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## Kerouac His Own Historian: *Visions of Cody* and the Politics of Historiography

In April of 1951, Jack Kerouac spent three weeks typing a manuscript on the now iconic scroll of paper, which he threaded through his typewriter so he could reel out his thoughts in one long, unbroken paragraph. This manuscript was the first version of the book he would eventually publish as *On the Road*. Contrary to popular legend, however, this frenetic outpouring did not result in the novel published six years later, for Kerouac was displeased enough with the scroll manuscript that he went on to write several more revisions before publishing *On the Road* in 1957. Almost immediately after completing the scroll version, in fact, Kerouac started revising his work; later in 1951, he began conceiving and writing a new version of what he called his road book.<sup>1</sup> In April, he had intended to write something that recorded life, as he said, “exactly like it happened, . . . the hell with these phony architectures,” but he felt that, in the end, these “architectures” still overwhelmed the truth of the manuscript.<sup>2</sup> He thus resolved to write a new book that would better record life “exactly like it happened.” The revision became *Visions of Cody*, a strange, surprisingly complex book that Kerouac long considered his masterpiece.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Tim Hunt, *Kerouac's Crooked Road: Development of a Fiction* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996), xxxvii, 2–3, 77–142. Hunt has shown that *On the Road* and *Visions of Cody* are successive revisions of what Kerouac considered his road book.

2. Qtd. in John Clellon Holmes, *Nothing More to Declare* (New York: Dutton, 1967), 78.

3. Hunt, *Kerouac's Crooked Road*, xxxvii, 141.

In *Visions of Cody*, Kerouac takes the energy of the scroll manuscript and experiments with numerous styles and narrative techniques, the result of which is a generic hybrid with elements of history, biography, and fiction.<sup>4</sup> With this unusual form, Kerouac aims to capture, as accurately and completely as possible, his friend and muse, the soon-to-be Beat legend, Neal Cassady.<sup>5</sup>

The fault that Kerouac found with his first stab at writing about Cassady is helpful in understanding *Visions of Cody*, in which he attempts to correct his earlier artistic vision by trying out, among other things, the role of historian. While the book is not history in the conventional, professional sense, it nonetheless exhibits a powerful impulse to record history, and as it experiments with both historical objectivity and radical subjectivity, much of it can be understood as a meditation on historiographic method. Read in this way, *Visions of Cody* reveals the limits of what could count as historical truth in an era when professional historians were turning from the relativism of earlier periods to a more stridently objective, consensus-minded historiographic method.

Since about the early 1980s, as Kerouac's work has begun to receive more rigorous scholarly attention, there has been some interest in the ways he conceptualized the relationship between fiction and fact. Tim Hunt's *Kerouac's Crooked Road*, for example, includes a lengthy chapter, "From Fact to Vision: The Road Book," the very title of which suggests a complicated if not conflicted attitude toward representation and authenticity. R. J. Ellis has argued that Kerouac's books should be read as "a living mix of contending voices," a cacophony that troubles "the issue of authenticity."<sup>6</sup> In 2007,

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4. On the difference between biography and history, see Robert K. Massie, "Narrating the Past: History or Biography," in *Biography and Source Studies*, ed. Frederick R. Karl (New York: AMS P, 1994), 103. Other theorists have overlooked the generic distinctions that Massie posits in favor of exploring what these seemingly distinct genres may have in common. See, for instance, Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973); White, "The Fictions of Factual Representation," in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978); and Robert Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap P, 1995).

5. For more on *Visions of Cody's* specific form with respect to the rest of Kerouac's work, see Michael Hrebeniak's recent *Action Writing: Jack Kerouac's Wild Form* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2006), 59–78.

6. R. J. Ellis, *Liar! Liar! Jack Kerouac—Novelist* (London: Greenwich Exchange,

when Viking published the original scroll version to help mark *On the Road*'s fiftieth anniversary, included were four new essays on Kerouac's work. George Mouratidis's essay takes on the question of authenticity in the road book: "Through his mutable responses to Cassady in his *Road* novels Kerouac problematizes both the existential concern with 'authentic' being particular to the postwar period, as well as the more contemporary preoccupation with authenticity in representation, showing that they are both (and respectively) unattainable as ends."<sup>7</sup> As this sampling may indicate, Kerouac scholars are no longer content to read his work as simply autobiography with the names changed for legal reasons but are rather engaged in analyzing the increasing complexity of his narrative structures and their relationship to his particular sense of the "authentic"—an elusive idea that he continually chased. My argument takes an interest in Kerouac's narrative techniques by looking at how *Visions of Cody*—probably his most formally complex text—explores questions of authenticity and truth through sustained experimentation with various historiographic methods.

For this essay, we might say that Kerouac's narratives are authentic when they are closest to the truth—or, as he himself put it, to life "exactly like it happened." This remark is reminiscent of Leopold von Ranke's famous dictum that history must be written *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*—"as it actually happened." As I will explain below, during the early Cold War period, Ranke's charge was taken seriously by many professional historians, who believed with him that the best route to this end was writing history scientifically and objectively.<sup>8</sup> Kerouac thus shares the same goals as professional historians of his day, and yet his own writing questions the very assumptions on which their resolute objectivity rests. *Visions of Cody* functions as history when it experiments with an objective methodology for recording life

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1999), 9, 15.

7. George Mouratidis, "Into the Heart of Things': Neal Cassady and the Search for the Authentic," in *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, Jack Kerouac, ed. Howard Cunnell (New York: Viking, 2007), 70.

8. Of the many works of this period that engage Ranke, see Herbert Butterfield, *Man on His Past: The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1955), 224–27.

“exactly like it happened”; it functions as self-reflexive historiography when it rejects and modifies radically this methodology. The book is centered on 128 pages of tape transcriptions, which Kerouac later “imitates.” Tape recording was a new technology in the early 1950s, and Kerouac was intrigued by it because he thought tapes would allow him to be a better historian. As he writes in *Visions of Cody*, “do need a recorder, *will* buy one . . . then I could keep the most complete record in the world.”<sup>9</sup> The tape is meant to record everything without discrimination, and Kerouac believes that he can transcribe the tape and get down on paper “the most complete record” of “what actually happened.” Like an objectivist historian, then, Kerouac aims to have a complete, unmediated record of a given historical moment. But, as we will see, he ultimately discovers that such objectivity is unachievable, and the remainder of the book is spent reflecting on narrative itself and on what it means to record the past.

