘football and war’ I have to

go a step further and add: 'Murder'" (VD 193). The murder in question happens to be that of the only homosexual character in the novel, Franz Mueller, by Claude de Maubris—one of Jack's friends at Columbia—whom he had tried to seduce. The narrator thus relates what he calls a "queer tale," while insisting that he is "not a queer, and neither is Claude" (VD 196). Having helped his friend in this homophobic murder, Jack is questioned by the police, a scene that allows him to reassert his straight masculinity over and over:

Me and O'Toole go, in the other room, he says: "Sit down, smoke?" cigarette, I light, look out the window at the pigeons and the heat and suddenly O'Toole (a big Irishman with a gat on his chest under the coat: "What would you do if a queer made a grab at your cock?" "Why I'd knock him," I answered straightaway looking right at him." Then another officer comes in to question him and asks again: "The case hinges on whether Claude de Maubris is a homosexual. We're trying to establish whether he is, you are, or whatever. O'Toole thinks you're not a homo. Are you?" "I told O'Toole I wasn't." "Is Claude?" "No, not in the least. If he was, he'd have tried to make me." "Now we have this other material witness, Hubbard, whose father just flew in from out west with five grand in cash and bailed him out. Is he a homo?" "Not that I know of." (VD 228-229)

In a simple prose deprived of affect that is reminiscent of hard-boiled detective novels, Kerouac enables his narrator and alter ego to deny four times the suspicion of homosexuality, in a manner that is redolent of witch hunt interrogations of alleged communists. Right after the interrogation, Jack walks past his friend in the police station, who whispers to him: "Heterosexuality all the way down the line" (VD 230). But in case it was not clear enough, the narrator is asked the same question twice again by two acquaintances, to which he tirelessly answers: "No, Claude aint no queer, he's straight. The guy he knocked off was a pansy" (VD 236) and "No, and if he did try to feel up my leg with his knee, I wouldn't talk to him anymore [...] Because I think it

would add up to an insult to my person as a male person" (VD 238). This repeated denial betrays the gender anxiety and the sexual paranoia that underlies Kerouac's ideal of athletic masculinity as well as the moral panic that struck America during the Cold War. The two Kinsey reports on male and female sexuality published respectively in 1948 and 1953 had revealed the widespread nature of homosexuality among American men, as well as the existence of a female sexuality that had been kept more or less silent until then. The moral panic that followed did not keep literature intact and Kerouac set on a crusade to free the American novel from this softening influence.

For Kerouac, homosexuality represented a negatively valued masculine softness that threatened the vitality of American literature and was the symptom of its feminization. His project of revitalizing American letters around a "muscular" poetics implied (physical) hardiness as well as (sexual) hardihood, as he explicitly confesses in one of his diaries: "We're gonna have a literature, boy, if we have to drive it home with a big hard prick, it ain't those damned fairies who are gonna do it" (NYPL 56.1). Like physical vigor, sexual vigor was a distinctive feature of athletic masculinity and required "compulsory heterosexuality" to use Adrienne Rich's phrase. Kerouac's anxiety about being identified as a homosexual gradually grew obsessional, as a letter to his friend Neal Cassady (the real life person whom the hero of *On the Road* is based on) testifies: "Posterity will laugh at me if it *thinks* me queer... little students will be disillusioned. [...] I am *not* a fool! A queer! I am *not*! He-he! Understand?"²¹ Indeed, male literary endeavors were then perceived as highly suspicious. Being a poet during the Cold War was perceived as highly effeminate, and penning novels was not deemed a manly activity. Senator McCarthy often attacked intellectuals for being too "soft" and for lacking the courage and vigor necessary to fight communism: their thoughts paralyzed their actions, betrayed a regrettable effeminacy and exposed America to communist penetration. It had thus become disreputable to become a writer at a time when communists, homosexuals and intellectuals were perceived as a threat to the masculine ethos and the family values championed by the American government.

