On the Road to the Market: Kerouac, Revisions, and Market Forces
Abstract

The publication of the thitherto unavailable original scroll of *On the Road* in 2007 marked a decisive point for Beat scholarship. Enabling line-by-line comparison, the two versions could suddenly be placed under proper scrutiny, and Kerouac’s revisions set up against the established myth of the novel’s creation. How should we understand the revisions? To supply a contribution to an answer, this paper will map the artistic as well as personal trajectory of Jack Kerouac throughout the 1950s. Basing my analysis largely on correspondence, I will show how Kerouac constantly oscillated between different positions and attitudes within the space of literary production. The essay will argue that Kerouac’s pursuit of literary prestige, stood side by side with the always-present alternative of satisfying the demands of the large audience. If we add to this Kerouac’s obsession with his imagined audience it becomes clear that his final work resulted from more than his own aesthetic preferences. Devoting a section to his aesthetic program, I will explore to what extent editorial revisions, even seemingly minor ones, compromised his original text in significant ways.

Keeping in mind his erratic trajectory, and adding to it Warren French’s complementary observation that Kerouac’s personality was violently split, will allow us to identify an equally contradictory literary self-expression. Thus comparing *On the Road* with *Visions of Cody* (the latter emerged through the revisions of the former), Kerouac’s literary expression can be said to manifest itself in two fundamentally different ways. In *Road* as a reifying gesture that mystifies man’s connection with the earth, and, in *Visions* as an opposite gesture of dereification that seeks to disclose the source of man-made products that have become reified. Proposing that the autobiographical component of Kerouac’s writing is essentially a gesture of dereification, the essay will argue that editorial revisions of such works inescapably destabilize the unity between experienced reality and textual representation.

**Keywords:** Kerouac; reification; dereification; *On the Road; Visions of Cody*; market; revision; Malcolm Cowley; Viking Press
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Our decade has witnessed an upsurge of cinematic interest in the Beats, with film adaptations like *Howl* (2010), *On the Road* (2012), *Big Sur* (2013), as well as the biographical drama film *Kill Your Darlings* (2013). Slightly before that, two documentaries were produced in the late 2000s: *Words of Advice: William S. Burroughs on the Road* (2007) and *Corso: The Last Beat* (2009). Viewing this revived interest as itself a sign of a lingering influence emanating from the legacy established by Beat writers in the 1950s, Richard Holton suggests that the Beat generation, as a literary movement, emerged as a late incarnation of the Parisian lumpen-proletariat of the 1840s (60-1). Characterized as an eclectic mix of “‘mental patients’ and artists, students and criminals, the decadent and the devout, substance users and sexual adventurers, scum and refuse,” the Beat generation “provided the site for a centrifugal cultural space in the midst of a centripetal cultural moment” (61). “Like the spectre of communism,” Holton writes alluding to the first line of *The Communist Manifesto*, “the spectre of bohemianism continued to haunt Europe and America for many decades” (61). The Beats’ articulations of “positions of radical dissent from the cultural mainstream,” (61) precisely like their Parisian predecessors, “at a time when political resistance was felt to be both dangerous and futile—in postrevolution Paris as well as in postwar America,” ultimately amounted to different strategies of political hibernation so as to evade “modern capitalism’s cultural homogeneity” instead of actively attempting to reverse or overturn it (61). *On the Road’s* protagonist Dean Moriarty, heavily based on Neal Cassady, became the screen onto which Kerouac projected his idealized
imaginings of homosocial interaction. The former was indeed the perfect personification of the lumpen-bohemian ‘scum’ and ‘refuse’, then Herbert Huncke and William S. Burroughs constituted “figures of downward mobility” (64). Including Kerouac himself, these figures, mingling in a “peculiar and savory social space with little regard for conventional class distinction [...] resist both capitalist and Marxist social logics, and their prominence in the Beat pantheon [...] is indicative of the resonance that this centrifugal and heterogeneous note created in the postwar cultural imagination” (64). If they indeed resisted simple taxonomy, I will propose that Jack Kerouac’s meeting with the literary market was equally slippery; it involved a constantly oscillatory trajectory that negotiated both prestigious as well as commercial publishing possibilities. Taking on board Holton’s implicit assumption that writers are inextricably embedded in their particular spatial and temporal location, and hence susceptible to the influence of the literary legacy established by previous producers, a contextual analysis of the literary tendencies of a given writer’s specific time and place becomes paramount. Locating the published novel at the very end of a long road of continued literary production that always begins with the unpublished producer, we must attempt to cast light on the political and literary scene in which the author operated.

Dividing this essay into seven sections, my argument will necessarily follow a deductive logic. The first section will deal with literary tendencies emerging as post-war reactions. First, the 1950s saw a gradual movement away from social writing and towards a form of stylized introspection that concerned itself with the internal life of characters. Second, in part conditioned by the development of sophisticated recording technology, the decade marked the rise of the author as celebrity. Third, drawing a connection between the Confessional poetry of the early 1950s and the autobiographical component integral to Kerouac’s aesthetic program, his partial embeddedness in the social machine becomes observable. Fourth and last, since the atmosphere of repressive Cold War policy strongly conditioned what could be put in print and distributed to the reading audience, many trade houses consciously refrained from publishing works with sexually explicit and politically radical content in anticipation of legal repercussions. They thus contributed to the shape 1950s literature would take. As our fourth section will show, Malcolm Cowley, affiliated to Viking Press in the capacity of literary advisor, would explicitly call for the removal of obscenity in Kerouac’s On the Road.
The second section will provide a brief biographical sketch stating some of the major events in the life of Kerouac. English as well as French-speaking, American and French-Canadian, athletically as well as intellectually inclined and later fusing Buddhism and Catholicism, Kerouac would later move in constant oscillation between a militant refusal to revise on the one hand, and readiness to do so, on the other.

Our third and fourth sections will deal with Kerouac’s encounter with agents, editors, advisors, and trade houses—in short, the literary market. Accordingly, outlining the method of Pierre Bourdieu, Randal Johnson claims that “to be fully understood, literary works must be reinserted in the system of social relations which sustains them” (Preface Fields 11). Integral to this reinsertion is “to understand the practices of writers and artists, and not least their products, entails understanding that they are the result of the meeting of two histories: the history of the positions they occupy and the history of their dispositions” (61). Consistently split between different values, Kerouac’s 1950s correspondence reveals an extremely dynamic artistic trajectory whose particular movements appear to have been informed by his ongoing dialogue with various diametrically opposed values within publishing. Outlining the main conflicts, a major determinant of production involved operating in constant dialogue with prestigious trade houses, on the one hand, and publishers that catered to the large audience, on the other. Kerouac, in other words, constantly assessed his publishing possibilities.

The fifth section will examine Kerouac’s aesthetic program, as expressed by himself, throughout the 1950s. Dealing primarily with his emphases on spontaneity and autobiography (to be understood as truth) this section will also explore his own obsession with an imagined audience. Proposing that such an obsession together with the strong autobiographical component undermine any claim of unhindered spontaneity, it also marks a point where the market actualizes itself as a concrete possibility. His works, in other words, developed dialogically in anticipation of its reception by such an imagined audience. Drawing on Nicholas Brown’s concept of analytically isolable “moments of externality to the commodity form,” Kerouac’s insistence on unmediated autobiography constitutes one point at which a non-commodified intention becomes observable (152). While unmediated autobiography is essentially dereifying in preserving the link between life and text, Kerouac’s spontaneous fallacy entails a concealment of his own production process—it reifies it. Applying our understanding of the Kerouacian split on specific texts, the sixth section will show how this irreconcilable split helped shape his literary expression. Analyzing
the two novels emerging out of the revisions of *On the Road*—namely Viking’s *On the Road* and *Visions of Cody*, both produced between 1951 and 1952—two mutually opposed gestures will be discerned: a project of reification on the one hand, and a project of dereification on the other. Taking on board Georg Lukács’ theorization of the concept I understand reification in its Marxist sense as the process whereby “a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity’” (1). Reification refers to the act of isolating a human product (be it a chair, a carton of milk, or literary works themselves) from their producers and specific context of production and so “conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people” (1). In essence, then, to reify a literary work is to mystify it and treat it as if autonomous and detached from its producer. Conversely, dereification signifies the act of reversal of reification: the act of demystification. Viewing the image as “the ultimate terminus or reification,” as the “final form of the commodity itself,” Fredric Jameson has proposed that *Ulysses* should be understood as an attempt to reunite the image (and of course also human products as such) with its source of human production (6). “Even so strikingly reified a datum as the sandwichboard ad,” Jameson writes, “is once again effortlessly dereified and dissolved when […] Stephen hears a down-and-out friend observe: ‘I’d carry a sandwichboard only the girl in the office told me they’re full up for the next three weeks’” (6). By calling attention to the advertisement’s necessary place in a familiar reality, dereification refers to the act of setting straight the disjunction between object and producer that has been obscured through reification. Hence, for the purposes of this essay, dereification is understood as demystification—as the attempt to reunite producer and product. As I will propose, without resorting to reductive biographism, the conflicting tendencies of reification alongside dereification can be read against the background of other conflicts present in Kerouac’s meeting with the market in the form of constant oscillation between literary prestige and economic profit, on the one hand, and the two mutually opposed maxims featured in his aesthetic program: the spontaneous maxim (with its more esoteric emphasis on creativity as non-rational, unaccountable) and the truth maxim (with its focus on literature as the incarnation of real-life events).

As is well-known by now, *On the Road* is widely held to be more or less completely autobiographical. As I will argue, Kerouac’s renunciation of all fiction in 1950 ultimately constitutes a completely dereifying gesture. Ascribing to fiction predominantly negative connotations, specifically deeming it false, to write
autobiographically is instead to preserve the unity between textual representation and historical referent so as to render the raw material of one’s writing—i.e., experiences—transparent to the reader. The strong autobiographical component of Kerouac’s writing, here also understood as essentially demystifying, makes impossible any attempt to repress determinations and social situated-ness. Accordingly, my final section will claim that Viking’s ultimate decision to remove the real names of characters in *On the Road* runs counter to such a project. In addition, their insistence on removing sexually explicit content ultimately destabilizes the unity between real-life experience and textual representation.

Critics have identified in *On the Road* a particular structure of feeling against reification. Historically, as a reaction to specific bourgeois anxieties, white Americans have objectionably tended to project their imaginings on black Americans and Mexico as an idealized other. Erik R. Mortenson, in his essay “Beating time: Configurations of Temporality in Kerouac’s *On the Road,*” advances his argument claiming that Kerouac’s is a “voice of dissent,” and his novel, “in its most basic sense […] is an attack on the corruption of time by capitalism” (52). Briefly summarizing Lukács’ influential theorization of the concept, Mortenson writes that reification essentially means that “the commodity itself gains ascendancy, subjugating consciousness and establishing itself as the basis of interaction between humans” (52). However, by delimiting his discussion only to reified time and not reification in general, Mortenson fails to see that the project of *On the Road,* precisely as a reaction against reification only on its most superficial level, is ultimately bound to backfire: its project of dereification is too vague and ultimately becomes a gesture of reification. Somewhat problematically, Mortenson treats the notion of “frenetically living in the moment” as itself unequivocally synonymous with the contradiction of the generally destructive effects of commodity fetishism (56). Overestimating the supposedly radical political implications of Kerouac’s modern classic, we should instead conclude that his characters merely escape oppressive notions of time—that his lack of theoretical precision ultimately means that *On the Road* falls short of real critique of capitalism and reification.

Dealing with the questions of myth, idealization of manual labor, and male friendship, Mark Richardson’s “Peasant Dreams: Reading *On the Road*” proposes that “Dean Moriarty comes to represent […] a peculiarly intense and charismatic masculinity, a vital relation to the body, cultural and spiritual authenticity, the promise of America itself” (218). “*On the Road,*” he continues, “achieves, at times, a certain
distance from its own enabling myths, quite as if it were holding them up for scrutiny even as it plays them out” (218-9). Testing the “limits of its own creed,” the novel nonetheless “refuses, often poignantly, to abandon it” (219). Ultimately dual, to read Road is to “look out and see double: promise and piety on the one hand, wickedness and fraud on the other” (219). Explicitly establishing the oppressive political atmosphere of 1950s Cold War hysteria, Richardson states that while “On the Road almost never refers directly to these events […] they are, in a nebulous sort of way, everywhere felt” (220). Expressly seconding Williams’ concept, Richardson writes: “the structure of feeling of On the Road is itself tempered by the Cold War, with its restless anxiety, its troubled optimism, its delirium and depression” (221). In stark contrast to Mortenson, Richardson casts bright light on the problems that inhere in the novel’s Romantic idealization of simple work, and its calls for a return to earth as the antidote for middle-class anxieties: “Sal’s pastoral eye is hardly the eye of a migrant worker, whose felt relation to the cotton field is probably more economic in character than literary and romantic” (223). Further seconding the pervasiveness of a shared structure of feeling, Kerouac’s novel is said to express “a problem associated with a specifically White middle-class culture” whose proposed therapy is “a kind of psychosexual pastoral, a return to the earth, to the soil, to sexual vitality and to color” (225). Indeed, “White Americans,” like Kerouac, “reduce Mexican-American and Black farm workers to poverty only to flatter them with suggestions that their lives are idyllic and charmed, free of White worry” (225). On the Road thus ultimately falls short of any real critique of capitalism.

While Mortenson and Richardson both deal with the political implications of On the Road,\(^1\) much of Beat scholarship effectively dodges the necessity of comprehensively scrutinizing the nature of literary production. In part as a consequence of this general reluctance, the tenacious three-week-myth of the novel’s coming-into-being has managed to survive for so long, and still does to some extent. If we are to trust Michelle Martin’s meticulous scholarly work on the state of Beat literary research, although primarily delimited to the aesthetic trajectory of Ginsberg and Kerouac based on recently published correspondence, and the particular political nature of the work of William S. Burroughs, the second decade of the twenty-first century, and particularly

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\(^1\) Richardson in fact does bring in the socio-historical context of its production although without looking into the constitutive influence of the literary market.
Oliver Harris’ introduction to the new edition of *Queer* marks a turn in Beat studies. Instead of castigating the immorality of the protagonists in Beat literature, scholarship has begun to “examine the socio-historical conditions which prompted them to write such characters in the first place and the aesthetic form their narratives then must take” (172). While it remains to be seen what this turn has in store, two major contributions have already been made that shed light on the external determinants of Kerouac’s literary production. Howard Cunnell’s introduction to *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, published 2007, traces the different directions the novel took on its way to publication in 1957. Basing his analysis on journals and correspondence, Tim Hunt’s book *Kerouac’s Crooked Road* (originally published 1981 and republished in 2010 with a new introduction) examines Kerouac’s aesthetic development throughout the 1950s.