I am suggesting, then, not that *Visions of Cody* is a work of history per se but rather that it functions as history at certain times. In those moments when Kerouac meditates self-reflexively on his writing about Cassady’s life and Cassady’s America, he is also meditating on historiography. My thinking here is informed by numerous theories of history and historiography that have appeared in the last thirty years—perhaps most notably in the works of Hayden White and Robert Berkhofer. Writing on recent developments in historiography, Ann Curthoys and John Docker single out White for “provocatively argu[ing] that historians inevitably write a certain kind of fiction.”<sup>10</sup> This is a sensibility that I explore in further detail throughout this essay, and I quote it here because it reminds us that history and fiction are both varieties of narrative and that the boundaries between them may be more permeable than people have traditionally supposed. This means that a given narrative—in this case *Visions of Cody*—may not be only history or only fiction, but rather may function as either history or fiction at different moments.

9. Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Cody* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 99. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Cody*.

10. Ann Curthoys and John Docker, *Is History Fiction?* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005), 191.

In order to better understand why Kerouac would come to reject the ostensible objectivity of *Visions of Cody's* tape section, it is useful to sketch what he thought about history more broadly. For Kerouac, history was both a mental and a political construct. Although many readers today think of Kerouac as apolitical, I would suggest that the way he conceptualized narrative and its relationship to history “exactly like it happened” has everything to do with politics.<sup>11</sup> He tended to have a flip, skeptical attitude about the grand concept of “history”—as he wrote in a 1949 letter to Allen Ginsberg: “History is people doing what their leaders tell them.”<sup>12</sup> As he matured as a writer, these beliefs only intensified; by 1956, he would describe history in decidedly political terms, as beholden to the demands of Cold War politics. The West, he wrote, was “making History in the present; *making* History, manufacturing it, shooting it up in H bombs and Rockets.”<sup>13</sup> In this conception, Cold War fear about nuclear weapons defines what history can mean. This line is important for what I want to say about *Visions of Cody* because it begins to suggest how Kerouac saw history as subjectively constructed and available for service to dubious masters.

In early 1954, a few years after *Visions of Cody*, Kerouac began intensive study of Buddhist thought, and his sense of history as politically inflected was augmented by a growing belief in its ultimate arbitrariness.<sup>14</sup> As he wrote in August

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11. See, for example, Ann Charters's introduction to *On the Road*: “Bebob is the major event in Sal's [the narrator's] world, much more powerful to him than the claustrophobic reminders of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, which Dean turns into a joke as they pass through Washington, D.C., in January 1949.” Ann Charters, introduction to *On the Road*, by Jack Kerouac (New York: Penguin, 1991), xxiii. Other scholars have begun to explore the political dimensions of Kerouac's work—and indeed the work of the Beats writ large. See, for instance, Oliver Harris, “Cold War Correspondents: Ginsberg, Kerouac, Cassady, and the Political Economy of Beat Letters,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 46.2 (2000): 171–92; Manuel Luis Martínez, *Countering the Counterculture: Rereading Postwar American Dissent from Jack Kerouac to Tomás Rivera* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2003); and María Saldaña-Portillo, “‘On the Road’ with Che and Jack: Melancholia and the Legacy of Colonial Racial Geographies in the Americas,” *New Formations* 47(2002): 87–108.

12. Jack Kerouac, *Selected Letters, 1940–1956*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Penguin, 1995), 194.

13. Jack Kerouac, *Desolation Angels* (New York: Perigee, 1980), 305.

14. For more on Kerouac's relationship with Buddhism and how this affected his

1954: "How imaginary, how popular is the concept of history! . . . It is only an arbitrary conception, when you tell me that history is the story of what happened with the governments and the peoples. Governments indeed, peoples indeed. Tell me, do you know what happened?"<sup>15</sup> Although *Visions of Cody* is not informed by Buddhist thought as Kerouac's later work is, the book is, nonetheless, an early manifestation of the belief that history is an "arbitrary conception"—one of its key insights is that a writer's subjectivity affects the meaning of historical facts. Questions like "Tell me, do you know what happened?" haunt *Visions of Cody*, in which there is a sense that however close Kerouac may be to a given historical moment, the act of writing, of narrating, always removes him from this moment so all of what happened is never quite known. Thus the story of Kerouac's relationship to history is a story of his striving to be truthful and complete. Two years before he died, in fact, he envisioned his life's work, the Duluoz Legend, as "a lifetime of writing about what I'd seen with my own eyes, told in my own words . . . put together as a contemporary history record for future times to see what really happened and what people really thought."<sup>16</sup> For Kerouac, the Duluoz Legend is "a contemporary history record" precisely because it obsesses over that adjective "really"—however much he wrote novels and poetry, Kerouac strove throughout his writing career to overcome the problems of history as ideology in order to get down a seemingly simple thing: "what really happened."<sup>17</sup>

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writing, see the chapter on Kerouac in *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*, ed. Carole Tonkinson (New York: Riverhead, 1995), 23–88; and Sarah Haynes, "An Exploration of Jack Kerouac's Buddhism: Text and Life," *Contemporary Buddhism* 6.2 (2005): 153–71.

15. Jack Kerouac, *Some of the Dharma* (New York: Viking, 1997), 109.

16. Jack Kerouac, *Vanity of Duluoz: An Adventurous Education, 1935–46* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 190.

17. Regina Weinreich has observed that "even the most superficial reading of Kerouac's individual novels suggests an attempt on Kerouac's part to make a fiction out of historical events." Regina Weinreich, *Kerouac's Spontaneous Poetics: A Study of the Fiction* (New York: Thunder's Mouth P, 1987), 6–7. Eric Mottram has likewise suggested that "*Visions of Cody* is history since it recreates and records, as fiction, love between two men." Eric Mottram, "A Preface to *Visions of Cody*," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 3.2 (1983): 59.