Besides, many Beat writers like Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, John Wieners, Brion Gysin, Peter Orlovsky or Jack Spicer did not hide the fact that they belonged to all three categories. So much so that Jack Kerouac, labeled the King of the Beats by the press, set to distance himself from such a pitfall, seeing in athleticism and muscular prose the opportunity of proving himself a manly writer while driving away suspicions of homosexuality. As the poet Ted Berrigan remarked of Kerouac shortly before his death, "Jack was telling his personal history, and he described to some small extent what it was like on the literary-poetry scene when he was a young man trying to be a writer [...] with everybody else being queer."²² In this context, Kerouac tried to build up a reputation as an athletic writer so as to convey an image of himself that bespoke manliness and found in his athletic approach to writing an opportunity to show that he was no "soft" nor "queer" novelist, but a straight hard-boiled writer. As Kevin Young and Philip White argue in their analysis of the links between sport, violence and masculinity, "[p]laying sport, particularly those sports connected with aggression and toughness, distances the participant from the possibility of being labeled a "sissy" or a homosexual."²³

Vanity of Duluo thus brings to light the hidden assumptions behind Kennedy's criticism of the "soft American"; youth fitness was a health issue—building strong bodies, a national security issue—building tough warriors, but also a sexual one—building straight males. Since homosexuality was then frequently described as a "disease," making healthy bodies was seen as a means to fight "sexual perversions" and straighten up "sexual disorders." The sudden transition from the college sport story (and the war narrative) to crime fiction at the end of the novel can only be accounted for through the soft/hard rhetoric of the time. It has to be read as a last desperate attempt by Kerouac's alter ego and narrator to stand as a "hard American," using the hard-boiled detective story to drive his point home. The genre, in the vein of Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain or Chester Himes, often staged a "hard-boiled male [who] was

characterized by a tough, shell-like exterior, a prophylactic toughness that was organized around the rigorous suppression of affect and was mirrored by his detached, laconic utterances and his instrumentalized, seemingly amoral actions."²⁴ It thus heavily relied on the distinction between the hard-edged, hard-hitting hero and the soft, feminine body of the "queer," which was to be detected and ruled out.²⁵ *Vanity of Duluo* borrows the masculine style and codes of the hard-boiled genre to eliminate even the slightest whiff of effeminacy and evacuate the threatening and shadowy presence of the homosexual. Kerouac's "queer tale" thus supports a criminalization of homosexuality and legitimizes a homophobic murder (which the narrator names an "honor slaying," he and the murderer being eventually exculpated), so as to "un-queer" himself, his narrative and his athletic ideal of masculinity.

Conclusion

Considered in the context of the Cold War against soft Americans, Kerouac's poetics of sport thus appears as an attempt at establishing a raw literature, written by a real man, beyond doubts and suspicion of softness, homosexuality, and in the end, communism. As such, Kerouac's literary concerns are to be read in perspective with those popular men's adventure magazines that flourished by the hundreds in the 1950s: many men found in adventure, sport or noir fiction the masculine heroism that was cruelly absent from their daily lives²⁶. Those fantasies of "hard" masculinity allowed readers to temporarily identify with ideal visions of the American Man that had become invisible outside fiction and to escape their own feelings of inadequacy and their incapability to enact this male role. To some extent, Kerouac's narratives also participate in this attempt to revitalize American masculinity, making fiction (and first person narrative in particular) a crucial site to renegotiate notions and representations of manliness. In this light, Kerouac emerges as one of the foremost actors of the postwar reaction against the perceived feminization of society and literature.

Twentieth-century literature was a "no man's land" according to Susan Gubar

and Sandra M. Gilbert; yet, they also remark that “male and female writers, working in the 1940s and 1950s, reimagined masculine victory.”²⁷ Sport, along with war and homophobia (both of which athletic imagery heavily relies on), allowed Kerouac to reterritorialize a space that was a “man’s land” and to reconfigure a body that was markedly masculine, that of the male warrior. Muscular prose thus stands as a singular instance of the twentieth-century masculine attempt to take over in what Gubar and Gilbert call “the literary battle of the sexes,” using an idealized version of the male body to reestablish masculine privilege over literature.²⁸ Besides, we hope to have shown that Kerouac’s body is not at all invisible, contrary to Michael Kimmel’s argument, but rather inscribed over and over again in the materiality of writing (and as such, it differs from male adventure magazines), making poetics a crucial site for understanding masculinity. Reciprocally, the male body appears as a crucial site to gain a better understanding of Cold War poetics and of Kerouac in particular.²⁹ In taking its roots in a historically grounded and performative understanding of gender, this approach moves away from the essentialist and normative notion of *écriture masculine*.³⁰

Yet, Kerouac’s novels differ greatly from men’s adventure magazine stories in that his autobiographical narratives follow the actual course of events that made his life and in that he confesses his delusions of (masculine) grandeur as well as his failure to fully act (and write) upon them. Kerouac’s narrator and alter ego is constantly anxious to appear strong and athletic, yet he realizes the utter failure of his attempt to achieve this athletic ideal and expresses his bitterness before his own softness as well as his nostalgia for a vanishing performance of masculinity. He appears to exemplify the uneasiness and strains linked to the “outmoded masculine mystique” of the 1950s, which, as the feminist critique Betty Friedan remarked, “made men feel utterly inadequate when there was no bears to kill.”³¹ The novel eventually reveals how the postwar muscular ideal (notably relayed in men’s magazine of the times through masculinity/femininity tests that valued musculature or through advertisements for muscle development methods) turned out to be a fraud, an impossible performance that

generated frustration and violence.