Indeed, the 2007 publication of *On the Road: The Original Scroll* marks a decisive turn in Beat scholarship. Having remained hidden from the public eye for fifty-six years, the appearance of Kerouac’s original 1951 manuscript made possible line-by-line comparison between the scroll and Viking’s version. Writing about the scroll, Cunnell asks whether the original scroll is the real *Road*, only to dismiss it as “perhaps the wrong [question] to ask” (31). His text traces the development of *Road* by reference to correspondence between Kerouac and Ginsberg, Malcolm Cowley, and other editors involved in the editing of the novel. While never completely addressing whether the published novel is a compromised version of the original manuscript he nonetheless hints at the possibility of Viking Press occupying a position that is compatible with market values: “the cultural tensions [...] the attempts to manage and commodify his wild book and Kerouac’s enthusiastic vulnerability and complicity in that process [...] would all be publicly played out in the reviews of *On the Road*” (48). While justifiably avoiding the question of authenticity, the project to disclose whether an artistic work has been compromised should not be ignored. Whatever our views vis-à-vis Kerouac’s literary production, the motivations concerning *On the Road*’s revisions and final publication must be questioned and properly scrutinized. Hence an integral aim of this essay will be to attempt to shed light on and demystify the conflicting imperatives vis-à-vis which Kerouac simply had to take a stand throughout the production of his controversial manuscript. What is more, inevitably dialogically constituted, literary works, too, are products of human labor and must be understood in light of the accumulated effort of the various agents, editors, advisors, and publishers involved in their production. To lift them from their particular context and analyze them in
isolation, is to reify and lend them a phantom objectivity—i.e., as autonomous objects unrelated to their producers and contexts. I feel it is necessary to state my own position here. On the one hand, I view writers as partaking in a given social environment and thus in part as products of the conflicts played out therein. On the other, there is always room for atypical behavior; hence writers are also agents in their own right and their works are never simple reflections of economic relations and social divisions. Since Kerouac was matched against Viking in his efforts to promote *On the Road*, and the latter indeed did make significant editorial changes of the novel, it is important to deal with the former’s movements and aesthetic program, not in order to establish a crude intentionality, but in order to see what ontological consequences on his texts certain revisions might possibly have had.

Tim Hunt, whose work is probably the most ambitious comparative study of the two versions of *On the Road* to date, views the two versions as representative of two distinctly different stages of Kerouac’s artistic development. Proposing that it would be a mistake to simply view the finally published, edited version as a commercialized compromise of his original vision, Hunt concludes that Viking’s version is best explained as the artistic culmination of an ongoing struggle for the literary expression that would best suit Kerouac’s intended vision. While I am not ready to fully accept Hunt’s conclusion, his work, by consulting letters and journals, nevertheless moves beyond pure immanent criticism (i.e. he complements his close readings with external information)—an impulse as much avoided as it is needed in Beat scholarship.

Restating the aims of this essay, the deductive method is justified by the necessity to prepare the ground carefully and gradually before moving on to the final sections of close readings. The first section that deals with literary tendencies as an attempt to undermine the spontaneous fallacy of Kerouac’s aesthetic that presupposes the freedom to write as if detached from any social machine. The biographical sketch is crucial for establishing Kerouac’s general refusal to conform to authority; the strong individualist ethos revealed in his inability to conform to military discipline would repeatedly manifest itself in the form of a militant refusal to accept even minor revisions. Insofar as Kerouac’s aesthetic program clearly reveals that the element of autobiography (or truth) was consistently a paramount literary maxim, immanent criticism proves particularly inadequate for accounting for the textual production of Kerouac. Quite simply, it invalidates from the very outset any considerations of the conditions that preceded and informed the shape of the former. Kerouac’s meetings
with agents and literary advisors therefore, constitute a source of insight that is indispensable for this sort of study. Insofar as the impact of revisions must be understood vis-à-vis a specific aesthetic program, Kerouac’s truth maxim renders his work particularly vulnerable: editorial revisions easily destabilize the link between real-life referents (i.e., the use of real names and events in the scroll draft, or in other words, references which lose their referential function and become fictionalized as soon as the name is altered) and text. Without carefully shedding light on Kerouac’s complex and extended conflict with agents and publishers, we cannot even begin to disclose the full impact of their involvement in his production—without it the editorial revisions will appear less fundamentally decisive. Whether informed by a general sanitary project of removing explicitly sexual or politically radical content in anticipation of legal repercussions, their ultimate effect on meaning remains equally decisive. Finally, set against the backdrop of Kerouac’s constantly oscillatory encounter with the market, the ultimately contradictory nature of his self-expression would manifest itself in the form of two mutually exclusive literary meditations. First, as the mystifying gesture of reification in On the Road. And second, as a demystifying gesture of dereification in Visions of Cody.

1: Part One: Post-War Literary Reactions

Intended to establish the general political and literary atmosphere in which Kerouac moved, essentially four main reactions will be observed. First, Malcolm Cowley’s book The Literary Situation, published 1954, observes a general post-war reaction in literature away from social themes that involves an increased concern with the inner life of characters. Second, the rise of the author as celebrity can be understood to have legitimized Kerouac’s feelings of self-importance, as will be shown in the other sections. Third, in part intended to expose the spontaneous fallacy of Kerouac’s literary production and point to the influence of external factors, to identify a link between the rise of Confessional poetry and the former’s specific aesthetic program with its strong focus on autobiography and truth proposes that Kerouac’s work cannot be lifted from its temporal and spatial context. Fourth and last, consulting Richard Holton’s

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2 As our next section will conclude, in 1951 Kerouac expressed his “secret ambition to be a tremendous life-changing prophetic artist” (Charters 274).
“Kerouac’s Lumpen-Bohemia” and Norman Mailer’s “The White Negro,” a general evasion of overt political engagement prompted by repressive Cold War policy defined the 1950s. Inevitably informing the decisions of publishers, editors, and agents, Cowley explicitly addressed how sexual content and radical political content were removed in anticipation of legal repercussions; as a safe-playing strategy.

In *The Literary Situation*, Cowley attempts to trace typical tendencies of every post-war literary movement from 1800 and onwards: “Every postwar generation, whether it is Romantic or lost or Silent, feels that it has been asked to share in too many public emotions. After the fighting stops it leaves the fate of the world to professional politicians [...] and concerns itself with the questions it regards as personal and immediate, or eternal” (5). Postwar literature, Cowley observed, tends to move towards “abstract, or subjective literature, toward pure poetry, dream fiction, or dogged scholarship” (5). The post-World War II period, however, saw a different development. One may have expected “a period of literary experiment” (6) but since this had already been done better by writers like James Joyce, Cowley speculates that it must have “seemed more fruitful for novelists to transform themselves into critics” (6). Yet, the period of literary experiment that Cowley failed to recognize in American literature was indeed being produced by at least one group of writers, namely the Beats, whose general aesthetic expressions to some extent constituted the antithesis of established literary traditions.

The emergence of Confessional poetry in the early 1950s seems to confirm Cowley’s observations of a general movement towards individual expression. In *A History of American Literature: 1950 to the Present*, Linda Wagner-Martin observes: “Drawing excitement from the visible successes of British poet Dylan Thomas’s public readings throughout the United States, the American response to its own writers […] became more public” (1950). Fueled and encouraged by the widespread publications of literary journals such as *Paris Review* and *Black Mountain Review* “universities and coffee houses began sponsoring readings by practicing poets and a few fiction writers” (1950). This growing interest in the person of the author can be observed by reference to the new journals’ increased focus “on the writer and his art, the interview” (1950). This included emphatic focus on “the writer’s work and its practice” (1950). What is more, the rapid development of sophisticated technology and the subsequent possibility to actually record these interviews further contributed to cementing a ubiquitous authorial presence that could be heard when wanted: “the interview worked in tandem
with taped readings (i.e., the public performances of poetry and fiction) to provide readers and listeners a useful context. Appreciation for contemporary letters increased noticeably” (1950). In other words, while the growing interest in the author could signify an increased tendency towards demystification of cultural production, it would seem more plausible to suggest that shifting the focal point of attention to the producer him/herself, the work becomes subordinated to the cult of the person. By focusing on the “writer’s work and its practice;” emphasis is placed, at best, not on his/her political motivations and social engagement (in which case the writer would have to be considered fundamentally secondary) but on craft—on an aesthetic program (literary styles and devices) expressed in the literature. These tendencies, in sum, anticipated and legitimized the culmination of literary expression into Confessional poetry in the late 1950s; the poetic equivalent to the autobiographical novels of Kerouac and the confessional poetry, avant la lettre, of Allen Ginsberg. Wagner-Martin’s account points to a clearly observable trajectory away from political engagement and towards pure self-expression.

While Wagner-Martin indeed characterizes Beat literature as an “anti-establishment poetic culture” (1952), and that their work constitutes “an antidote to the miasma of life as serious enterprise—one that forced the human mind to both accept the horrors of the bomb, the Holocaust, the thousands of war dead, and then to move past that recognition” (1953), this reaction alone should not be conflated with any express formulation of legitimate social critique. The relation of the beats to Cold War politics is ambiguous: “the structure of feeling of On the Road is itself tempered by the Cold War, with its restless anxiety, its troubled optimism, its delirium and depression” (Richardson 221). Jack Kerouac, it may be said, occupies a contradictory position in drawing on a shared experience—a collective structure of feeling—that is subsequently converted or translated into a politics of refusal of active political engagement. In ‘The White Negro’, Norman Mailer seconds Cowley’s observation that the sum of atrocities witnessed or indirectly experienced by the post-war generation prompts political withdrawal: “The Second World War presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it” (338). Out of the “bleak scene” of postwar existence a phenomenon emerged: “the hipster, the man who knows that if our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war […] then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the
religious imperatives of the self” (339 my italics). Or, as Richard Holton puts it, “at a
time when political resistance was felt to be both dangerous and futile […] if modern
capitalism’s cultural homogeneity could not be overturned or reversed” then “it might
at least be evaded” (61).

Consulting Mark Richardson’s essay, we may briefly summarize some of the
major events of the 1950s that constituted the political backdrop for social interaction
and literary expression. In 1950, enacted over Truman’s veto, the Internal Security Act
became law, forcing Communist organizations to register, thus legitimizing the
arbitrary investigation of people suspected of engaging in allegedly subversive activity.
In 1954 the Communist Control Act criminalized membership in Communist
organizations. In 1952 the United States detonated the first hydrogen bomb at Eniwetok
Atoll in the Pacific Ocean. Under the Smith Act (1940) 1953 saw the execution of Ethel
and Julius Rosenberg, accused of espionage and disclosing information about the
atomic bomb to the Soviet Union. The year also marks the culmination of preemptive
defense spending that quadrupled between 1950 and 1953 “as the peacetime economy
was partly militarized” (220). ComplementingMailer’s assertions, these restrictions
must be added to the forces that discouraged political engagement and motivated self-
censorship. Although Kerouac was an outspoken anti-Communist and supporter of
Senator Joseph McCarthy, he was certainly not detached from the general political
atmosphere of the 1950s. Insofar as that atmosphere conditioned what could be put in
print, Kerouac was more plausibly affected by, and indeed part of, the literary scene
emerging at the time; a literary scene whose symptom was in part the stylized
introspection and subjectivism prompted by the fear of repressive legislation. Indeed,
in a 1952 letter to Hemingway, Cowley noted the effects of political repression: “The
motto everywhere is Play It Safe, and that explains why publishers’ lists are so full of
the trivial and inconsequential” (444). Although in 1952, “the great purge” had not yet
“really hit the publishing trade (except at Little, Brown) […] there are signs that the
purgers are working in this direction and the publishers are scared enough so that they
don’t bring out some books that would probably have a large sale” (443). Evidently,
judging from these different accounts, the political atmosphere visibly permeated the
field of literary production, affecting the artistic considerations of the individual writer
whatever his/her political sympathies, the agents’ editorial demands before promoting
books, the mediating role of literary advisors like Cowley who, as we shall see,
explicitly justified the censorship of obscenity, and lastly, the final decision of many
publishers to play by the rules of McCarthyism, reflected in their decisions to censor content that could potentially lead to legal repercussions. All these factors contributed to rendering publishing in the 1950s a hyperconscious enterprise, affecting all potentially disturbing material, be it sexually explicit or politically radical. All factors put together, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain that Kerouac’s work would simply have slipped through such regulating mechanisms unnoticed.

Summarizing this section, we have briefly dealt with the post-war literary reaction that marked a growing concern for interior moral stirrings; the increased interest in the author as the immediate focal point of attention; the turn towards the confessional mode of expression; and the evasion of overt political engagement. Seen in light of the second point, Kerouac’s amplified sense of his own importance can be understood as legitimized by the rise of the author as celebrity. Second, the turn towards the confessional can be readily observed in Kerouac’s emphatic insistence on unmediated autobiographical writing. Placing heavy emphasis on the fact that writers are linked to the social machine (although certainly also authorities of their own work), as can be observed in the Beat intersection with parallel literary tendencies, in my second section I will summarize some of the major events in the life of Jack Kerouac before turning to his encounters with literary agents, editors, advisors, and publishers – in short, the literary market.

2: Kerouac: Biographical Sketch

Jack Kerouac, originally named Jean-Louis Lebrin de Kerouac, was born in 1922 in Lowell, Massachusetts, as the last of three children to French Canadian immigrants. Speaking a French dialect called joual, Kerouac did not learn English until the age of eleven (Maher 30-1). His brother Gerard died when Kerouac was five, a loss that would remain a central recurring theme throughout his literary career. Up until finishing middle school in 1933, Kerouac attended Saint Louis de France school and Saint Joseph’s school—both of which were Catholic educational institutions that would, together with familial influence, provide the basis for his life-long religious commitment (29). His mother Gabrielle, born in Quebec, came from a family with minimal education (9). By contrast, his father Leo was a writer and printer for a French weekly newspaper, L’Impartial, that reached the French–American fraction of the population in New Hampshire and New England (8). Leo came to Lowell,
Massachusetts to work for *L’Etoile*—the then-leading and most enduring French newspaper throughout the 1930s (8). His occupation ensured continued work throughout the 1929 recession, thus granting his family the privilege of relative financial stability. Engaged in relatively well-paid intellectual labor, the Kerouac family’s class-belonging is somewhat slippery; neither fully plebeian nor patrician. Indeed, in 1937, earning $89 a week, Leo had the “best-paying job in town” (49). Having previously concealed his French–Canadian heritage, Kerouac writes in a letter to Lowell-based reviewer Yvonne Le Maître in 1950: “Believe me, I’ll never hide it again; as once I did, say in high school, when I first began ‘Englishizing [sic!] myself’ (Charters 229). Identifying an explicitly addressed split, Kerouac appears to have experienced a strong sense of alienation on the basis of his French-Canadian heritage. The statement moreover points toward a general project of assimilation; that he consciously attempted to conform implies that he felt excluded.

According to Maher’s biography, Kerouac was free of any obligations to contribute to the household because it was expected that his academic merits together with his athletic performance would earn him a scholarship (48). He would indeed receive a scholarship to Columbia (56). However, as a consequence of his low class attendance that resulted in mediocre grades in language arts and math it was not on the basis of his academic achievement (56). Instead, a full academic scholarship would be granted him only under the condition that he attended Horace Mann School for Boys and received passing grades in all of the courses (56).