From this perspective, then, we might read *Visions of Cody* as a book about Kerouac's vexed relationship to history. The book demonstrates how difficult—and perhaps impossible—it is to write about what really happened; its formal complexity reflects Kerouac's struggle to accurately represent Cassady's history. To begin to address such problems, Kerouac developed a methodological innovation that he imagined would help him remove the negative aspects of "craft" from writing.<sup>18</sup> The "Spontaneous Method" was a way for Kerouac to produce writing without the dishonest artifice of a negatively charged craft. As he explained in his 1958 piece "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose": "No periods separating sentence-structures already arbitrarily riddled by false colons and timid usually needless commas. . . . Not 'selectivity' of expression but following free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought. . . . tap from yourself the song of yourself, *blow!—now!—your way is your only way—'good'—or 'bad'—always honest, ('ludicrous'), spontaneous, 'confessional' interesting, because not 'crafted.'* Craft is craft."<sup>19</sup> Kerouac experimented with this free-wheeling, free-associative method in numerous works, but many critics agree that among his more successful applications of it is *The Subterraneans*, a novel he wrote over a three-day period in October of 1953. What is significant about *The Subterraneans* for our purpose is that Kerouac later insisted that the spontaneous method allowed him to "tell the truth" about "what actually happened in real life": "Not a word of this book was changed after I had finished writing it in three sessions from dusk to dawn at the typewriter like a long letter to a friend. This I believe to be the only possible literature of the free future, uninterrupted and unrevised full confessions about what actually happened in real life. It's not as easy as it sounds since it hurts people

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18. See Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998), 196–221; Weinreich, *Kerouac's Spontaneous Poetics*; George Dardess, "The Logic of Spontaneity: A Reconsideration of Kerouac's 'Spontaneous Prose Method,'" *Boundary 2* 2.3 (1975): 729–43; and Yuki Gennaka, "Writing, Typing, Telepathic Shock: The Value of Literature and Culture in Jack Kerouac's 'Spontaneous Prose,'" *Studies in English Literature* 47 (2006): 203–22.

19. Jack Kerouac, "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," *Evergreen Review* 2.5 (1958): 72–73.

to tell the truth.”<sup>20</sup> Oliver Harris has incisively asked of this passage, “Is this Kerouac at his most naive, or at his most political?”<sup>21</sup> I argue that reading Kerouac as a historian allows us to see him here at his most political. Notice the echoes of the intersections among history, truth, and Cold War ideology I have already described: writing responsibly of “what actually happened in real life” is the literature of the “free future”—this is Kerouac insisting that his method is the best way to “tell the truth,” a fraught, politically inflected venture in any age.

As I have also been suggesting, however, it is no simple matter to “tell the truth,” and Kerouac would perhaps be naive to think he had definitively captured truth in a book like *The Subterraneans*. What is in fact compelling about *Visions of Cody*—which he began two years before *The Subterraneans*—is the formal and methodological experimentation he uses to “tell the truth.” The tape transcriptions represent Kerouac’s attempt to remove his own subjectivity from the writing of history. He dispassionately records conversations with Neal and Carolyn Cassady, the transcription of which becomes the book’s “Frisco: The Tape” section. One finds in this section the marriage of a spontaneous aesthetic with an objective methodology: Kerouac wants his conversations with Cassady to be unplanned and uncrafted, but he uses the recorder to capture objectively this spontaneity.

This experiment with the objective technology of the tape recorder ultimately fails, partly because Kerouac and Cassady find themselves conscious of the tape—“both of us are going around containing ourselves,” says Cassady—and partly because Kerouac begins to theorize a split between “real life” and the narrative that is meant to represent that life (*Cody*, 128).<sup>22</sup> The second problem has farther-reaching consequences for Kerouac’s historiography in relation to

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20. Qtd. in Harris, “Cold War Correspondents,” 186.

21. Harris, “Cold War Correspondents,” 186.

22. In 1967, Kerouac told Ted Berrigan that the tape recording in *Visions of Cody* “really doesn’t come out right, well, with Neal and with myself, when all written down and with all the Ahs and the Ohs and the Ahums and the fearful fact that the damn thing is turning and you’re forced not to waste electricity or tape.” Ted Berrigan, “The Art of Fiction: Jack Kerouac,” in *Conversations with Jack Kerouac*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2005), 55.



professional American history at this time, so I want to describe how it is explored in the “Frisco: The Tape” section of *Visions of Cody*.

As the tape section opens, Kerouac asks Cassady to tell him old stories about William Burroughs. Although Kerouac insists that he wants to hear about the “actual happening” (*Cody*, 122), Cassady has trouble remembering all the details, and the tenuousness of memory becomes the subject of conversation. After a lengthy preamble in which he reflects on why Burroughs shot and killed his wife, Joan Vollmer, in the now-famous “William Tell” accident, Cassady (named Cody in the book) meditates on his own memory:

[CODY.] I didn't know that I'd appreciate remembering these things more, so therefore when I was there I didn't pay much attention to any of this, I was hung up on something else, you know, so I can't remember, say, like for example, I can remember NOW for example, but now that I CAN remember it doesn't do any good, because . . . man . . . I can't get it down. You know . . . I just remember it, I can remember it well, what happened 'cause I'M not doing nothin, see?

JACK. You don't have to get it down

CODY. (*demurely downward look*) But I can't remember what happened there, man, except I remember certain things . . . (*Cody*, 123; ellipses in original)

If this passage is about Cassady's ability to remember, it also concerns, by extension, Kerouac's ability to provide accurate history in his book. Cassady is a primary source; if his memory is faulty, so too will Kerouac's book be faulty. Although Cassady's shaky memory casts uncertainty over a project about truth telling—is he remembering things correctly? can we trust his version of these events?—Kerouac's tape recording may be read as a solution to the problem of not paying attention. However mannered Kerouac and Cassady are in the present, or however forgetful they are about the past, the tape rolls on, objectively and disinterestedly recording their every word.

The problem that Kerouac encounters, however, lies in narrating, which is typified by his insertion of the phrase “demurely downward look.” In *Visions of Cody*, this phrase functions as a metonym for the act of narration, and so a sustained exploration of how Kerouac treats it helps us

understand his thinking about historiography and narrative representation. Whenever he tries to translate the recording to the page—in effect, to write history—he encounters the split between a narrative and the thing to which a narrative refers. This is the split that Michel de Certeau sees evident in the word historiography itself: “Historiography (that is, ‘history’ and ‘writing’) bears within its own name the paradox—almost an oxymoron—of a relation established between two antinomic terms, between real and discourse.”<sup>23</sup> For a writer so insistent on narrating “what actually happened in real life,” this split is enough of a crisis that it soon becomes the topic of conversation between Kerouac and Cassady. After the first night’s recording session, from which the above exchange is taken, Kerouac spent the following day transcribing what had been discussed. That night, when he and Cassady were set to continue the experiment, Kerouac began by reading from the transcriptions of the previous night’s conversation. The result is a self-referential, meta-critical analysis of writing and its ability to accurately capture a historical moment, even one so near as the night prior.