NOTES

¹ In *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*, Kyle A. Cuordileone retraces how the hard/soft dichotomy pervaded the cultural climate and the intellectual debates in the 1950s, notably in Schlesinger's *The Vital Center* (1949), David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956): "the dualistic imagery," he says, "put a new premium on hard masculine toughness and rendered anything less than that soft, timid, feminine and as such a real potential threat to the security of the nation." Cuordileone, Kyle A. *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

² According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the term was first used by John Fitzgerald Kennedy in a speech delivered on August, 14th 1958: "Our nation could have afforded, and can afford now, the steps necessary to close the missile gap." Quoted in "Who ever believed in the "missile gap?": John F. Kennedy and the politics of national security in Preble, Christopher A.. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, December 2003, p. 806.

³ For instance, a *Reader's Digest* article entitled "Let's Close the Muscle Gap" by Max Eastman warned that "the muscle gap between us and those who would bury us" aggravated America's military inferiority. Eastman, Max. "Let's Close the Muscle Gap" in *Reader's Digest*, November 1961. Quoted in Cuordileone, Kyle A.. *op. cit.*, p. 203.

⁴ Kennedy, John Fitzgerald. "The Soft American" in *Sport Illustrated*, December 26, 1960, p. 16.

⁵ Kerouac formulates this project in an unpublished essay entitled "The Revitalizing of American Letters" in which he chastises "lesbians, fags and intellectuals" for their lack of vigor and their effeminate softness: "I will make my position clear on one issue, and accept full responsibility for the statement: I would like to see American letters revitalized along more authentic and appreciative lines, discarding the interpretive and critical trends because they distort the Everything through the prism of a few minds that are not representative of the American people. » Kerouac, Jack. "The Revitalizing of American Letters," Jack Kerouac archive, Berg Collection, New York Public Library, 53.10, n.p..

⁶ Kerouac, Jack. *Vanity of Duluoz*. New York, Penguin, 1967, p. 178. Hereafter referred to as VD in the main body of the text.

⁷ Kerouac, Jack. "Big Trip to Europe" in *Lonesome Traveler*. New York, Penguin, 1961, p. 124.

⁸ Kerouac, Jack. *Selected Letters II*. New York, Penguin, 2000, p. 103.

⁹ Kimmel, Michael. *Encyclopedia of Men and Masculinities*. Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2004, p. 453.

¹⁰ Maher, Paul Jr.. *Empty Phantoms: Interviews and Jack Kerouac*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005, p. 271.

¹¹ "For college-age men who played the game," Michael A. Rembis remarks in *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*, "it [American football] represented a rite of passage from youth into adulthood, allowing the participants to reclaim their physical manliness through aggression, without becoming uncivilized". Rembis, Michael A. "Football," in Carroll, Bret E. *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*. New York: Sage, 2003, p. 174.

¹² Kerouac used the first expression to refer to *Dharma Bums* and *On the Road* in a letter to Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso and Peter Orlovsky, and the second about his fellow beat writer John Clellon Holmes in a recommendation to Random House. *Selected Letters II*, *op. cit.*, p. 96 and 100.