Kerouac’s time at Columbia reveals a crucial disposition in him. Two weeks in, he had already begun to skip classes (70). Then, in mid-September, he abruptly left campus (83). Overwhelmed by the heavy course load of Columbia, he wanted to devote his time to hitch-hiking and writing (83) much to the chagrin of his father (86). When explaining his motivations for dropping out, Kerouac answered that it was “allright to be an athlete if you think you’re going to get something out of college. I wanta be a writer” (91). A strong *non serviam* ethos would repeatedly manifest itself in his encounters with military discipline.

In 1943 Kerouac enter training to become a seaman in the U.S. Navy (108). Not before long, however, the demands of military discipline would take their toll. Refusing to handle weapons, Kerouac instead put down his gun and walked to the library to read (109). The psychiatric report denied Kerouac’s perceived right “to act differently than the military unit” (110). The report concludes: “individuality is subordinated to
obedience and discipline. Anyone not conforming to this regimen is of no use to the organization” (qtd in Maher 110). Confirming the strong individualist ethos of Kerouac, these two different forms of protest share one basic characteristic: the general refusal to conform to, and accept, the dictates of authorities, be it in the form of college curricula or military discipline. Complementing this sketch with epistolary information, the contours of several additional traits also become visible. First, his homophobia. Two months before the publication of Road, unsure about the other editors at Viking, Kerouac pulled back his manuscript from Cowley, this time under the title Beat Generation, and asked his literary agent Sterling Lord to “sell Beat Generation to soft cover people, who cares about hard cover just so you can get snide reviews by little fags in the New York Times” (588-9). Second, the pervasiveness and strong emphasis laid on homosocial friendship in On the Road and the absence of women seen as subjects together with the abundant and highly personal letters to Neal Cassady lends a highly androphilic character to Kerouac’s writing. Third, an elevated sense of his own importance and sense of mission. Kerouac revealed to Cassady in 1951 his “secret ambition to be a tremendous life-changing prophetic artist” (274). This would make publishing difficult. If an integral part of a newcomer’s quest for recognition is indeed the acceptance of his/her superiors’ (i.e. agents, advisors, editors, and publishers who, by virtue of their power of deciding who gets published are in a position of negotiation leverage) these must then also be recognized and accepted as such. To point towards Kerouac’s inability to do so, when Cowley, in 1953, asked the former to revise his work, Kerouac refused to listen, calling him a “semi-pedantic professor with a hearing-aid” (Charters 397).

Concluding this brief sketch of Kerouac’s various dispositions, one conspicuous trait stands out: an oscillatory tendency—or dialectic of extremes within one and the same subject—characterizes numerous spheres of Jack Kerouac's identity. American and French-Canadian, French and English-speaking, neither working nor upper-class, later fusing Catholicism with Buddhism, athletically as well as intellectually inclined, Kerouac appears consistently split between various different poles. In his book Jack Kerouac Warren French theorizes this split with regard to Kerouac’s debut novel The Town and the City, basing his analysis on the two twins Peter and Francis featured therein: “Was one part of him in a Joycean revolt against family, country, and church (or any other institutions), while another was from childhood conservative, traditional, and devoted to a rural patriarchal life?” (27).
Characterizing Kerouac’s as an “often tortured and contradictory personality” (26), French speculates that his debut novel reflects this insofar as “Kerouac split himself into two brothers—Peter […] who shares Kerouac’s athletic career, and Francis, an intellectual who is the surviving member of the slightly older pair of twins” (25). In short, “a constantly raging conflict between the twins” was “imprisoned in one body” (28). Indeed, as his 1950s letters will reveal, he would also operate in constant oscillation between various diametrically opposed values represented by the market. Preparing the ground for my more detailed analysis of Kerouac’s zigzagging trajectory throughout the 1950s, we will be able to trace a constant movement between different attitudes. Boiled down to their bare essentials we find: the conflicted affiliation with prestigious trade houses, on the one hand, as well as publishers with a large, more commercial audience, on the other. Second, his involvement with highly experienced literary agents and advisors as well as with untrained amateurs points toward this inability to discern between fruitful and ineffective promoters of his writing. Returning to the claim made in the introduction, it is precisely this split that will provide the basis for our theorization of the origin of Kerouac’s irreconcilably contradictory literary expression. If Visions of Cody presents us with a general project of dereification, On the Road ultimately amounts to a completely mystifying gesture of reification. Our next move will be to draw a sketch of his involvement with editors, agents, literary advisors, and publishers throughout the 1950s. As I will argue, Kerouac’s constant oscillation between different publishing possibilities strongly reveals that he was palpably affected by the influence of such figures. By extension, that he was affected also means that his texts must have opened themselves up and reflected such conflicts. In short, intended to prepare the ground for my final analysis, this sketch stresses the connection between books and life—it is essentially a gesture of demystification. To isolate the work is to reify it and render it superficially arbitrary. Or as Kerouac put it in Visions: “when I thought of Hollywood camera crews I always pictured them in the California night, by moonlight, […] I thought of movie crews in a location like that” (285). Kerouac’s work expressed such refusals of the phantom objectivity of the cultural product while, as we will see, his aesthetic program paradoxically sustained it by consistently concealing, and thus reifying, his own literary production process.
In 1949, following Ginsberg’s advice that Kerouac show the manuscript of his debut novel *Town* to Mark Van Doren at The New School for Social Research, the latter was impressed and contacted Robert Giroux, editor at Harcourt, Brace, suggesting that they publish it (Maher 192-3). In March that same year, Giroux sent Kerouac a letter of acceptance with a $1000 advance (193). The acquaintance with Giroux thus marked Kerouac’s rite of passage into the world of publishing. Apart from Van Doren’s recommendation, Richard M. Cook’s biography of Alfred Kazin reveals that the latter met Kerouac who attended a two-semester course on American literature held by Kazin (133). Reading his manuscript of *Town*, Kazin was apparently impressed enough to “send a note of recommendation to Robert Giroux, editor at Harcourt” (133).

Although Giroux was only eight years older, Kerouac had allegedly been heard referring to this young editor as his father (Amburn). Their shared Catholicism and French-Canadian background, Amburn speculates, was possibly what brought them together. Working at Harcourt, Brace, initially hired as junior editor by Frank Morley in 1940, Giroux “scored his first best-seller,” assigned to him by Morley, in the form of William Saroyan’s *The Human Comedy* (Amburn). Through Morley, Giroux met important authors like Isaiah Berlin, Herbert Read, and T.S. Eliot, and would eventually cement his position as one of the major editors and publishers in the history of US publishing. While Kerouac was suitably impressed by Giroux’s contact with major authors, he would later reproach Giroux for making too extensive cuts and it was indeed through these cuts that the peculiarities and conflicts of the literary market first revealed themselves to him (Charters 588-9).

An unpublished study of the field of US publishers in 1955, conducted by Bo G. Ekelund and Mikael Börjesson and included below, locates Harcourt, Brace among the major established trade houses:
Consequently, they catered to both the demands of more specialized readers with particular tastes, as well as to a more general readership. At the time of Kerouac’s being signed by them, by the end of the 1940s, they had published both prestigious writers like Sinclair Lewis, Walter Lippmann, Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot and George Orwell; children’s books like *Mary Poppins* (1934) and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince* (1943). Having his debut novel published by Harcourt, Brace meant that Kerouac had a golden opportunity of fairly quickly building a reputation for himself as a prestigious writer if he would only show a minimal willingness to cooperate.

According to Ann Charters’ edition of Kerouac’s letters, it was on April 2, 1951 that Kerouac started revising his initial *Road*-manuscript and began typing what is now known as the original scroll (315). Consulting Maher’s biography, we learn that Kerouac would approach Giroux again in June 1951, making it at least his third attempt to have *Road* published by Harcourt, Brace. Dramatically unrolling part of the scroll, Giroux allegedly asked, “‘How the hell can the printer work from this?’” (236). As a token of his indignation Kerouac then furiously rolled up the scroll and left (236). Apparently, there were at least two different versions of *Road* circulating at this point. Maher’s account of Giroux’s reaction suggests that the latter never read it—that he simply dismissed it on account of the difficulties involved in a future editing of it. In fact, in January 1951, in a letter to Neal Cassady Kerouac writes: “Giroux didn’t take
my book […] Giroux says HE likes book but is sure the President of the company and the Sales Manager won’t” (320). That Giroux liked the book, unless he was blatantly lying, can only mean that he had read at least parts of it. What is more, had it indeed been the same version, he would already be aware, and hence not surprised, that it was written on a huge scroll.

Following Giroux’s perplexed reaction, Maher claims that Kerouac retyped “the scroll into a more conventional format with numerous alterations” (236) and that Harcourt, Brace ultimately still rejected it. Again on Holmes’ suggestion, Kerouac brought the manuscript to Everitt but she “declined to accept it in its current form” (236). Kerouac, reluctant to conventionalize his manuscript, refused her suggestions for revision. It appears that Kerouac ended his work with Everitt at this point, because in another 1951 letter to Cassady he writes: “I have to get an agent like beat young first novelists do only worse” (Charters 320).

The sum of these demoralizing rejections, all of them between 1950 and 1951, decisively culminated in Kerouac’s conviction that he would not reproduce the style of Town. Maher writes: “What Kerouac needed to do was forget his audience and rely purely on his instinct to capture his conception of Neal” (236). It was at this point that Kerouac’s revisions of the original scroll gradually developed into Visions of Cody (1951-52)—his experimental character-study of Neal Cassady.

The letter to Cassady, apart from suggesting that Kerouac was indeed in the process of revising his novel, reveals two things. First, the modest success of Town, together with Kerouac’s distanciation from “beat young novelists,” points towards an awareness of his own lack of reputation and therefore also minimal negotiation leverage. Second, the letter puts on display the conflicting interests that inform the decision-making processes of agents and editors, on the one hand, and the imperative of profitability that informs executives, on the other. There is in short a split within trade houses themselves; a pure distinction between profit and culture is not possible. Immediately following Kerouac writes: “Giroux says Harcourt expected me to write AGAIN like Town & City” (320). This last statement is interesting because it marks Kerouac’s felt need to break with, both the style now associated with his previous literary production (Giroux’s knowledge of which is of course what conditions his request for its continuation), but also with literary tradition in general: “this thing so new and unusual and controversial and censorable” (320). As I will show, his correspondence with Neal Cassady clearly reveals his literary project to find a unique
voice—itself another manifestation of his aesthetic program that sought to break with previously established literary forms. The correspondence also reveals Kerouac’s almost neurotic obsession with the imagined readers—his future audience. Its presence as such marks a decisive point at which the values of literary market—in its commercial as well as cultural terms—clearly appear as constitutive factors with which Kerouac must have been in dialogue in various ways. What is more, these numerous rejections, and Kerouac’s reluctance to accept editorial demands point to three possible forms of the author’s relationship to the publisher’s demands. First, to refuse even the slightest revision. Second, to readily accept even unacceptable editorial demands. Or, third, to negotiate these demands and try to reconcile the publisher’s view of the product with the author’s aesthetic program. The latter program will be explored in greater detail further on in this essay.

The period between 1951 and 1953—the latter marking Kerouac’s first meeting with Cowley through Allen Ginsberg—are somewhat difficult to trace. Nevertheless, still persistent in his efforts to publish On the Road, and at this point also Visions of Cody, the influence of non-professional contacts acting as agents, or in other ways representing Kerouac, can be registered. Among these agents (some were experienced professionals while others were amateurs) we find Allen Ginsberg, Carl Solomon, Sterling Lord, Neal Cassady, and Caroline Kerouac—Kerouac’s sister. In the period following Giroux’s rejection of the On the Road manuscript in June 1951, Kerouac started with the plan to have Carl Solomon persuade his uncle A.A. Wyn—owner of Ace Books, a major paperback publisher—to publish the novel (Charters 328). Aware of the lower literary status of paperback publishing, Kerouac, in April 1952, “urged Solomon to persuade A.A. Wyn to publish the longer version of On the Road in a hardcover edition” (341). According to Charters, Kerouac was by now “so desperate to be published that he accepted a $250 advance from Ace Books and signed a contract giving them an option on his next three book” (341). Despite their contract, Ace was never to publish his road-novel. The Ace mass-market paperback format was a product mainly sold in drug-stores (341). Torn between the necessity of considering publication by a lower-reputation publisher and his own conception of himself as a significant, even prophetic writer, Kerouac wrote Solomon in April 1952. Using precisely prestige—instead of immediate acquisition of economic profit—as his argument, Kerouac wrote: “My only fear is you wouldn’t publish full ROAD in hardcover […] believe me, Carl, the full ROAD will make Wyn a first-rate reputation” (343). Locating Ace among the
publishers with virtually no literary prestige, Kerouac’s insistence that a paperback house publish his novel in hardcover is highly interesting. First, it points towards a visibly undiscerning promotional strategy. Second, he nonetheless proves obsessed with literary status—i.e., his own fame and reputation while disguising it under the pretext that it is indeed Ace that will reap the fruits. Considering his inability to orient himself within the world of publishing, Kerouac’s appeal to a publisher with virtually no literary credibility, no prestige, to recognize his incommensurable aim for the highest literary recognition is even more striking. Still awaiting Ace Books’ manuscript approval, Kerouac asked Allen Ginsberg to act as his agent in May 1952 (Charters 345). Confirming the claim that he was indeed convinced of his own greatness at this point, he writes that On the Road “is like Ulysses and should be treated with the same gravity. If Wyn or Carl insist on cutting it up to make the ‘story’ more intelligible I’ll refuse” (355). By placing story within quotation marks Kerouac indicates his distancing from chronologically linear narrative, implicitly highlighting the virtues of literary experimentation. Indeed, revealing that he had discovered a new technique of sketching in October the previous year, he also mentions the coming-into-being of Visions of Cody: “I began sketching everything in sight, so that On the Road took its turn from conventional narrative survey of road trips etc. into a big multi-dimensional conscious and unconscious character invocation of Neal” (356). His own negative characterization of the scroll version as conventional is crucial: when we compare the scroll draft with Viking’s revised publication, the latter was if anything even more conventional with its excessive punctuation and omission of sexual content.