As they read over his transcription of the earlier conversation, Kerouac and Cassady debate the meaning of the “demurely downward look” insertion:

**JACK.** Then I remembered this, “demurely downward look”

**CODY.** I seem to remember that myself

**JACK.** Although it wasn’t really

**CODY.** No

**JACK.** It was *my* idea

**CODY.** Yeah

**JACK.** About the look you had

**CODY.** Well yeah . . . it was kinda of a—

**JACK.** But it apparently wasn’t . . . what you were really doing . . .

**CODY.** That’s what it really amounts to, though

**JACK.** Why, because lookit . . . the talk is far way from demure . . .

**CODY.** Well, the reason for the *demure* is . . . any approach to the words like, as I remember like what I

23. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia UP, 1988), xxvii.

said . . . here, ah, "I can't get it down," for example, you know, "I can't get it down"—Well, I approached that very terribly, I was talking you know about something you know, that—it's goin on—You know what I'm trying to say? (*Cody*, 133)

When Cassady notices that Kerouac has added "demurely downward look" as a descriptor, this insertion triggers a debate about what "actually happened" in their conversation the previous night. Thus even the most apparently innocuous example of Kerouac's impulse to narrate—to convert bare historical data into legible history—causes controversy as both men question the fitness of "demure" to describe Cassady in that particular historical moment. This controversy is enacted in the dialogue, which pits Cassady—the historical source who may only "seem to remember"—against Kerouac, who insists on capturing "what you were really doing." As this exchange begins to suggest, however, Kerouac's project may be doomed from the start, for as de Certeau points out, to narrate (even just the mild "demurely downward look") is to recognize the distance from the event and the narrative of that event.<sup>24</sup>

As the discussion continues, Cassady himself intuitively feels the distance between history and historian as he muses about his ability to get his thoughts and memories "down." Once again, this distance dominates the conversation:

**CODY.** See? Here's what I'm saying, for example, I say, now man, "can't get it down," you know, and even as I say it sounds awful, then also it it sounds like struggling to get it down, and also sounds like whatever approach a young kid would, ah, approach with definite talk of getting it down, [. . .] And, so—that's what I say when I say "I can't get it down," and then . . . "two minutes"—but you picked up on that, of all the different things I was sayin, and so you said, "But you don't *have* to get it down," you know, that's what you said . . . and so the demure downward look . . . was simply in the same tone and the same fashion . . . as my reaction and feeling was when I said the words "but you can't get it down" you know

24. See Ellis, *Liar! Liar!*, 105: "There is a recurrent sense that any attempt to tell Cody's story is itself doomed in its very formulation."

**JACK.** Ah . . . you *were* demure when you were saying those words

**CODY.** No, I said this—

**JACK.** I don't know why you were demure if you *were* demure

**CODY.** I was demure simply because of the same reaction of those words, 'cause you chose "I can't get it down," and I approached it with a hesitancy, you understand what I'm sayin? What I'm saying is—

**JACK.** I thought you were bein demure because when I said "You don't have to get it down" . . .

**CODY.** Yah?

**JACK.** . . . you thought it meant, ah, that I was saying . . . ah, you don't have to write, see, *I'll* write. You looked away demurely, guy's saying "I got bigger muscles than you have"

**CODY.** Yeah yeah, that's right, yeah. Well it wasn't—and I didn't dig it personally, I dug it as a, like I say . . . ah, a remembrance of my own past, my own, you understand—it was all an inward thing—not outward, you understand . . . So when I looked down demurely it was the same way as . . . ah—in my own self (*Cody*, 133–34; unbracketed ellipses in original)

Here the men try to resolve Cassady's actual words—"I can't get it down"—with Kerouac's interpretation of these words, with his sense that they were delivered with a "demurely downward look." The problem of course lies in the accuracy of this interpretation: as author, Kerouac has perceived the event differently than his subject, a difference that points to the difficulty of reconciling objective reality (what actually happened) with a writer's account of this reality. As if to emphasize the notion that the signifier endlessly chases the signified, Cassady intones over and over that his words "sound" like something different from what he meant. This difference is dramatized in the conversation in which we learn that Cassady intended the statement "I can't get it down" to mean something like he cannot get his memories down pat because he never has total command over these memories or over his life.

Playing the role of historian, Kerouac tries to use writing to fix Cassady's fickle memory. The overt purpose of creating a "complete record" is to prevent his and Cassady's lives from falling victim to just such fragile memories. But at the

moment when Kerouac asserts his will to “get it down” as long as Cassady feeds him raw material, the text demonstrates the incommensurability of the objective tape-recording method with historical truth. The “demurely downward look” comment is the first place in *Visions of Cody* when the limits of the objective method become visible. As Kerouac discovers, the “demurely downward look” comment was predicated on a faulty assumption: as writer and organizer of truth, Kerouac assumed Cassady was ashamed of his inability to write history as Kerouac could. While Kerouac first conceived of the tape recorder as a tool for creating a definitive, complete historical record (thus alleviating the problem of Cassady’s tendency to not “pay much attention to any of this”), the flap over “demurely downward look” exposes an immediate problem in historiography. The moment Kerouac narrates or interprets an event, he destroys the objectivity of the tape-recording technology. This is a significant problem because the tape cannot function as history without being transcribed—and thus interpreted—by the guiding hand of the writer/historian. The experiment with tape transcriptions, then, suggests to Kerouac that objective history is nearly impossible to achieve, for a writer must always interpret and arrange the facts.<sup>25</sup>

At this point, it will be useful to connect the questions that *Visions of Cody* raises to some of the questions that historians ask about historiography and to the specific questions that historians in the early 1950s were asking about their profession. In this way I hope to show not only that Kerouac treats many of the same theoretical problems that interest people who think about historiography, but also that the method he settles on in the latter sections of *Visions of Cody* amounts to a radical departure from the historiographical norms of his time—a departure that can be read as a critique of the politics of representation and narrative.

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25. To my knowledge, the only critic who has worked with the remains of the physical tape recordings is John Shapcott, “I Didn’t Punctuate It’: Locating the Tape and Text of Jack Kerouac’s *Visions of Cody* and *Doctor Sax* in a Culture of Spontaneous Improvisation,” *Journal of American Studies* 36.2 (2002): 231–48.