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- ¹³ Hayes, Kevin J. *Conversations with Jack Kerouac*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2005, p. 71.
- ¹⁴ Jack Kerouac archive, Berg collection, New York Public Library, 57.6. Hereafter referred to as NYPL with call number in the main body of the text.
- ¹⁵ McLure, Michael. "Author's Introduction" to *Rebel Lions*. New York: New Directions, 1991, vii.
- ¹⁶ Kerouac, Jack. Preface to *Big Sur*. New York: Penguin, 1962, iii.
- ¹⁷ Interview with Jarvis Charles E., and Curtis, James, published in *Empty Phantoms*, *op. cit.*, p.192.
- ¹⁸ Kerouac, Jack. "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," in *Good Blonde and Others*. San Francisco, City Lights Book, [1993], 2001, p.69.
- ¹⁹ Kerouac felt both hate and fear of editors who would cut out into his texts with their "Big Castrating Scissor" to restore a more conventional punctuation and syntax, which he saw as an emasculation of his prose. After re-reading the original manuscript of *On the Road* in June 1960 for instance, he remarks in his diary how it "is truly horribly marked up and castrated by Cowley – would have been a greater book – I'll reprint it in 1970 intact". NYPL 57.5.
- ²⁰ Kerouac and Capote, the author of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, disliked each other very much, eventually entering into a feud with one another after Capote severely criticized Kerouac's *On the Road* on David Susskind's television show—"it's not writing, it's typing," he famously declared; reciprocally, Kerouac thought Capote's writing was affected and precious, often calling him "the little faggot" in a letter to Philip Whalen (dated from June 10, 1959) in which he related the event. Kerouac, Jack. *Selected Letters II*, *op. cit.*, p. 236.
- ²¹ Kerouac, Jack. *Selected Letters I*. New York: Penguin, 1996, p.167.
- ²² Hayes, Kevin J., *op. cit.*, p. 71.
- ²³ Young, Kevin, and White, Philip. "Masculinities, gender relations, and sport," in McKay, Jim, Messner Michael A., and Sabo, Don (eds). *Masculinities, Gender Relations, and Sport*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2000, p. 123.
- ²⁴ Breu, Christopher. *Hard-boiled Masculinities*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005, p. 1.
- ²⁵ For an in-depth analysis of the links between masculinity and hard-boiled detective and crime fiction, see Abbot, Megan E. *The Street was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005; Nyman, Hopi. *Men Alone: Masculinity, Individualism, and Hard-Boiled Fiction*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997; Krutnik, Frank. *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- ²⁶ Those stories were published in pulp magazines like *Male*, *Man to Man*, *Man's Magazine*, *Man's Life*, *Real Men*, *Real Action For Men*, *Man's Daring* or *Man's Illustrated* to mention just a few of the more than 100 different magazines that were then available. Several of those had a circulation of more than one million, with *True* selling more than 2 million copies each month in the late fifties. Some of those magazines made sportsmen their primary focus, like *Sport Adventure*, *Sport Life*, *Sportsman* or *Sport Trails*. Those « armpit slicks » or « sweats » as they were sometimes called, featured supposedly true stories about heroic men engaging in adventure, sport or hunting, as well as lurid reports on sexual matters. In a July 1964 issue of *Writers' Digest*, the editor of *Argosy*, one of the first magazines of the genre, encapsulates the desired style of this particular masculine trend in 1950s fiction : "We are principally interested in strong-action picture stories on non-war adventure themes ; man against nature, man against beast, man against man. We try to stress the 'man-triumphant' idea whenever possible." Quoted in Adam Parfray, *It's a Man's World : Men's Adventure Magazines, the Postwar Pulp*. Los Angeles, Feral House, 2003, p. 4.

²⁷ Gubar, Susan, and Gilbert, Sandra M.. *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 6.

²⁸ In an article entitled "The Crisis of American Masculinity," one of Kennedy's closest advisors, the historian Arthur Schlesinger, underlined how this crisis deeply affected American literature: "What has happened to the American male?" he asked, contemplating the nation's literary production: "[f]or a long time he seemed utterly confident in his manhood, sure of his masculine role in society, easy and definite in his sense of sexual identity. The frontiersmen of James Fenimore Cooper, for example, never had any concern about masculinity; they were men, and it did not occur to them to think twice about it. Even well into the twentieth century, the heroes of Dreiser, of Fitzgerald, of Hemingway remain men. But one begins to detect a new theme emerging in some of these authors, especially in Hemingway: the theme of the male hero increasingly preoccupied with proving his virility to himself". Schlesinger, Arthur. "The Crisis of American Masculinity" in *Esquire* n. 51, November 1958. Reprinted in *The Politics of Hope*. Princeton University Press, 2008 [1963], p. 292.

²⁹ I am thus indebted to Michael Davidson's groundbreaking study of masculinity in postwar poetry. Davidson, Michael. *Guys Like Us: Masculinity and Cold War Poetics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004.

³⁰ See for instance Cixous, Hélène. *Le Rire de la Méduse*. Paris: Galilée, 2010 [1975], p. 43.

³¹ Friedan, Betty. "Epilogue" published in 1973 in *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 2001 [1963], p. 521.

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