In August that year, refusing to revise his novel, Kerouac asked for his manuscript back at Ace Books: with its “new visions” that “rough against established ideas,” the novel “is going to be considered unprintable for a while to come” (376). Kerouac again shows that breaking with established literary tradition was an integral part of his aesthetic program. At this point Kerouac expressed a palpable animosity towards the whole publishing industry. To Clellon Holmes, one month earlier, he wrote: “I really am getting fucked again by the publishing business, they just won’t publish me any more” (375). Similarly, Ginsberg, contrary to his role as agent, and Giroux, are blamed for Kerouac’s remaining unpublished: “Because of people like you […] even with G. [Giroux] you [Ginsberg] fucked me up from making money because he hated you” (379). Given his obsession with recognition, and explicit invocation of a specifically economic interest, in an apparent fit of feigned indifference he wrote to
Giroux that same year: “I dont give a damn actually. Even for being published” (444). Before his affiliation with Sterling Lord in 1954, Kerouac’s desperation prompted him to make a number of, publishing-wise, disastrous decisions. The quote moreover reveals that writing in order to make money remained an alternative—at least he negotiated that option. That Kerouac was in constant oscillation between and in dialogue with two alternatives is apparent from the letters; the possibility of either writing for a more general, commercial audience or consistently refusing to revise and to persevere in this refusal despite great financial straits. In fact, the commercial possibility increasingly seemed a viable one towards the end of 1952. Recalling his consistent downward trajectory from Harcourt, Brace (considerably prestigious) to Ace Books (catering to the mass-market of paperback readers and sold primarily in drugstores), Kerouac finally negotiated his initially militant position against revisions and considered the possibility of being published by Dell Books—a small press that, from 1951 and onwards, began publishing “blurb”-covered paperbacks. Writing to John Clellon Holmes, he expresses a surprising willingness to satisfy their demands: “let me know about Dell Books!—If they turn it down, what for? I can abridge it and add sex to it myself, & improve it too” (388-9). Showing a willingness to negotiate the possibility of being published by a low-prestige, essentially paperback publisher, his literary strategy appears conspicuously fluid. In 1952, again, he laments the rejection of Road to Ginsberg despite “all this talk about pocket book styles and the new trends in writing about drugs and sex” (377). Paperback publishing in the 1950s represented a new state of the market and by virtue of this novelty its prestige was minimal. What is more, in marking the relative beginning of a different market dynamic parallel to established forms of hardcover publishing, venturing into the uncharted currents of paperback publishing meant dealing with a market whose prospects were unknowable and hence could not be calculated to the same extent. Crucially, moreover, any claim that posits that Kerouac’s novel resisted the influence of commercial pressures and was purely the result of his own aesthetically informed impulses to improve it simply must address his extended negotiation with commercial paperback publishers. Despite having signed a three-book option with Ace Books, his fruitless affiliation with them nonetheless officially ended in 1953—an important year that marks his involvement with Malcolm Cowley, literary advisor at Viking Press.

So far we have seen how Kerouac moved erratically between different publishers, each representing different values within the market. Instead of concluding
that either the incentive of profit or prestige took precedence over the other, and without viewing his literature as a direct reflection of such tensions, we should stress the conflict itself: that his contradictory literary expression appeared alongside a contradictory oscillation between different values and publishers. Further justifying the indispensability of a more thorough analysis of Kerouac’s movement in the field, I argue that it is the most viable way of accounting for his paradoxical literary meditations. No doubt, mere immanent criticism too would be able to identify this literary paradox, but it would fail to account for its source. Such an analysis would thereby implicitly treat it as an arbitrary expression, devoid of any explicitly acknowledged producer. Apart from the commerce/prestige dichotomy, by early 1950s Kerouac had already begun his attempt to break with tradition. By explicitly addressing this felt need, he points towards the fact that his work indeed took shape dialogically. This should be understood as an acknowledgement of the connection between context and literary production – similarly, other co-existent conflicts must also have exercised a similarly constitutive influence. My next section will deal primarily with Kerouac’s involvement with Malcolm Cowley who worked in the capacity of literary advisor for Viking Press. As I will show, Kerouac’s affiliation with him would be equally conflicted and the latter would consistently assume the role of a counter-force pushing Kerouac towards compromising his novel. I will begin the section with a short character description of Cowley that includes a very brief sketch of his political history. While actively involved in leftist politics throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Cowley found himself effectively silenced by the 1950s. As our first section showed, the repressive atmosphere of the 1950s prompted him to work in constant anticipation of legal consequences proceeding from publishing works with sexually explicit or politically radical content.


Malcolm Cowley’s co-writing of *Culture and the Crisis: An Open Letter to the Writers, Artists, Teachers, Physicians, Engineers, Scientists, and Other Professional Workers of America* marked his involvement with a group of left-wing instrumentals that openly endorsed the Communist Party’s 1932 presidential candidates (Denning 98). In 1935, Cowley and other leftist writers founded the League of American Writers, an
association of journalists, writers and critics launched by the Communist Party USA. With Cowley as vice president, an integral part of their project involved pushing the United States government to support the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. Cowley is characterized by Denning as one of the “major left critics” and of “solid middle-class origins and education” (239). “The teaching of American literature, which had hardly existed at the turn of the century,” Denning writes elsewhere in his book, was revived by left-wing writers like Cowley who “became central figures in the formation of post-war literary scholarship” (434). Indisputably a major authority in literary matters—and whose 1946 editing of The Portable Faulkner became instrumental in enlarging “America’s awareness of its greatest living writer” (Maher 270)—Cowley would remain a central figure in what Denning terms the laboring of American culture. However, proceeding directly from events occurring in 1949 that immediately affected him, Cowley would gradually withdraw from the public eye to work behind the scenes, among other things as advisory editor for Viking Press.

A number of bitter experiences in 1949 prompted Cowley to refuse speaking about politics in public. As a result of his left-wing affiliations throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Cowley was summoned to testify in the 1949 Alger Hiss trial. Hiss, an American lawyer and government official, was accused of being a Soviet spy and later convicted of perjury. In his compilation of Cowley’s letters, Hans Bak writes: “in a climate of political intolerance, suspicion, and intimidation, he worried about the passivity and the self-imposed silence of progressives like himself” (397). Indeed, “his endeavors on behalf of American literature took place in a sharply intensifying reactionary political climate of Cold War threat and anticommunist witch-hunting” (397). Together with this brief sketch of Cowley’s trajectory from left-wing political involvement to silence, a closer look at Cowley’s 1950s correspondence reveals his standards as a literary advisor—i.e., his own aesthetic preferences—and also sheds light on the character of his relation to Jack Kerouac.

As a result of their shared interest in publishing Kerouac, the efforts of Allen Ginsberg led to the first meeting between Cowley and Kerouac in 1953. In a 1953 letter addressed to Ginsberg, Cowley writes: “the only manuscript of his that I have read with a chance of immediate book publication is the first version of ON THE ROAD. As

3 Other writers included Langston Hughes, Archibald MacLeish, Upton Sinclair, John Dos Passos and Dashiell Hammett.
much of the second version as I saw contained some impressively good writing, but no story whatsoever” (483). Whether the first version he refers to is indeed the scroll draft of 1951, Cowley nevertheless highlights the need for a clear story. In a letter to Arabel Porter, executive editor of *New World Writing*, Cowley writes of Kerouac: “of all that beat generation crowd, Kerouac is the only one who *can* write, and about the only one who doesn’t get published” (483). His efforts proved successful, and that same year an excerpt from *Road* was published by *New World Writing*. To get a sense of the central role Cowley played, and the particular strategy used, a number of other decisions helped make Kerouac attractive to Viking. First, in *The Literary Situation* (1954), Kerouac is mentioned twice as a promising new writer. Second, in “Invitation to Innovators,” an article published in *The Sunday Review of Literature*, he is mentioned again—in both instances as John Kerouac (482).

Kerouac was obviously aware of Cowley’s stature as a literary advisor. In 1955, Cowley offered to write a short foreword to the novel: “I was thinking that Viking might consider it more favorably if I would write a brief foreword” (qtd in Bak 485). Writing Sterling Lord, his agent at the time, Kerouac enthusiastically mentions Cowley’s suggestion: “Malcolm also said that he wants to write a foreword for BEAT GENERATION so that the heads of Viking will be more likely to accept it. So I would rather have that thing at Viking any day, because of the integrity of such a foreword” (Charters 504). Let us compare two letters written by Kerouac. In 1955, in a letter to Ginsberg, Kerouac expresses frustrations due to financial constraints: “I admitted [to Malcolm Cowley] that I’d been a fool early 1953 refusing to publish ON THE ROAD with him. Allen do you realize if I had published then, by now I’d have been in the money all this time” (Charters 482). The other letter conversely, written in 1952, highlights the more idealistic, monetarily disinterested, pursuit for literary prestige: “T’would be foolish to sacrifice reputation for quick profit; and besides, *I wouldn’t stand for it*” (343). In other words, all conclusions—that Kerouac either wrote for money, for reputation alone although it is precisely literary recognition that makes up the aim, or—as Ginsberg puts it in the foreword to *Visions of Cody*—that “Jack Kerouac didn’t write this book for money, he wrote it for love, he *gave* it to the world; not even for fame, but as an explanation and prayer to his fellow mortals” (425)—all prove inadequate for explaining what motivated the nature of his works and his continued literary production. Kerouac indeed acknowledges the positive effects of a grant arranged by Cowley: “I’m flying in my writing now, on the stimulus of your efforts—
just wrote a long short story and a short one […] simply to prove that if money is sent me, I can send back stories, one, two, three” (515). The great irony of commercial success is ultimately such that money is unimportant to its possessor, everything for its non-possessor. What is more, in establishing a link between monetary stimulus and productivity, Kerouac affirms that literary production is not completely mysterious; to some extent novels, too, are products of labor. As I will argue, moreover, this completely rational, demystifying, and dereifying gesture of constantly emphasizing and stabilizing the bond between historical reality (or experience) and textual representation is at the very heart of Kerouac’s literary project. Yet paradoxically, as his aesthetic program reveals, the dereifying component was compromised by his perpetuation of the spontaneous fallacy that amounted to a reifying concealment of his own production process. Nonetheless, the inclusion of real names and events renders his work especially vulnerable to editorial changes since they easily disrupt the immediately visible unity between life (in the simple sense of actually lived events) and its textual incarnation. What is more, if the referentiality of autobiographical fiction hinges on the correspondence between the name and its real, empirical bearer, the act of changing that name (in effect to fictionalize it) radically alters the ontology of such texts. As we shall see, Viking’s decision to do so in fear of libel suits amounts to a censorship of the link between persons and real-life events and text.

Returning to Cowley’s political withdrawal and the intimidating effects of Cold War policy that pushed him towards silence, he seems at certain points to play by the rules of McCarthyism, explicitly justifying censorship as part of his promotional efforts. Returning to the year 1953, in his effort to convince Arabel Porter to publish an excerpt from Road, he writes: “It’s terrific as a transcript from life—maybe a little too dirty in spots, but could be censored” (Bak 483). This sentiment is again expressed two years later, in 1955, when Cowley lists three if’s that will determine whether or not Road could be published: “if we can find out what the right changes will be (cuts and rearrangements); if we can be sure that the book won’t be suppressed for immorality; and if it won’t get us into libel suits” (Bak 486). Before returning, in more detail, to an analysis of what specific role censorship played in informing the editorial decisions reached by Viking, let us try to sketch an outline of Cowley’s aesthetic demands on Kerouac.

Kerouac’s demand to write without hindrance was without doubt a major source of conflict between him and Cowley. Kerouac writes in 1955 that if writing “isn’t (sic)
spontaneous, right unto the very sound of the mind, it can only be crafty and revised” (Charters 516). If craft itself is portrayed as something undesirable, Cowley is of the opposite conviction when, in 1956, he writes to Kerouac: “I do think, seriously, that he’s [Ginsberg] very wrong when he keeps encouraging you to do nothing but automatic writing. Automatic writing is fine for a start, but it has to be revised and put into shape or people will quite properly refuse to read it—and what you need now is to be read” (Bak 488). Commenting on Thomas Wolfe, Cowley observes in a 1956 letter addressed to Hamilton Basso, that “there are two sides to every writer, the memory transformed in the unconscious and the critical intelligence” (Bak 503). Whereas Kerouac, according to his aesthetic program, would favor the former, Cowley qua advisor is inescapably stuck in the position of reader, and is therefore possessive of a keener sense of the potential drawbacks of unhindered experimentation. As he writes Kerouac in September 1955: “there are two sides of writing, the unconscious and the conscious, the creation and the self-criticism, the expression and the communication, the speed and the control” (Bak 486). “What your system ought to be,” he concludes, “is to get the whole thing written down fast, in a burst of creative effort, then later go back, put yourself in the reader’s place, ask whether and how the first expression ought to be changed to make it more effective” (487). For Cowley, in contrast to Kerouac, writing in a “burst of creative effort” may be one way of producing a novel, but equal weight must then be given to regulating, revising, and organizing the literary outcome of such bursts. Having resumed his stance against revising at this point, he was matched against Cowley as a decisive counter-force that consistently attempted to regulate and restrict Kerouac’s opposite impulse that was based on the conviction that the validity of his literary production hinged on the condition that he be granted the “freedom to write without hindrance” (432).

In a 1956 letter Cowley explicitly addresses his partial task that always involves rendering his clients’ work economically profitable. With a constant eye on the economic market, he states that while Road is not “a great or even likable book,” it will nonetheless get “mixed but interested reviews, it will have a good sale (perhaps a very good one), and I don’t think there is any doubt that it will be reprinted as a paperback. Moreover, it will stand for a long time as the honest record of another life” (qtd in Cunnell 46-7). Literary advisors then, seen as middlemen who occupy the ground between writers and publishers, constantly put their reputation at risk in promoting new authors. It is in light of this that Malcolm Cowley’s verdict on Kerouac’s On the Road
that it was not great or even likable must be understood: the justification for publishing it was that it would certainly become a paperback. In laying emphasis on economic profit and not prestige, Cowley indeed appears to have been pushing Kerouac towards releasing a compromised version of *On the Road* out on the market. As mediators, literary advisors must constantly have one eye on the market and one on literary culture.

Indeed, in 1957 *On the Road* was finally published by Viking with the editing completed by Helen Taylor. In their manuscript acceptance report Viking wrote that Taylor “went over it taking out the rest of the libel, some of the obscenity” finally “tightening the story” (Bak 489). Further support of Viking’s deliberate project of sanitizing the novel in anticipation of legal repercussions can be found in a 1955 letter addressed to Nathan Asch. There Cowley claims to be observing in himself a change of attitude concerning writing that contains “usually unwritten details of sexual intercourse” because he has “fallen into the habit of asking a first question about any piece, ‘Can it be published’, and in many of these pieces the answer is no, not ever, except in an edition privately printed in English in Paris” (Bak 497)⁴. Censorship laws clearly prevailed during the 1950s and informed the decisions of major trade houses such as Viking: “for a trade book, there’s the problem of bad language. You don’t know how much trouble the simple word ‘fuck’ can make for publishers” (Bak 504). Indeed, the word “fuck” is consistently removed from Viking’s version of *On the Road*. In sum, when Kerouac was in the process of writing and revising *On the Road* throughout the 1950s, restrictive obscenity laws still prevailed and regulated what could be put in print and distributed to an audience.

Building a reputation of publishing everything from philosophy and detective stories to children’s picture books, Viking’s 1950s list of novels published includes John Steinbeck, Arthur Miller, Upton Sinclair, Saul Bellow, R.K. Narayan and Rex Stout. A random mix, in other words, of prestigious, reputable literature and mainstream detective stories. Commercial considerations would be mixed with other editorial and literary preferences in the demands made on newcomers like Jack Kerouac.