As we have seen, the "Frisco: The Tape" section of *Visions of Cody* complicates Kerouac's understanding of objective history as it records the difficulties that attend writing "what actually happened in real life." Similarly, professional historians in postwar America were also struggling with the best way to maintain objectivity in their writing—Peter Novick offers a helpful working definition of "historical objectivity": "The assumptions on which it rests include a commitment to the reality of the past, and to truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and, above all, between history and fiction. Historical facts are seen as prior to and independent of interpretation. . . . The objective historian's role is that of a neutral, or disinterested, judge."<sup>26</sup> As I have already mentioned, historians invested in maintaining such objectivity often began with Ranke's idea that history must be written "as it actually happened." This starting point implies not only that such a thing is desirable but also that it is possible with the right methodology. As J. G. Randall remarked in his 1952 presidential address to the American Historical Association, the views of historians, "if not strictly 'scientific,' must be authentic. . . . Objective truth must be and is the goal of the scientist."<sup>27</sup> For Randall, as for the many historians who adhered to Ranke's dictum, "objective truth" is attainable if the writer proceeds with appropriate care.

Yet even those historians who were most stridently committed to "objective truth" still acknowledged the difficulty of articulating this truth.<sup>28</sup> What Kerouac's experimental failure in the "Frisco: The Tape" section demonstrates, however, is that the commitment to objectivity is itself an ideology worth being self-reflexive about. If the objectivist's goal is to draw reserved, disinterested judgments about historical facts, then he or she assumes that historical facts exist and are knowable and that disinterestedness is superior to interestedness. Although it may seem obvious that this position amounts to ideology—to the extent that

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26. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1988), 1–2.

27. J. G. Randall, "Historianship," *American Historical Review* 58.2 (1953): 251.

28. Randall, "Historianship," 251–54.

any and every belief we hold may be labeled “ideological”—Cold War historians tended to assume that the objective method somehow exempted them from ideology. As Novick has shown, for example, historians such as Richard Hofstadter, Louis Hartz, and Daniel Boorstin “argued forcefully that rather than agreeing on an ideology, Americans were united by their rejection of the very notion of ideology.”<sup>29</sup> Richard Pells argues that a principal reason for the idea that objectivity was nonideological was the pressure of the Cold War itself.<sup>30</sup> American historians who claimed to seek “objective truth” could always set their methodologies against that most pernicious, “questionable method” of them all: Marxist historiography.<sup>31</sup>

For American historians in the early 1950s, Marxist histories were dangerous because they were seen as relativist documents passed off as objective truth. From a Marxist perspective, a historical account that gives primacy to a theory of economic determinism is not relativist at all but is, on the contrary, responsible scientific history. From an anti-Marxist American perspective, on the other hand, such history is propped up by a faulty, relativist premise—that Marxist theories have any validity at all. Consider, for example, Chester McArthur Destler, writing in 1950 on “Some Observations on Contemporary Historical Theory.” Destler explicitly associates Marxism with “subjective realism” and locates the danger of such historiography in this subjectivity:

The advocates of the new historical theory urge us now to accept as the ultimate justification and controlling frame of reference for historical studies in the United States certain concepts that derive from metaphysical idealism, Freudian psychology, and Marxism. . . . The acceptance of subjective realism . . . will make history especially vulnerable to the renewed activities of pressure groups who would dictate, respectively, the “value theory” that they would have historians employ. . . . [Relativist historians] have transformed history into an instrument of propaganda and

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29. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 333.

30. Richard Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 148–62.

31. Randall, “Historianship,” 255.

surrendered it in advance to whatever power group gains control of the Capitol.<sup>32</sup>

This is an especially dire scenario, but it is a good articulation of how professional historians viewed relativist histories as ideological, whereas objective history was simply the closest one could get to "what really happened." Holding *Visions of Cody* against such formulations begins to show that however much historians would downplay or simply ignore it, the objective method is itself beholden to ideology.

Kerouac, in contrast to a historian like Destler, learns from the "demurely downward look" incident that historical objectivity is not only difficult to attain but perhaps impossible and undesirable. Ultimately, as I will suggest, Kerouac decides that the best way to approximate "what actually happened in real life" is to flaunt his "subjective realism." In other words, he endeavors to write himself into the story to such an extent that his style becomes inextricable from the version of truth he presents.<sup>33</sup> In this way, Kerouac is descendant of a historiographic sensibility popular in the 1920s and 1930s that, for the reasons I described, was eclipsed in the 1950s by an interest in "objective truth." This school was typified by historians Carl Becker and Charles Beard; Becker's 1932 presidential address to the American Historical Society, "Everyman His Own Historian," could hardly be more different from Randall's address to that body twenty years later. As Becker insisted throughout his career, historical facts are relevant when and only when a historian animates them: "There are two histories: the actual series of events that once occurred; and the ideal series that we affirm and hold in memory."<sup>34</sup>

32. Chester McArthur Destler, "Some Observations on Contemporary Historical Theory," *American Historical Review* 55 (1950): 506-26.

33. In this sense, my argument is related to a point that Gerald Nicosia makes with particular reference to *Visions of Cody*: "Objective reality doesn't exist for Kerouac. When he tries to describe it, he realizes that he is deceiving himself, merely mouthing someone else's clichés or misconceptions. His own voice speaks only in the outpouring of imagination. Paradoxically, however, a certain objectivity can be achieved by reviewing one subjective vision through the lens of another." Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994), 379.

34. Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," in *Everyman His Own Historian: Essays on History and Politics* (New York: Crofts, 1935), 234.



Given this difference, Becker concludes: "It is thus not the undiscriminated fact, but the perceiving mind of the historian that speaks: the special meaning which the facts are made to convey emerges from the substance-form which the historian employs to recreate imaginatively a series of events not present to perception."<sup>35</sup> For Becker and the school of historiography that he inspired, historical facts are not "seen as prior to and independent of interpretation"—as Novick defines objective history—but rather are dependent for their meaning on the historian's imaginative re-creation and orchestration.<sup>36</sup>

In *Visions of Cody*, Kerouac takes an idea like the one Becker articulates and runs with it: he juxtaposes the "Frisco: The Tape" transcriptions with the "Imitation of the Tape" section, in which he sheds any pretense to objectivity and instead develops a subjective style that grows increasingly self-referential. If, for Kerouac, history is an "arbitrary conception," then it makes sense that he should flaunt this arbitrariness in his writing to yield a historiographic sensibility which reads as a dynamic exchange between history and historian, knower and known. Although Kerouac emphasizes that this section is an "imitation," the label is meant to suggest not that it is removed from truth but rather that imitation is a narrative method that draws attention to itself as a narrative method, a move that makes it potentially more truthful.