Whereas publishing houses before World War II tended to be controlled by a single strong personality, and the name of the house identified by the same name,

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⁴ Confirming Cowley’s assertion, J.P. Donleavy’s *The Ginger Man* and Nabokov’s *Lolita*, both published in Paris in 1955. The former was deemed obscene and banned in both the United States and Ireland.
postwar publishing was to a higher degree characterized by the cooperative effort of its staff (Tebbel 171). This would inevitably lead to split within the houses themselves, thus creating highly dynamic and varied lists of publications. Indeed, Viking survived the depression, a time when growth was difficult, by launching their Viking Portable Library in an attempt to profit from the demand for pocket-size reading material for the armed forces (196). Cementing their reputation as one of the major publishing houses by consulting noted critics like W.H. Auden, Malcolm Cowley, Carl and Mark Van Doren, Lionel Trilling, Alfred Kazin and Bernard de Voto, they had by the 1950s published portable editions of respectable authors such as James Joyce, John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Dorothy Parker, and Thomas Wolfe, as well as classics by Whitman, Twain, Dante, and Plato (197). Suggesting that they deliberately resisted expansion, Tebbel characterizes Viking as a publishing house that concentrated on a quality list (196). Much through the efforts of their hired critics, “Viking continued to exhibit its ability to assemble extraordinary talent –book-rooted talent of the kind that had always distinguished the best houses from the others” (197). In publishing Joyce (Viking in fact published editions of both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*) and Faulkner alongside writers like Hemingway and Steinbeck, we should note that in publishing modernist texts as well as more socially oriented writing, their publications reflected a strong genre-disparity. It is hence difficult to pin down one specific literary demand that takes precedence over other. As a counter to such prestigious writers, throughout the 50s and 60s, Viking also consistently published the mystery novels of Rex Stout. Thus embodying the duality of the literary field, Viking’s reputation is one of great literary prestige while still catering to the demands of a general market of readers. Viking’s history of publishing books with obvious genre disparity, therefore, together with the power that comes with the possession of significant economic capital, lead us to conclude that they could indeed afford the risks involved in promoting novels with a higher degree of commercial uncertainty. Whereas a minor house might put their whole business at stake in promoting a risky newcomer such as Kerouac, Viking could well afford the risk.

While Viking did indeed consistently publish what might be termed challenging, unconventional literature, there were indeed also houses that were more purely oriented towards prestigious publishing. For instance, it was New Directions that first published a selection from *Visions of Cody* in 1959, although the novel was never published in its entirety until after Kerouac’s death. As such, and in seeing that they did
publish individual chapters from *On the Road* in 1954, they would perhaps have been the more suitable candidate for publishing *Road* in its original shape. Whatever the optimal strategy would have been for Kerouac, his undiscriminating negotiation with publishers engaged in commercial (Dell Books and Ace) as well as prestigious publishing (Harcourt, Brace and Viking), in short that he was in dialogue with various different possibilities that would normally be kept separate, reveals his fundamental inability to identify the most suitable publisher for his particular literature. His movements throughout the 1950s appear almost random. It is necessary to pay a closer look at Kerouac’s aesthetic program through which he positioned himself vis-à-vis the different values represented by that market.

Summarizing this section, several crucial things stand out. First, Cowley’s ambivalent position, both inherent in his role as literary advisor, but also observable in his trajectory from leftist affiliations to his later political hibernation. Having tasted the bitter fruits of vicious Cold War repression first-hand, he repeatedly expressed a reluctance to promote sexually explicit literature. This caution manifested itself in his calling attention to the problems the word “fuck” could cause, his readiness to call for censorship as a marketing strategy (*Road “could be censored”), and his motivation for Viking to publish it: “if we can be sure that the book won’t be suppressed for immorality; and if it won’t get us into libel suits.” Apart from pushing towards censorship, his main card appears to have been *Road*’s commercial potential. Evaluating *Road* as neither good nor likable, the imperative invoked to justify Viking’s publication of the novel was its sales potential— that it would, without doubt, be reprinted as paperback. Restating the imperatives contained in his letters to Kerouac, Cowley undoubtedly functioned as a counter-force to the former’s aesthetic program that emphasized the virtue of unhindered spontaneity. The contours of the opposition between writer and reader clearly actualize themselves through the Kerouac-Cowley meeting: they move in mutually opposed directions; Kerouac plausibly towards preserving the aesthetic principles contained in his specific literary program and Cowley as a regulator or modifier of such a program. Cowley’s emphasis on revisions and craft amounted to a strategy of domesticating the wild, unrevised text. Adding to this Kerouac’s financial straits throughout the 1950s, he explicitly lamented not having published *Road* earlier; that, had he done so, he would have “been in the money all this time” (Charters 482). Moreover stressing the link between monetary stimulus and productivity, Kerouac acknowledges at least one point in which external influences
entered into his literary production. Accordingly, our next section that deals with Kerouac’s aesthetic program throughout the 1950s will attempt to show that he was indeed in dialogue with external determinants, both in the form of literary tradition and the commercial book market. Explicitly addressing the problem of finding one’s literary voice, Kerouac thereby implies the partial project of working in negation to established forms of expression. Restating my thesis as formulated in the introduction, an integral aim of this section has been to point towards the constant presence of decisive conflicts and splits and how they inescapably must find their way into the text. Placed against the background of all these different conflicts, Kerouac’s highly contradictory literary expression that allowed gestures of reification to stand side by side with gestures of dereification can be understood as completely consistent with his constantly oscillatory trajectory; as a paradoxical literary stylization that juxtaposed and encapsulated his conflicted encounters with publishing.

5: Kerouac’s Aesthetic Program and the Imagined Audience

This section explores the ontological consequences of revisions on literary texts. I will consult Nicholas Brown’s text “Close Reading and the Market” in an attempt to identify what he terms the analytically isolable “moment[s] of externality to the commodity form” that preserve the intended literary meaning and validate close reading (152). Included to prepare the ground for my discussion on Kerouac’s specific aesthetic program, Brown’s text offers useful ways of conceptualizing literary texts’ specific place within the economic market. A closer look at Kerouac’s program will also enable us to discern the specific points at which the spontaneous imperative reveals its own inadequacy: it is always inextricably bound to a specific context, be it implicit or explicit. Accordingly, Kerouac’s consistent focus on autobiography and truth restricts and limits its claimed unhinderedness. Spontaneity, now seen as an epistemological fallacy, is necessarily filtered and conditioned by the nature of the lived experience itself. The literary work is thus conditioned by the specific conflicts and events that befall its author. What is more, the autobiographical component, as we shall see, renders editorial revisions particularly decisive in that they destabilize the visible unity between experience and textual representation. Its focus on truth, in addition, renders his project essentially dereifying and demystifying: to compromise that insistence, whether justified or not, is ipso facto to contribute to the reification Kerouac’s experiences and
reduce their traceability. What is more, Kerouac’s aesthetic program will reveal two mutually exclusive maxims: its dereifying truth maxim is called into question by the reifying spontaneous maxim that simultaneously conceals the literary production process. Brown’s argument that texts are always, by their very nature, inextricably bound to the social machine, and that all texts, as such and through their very existence, implicitly or explicitly inevitably should be seen as participating in their specific context, we may suggest that Kerouac’s contradictory literary expression constituted precisely one implicit commentary that reflected his own consistently experienced conflicts and splits. What is more, Kerouac’s consistent obsession with the future audience clearly points towards the fact that he was indeed in dialogue with his understanding of the external demands of that same audience.

Since “[l]iterature is a social machine […] and like all such machines is of historical origin” (145), Nicholas Brown writes, “a certain materialism is […] not only a possible but an unavoidable aspect of close reading” (“Close Reading and the Market” 147). Using as his theoretical point of departure Hegel’s concept of the universal, _das Allgemeine_, in this context signifying the “social machine, be it language as such or a particular signifying network like the royal court; or […] literature itself” (146), the literary expression, like any other deed, should be understood in terms of its inevitable interaction with that social machine (147). Advancing his argument, Brown identifies two main features of the materialism that inheres in the text as a medium. First, “words have a material existence […] in the more consequential sense that the social machine in which they mean is not dead context but the very substance of the meaning itself” (147). Second, because texts participate in various social machines, the text’s meaning itself is material in the sense that it is designed to intervene, implicitly or explicitly, in these networks (147). In other words, texts presuppose the context in which they function and are meaningless when severed from the social machines in which they participate, be it discourse, the novel form, or the totality of the literary market. Approaching the pivotal point of his argument, Brown writes: “the place of the universal will be largely occupied by the medium in which artworks circulate today, namely the market, and the primary question that will be asked is whether the minimum conditions of possibility for the practice of close reading can be met for artworks whose existence is only ratified on the market” (174). Brown then poses two fundamental questions: “Can art that is mediated by the market plausibly mediate itself? Can art that is a commodity before it is anything else be an object for close reading?” (147). In order
to follow his line of argument, it is necessary to unpack what constitutes the meaningful other of simple commodity production—i.e., the particular qualities that distinguish literature from mere commodities even as the work enters the economic market to be sold.

“From the standpoint of the commodity,” Brown’s paraphrase of Marx goes, “all commodities are qualitatively indifferent” (149). The only quality that matters, in a purely economic market, is its lack thereof, its exchangeability (149). Insofar as only the act of exchange can fully disclose the value of the product exchange always precedes use; the intended market never fully actualizes before the product has entered into it and its qualities, or lack thereof, are confirmed by the amount of profit it generates. The crucial point to be made is that the meaning of a literary product ultimately hinges on the decisive condition of whether or not it is fully subsumed by, and produced within, a fully commercial market. Insofar as the logic of exchangeability renders all products qualitatively indifferent—i.e., reduces their unique individual qualities to their quantifiable expression in the form of their specific exchange-value within an economic market— the production of the art commodity, in order to mean something, cannot be informed solely by an anticipatory prediction of the desires of its future readers (152). If the producer is primarily concerned with the exchangeability of his product, then the particular considerations that help shape that demand render the product meaningless insofar as its form is decided on the market itself and not by the author’s own aesthetic considerations (152). Which product, then, can plausibly merit close reading? Shifting his attention to intentionality, Brown writes: “if a work of art is […] not only a commodity, which is to say that a moment of externality to the commodity form is analytically isolable, which is to say that there is something in the work that is not a commodity—then it makes perfectly good sense to read it closely, since it can plausibly be intended to mean something” (152). When indeed intended to mean something—and here we are clearly placing a high demand on the phrase “intending to mean”—the value of the literary product can no longer be reduced to its qualitative indifference to other products. Even in entering the economic market (and hence also intended to be sold), the intended literary product, in contrast to pure commodities, is qualitatively different in that it resists simple commodification.

Insofar then as the work of art is the objectification of an artistic vision and not produced with one eye constantly glancing at the market—in short, if it is not intended solely as a commodity that will enter the market in order to disclose its own exchange-
value—it can plausibly mean something. But what about the work that is subject to heavy editorial revision? Where do we locate the “analytically isolable,” intended “moment of externality to the commodity form” in Kerouac’s case? Despite the prevailing misconception that Kerouac’s work was improvised on the spot—which would also to some extent presuppose that he himself could hardly account for the origins if his texts—the great lesson of psychoanalysis nonetheless maintains that everything proceeds from an intention, be it conscious or motivated by unconscious drives. The intention that Brown theorizes, it should be noted, does by no means have to be explicit; the prerequisite for meaning is simply that the text did not emerge out of the informed guesses about an audience’s commercial demands. One isolable moment of externality, I argue, is Kerouac’s unmediated autobiographical component that seeks to sustain the visible unity between life and text. Insofar as real actions are not motivated by informed guesses about an audience’s demands, they resist simple commodification. If the validity of close-reading and meaning of the text itself hinge on an identity between intention and object, cuts and revisions, if not sever, at least destabilize the interconnecting bond between authorial intention and meaning. Editorial excisions mark one exact point at which such moments of externality, sustained only by the preservation of their real life referent, are compromised. To radically alter the textual content of unmediated autobiography is to reify the text; it destabilizes the visible link between life and text and reduces the traceability. As my final sections will show, Kerouac’s contradictory literary expression that allowed gestures of reification alongside dereification strongly reflects his contradictory meeting with the publishing industry. Outlining the conflict, Viking attempted to reify the text through the removal of obscenity and changing the names of the characters, while the emphasis on the component of unmediated autobiography—sustained in the original scroll through its use of real names, years, and places—as such, tried to resist those attempts. The result was a literature that attempted to dereify man-made reality by exposing the cultural production process while, as Kerouac’s aesthetic program will show, backfiring into reification through his own simultaneous attempts to conceal his own production process by emphasizing spontaneity and literary improvisation.

Returning to Hunt, he writes that the long-lasting unavailability of the original scroll produced the desire among Kerouac fans to conceive of the Viking version as “a progressive lessening of the novel driven by commercial reality” (xx). However, while some changes can be read that way, Hunt instead proposes, citing Howard Cunnell that
some of the passages that we have valued most highly in the novel were not written in April 1951 but were added or reworked into the form we’ve known them in as Kerouac revised the novel” (xx). Hunt somewhat problematically conflates popular taste and reception with Kerouac’s own artistic vision. That the revised passages found their way into the novel as a result of ongoing revisions does not, ipso facto, entail that they entered as a result of an independent artistic trajectory, detached from the general market. He accepts at face value that the changes were made, as if in isolation from external determinants; he sees them as the natural culmination of Kerouac’s development. Hunt engages in pure speculation when he asserts that Kerouac was “clearly, in part trying to make the book more marketable by dropping or trimming a few scenes to enhance the momentum of the narrative, by reducing or altering the presence of a few figures (in particular Justin Brierly) to lessen the chance of libel suits, and by cutting or muting some details that might alarm the censors” (xxix). How does Hunt know which revisions were in fact made by Kerouac? The manuscript acceptance report (quoted on p.31 in this essay) at least shows that Viking explicitly removed sexual obscenity. While justified in his reluctance to set against each other one true and one compromised version, Hunt nonetheless excludes from his analysis Viking’s role as a major determinant of the shape the novel was finally to attain. While Kerouac’s constant oscillation between different values represented by the market, especially his momentary willingness to abridge and add sex, can indeed support the claim that he himself made the revisions, that conclusion would nonetheless not disprove the influence of something external informing that decision. As I will argue, it is more plausible that it was Viking, and not Kerouac, who were responsible for the removals.

One particular event strongly suggests that Kerouac was never happy with his final version of On the Road. In 1959 Kerouac appeared on The Steve Allen Show, supposedly reading a passage from his new book. What the audience did not know was that Kerouac, holding a copy of On the Road, had actually pasted, and was reading from, a passage from Visions of Cody (Trudeau). What is more, in a 1951 letter addressed to Neal Cassady, Kerouac refers to Visions as his “re-writing of ROAD,” crucially adding that “‘Dean Pomeray” is a vision—and also my finally-at-last-found style & hope” (326-7; my italics). That he refers to his protagonist as Dean Pomeray is central. In doing so he conflates, or juxtaposes, the two versions of Neal as expressed in Visions (there named Cody Pomeray), on the one hand, and Road (there named Dean Moriarty), on the other, thus revealing the position of the novels as two versions situated
within one and the same literary project; as representing two different stages of the struggle to perfect one and the same artistic vision. In additionally revealing that *Visions* did indeed emerge out of his attempts to perfect *Road* (in which case the former is also held to be the artistically more accomplished) Kerouac provides us with a justification for analyzing them comparatively as two realizations of one and the same ‘vision’. These factors certainly complicate Tim Hunt’s conclusion that the Viking *Road* marked, for Kerouac, the novel’s highest artistic stage of development.