Such self-reflexiveness invites us to speculate about how *Visions of Cody* may exhibit a postmodern sense of history.<sup>37</sup>

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35. Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," 251.

36. Charles Beard was another well-known advocate of relativism in the 1920s and 1930s. We know from his journals that in 1948 Kerouac was reading Charles and Mary Beard's *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927), a volume he called "a mighty book." Significantly, Kerouac fixed on the style as an explanation of why the book is so mighty: "it is written so creatively and contains so much. It's another of those great works that humble the reader and at the same time fire him with ambitions." Jack Kerouac, *Windblown World: The Journals of Jack Kerouac 1947-1954*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York: Penguin, 2004), 59.

37. For discussions of Kerouac and postmodernism, see Ronna C. Johnson, "You're Putting Me On': Jack Kerouac and the Postmodern Emergence," *College Literature* 27.1 (2000): 22-38; Matt Theado, *Jack Kerouac* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2000), 82; Robert Holton, "Kerouac among the Fellahin: On the Road to the Postmodern," *Modern Fiction Studies* 41.2 (1995): 265-83. For an argument against Kerouac as postmodern, see Ellis, *Liar! Liar!*, 28-29n48.

Writing on what postmodernism means for history, Hayden White discusses the ideology of objective historiography that emerged from the political and cultural moment in which *Visions of Cody* was written. From a contemporary perspective, White suggests:

It is a commonplace . . . that we have at least become post-ideological, as if the breakup of the Soviet Union confirmed the claim of the United States that its own foreign policy had been based on "reality" while that of its Russian enemy was based on "ideology." . . . From a post-modernist perspective, of course, it is not "ideology" that has ended with the putative defeat of "Communism" as rather that ideology of objectivism which purported to be able to distinguish between "ideology" and "reality" on the basis of an appeal to the "facts" of "history."<sup>38</sup>

White thus observes that our own post-Cold War moment helps us revisit the past to see that objectivity is its own kind of ideology, an insight that, I have argued, Kerouac explores in *Visions of Cody*. This is important for understanding the "Imitation of the Tape" section because it suggests that writers working from such a postmodern position may attempt to create new or innovative ways to engage reality. As White argues:

If postmodernist notions of history are informed by a critique of the ideology of objectivism, this does not necessarily mean that they are opposed to the truth and committed to lie, delusion, fantasy, or fiction. It means rather that postmodernism is more interested in reality than it is in truth as an end in itself. But post-modernism recognizes that "reality" is always as much constructed in discourse as it is discovered in the historical record. Which means that post-modernist "objectivity" is aware of *its* own constructed nature and makes this work of construction the subject of its discourse."<sup>39</sup>

White's suggestions help us conceptualize what happens in the final sections of *Visions of Cody*—having tried and

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38. Hayden White, "Literature against Fiction: Postmodernist History," *La Torre* 2.4-5 (1997): 200-201.

39. White, "Literature against Fiction," 201-2.

abandoned an objective methodology, Kerouac explores how the “reality” he wants is, as White puts it, “always as much constructed in discourse as it is discovered in the historical record.” Thus the “complete record” of Kerouac’s or Cassady’s real life comes only as the writer examines the mediation of this reality by his own subjectivity.

Such examination is apparent in the opening line of the “Imitation of the Tape” section, which draws attention to the circumstances of its own composition. As though heading a grade-school theme, it reads: “COMPOSITION . . . . . by Jackie Duluo<sup>z</sup> . . . . . 6-B” (*Cody*, 249; ellipses in original). The joke here has a point: Kerouac has discarded his pretense to objectivity that marks the tape section and begins an imitation that becomes about writing itself. In the opening paragraphs, in fact, Kerouac suggests that the construction of his own discourse is as potentially paralyzing as the tape: “But no, wait in here, don’t you know I’m serious? you think I’m?—damn you, you made, you make, the most, m—I guess—but now wait a minute, till I l—but no I’ll jump on in, I meant to say, w—about whatever” (249–50). The text continues in this vein for a few pages as competing voices proliferate and the narrator clears his throat trying to orient himself. Far from maintaining the fiction of an objective persona, then, the narrator of the “Imitation” section begins too self-consciously, so he finally writes to himself: “YOU’VE GOT TO MAKE UP YOUR GODDAMN MIND IF YOU WANT TO GOOF OR DON’T WANT TO GOOF OR WANT TO STAY ON ONE LEVEL KICK OR GOOF” (255). With these asides to himself, Kerouac indicates not only the difficulty of writing but also the responsibility of one writing with a commitment to reality. He notes that cultural and intellectual institutions—such as the American academy—order reality in particular ways that ought to be second guessed. Of his Contemporary Civilization class at Columbia University, for example, Kerouac writes: “When Mark Van Doren made me realize professors could be real interesting, I nevertheless spent most of my time dreaming on what he must be like in real reality instead of listening to what he was saying” (265). For Kerouac, “real reality” is found not in the classroom but in one’s own imaginative engagement with the world.

This engagement may have stemmed from Kerouac’s reading of another history book that by the early fifties was

spurned by professional historians and teachers of contemporary civilization: volume 1 of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality* (1918; trans. 1926).<sup>40</sup> Those who are familiar with Beat studies know that Burroughs was supposed to have given Kerouac a copy of Spengler's metaphysical tome in the early 1940s and that Spengler's ideas about the cyclical nature of history greatly influenced Kerouac's own sense of the past. Manuel Luis Martinez, in fact, has argued that Burroughs's "suggestion that they [Kerouac and Ginsberg] read Spengler's *Decline of the West* was instrumental in the construction of a Beat historiographical understanding."<sup>41</sup> While most scholars who discuss Spengler's influence on Kerouac tend to focus either on the idea that the decadent West is in a state of decline or on the concept of the "fellaheen"—Spengler's name for third-world peoples not implicated in this decadence—I want to draw attention to how exactly this cyclical logic of history operates.<sup>42</sup> Since Spengler's "organic" conception is far beyond the pale of any objective sense of history, I suggest that it gave Kerouac permission—or at least inspiration—for using a radically subjective style to narrate Cassady's history in *Visions of Cody*.