In a 1951 letter to Cassady that same year he writes that “starting with my own life,” the latter must be depicted in all its “pure aspects, no fiction” (317). In May 1952, conclusively establishing his emphasis on literary innovation, spontaneity, and freedom to write without hindrance, he writes to Ginsberg: “Sketching came to me in full force on October 25th […] and I began sketching everything in sight, so that *On the Road* took its turn from conventional narrative survey of road trips etc. into a big multi-dimensional conscious and subconscious character invocation of Neal in his whirlwinds” (356). The idea of sketching was inspired by his friend Ed White who, earlier that year, had allegedly proposed to Kerouac that he “just sketch in the streets like a painter but with words” (Charters 356). The keywords, it seems, are truth, unfiltered sketching, spontaneity, and the moving-away from conventional narrative. In the end of the 1950s, that is, after the final publication of Viking’s *Road*, Kerouac produced two essays that explicitly outlined his aesthetic program: “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” (1958) and “Belief & Technique for Modern Prose” (1959). First, since they were written after the publication of *Road*, any divergence of the latter from these maxims suggests dissatisfaction and involuntary revision. Second, comparing these documents to his aesthetic ideas as expressed in his early 1950s letters, the repetition, or persistence, of earlier expressed ideas suggests stability and reliability. If Viking’s *Road* does not correspond stylistically to his aesthetic program as expressed in these essays, we cannot, as Tim Hunt does, conclude that this *Road* was indeed the result of Kerouac’s ongoing struggle to find suitable literary form for his novel. A few of the maxims of the later essay read: “5. Something that you feel will find its own form […] 13. Remove literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibition […] 15. Telling the true story of the world in interior monolog […] 21. Struggle to sketch the flow that

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5 The latter was originally written in 1955, comprising a list of twenty-seven items, but was not published until 1959 in *Evergreen Review* (Charters 487).
already exists intact in mind […] 28. Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better” (487). In “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” similarly, we find these formulae:

Sketching language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, blowing (as per jazz musician) on subject of image […] 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 […] speak now in own unalterable way or forever hold tongue—no revisions (except obvious rational mistakes, such as names or calculated insertions in act of not writing but inserting) […] Never afterthink to ‘improve’ or defray impressions.

At the end of the essay Kerouac advocates writing “without consciousness” in semi-trance” so as to allow unhindered flow to the subconscious in order to release that which “conscious art would censor” (1). Conventional structure is rejected in favor of following “roughly outlines in outfanning movement over subject” (1). In taking note of the idea that craft and revision stands in direct opposition to authenticity and truth and finally the spontaneous imperative, we may conclude that his aesthetic program remained palpably stable throughout the decade. It ought therefore to be perfectly valid to assume that any deviation from these maxims constitutes a compromise that cannot reasonably have been informed by Kerouac’s insistence to contradict his own formulae. Instead, they must most plausibly have entered as the result of mediation—partly in the form of editorial revisions, and partly as products of Kerouac’s ongoing dialogue with agents, editors, and a readership—by the irressible market. In fact, in 1957, only a few months before the publication of On the Road, Malcolm Cowley wrote a letter to Kerouac that summarized a central conflict between the latter and editors in general. Kerouac, invoking a passage from the Bible as a justification for unhindered expression, received the following answer from Cowley6:

If the Holy Ghost is speaking through you, fine, fine, let him speak. Sometimes he turns out to be the devil masquerading as the Holy Ghost, and that’s all right too. Sometimes he turns out to be Simple Simon, and then you have to cut what he says. (Bak 490)

Based on this, in other words, given that the maxim of unrestricted flow remained a constant throughout the 1950s for Kerouac, the decision to conventionalize the text, or

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6 “But when they shall lead you, and deliver you up, take no thought beforehand what ye shall speak, neither do ye premeditate: but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye: for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Ghost” (Mark 13.11 King James’ Version).
to reconsider the consistent insistence on unhindered flow—in effect regulate it—was indeed an editorial imperative in the face of which Kerouac simply had to position himself. What is more, having established unmediated autobiography as an integral component to his aesthetic program, the invocation of the Holy Ghost runs counter to the essentially dereifying character of autobiography: while the former seeks to preserve the link between life and text, the mystical character of the spontaneous fallacy, of a literature allegedly dictated by the Holy Ghost, renders it simultaneously reifying in attempting to conceal the literary production process. Furthermore, the emphatic insistence on truth allows us to claim that unmediated autobiography constitutes one analytically isolable moment of externality, in other words intention, to the commodity form. Again stressing the indispensability of establishing the consistently oscillatory trajectory of Kerouac together with his contradictory aesthetic program, this paradox would manifest itself in an equally contradictory literary expression.

Integral to his specific aesthetic program is the question of literary voice. According to a 1950 letter to Yvonne Le Maître, a Lowell critic who wrote a favorable review of *Town*, Kerouac revealed: “The English language is a tool lately found […] (I never spoke English before I was six or seven). At 21 I was still somewhat awkward and illiterate-sounding in my speech and writings” (228-9). “The reason I handle English words so easily,” he continues, “is because it is not my own language. I refashion it to fit French images” (228). Counter to spontaneity, to “refashion” language presupposes conscious writing—in other words craft—that is ultimately at odds with the latter. In 1950 Kerouac seriously began addressing the problem of voice. Praising the literary quality of Neal Cassady’s letters, he highlights the oppressive influence of canonical voices like Mark Twain and Thomas Wolfe. Cassady succeeds because he is “not hung up on making a LITERARY voice and working two days on one crazy sentence” (Charters 233). Indeed, contradicting the maxim of unhindered spontaneity, Kerouac writes: “I’ve been trying to find my voice. For a long time it sounded false, of course, For (sic) a long time I labored on several other variations […] one an outright voice for the ‘boys’ (that is, the boys at the office, or the brakemen you see, which will be my ultimate voice); and a voice for the critics” (233). As part of his project, Kerouac proposes writing “one book in nigger dialect, another in bum dialect, another in hip-musician dialect, another in French-Canadian-English dialect, another in American-Mexican dialect, another in Indian dialect, another in cool” (233). Hyper-conscious of
writing as craft (i.e., non-mystical), Kerouac could not reasonably have suddenly abandoned the project of finding voice later on in his writing career. As I will also show, Kerouac’s obsession with a future audience invalidates any definite claim of unhindered spontaneity, completely unaffected by literary as well as economic market forces. What is more, to work in the mode of negation ultimately means that one is affected by the presence of what is negated; Kerouac’s struggle to find voice that meant working in opposition to the tradition ultimately acknowledges the decisive influence of something external to the producer himself. Recalling the post-war tendencies addressed in the first section of this essay, by identifying in Kerouac’s writing the general impulse to effectively evade outspoken political engagement we are provided further support for rejecting the vacuum as a possible space wherein the writer can supposedly operate in immunity from external influences. Identifying another instance in which the influence of the social machine indeed reveals its participation, I propose that the notion of a shared structure of feeling itself calls into question the conception of the autonomy of art. As our next sections will show, Kerouac’s literature expressed the common and objectionable tendency among White American male writers to idealize and elevate the physically disastrous labor of non-White others, reducing such figures to mere screens onto which they subsequently projected their idealized imaginings of a viable alternative to the anxieties of capitalism. Finally calling attention to the intersection between Confessional poetry and Kerouac’s non-mediated autobiographical novel, the literature of the latter indeed came about as a dialogically constituted artifact that was inextricably bound to the literary stirrings of its specific time and place. The establishment of Kerouac’s contextual embeddedness within a given time and space provides our main basis for understanding how extra-textual factors entered into his texts; the ongoing oscillation and conflicts throughout the 1950s can, given any writer’s susceptibility to the influence of the social machine, account for his equally conflicted literary juxtaposition of reification alongside dereification.

Any project that attempts to establish the particular nature of the meeting between author and market must deal with the former’s understanding of who constitutes his/her audience and what this audience specifically demands. When basing an analysis significantly on correspondence it is essential to know the properties of one’s raw material. First of all, since letters are generally intended to be read only by one person (they are thus mainly communicative), the degree of sincerity and authenticity contained therein can be assumed to be fairly high. For the purposes of this
essay, they comprise an indispensable source of insights for understanding Kerouac’s literary production. In his response to Neal Cassady’s famous “Joan Anderson Letter,” Kerouac repeatedly addresses his inability to forget the constant presence of an imagined audience even in his private writings. I feel it is worth quoting at length because it contains important leads suggesting an almost neurotic obsession with a future audience:

I can’t freely undertake to tell you (my friend & willing listener) every single thing I can recall about my life and deal with my memory as if it were my single moral responsibility, without feeling a twinge of guilt that I would bore “the reader.” Yes, the “mysterious reader” re-entered lately; I wrote several pages that were not primarily addressed to you, only secondarily; I tore them up; they were of no value to anybody.

(273)

The segment reveals that ‘the reader’ constitutes an imposing presence that has to be overcome as part of the literary project it disturbed. Evidently, there is no immediately and empirically identifiable ‘who’ of his novels—the imagined audience should be understood as a virtual presence that is both physical, in the sense that they indeed exist, but, more decisively, anticipatorily constructed as a demand to satisfy.

Any literary project is a dialectical power struggle between what has to be said, and remain uncensored regardless of subject-matter, and the regulating presence of an imagined response by an audience, publisher, or literary conventions that can be either accepted or rejected. As Bourdieu writes: “the science of the literary field is a form of analysis situs which establishes that each position […] is subjectively defined by the system of distinctive properties by which it can be situated relative to other positions” (30). “Writers and artists, particularly newcomers,” he writes elsewhere, “do not react to an ‘objective reality’ functioning as a sort of stimulus valid for every possible subject, but to a ‘problem-raising situation’, as Popper puts it; they help to create its intellectual and affective ‘physiognomy’ (horror, seduction, etc.) and therefore even to the symbolic force it exerts on them” (64). In situating oneself “relative to other positions,” the understanding of one’s audience (future or current) determines the shape of the cultural product (30). Never knowing exactly what is artistically or commercially successful, the product of the artist, shaped in dialogue with an anticipated other is essentially dialogic. Positions are not simply out there, passively waiting to be filled: their constitution is equally characterized by a constant negotiation of already existent positions as it is constantly reshaped by the emergence of previously non-existent
positions. Indeed, Bakhtin tells us that “the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object” (Discourse and the Novel 1091 my italics) and that “every word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influences of the answering word that it anticipates” (1091). As soon as Kerouac’s mind is occupied with the task of solving the character of the mysterious audience, his work has already started to take shape; his literary production is “directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer’s direction” (Bakhtin 1091).

Speculating, the neurotically omnipresent ‘reader’ can perhaps, in part, be explained by Kerouac’s apparent feelings of grandeur: “For I still have a secret ambition to be a tremendous life-changing prophetic artist” (274). Hubris presupposes that one deserves excessive praise, which requires an other to supply the praise—an audience. In order to be a socially important writer one must break with tradition:

who’s laid down the laws of “literary” form? Who says that a work must be chronological; that the reader wants to know what happened anyhow […] Just so long as it “happened,” […] Let’s tear time up. Let’s rip the guts out of reality. (274)

The term fiction is itself problematic for Kerouac and associated with falsehood. Confirming one central literary maxim, On the Road is generally considered autobiographical. In the jacket copy, the editors of The Library of America characterize Road, together with Dharma Bums (1958), The Subterraneans (1958), Tristessa (1960), and Lonesome Traveler (1960), as Kerouac’s five autobiographical “road books” (X)7. In a 1950 letter to Neal Cassady, Kerouac deals in depth with his struggle to find a suitable literary form for his purposes: “I hereby renounce all fiction” (1950). In renouncing “all fiction,” Kerouac ascribes to fiction predominantly negative connotations; the opposite—in other words, truth—becomes the expression for authenticity, sincerity, and “realness.” Fiction, in this context, should be understood as falsehood—as insincerity, cowardice, and plain lying. Recalling Kerouac’s letter to Cowley, “crafty and revised” literature is stiff, mechanical, dead, and redundant. This “one-take-philosophy,” I argue, is one expression of Kerouac’s dereifying gesture: to write autobiographically is to preserve the unity between textual representation and

7 Correcting the editors, The Subterraneans (written in 1953) and Tristessa (1955-56) were written in the period following the writing of Road and thus before its final publication. The autobiographical claim nonetheless finds support.
historical referent so as to render the raw material—i.e., experiences—transparent to the readers. Its character is therefore demystifying. Assuming then that On the Road is indeed ‘true’, revisions and, in particular deletions and censorship, would then have fundamental consequences on truth and on the genre of the spontaneous, non-mediated, autobiographical novel itself.

Turning to Kerouac’s aversion to revision, a letter from 1955 to Cowley is worth quoting at length:

If it isn’t (sic) spontaneous, right unto the very sound of the mind, it can only be crafty and revised, by which the paradox arises, we get what a man has hidden, i.e., his craft, instead of what we need, what a man has shown, i.e., blown (like a jazz musician or rose) […] What a man most wishes to hide, revise, and un-say, is precisely what Literature is waiting and bleeding for (516 my italics)

To revise is to conceal; excessive craftiness is mystification. The notion of truth, of saying “what a man most wishes to hide, revise, and un-say” is therefore implied in the very notion of transparency—of allowing conscious and unconscious impulses free flow. To look for allegories and metaphors in Kerouac’s novels is therefore rather futile: the text is not a stand-in for something external to it. For this reason, Kerouac’s emphatic insistence on truth and spontaneity are important dereifying gestures against interpretive models of the day such as New Criticism. Distinctly referential, autobiographical writing renders textual representation secondary to experience. By extension, it can be argued, that to establish causal links between experience and representation means humanizing the author that has been fetishized (and therefore dehumanized) by the reified consciousness. As Bourdieu writes: “the representation of artistic production as a ‘creation’ devoid of any determination or any social function […] achieves its fullest expression in the theories of ‘art for art’s sake’; and, correlatively, in the representation of the legitimate relation to the work of art as an act of ‘re-action’ claiming to replicate the original creation and to focus solely on the work in and for itself, without any reference to anything without itself” (36). The strong autobiographical component of Kerouac’s oeuvre, in other words, makes it impossible to repress determinations and social situatedness—dealing explicitly with 1950s America, Road should not be analyzed as an isolated artifact. The event, preceding as it does its textual incarnation, constitutes an authentic moment of externality that attempts to resist pure commodification.
While a moment of externality is certainly analytically isolable, editorial voices also entered into Viking’s *Road*. In light of the constant oscillation between prestige and commerce as established in the third and fourth sections, his aesthetic program’s consistently dereifying emphasis on autobiography entailed a simultaneous reifying concealment of his own production. The palpable conflict with Malcolm Cowley with regard to style in which Kerouac’s aesthetic program emphasized the virtues of unhindered spontaneity and truth, while Viking’s revisions served to restrict that freedom. All these different conflicts must have factored into the shape *Visions of Cody* and *On the Road* would take. As I will propose, the irreconcilable paradox of reification alongside dereification, can be read alongside other conflicts as well, namely as a conflicted literary stylization. What is more, as I will propose in my final conclusion that compares the scroll draft of *Road* with the final version, Viking’s editorial decisions to change the names of the characters for fear of libel suits, together with their consistent removal of perceivably sexually obscene content, and their addition of heavy punctuation, did not constitute minor changes. Instead, given that the aesthetic component of unmediated autobiography can be identified as a moment of externality, of intention, these decisions contributed to the destabilization of the visible unity between experience and textual representation. Viking’s decisions ultimately amounted to a partial reification of Kerouac’s original text.

6: Part Two: Dereification in *Visions of Cody* and Reification in *On the Road*

“The essence of commodity-structure,” Georg Lukács begins his foundational analysis, “is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity’, an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people” (1). The basic assumption is that the structure of commodity exchange (the fundamental structure of capitalist production) has “structural consequences [that are] able to influence the total outer and inner life of society” (2). Commodity fetishism, Lukács continues, is a problem specific to modern capitalism. In pre-capitalist, primitive societies “exchange value has as yet no form of its own, but is still directly bound up with use-value” (Marx qtd in Lukács 2). The necessary soil out of which illusions as to the value of commodities arise had not yet been prepared: “Production, in its entire
organization, aims at the creation of use-values and not of exchange-values” (2). When the supply of commodities exceed the reasonable measure of consumption, however, use-values lose their distinct quality determined by their specific use-value and become means of exchange (2). Ultimately, this change, Lukács writes, marks the end of primitive societies and the beginning of barter (2). From this point the commodity structure “strikes back into the interior of the community, decomposing it” (2). The commodity structure is now understood as a mirror held up, and according to whose image the world becomes a reflection. If this process indeed permeates every layer of society, reification must also determine our ways of approaching and understanding any form of production, be it manual labor or literature.

In _Visions of Cody_, the narrator-character Jack finds himself on a movie set observing Joan Rawshanks and seeks to disclose the fakery of Hollywood movie production with all its retakes in the quest for cinematic perfection: “Joan Rawshanks, wearing a mink coat, is trying to adjust herself to the act of crying but has a thousand eyes of local Russian Hill spectators who’ve been hearing about the Hollywood crew filming for the last hour” (276)\(^8\). Reaching the pivotal allegation, the narrator addresses the inauthenticity: “all these people are going to see you muster up a falsehood for money, you’ll have to wimper tears you yourself probably never had any intention of using; on some gray morning in your past what was your real tear, Joan, your real sorrows” (281). When the director is satisfied, “there’s only the great silence of the great moment of Hollywood, the actual TAKE (how many producers got high on Take do you think?) […] there were three takes of every area of the action” (281)\(^9\). As his

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\(^8\) For a similar analysis, in “_Ulysses in History_”, Fredric Jameson proposed that we understand _Ulysses_ in terms of the reversal, the _dereification_, of the mystified product: “I’d carry a sandwichboard only the girl in the office told me they’re full up for the next three weeks, man. God, you’ve to book ahead!” (_Ulysses_ qtd in Jameson, 6). The point is that the “exotic picture post-card vision of a tourist Dublin,” represented in the sandwichboard ad, is “transformed back into the dreary familiar reality of jobs and contracts and the next meal,” or differently put, “effortlessly dereified and dissolved” (6).

\(^9\) Justin Trudeau writes this about the chapter: “Kerouac’s point is to strip the filmed sequence of its illusion, its attempt to fictionalize the performance as if it were happening for the first time” (7). Consulting Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Trudeau proposes that Kerouac, through the chapter, intends to expose how “the scene’s repetition [is] only reinforcing its unreality” (7). However, he does not understand it in terms of dereification or demystification. Instead he focuses his discussion on authenticity: uninterested in “producing the truth
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final dereifying death strike, Jack explains: “when I thought of Hollywood camera crews I always pictured them in the California night, by moonlight, [...] I thought of movie crews in a location like that” (285). For almost twenty pages, the narrator scrutinizes the mechanics of shooting a movie and in doing so he focuses as much on the actress in action as on the crowd behind the cameras that is never seen: “in back [...] the angry technicians muster and make gestures in the blowing fog that rushes past klieg lights and ordinary lights in infinitesimal cold showers, to make everything seem miserable and storm-hounded” (275-6). In other words, the feverish pursuit of the perfect shot can only lead to inauthenticity. Having exposed the production process, the narrator then addresses the film’s inherent concealment of its makers “though how can anybody in a movie audience get to detect that [process] when the picture finally flashes on the screen” (277). Standing in direct view of its production, Jack brings to the foreground everything that surrounds it; retakes, spectators, security and film crew. In directing the reader’s attention to the beyond of the images immediately at hand, the process whereby production is obscured is revealed.

By exposing the production process preceding the shooting of a movie, the narrator lashes out against commercialism and the commodity aesthetic of the perfect take; they are staged as the antithesis of the spontaneous aesthetics. Yet, as we have seen, the spontaneous maxim contained in Kerouac’s aesthetic program was also undermined by the truth maxim. What is more, that his literary expression also contained the autobiographical component integral to Confessional poetry, also undermines the ability to write as if free from the influence of the social machine: it is essentially dereifying. Thus, while Visions essentially exposes the alleged fakery of Joan Rawshanks, Kerouac nonetheless concealed his own production process, which itself is a form of reification that puts at stake the autobiographical dereification by consistently refusing to acknowledge that his own work was itself crafted. Plausibly commenting on Viking’s consistent attempts to reify his own work, Kerouac’s literary expression is curiously contradictory. Adding to this his constant oscillation between the different values of literary prestige and profit, as well as his highly contradictory aesthetic program, insofar as the social machine cannot be ignored, it appears only of the moment,” Hollywood, represented by Joan and the film crew, attempt to perfect “what they want to be seen in the future, and the present moment loses its authenticity as a result” (10).
natural that such paradox a would enter into his literature. If we recall that *Visions* emerged out of the revisions of the initially rejected original manuscript of *Road*, its stylistic departure and anti-commercial message renders the former an implicit critique of the latter. To revise one’s own work is to repeat the sins of Hollywood and distance oneself from the possibility of pure and sincere artistic expression: first take or no take.

Two quotes stand out from the Joan Rawshanks episode: first, “there were three takes of every area of the action” (281), secondly, “all these people are going to see you muster up a falsehood for money” (281). These two quotes eloquently summarize Kerouac’s main writing maxims: never revise and do not sacrifice your authentic expression in favor of the immediate acquisition of money. The latter is expressed in two letters addressed to Carl Solomon, agent for A.A. Wyn, the first one in 1951: “I’m only gone off to earn money on my own hook so that when I do sell my book it wont [sic] make any difference” (Charters 328). “T’would be foolish,” he writes in 1952, “to sacrifice reputation for quick profit; and besides, *I wouldn’t stand for it*” (Charters 343). While an appeal to literary prestige could also be extracted from this quote, it seems that it is fame that makes up the aim. What is more, in light of the depiction of the constant retakes of Hollywood movies as the epitome of artistic depravity and fakeness, Kerouac seems to have unintentionally commented on the transformation of his original scroll into the Viking version—itself the product of heavy revisions. The ultimate implication of *Visions* is its imperative that literary texts should not be severed from their extra-textual referents; it thus confirms the moment of externality isolable in Kerouac’s unmediated literary autobiography.

While *Visions* is clearly dereifying, *On the Road* constitutes its reifying opposite. In his book *Reification or The Anxiety of Late Capitalism* Timothy Bewes writes about the numerous objections raised against the theory of reification. Because of its scope, it tends to become vague and mystical, leading some theorists to shun it altogether. Citing Adorno, Bewes writes: “reification is a reversible concept, as potentially liberating as it is potentially oppressive” (xvi). “In its capacity to comprehend the ontological disjunction between truth and its representation,” he continues, “reification is a signifier of its own inadequacy” (xvi-xvii). How, then, can reification itself be reified? The lack of specificity—that it includes everything in general and therefore potentially nothing in particular—turns reification into “a mystical, autonomous and inevitable process, a purely ‘objective’ phenomenon impermeable to political intervention, a notion equivalent to and simultaneous with
modernity and globalization” (9). To quote Lukács, precisely because “‘man-made’ reality [...] appears to man to be ‘a natural phenomenon alien to himself’”, in which his activity is restricted,” he remains “the object and not the subject’ of events, even of his own activity” (8-9). Set against the background of Kerouac’s generally contradictory meeting with publishers, editors, and agents, such tensions appear to have imposed themselves on the shape of his literature as well. As Matt Theado remarks: since *Road* indeed “traces, with few variations, the actual events that actual people experienced” (53), I propose that those conflicts cannot reasonably have been kept out of the novel.

Mortenson understands *On the Road* as a successful project of dereification that involves escaping oppressive notions of reified time: the novel, seen as a “voice of dissent” and “an attack on the corruption of time by capitalism” (52). While it is true that the behavior of Sal and Dean in *Road* amount to a resistance to the forces of reification, Mortenson, by delimiting his discussion only to time and not space, does not theorize to what extent a simultaneous gesture of reification cancels that out. As a counter to Mortenson’s argument, Mark Richardson observes that *Road’s* “therapy proposed [...] is a kind of psychosexual pastoral, a return to the earth, to the soil, to sexual vitality and to color” (225). Indeed, eighty pages into the novel Kerouac begins a love-affair with a Mexican girl and begins picking cotton to make a living: “Every day I earned approximately a dollar and a half. It was just enough to buy groceries in the evening on the bicycle. The days rolled by. I forgot all about the East and all about Dean and Carlo and the bloody road [...] *I was a man of the earth*, precisely as I had dreamed I would be, in Paterson” (88 my italics). One aim of Kerouac’s portrayal of America was to isolate the common denominator connecting its constituent parts. Dean says: “we know America, we’re at home; I can go anywhere in America and get what I want because it’s the same in every corner, I know the people, I know what they do” (108). Precisely the reductive arrogance of such a conception reifies America: it obliterates the uniqueness individual experience and reifies it through vulgar generalization.

As Richardson notes, Mexico is idealized as the ‘primitive’ Other of America. Expanding his analysis, we can suggest that it is depicted as a place supposedly not yet fully subsumed by the dividing forces of reification: it constitutes a powerful example of the White American construction of the ‘primitive’ Other of America: “we had finally found the magic land at the end of the road” (248). Whereas American society is divided against itself, Mexico is not. The episode’s symbolic meditation on Mexico
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emphatically calls for unmediated material contact: “the same Tropic of Cancer heaviness held us all pinned to earth, where we belonged and tingled” (266). By the forces of nature, the characters are magnetically pulled towards the ground; they cannot drift rootlessly. Yet, this dereifying gesture is ultimately cancelled out by Road’s undifferentiated reification manifested in its idealization of Mexico. If reification indeed entails a fetishistic obsession with appearance and repression of the human being, process or object behind the appearance, Mexicans, “don’t bother with appearances” (249). In their look, “all of the human qualities are soft and subdued and still there” (250 my italics).

Registering the inherent problems of such projects, Bewes has this to say about the mythic aspects of reification: “A myth of originary purity untouched by commodification underlies the concept, according to which ‘primitive’ societies enjoy access to a quality of existence that has been lost in ‘developed’ Western ones” (69). Kerouac’s idealization of the simple life refuses to understand that simpler societies were not Utopias. The pervasiveness of this tendency is confirmed by Norman Mailer’s “The White Negro” which expresses a similar gesture of involuntary condescension. Referring to an illiterate African-American man, he writes: “Being unable to read or write, he could hardly be interested in ideas nearly as much as in lifemanship, and so he eschewed any attempt to obey the precision or lack of precision in the girl’s language, and instead sensed her character (and the values of her social type) by swinging with the nuances of her voice” (350-1). Denied intellect, note well Mailer’s hardly subtle praise of the man’s apparent purely instinctual, animal sensibilities.

As we have seen, the dereifying project in Road backfires. While it expresses the gesture against reification, its theoretical imprecision cancels out any simultaneous gesture of dereification. While Kerouac’s assertion that he wants to write “intensely personal and directly auto-biographical, non-fictional” implies a dereifying component of this form of autobiography, Road’s phantasmatic evocation of Mexico entails an irreconcilable juxtaposition of dereification and reification. The contradictory literary expression of Visions that involved exposing Joan Rawshanks while he himself concealed his own production process, as though detached from the social machine, can additionally be identified in On the Road’s dereifying gesture that ultimately backfires into an act of reification. What is more, his constant oscillation should be consulted as a way of accounting for the possible source of the Kerouacian literary paradox. Ultimately, Kerouac’s own meeting with publishers amounted to a similar conflict: the
former strived to preserve the intended integrity of his text that was heavily informed by his dereifying insistence on the unity between life and textual representation, while Viking’s attempts, as we shall show, change of names and removal of explicit sexual content compromised what can be seen as the analytically isolable moment of externality to the commodity form in his writing: namely the intended preservation of real names and events.

7: Comparison between Original Manuscript and Final Novel

Given the stability of Kerouac’s aesthetic program, the emphasis on unmediated, uncensored autobiographical writing was consistently paramount in his literary project throughout the 1950s. Deletions of passages that formed part of that immediate expression clearly constitute a violation of the aesthetic principle. To remove certain ‘indecent’ passages in the name of decorum destabilizes the dereifying component of the original scroll; whereas the original version kept the original names of its characters, Viking’s changing of these names amounted to a disruption of the visible link between traceable event and its textual incarnation. It may be argued that the dereifying character of Kerouac’s form of autobiographical writing constitutes one analytically isolable moment of externality to the commodity form. Insofar as the lived experience precedes its textual representation, our actions are not informed by our anticipation of an audience’s desires. The identification of a living person therefore constitutes a gesture that resists simple commodification as long as it is retained insofar as the character of that person cannot be reduced to a mere commodity. By extension, we would not view pure autobiography as the product of informed guesses regarding a specific market demand but rather as something whose form is determined by the character of the lived experience itself. Hence, Viking’s decision to change the names, as I will show, amounts to a conscious effort to fictionalize an otherwise nonfictional component of Road: the sustained bond between reality and text is ensured by the retaining of the original name. The disruption of that unity is a highly objectionable form of reification. Editorial cuts, therefore, constantly threaten to cancel out the isolable points of externality. What is more, this particular component of Kerouac’s writing renders it especially vulnerable to editorial revisions. Let us place a couple of corresponding passages from the respective novels in comparative light. Here is the passage as it was originally intended by Kerouac and published in the scroll draft:
Along about three in the afternoon after an apple pie and ice cream in a roadside stand a woman stopped for me in a little coupe. I had a twinge of hardon joy as I ran after the car. But she was a middle-aged woman, actually the mother of sons my age, and wanted somebody to help her drive to Iowa (118).