For Spengler, history is best understood in terms of Destiny, a concept useful for understanding *Visions of Cody* insofar as it suggests how and why Kerouac came to conceptualize Cassady as what he called an "archetypical American Man" (*Cody*, preface). In Spengler's conception, history as Destiny means that certain historical "incidents" stand as symbols of the organic, cyclical logic of history. Of Napoleon, for example, Spengler writes: "Supposing that he himself, as 'empirical person,' had fallen at Marengo—then that which he *signified* would have been actualized in some

40. See, for example, Stuart H. Hughes, *Oswald Spengler: A Critical Estimate* (New York: Scribner, 1952).

41. Martinez, *Countering the Counterculture*, 62. Martinez's project is concerned with how Kerouac constructed the Mexican "fellaheen" rather than Kerouac's general historiographic method.

42. See Nicosia, *Memory Babe*, 134, 203–4; Martinez, *Countering the Counterculture*, 62–63, 80–81; Theado, 13, 49; and Michael D'Orso, "Man out of Time: Kerouac, Spengler, and the 'Faustian Soul,'" *Studies in American Fiction* 11.1 (1983): 19–30. Note also that Kerouac's *Doctor Sax* (written 1952; pub. 1959) is subtitled *Faust Part III*, which is a nod to Spengler's ideas.

other form."<sup>43</sup> Thus, for Spengler, history is more than meets the objective eye. To understand a historical figure is to understand both the "empirical person" and the greater historical importance that he "signified." "Real historical vision," writes Spengler, "belongs to the domain of significances, in which the crucial words are not 'correct' and 'erroneous,' but 'deep' and 'shallow'" (96). This idea helps open up *Visions of Cody* because Kerouac's historiographic project tries to record both the real-life and symbolically significant Neal Cassady. Even this brief taste of Spengler's ideas suggests that while reading *Visions of Cody* as history, one ought to be attuned to how Cassady can function simultaneously as a "real life" person and as an archetype, a simultaneity that, for Kerouac, is true.

Kerouac also believes with Spengler that history writing ought to be rooted in the personal and subjective; in *The Decline of the West*, Spengler argues that it takes uncommon perceptive power to even glimpse what he calls "the secret logic of history," let alone articulate it sensibly: "Only the insight that can penetrate into the metaphysical is capable of experiencing in data *symbols* of that which happened, and so of elevating an Incident into a Destiny" (144, 142). Significantly, Spengler disassociates this "insight" from historical or scientific epistemologies and connects it with a literary sensibility, specifically that of Shakespeare, whose insight into the "secret logic of history" was so powerful that he could show how the most apparently incidental circumstances—"the conjunction of this [Lear's] commanding dignity with these fateful passions and the inheritance of them by the daughters"—are in fact indicative of "deep life" (143). With *Visions of Cody*, then, Kerouac is trying to project a similarly powerful insight onto Cassady's character with the aim of capturing the reality of "deep life" that transcends superficial understandings of history.

It is thus fitting that Kerouac should reject objectivity in order to analyze the nature of his own subjectivity and its power to shape reality into historical narrative—a "vertical, metaphysical study of Cody's character and its relationship to the general 'America'" (*Cody*, preface). Late in *Visions of*

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43. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, vol. 1, *Form and Actuality*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Knopf, 1926), 1:144. Hereafter cited parenthetically as Spengler.

*Cody*, Kerouac compares this strategy to the technique of a jazz musician: "Miles Davis, like the sun; or the sun, like Miles Davis, blows on with his raw little horn . . . to flesh some of its fine raw sound, some wild abstract new ideas developed around a growing theme that started off like a tree and became a structure of iron on which tremendous phrases can be strung and hung and long pauses goofed, kicked along, whaled, touched with hidden and active meanings" (323–24). Like Davis's music, *Visions of Cody* develops "wild abstract new ideas" around the "growing theme" both of Cassady's real-life exploits and of the way that Kerouac has come to write about these exploits. If we read *Visions of Cody* as a meditation on historiographic method, then we see that the "tremendous phrases" here are "strung and hung" by Kerouac-his-own-historian as a way to articulate Cassady's real life; it is a method for writing history that flaunts its own ideology of subjectivity.

After Kerouac rejects his earlier experiments with capturing "life as it actually happened," he turns in force to his subjective historiographical method, thereby giving his reader what he considers a more complete, imaginative portrait of Cassady. The botched experiment with the "Frisco: The Tape" section has taught him that the mediating author is always present whenever a narrative—whether putatively factual or putatively fictional—is being written. This presence (typified by the insertion of "demurely downward look") is for Kerouac a condition of narrative: rather than gloss over this condition by pretending to objectivity, he brings his own interpretations, preoccupations, and opinions into fuller focus by the end of *Visions of Cody*, a technique that yields a truer "vision" of Cassady.

Kerouac's experimentation with different narrative strategies may be briefly illustrated by looking at the way the same historical moment is described in the successive revisions of his road book. In the first version, typed on the scroll in April 1951, Kerouac uses real names and describes his first encounter with Neal Cassady in a surprisingly succinct way:

I went to the coldwater flat with the boys and Neal came to the door in his shorts. . . . My first impression of Neal was of a young Gene Autry---trim, thin-hipped, blue eyes, with a real Oklahoma accent. In fact he'd just been working on a ranch, Ed Uhl's in Sterling Colo. before marrying L. and

coming East. Louanne was a pretty, sweet little thing, but awfully dumb and capable of doing horrible things, as she proved a while later.<sup>44</sup>

From here Kerouac veers into a description of a night of drinking and how Cassady “paced around thinking” (110). In the subsequent revision—eventually published as *Visions of Cody*—Kerouac retains the central image of Cassady as a young Gene Autry but develops the tension between the real Cassady and the movie-star myth he evokes:

Cody, all bare ass standing in the door of a coldwater pad when we first knocked on the door, . . . they told me Cody was a mad genius of jails and raw power, that he was a god among the girls with a big huge crown wellknown wherever he went because he liked to talk about it and made frequent and assertive use of it and also the women talked about it and wrote letters mentioning it; sometimes frantic; a reader of Schopenhauer in reform schools, a Nietzschean hero of the pure snowy wild West; a champion. In the door he stood with a perfect build, large blue eyes full of questions but already thinning in edges, at edges, into sly, or shy, or coy disbelief, not that he’s coy, or even demure; like Gene Autry (exact appearance) with a hardjawed bigboned—but he also at that time bobbed his head, prided himself on always looking down, bobbing, nodding, like a young boxer, instructions, to make you think he’s really listening to every word, throwing in even early as 1947 a thousand manifold yesses and that’s rights. (*Cody*, 338)

In the revision, Kerouac turns away from the comparatively objective chronicle of Cassady’s activities—the names and locations of his employers—in order to develop the most subjective, interpretive aspect of the passage. By focusing on Cassady as a “young Gene Autry,” Kerouac dampens the sense of objectivity that may have been present in the scroll version. Literally and metaphorically, Cassady is “all bare ass” in the revision, whereas in the scroll he remains tastefully covered in shorts. What makes him better exposed in *Visions of Cody* is not merely the profusion of detail but the way that Kerouac’s subjective vision stylizes Cassady

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44. Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 110.

into an archetype—"a mad genius," "a god among the girls," "a champion." From the perspective of one reading for the historical plot—for "what actually happened in real life"—the bare facts in the scroll version make Cassady seem, like his accent, more "real," more like a human being. In *Visions of Cody*, by contrast, he is larger than life and something like a Spenglerian Destiny.

In the published version of *On the Road*, Kerouac ended up somewhere between the scroll version and *Visions of Cody*—again he retained the sense of Cassady as a young Gene Autry, but he also reined in the hyperbole:

I went to the cold-water flat with the boys, and Dean came to the door in his shorts. . . . You saw that in the way he stood bobbing his head, always looking down, nodding, like a young boxer to instructions, to make you think he was listening to every word, throwing in a thousand 'Yeses' and 'That's rights.' My first impression of Dean was of a young Gene Autry—trim, thin-hipped, blue-eyed, with a real Oklahoma accent—a sideburned hero of the snowy West.<sup>45</sup>

Taken together, these three versions of the same scene suggest Kerouac's vacillation between different sorts of historical representation. In the scroll version, as wildly as it is written, Kerouac seems most concerned with getting the facts down, at least in this important instance; in *Visions of Cody*, we have Cassady obviously filtered through the mediating narrator's impressions; in *On the Road*, the mediation is maintained but tempered. In *Visions of Cody*, Cassady is every bit the "hero of the pure snowy wild West," which suggests, when set against the scroll version, that Kerouac is enacting in the revision his sense of the real-life Cassady as "an archetypal American Man."<sup>46</sup> Of course, one cannot articulate such mythic terms objectively: Cassady hardly comes across as "a mad genius" in the "Frisco: The Tape" section. So Kerouac is left to try out different narrative techniques, including imitations of the tape; by stringing his writing with subjective phrases, he captures historical truth

45. Kerouac, *On the Road*, 4-5.

46. Note that even in this passage, Kerouac qualifies Cassady's heroism; he ends by remarking that, after their first meeting, "I didn't think of Cody as a friend" (*Cody*, 339).



from his perspective: to understand Cassady is to understand that he embodies the mythos of the West—a word that for Kerouac signifies both the West as in the “wild West” and the West as in “western civilization.”<sup>47</sup>

The *Visions of Cody* passage also returns us to that moment of crisis in the “Frisco: The Tape” section when Kerouac improperly described Cassady as casting a “demurely downward look.” In that version of Kerouac and Cassady’s first meeting, Cassady’s eyes are “full of coy disbelief, not that he’s coy, or even demure” (*Cody*, 338). This is Kerouac talking to himself, and it invites reflection: in both the *Visions of Cody* and published *On the Road* versions of the scene, Cassady is “always looking down,” a characteristic that would seem to justify Kerouac’s insertion of the “demurely downward look” in the “Frisco: The Tape” section. Yet, in the end, Kerouac rejects this adjective, the vestige of a moment in *Visions of Cody* when his half-hearted objectivity was exposed as such. By insisting here that Cassady is not demure—that in fact, to judge from his reputation with women, he is far from demure—Kerouac erases any authority the objective section may have had and locates the “truth” of Cassady’s character in these later descriptions, which merge his real life with the archetypal mythology as perceived by the ever-present author.

Ultimately, one may agree with Allen Ginsberg’s initial reaction to *Visions of Cody*, which he shared with Kerouac in a 1952 letter: “You still didn’t cover Neal’s history.”<sup>48</sup> With his innovative style, Kerouac nonetheless manages to conceptualize a relationship between self-reflexivity—writing about writing—and historical truth. Whereas professional historians in the early 1950s tended to view historical truth as necessarily born of objectivity, Kerouac peels away this veneer of objectivity to expose the author behind the arranged facts. We are now in a critical moment in which narrative theorists are beginning to wonder if metadiscourse may not be a route to truth rather than an escape from it.<sup>49</sup>

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47. Hunt argues that by comparing the *Visions of Cody* and *On the Road* passages, one sees how Cassady becomes “a multifaceted presence.” Hunt, *Kerouac’s Crooked Road*, 125.

48. Qtd. in Mouratidis, “Into the Heart of Things,” 78.

49. See, for example, Ansgar Nünning, “Fictional Metabiographies and Metaautobiographies: Towards a Definition, Typology and Analysis of Self-Reflexive Hybrid

Reading *Visions of Cody* as a meditation on historiography is instructive not simply because it anticipates such theoretical work but because it points to culturally and historically specific constrictions on what could count as true and how this truth could be represented. The politics of historiography in *Visions of Cody* is thus the politics of representation—does a writer committed to “what actually happened in real life” merely reflect reality, or does he have a hand in shaping it? While *Visions of Cody* may seem to refuse an answer, Kerouac’s experimentation with the limits of history and fiction yields a radically subjective historiographic sensibility, so that to shape reality, to figure Cassidy as the hero of the snowy West, is to write the “truth.”

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Metagenres,” in *Self-Reflexivity in Literature*, eds. Werner Huber, Martin Middeke, and Hubert Zapf (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2005), 195–210; and Monika Fludernik, “Metanarrative and Metafictional Commentary: From Metadiscursivity to Metanarration and Metafiction,” *Poetica* 35.1–2 (2003): 1–39.