In the Viking version, conversely, the same passage appears in the following shape:

Along about three in the afternoon, after an apple pie and ice cream in a roadside stand, a woman stopped for me in a little coupe. I had a twinge of hard joy as I ran after the car. But she was a middle-aged woman, actually the mother of sons my age, and wanted somebody to help her drive to Iowa (13).

What immediately strikes us is that Viking’s editor Helen Taylor has cleaned up the passage in a fundamental way. By removing the explicitly sexual implications of the protagonist’s reaction when seeing the woman: “I had a twinge of hardon joy as I ran after the car.” It may have been acceptable to keep the allusion to erection had it not appeared in juxtaposition with the reference to the woman as a “mother of sons my age,” lending it obvious incestuous, Oedipal implications. The revision further conventionalized the passage by sanitizing it, plausibly in anticipation of both legal consequences and reader objections. Apart from the excision of the sexual reference, the editor has added commas between each subordinate clause, thus creating natural stops for the readers, steering the pace of their reading and making the passage neater and more conventional.

Let us compare two other passages—the former containing an explicit reference to sexual intercourse:

Louanne was jumping off quickly from the bed; apparently he was fucking with her. He always was doing so. This other guy who owned the place Bob Malkin was there but Neal had apparently dispatched him to the kitchen, probably to make coffee while he proceeded with his loveproblems … for to him sex was the one and only holy and important thing in life (Scroll 110).

In Viking’s version, contrastively, we have:

Marylou was jumping off the couch; Dean had dispatched the occupant of the apartment to the kitchen, probably to make coffee, while he proceeded with his loveproblems, for to him sex was the one and only holy and important thing in life (4).

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10 Whether the reference is consciously and intentionally Oedipal is difficult to ascertain. However, numerous references to Marxist psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957), who incidentally died in the year of Road’s publication, reveals Kerouac’s acquaintance with Freudian theory. What is more, the protagonist of his 1953 novella The Subterraneans is named Percepeid (evoking a pierced foot)—a possible reference to Oedipus (swollen foot).
We are now beginning to trace a systematic sanitary project in Viking’s revisions. Our first objection, motivated by the conviction that censorship of sexual content often amounts to a compromise of artistic expression, concerns the suspicious omission of “he was fucking with her” as well as replacing the bed with a couch. The second change: for fear of a libel suit, Viking decided to change the names of the characters: Louanne becomes Marylou, and Bob Malkin is simply removed. Given the importance attributed to the aesthetic principle of unmediated writing, the change of names entails a censorship of the social relationship between Kerouac and the human beings that found their way into his text. While Viking’s fear of a libel suit is certainly understandable, that fear itself does not alter the fact that they Nonetheless effectively censored the identity of the real person. What is more, by removing the explicit reference to intercourse between Neal and Louanne, the sentence “he proceeded with his loveproblems … to him sex was the one and only holy and important thing in life” loses its specific referential function in Viking’s version. Instead, it becomes abstracted and sterilized. In short, it is made less objectionable—sex no longer specifically refers to Neal “fucking with her.” Instead it becomes neutralized—reified as a private, quasi-religious phenomenon, devoid of desire and passion. Adding to this Viking’s inclusion of excessive punctuation, moreover, halted the uninhibited flow and the intended rhythm of the barely punctuated original. Such violations of the prose thus compromised one moment of externality implied by the intended non-punctuation.

Our third passage depicts homosexual intercourse. Perhaps it goes without saying that it was removed:

Neal proceeded to handle the fag like a woman, tipping him over legs in the air and all and gave him a monstrous huge banging. I was so non-plussed all I could do was sit and stare from my corner. (Scroll 188)

The removal was not prompted by Kerouac’s use of the word ‘fag’. In fact, the word appears several times in Viking’s version (see for instance page 185). Instead it seems that the removal was motivated by a general objection against depicting homosexuality per se. The excision neutralizes the potential political edge of the novel at a time in which a debilitating sexual moralism prevailed. Despite the publication by this time of a few relatively explicit novels—Gore Vidal’s The City and the Pillar (1948), John Horne Burns’ The Gallery (1947), and James Baldwin’s Giovanni’s Room, only one year away from the publication of Road (1956)—we should nonetheless recall Cowley’s increasing concern with obscenity and infer from that that the reading public was not
yet ready for novels dealing with the theme of homosexuality. Indeed, when *Giovanni’s Room* was published, readers at Knopf reacted to its homosexual scenes as ‘repugnant’ (Field 98). Citing William Cole, “it was judged not the time for an out-and-out homosexual novel. There had only been Gore Vidal’s” (qtd in Field 98). Further establishing the pervasiveness of anti-homosexual opinion in 1950s America, Michael Bronski similarly observes that Vidal’s novel, John Horne Burns’ *The Gallery*, and Charles Jackson’s *The Fall of Valor* were harshly criticized and “new standards were set up to safeguard the American literary scene” (77). The quotes, indeed provide support for the suggestion that the motivation for removing the passage was its explicit treatment of homosexual intercourse. Taking note of Kerouac’s sexist portrayal of the act, this was probably not the cause for objection. Recalling his homophobic statement quoted elsewhere in this essay, Kerouac’s intention with the paragraph was obviously not to promote gay rights. Most plausibly, the cause for removal falls under the general reluctance to publish any novel containing explicit portrayals of sexual intercourse; that it depicted homosexual sex at a time of Cold War repression certainly did not help. Again we are dealing with an example of how Viking consistently disrupted the unity between experience and text, thus compromising the moment of externality ensured by Kerouac’s unmediated autobiography.

Towards the end of the novel a passage appears that is plausibly considered to promote, using the language of moralists, ‘immoral behavior’:

I took up a conversation with a pretty country girl wearing a lowcut cotton blouse that displayed the beautiful suntan on her breast tops. I was on my way to see my wild former wife, I wanted to test other girls and see what they had to offer me. She was dull (*Scroll* 340).

And the corresponding passage in *Road*:

I took up a conversation with a gorgeous country girl wearing a low-cut blouse that displayed the beautiful sun-tan on her breast tops. She was dull (*Road* 219)

Apart from the negligible addition of a comma and two instances of hyphenation, we are faced with a startling removal of arguably important information. Given that a significant element of Kerouac’s original version of his Road-novel was the exuberant, as opposed to disinterested depiction of sex, this removal cannot be viewed lightly. Conceivably, the motivation behind the deletion was its supposed promotion of indecent behavior; it expresses a desire to indulge in promiscuity: to “test other girls.” And that such be done without the intention of marrying them. From the perspective of
this essay, in any event, the pattern to be found in the deletions revealed by a comparison with the scroll version and the Viking *Road* shows the systematic removal of sexual content and the introduction of conventional typographical marks.

Having established that sexual content was consistently removed, and punctuation added to the final version of *Road*, a fundamental question arises: what are the consequences on literary meaning when significant themes are played down in this way? The initial questions we have to ask ourselves are the following: what motivated the revision? Who made the revisions? Did Kerouac gradually change, without the express influence of editors, his views on the theme of explicit sex in literature? *The Subterraneans*, written after *Road*, does in fact contain references to intercourse. That he would have deemed sexual content appropriate for *Subterraneans* but not *Road* seems unlikely. Viking’s manuscript acceptance report, quoted in the section that dealt with Malcolm Cowley, indeed confirms their removal: Helen “Taylor “went over it taking out the rest of the libel, some of the obscenity” finally “tightening the story” (qtd in Bak 489). In light of Cowley’s explicit acknowledgment of an increasingly hostile publishing atmosphere of the 1950s, Kerouac’s 1951 comment on the scroll draft reveals that he was certainly not oblivious to the “controversial and censorable” character of his choice of themes that dealt with “hipsters, weed, fags” (320). This points to a deliberate, and intentional inclusion—a clearly discernible moment of externality. His earlier objections to excisions in *Road* made by Robert Giroux in 1952, that involved the former’s apparent removal of his “cunts” (*Letters* 388-89) provides further support for the claim that it was Viking who removed the sexual content.

If we compare the shape of the final version of *On the Road* to novels written immediately after the scroll draft and before the Viking version, the stylistic discord between them and *Road* is so striking as to render the latter almost anachronistic in light of the logic of Kerouac’s stylistic trajectory throughout the 1950s. For Kerouac at this point to suddenly begin to punctuate heavily and remove references to sex simply does not make sense. For this reason, Hunt’s claim that the final version is simply a “further development of the novel, informed solely by Kerouac’s desire to make his writing more fully literature as ‘life itself’” is difficult to accept at face value (xix). First, it

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11 Among the novels written between 1952-1957 we have *Visions of Cody* (1952), *The Subterraneans* (1953), *Tristessa*, and *Visions of Gerard* (1956), all of which are significantly more experimental in style than *Road*. 

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excludes the social machine. Second, it does not address the market. Consider two comments made by Kerouac himself in two different letters. The first one, written in May 1952, was addressed to Allen Ginsberg “If Wyn or Carl insist on cutting it [Road] up to make the ‘story’ more intelligible I’ll refuse; and offer them another book which I’ll commence writing at once, because I know where I’m headed” (355). The second one, sent to Sterling Lord as late as October 1956, two months before it was accepted, reads: “in making those ‘minor changes throughout’ we do not dare touch the rhythm of the prose and those sentences” (588-89). Here Kerouac is discussing his novella The Subterraneans. Nevertheless, it is fair to assume that his objections would reasonably apply to Road as well. Adding to this Kerouac’s appearance on The Steve Allen Show, pasting a passage of Visions into Road, as well as his verdict on the former as his “finally-at-last-found style & hope,” it appears unlikely that On the Road emerged as the culmination of his artistic development and was recognized as such by himself. What is more, given Kerouac’s explicit lamentation of an intrusive imaginary audience, it would constitute an act of exceptional gullibility to simply conclude that Kerouac matured throughout the 1950s—as though situated in a vacuum—and that Viking’s Road, completely unproblematically, was the natural culmination of an artistic development left completely untouched by market forces.

8: Conclusion

By comparing the two versions of Kerouac’s novel On the Road, I have shown that the finally published novel resulted from more than his own aesthetic preferences. In my first section I dealt with post-war literary reactions as an attempt to locate Kerouac’s writing within a specific tradition so as to expose the spontaneous fallacy, i.e. that writing is never completely detached from the literary stirrings of its specific time and place. First, taking on board the conclusions drawn by Malcolm Cowley, Norman Mailer, and Richard Holton, 1950s American literature was largely characterized by a growing concern for the internal life of characters and the evasion of overt political engagement. Second, the turn towards the confessional mode of expression finds a representative in Kerouac’s aesthetic program that renounced fiction and explicitly emphasized the virtues of truth writing. Third, the oppressive political atmosphere of Cold War America largely conditioned what could be put into print and distributed to
a readership. As we have seen, Viking’s literary advisor Malcolm Cowley in his letters justified censorship of sexually explicit content as part of his promotional efforts on behalf of Jack Kerouac. Summarizing some major events in the life of Kerouac, the second section is intended to prepare the ground for the next two sections.

The third and fourth sections dealt with Kerouac’s meeting with the literary market. His movements were palpably erratic and involved negotiating prestigious publishing possibilities alongside more commercially oriented publishers that catered to a larger audience. In other words, he considered many different forms of publishing without discerning between values that are normally kept apart. Following his involvement with literary advisor Malcolm Cowley, the latter appears to have been pushing towards the release of a more compromised version of the original scroll. Explicitly lamenting the increasingly hostile publishing atmosphere of the 1950s, Cowley wrote in a letter that the prerequisite for publishing the novel was that it would not be suppressed for immorality and that it did not bring Viking a libel suit.

Taking on board Nicholas Brown’s theorization of isolable moments of externality that resist simple commodification, the fifth section dealt with Kerouac’s aesthetic program in an attempt to identify the specific character of his literature. Emphasizing the consistency of primarily two maxims, namely truth writing and spontaneous writing, these two enable a theorization of yet another paradox: while the spontaneous maxim implies that writing is a more or less mystical process in which the writer can never fully account for the source of inspiration nor the particular raw materials of the literature, the truth maxim that insisted on preserving the real names of characters and particular events implicitly calls into question the claim on unhindered spontaneity. What is more, if the referentiality contained in the use of real names is essentially dereifying (in the sense of ensuring a level of traceability and unity between event/person and text), to change these names amounts to a fictionalization of an otherwise not fully fictional component, i.e. a form of reification and mystification. For this reason, I consider the nature of Kerouac’s particular form of fiction especially vulnerable to editorial revisions. In essence, what would perhaps not dramatically alter the character of other forms of literature has significant ontological consequences on Kerouac’s truth fiction.

I have devoted my sixth section to close readings of the two novels emerging out of the revisions of the scroll draft of On the Road, namely Visions of Cody (1951-2) and Viking’s version of Road (1957). By exposing the cinematic production process
and shedding light on everything that surrounds the shooting of a movie, *Visions* is clearly dereifying in character. In stark contrast, *On the Road*’s phantasmatic evocation of Mexico and idealization of the simple life ultimately amounts to a reifying mystification that completely ignores the anxieties proceeding from monotonous and physically disastrous manual labor.

The seventh section was devoted to a comparative reading of the two versions of *On the Road*, namely the scroll draft (1951) and Viking’s version (1957). Having identified non-punctuation and the keeping of real names as isolable moments of externality to the commodity form, Viking’s editorial decision to change the names for fear of a potential libel suit, as well as their inclusion of heavy punctuation, ultimately amounted to a significant alteration of Kerouac’s original version of the novel.

Given the oscillatory trajectory of Kerouac throughout the 1950s, between appealing to prestige on the one hand, and money on the other values that are normally kept apart, he was obviously in dialogue with the market. Constantly moving between different positions, and their final contradictory expressions of both reification as well as dereification all contribute to the peculiar and constantly changing forms his literary self-expression took. While *Road* is itself largely reifying in character, Viking’s changes further reified the novel. Given the strong emphasis on truth, the name changes as well as neutralization and omissions of sexual content, also contributed to mystifying the novel in depicting sex as a quasi-religious phenomenon. Having identified non-punctuation and unmediated autobiography as isolable moments of externality to the commodity form, the removal of obscenity, the addition of heavy punctuation, and the change of names obscured and destabilized the previously visible unity between real life experience and textual representation, Viking’s compromise of such moments of externality thus marks one isolable point where editorial voices mix with Kerouac’s authorial one. Ending this essay on a speculative note, it is possible that Kerouac’s dereifying project in *Visions* emerged as a reaction against alienation. With Viking’s consistent editorial demands constantly threatening to compromise his authorial intention, to viciously expose Joan Rawshanks, analogously amounted to a refusal to accept that his work be severed from him.
Works Cited


