

Visions of Jack / Versions of Jack:

Toward a Digital Fluid Text Edition of Kerouac

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[Note: This paper is supplemented with a [PowerPoint presentation linked to this paper.](#)]

As a textual scholar, I've been asked to suggest some ways to edit Kerouac online and with a focus on what I call the Fluid Text. But I have two confessions to make, involving two shocking seductions. [SLIDE 1 on PowerPoint] First confession: I am only a Melville scholar, and became a textual scholar only because I was intrigued by the working-draft manuscript of *Typee* and what it could say about Melville's writing process. But to make his manuscript revisions comprehensible to others, I had to make the hidden texts of the revisions readable. This is how I was seduced into textual editing. I also discovered that if readers were to witness the evolutions of Melville's fluid texts, I would also have to go digital. So in time I also became a digital scholar, and that was my second seduction. [SLIDE 2] My second confession is that because I am a Melville scholar, I also love Jack Kerouac. Both writers had to get to sea and on the road, or go nuts; these fellow travelers had to write. [SLIDE 3] In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael admits to certain "hypos" or what we would call bipolar blues. Going to sea is his "substitute for pistol and ball." [SLIDE 4] In *On the Road*, Sal admits to a "serious illness" and a "weary split-up" and his "feeling that everything was dead." His dream to hit the road is now a necessity, triggered by a savage friend, Dean Moriarty, a version of Queequeg. [SLIDE 5] Similarities between Herman and Jack abound. Both, for instance, lost a father. And this similarity is clearer in the *On the Road* scroll in which the death of Sal's

father, not the weary split-up, is the source of his existential alienation.

Also like Herman, Jack was an inveterate reviser. He composed numerous versions of *On the Road* before jump-starting his scroll. *Visions of Cody*, *Pic*, and *Dr. Sax* evolved out of these early versions. And having composed his scroll, Kerouac repeatedly revised *On the Road* in subsequent conventional typescripts. “My work,” wrote Kerouac, “comprises one vast book.” And in order to imagine our Vision of Jack, we need access to the Versions of Jack embedded in his revisions to that “vast book.” Now that Kerouac’s documents are available, scholars can begin to shape an edition. But for readers to witness Kerouac’s revisions, the edition must allow readers to navigate the many versions located on and in these documents. Contained within each version are undeciphered revisions, each concealing sequences of heretofore unworded texts waiting to be edited into view. What I would like to do today is seduce you with the prospect of editing Kerouac’s vast and fluid text. My hope is that being able to witness more of Kerouac’s writing than currently found in print will prove to be your aphrodisiac. [SLIDE 6]

To acquaint you with the fluid text editorial approach, let me share some screen shots from my electronic edition of Melville’s first published book, *Typee*. [SLIDE 7] Published in 1846, *Typee* was a controversial success. Reaction to its sexuality and attacks on missionaries forced Melville to issue an expurgated edition; thus, because of its several print versions, *Typee* exists as a major American fluid text. [SLIDE 8] But there is more. In 1983 a three-chapter fragment of Melville’s working draft manuscript of *Typee* was discovered, revealing over a thousand revision sites and evidence of three versions layered one over the other, all made in advance of *Typee*’s publication. The

manuscript itself is virtually unreadable, so I set about to transcribe. [SLIDE 9]

But I found that my transcription is equally inaccessible because it does not give you the actual “revision texts” Melville considered as he revised and in what order. Imagine Melville’s complex sets of deletions and insertions as “revision codes” instructing the language on what to say. The texts hidden in these codes remain invisible to us. But fluid text editing decodes the codes to make these invisible revision texts visible. [Slide 10]

Let’s look at one *Typee* revision. Here, the islanders try to convince Tommo that they abhor cannibalism; never practice it, and attribute it to rival tribes. To underscore their benevolence, they point to “the natural loveliness of their own abode,” as if nature dictates character. [Slide 11] However, in manuscript, Melville revised this passage considerably. [Slide 12] Originally, he had the Typees call their abode a “favored valley,” as if the gods, too, favor the lovely inhabitants. [Slide 13] But after crossing out those words, he substituted for them “beautiful abode” in the space above “favored valley.” [Slide 14] Then later, he deleted “beautiful” and, beneath the base line, inscribed “paradisical,” to give the final manuscript reading: “their paradisical abode.” [Slide 15] Later on, probably while proofreading, Melville or an editor revised the text again to simply “their own abode.” [Slide 16]

Notice that Melville’s revisions follow a sequence that indicates Melville’s shifting intentions, and each intention can be textualized into a particular wording that does not appear in print, nor is it fully spelled out in manuscript. [Slide 17] Critical editions worry over how to display its chosen text and variants. In traditional editing, the reading text is free of editorial interruption, and revision evidence is concealed elsewhere in an appendix or footnote, often in the form of highly compressed editorial coding that

further conceals the revision sequence. [Slide 18] Genetic editors integrate the variants into the reading text, using symbols to indicate sequence. But this protocol interrupts severely impedes the reading experience. [Slide 19] The problem with these two approaches is that the edition layers its abstruse editorial codes over the author's already abstruse revision codes, [Slide 20] and readers must decode both layers to find the hidden revision. [Slide 21]

In fluid text editing the editor's job is to spell out the revision codes in what I call Revision Sequences and Revision Narratives. Let's look at how the *Typee* edition works and consider how this approach might be applied to Kerouac. [Slide 22] The screen is divided into two frames, into which you may put any two documents for comparison. Here we have manuscript page 19 and its corresponding transcription, with our "favored valley" revision site in view. [Slide 23] The edition includes a "base version," which is the manuscript's final reading text. To create it, I followed Melville's instructions: I deleted what he deleted and added what he added. [Slide 24]

Next, I used the base version as a textual terrain on which to map all of the revision sites that appear on Melville's manuscript pages. Here, we can see on line 18 the words "paradisical abode," mapped in yellow. [Slide 25] When readers click on this highlighted revision site, a sequence for that site pops-up spelling out Melville's revision steps. At each step I provide the full readable revision text thus decoding Melville's revision codes into the very language he would have had in mind as he composed, revised, reconsidered, and revised again. Here, the sequencing from favored to beautiful to paradisical textualizes Melville's process; it makes invisible visible. [Slide 26]

An added feature is the Revision Narrative, which tells the story behind the site's

revision sequence. As we have seen, the sequence records a site's revision steps in their likely order. But the more complicated a site, the more steps, and the more likely that your sequencing of these steps will differ from mine. A revision narrative is designed not only to explain what happens step by step, but to argue for the who, when, how, and why of the revision act. Also, by narrativizing, the editor necessarily exposes the critical judgment used in constructing revision sequence.

[Slide 27] How might we apply these fluid text protocols to *On the Road*? To begin with, the model adapts well to the core documents—the scroll and typescript versions—but Jack's early “sketchings,” as well as Cody, Pic, and Sax, pose intriguing problems. [Slide 28] Everyone knows the story: With a typewriter and (according to Jack) some coffee, Jack typed out his first complete draft of *On the Road* in April 1951 on a customized “scroll” of paper. Less known is that he then retyped his text in a conventional typescript now unlocated for circulating to publishers. Critic Malcolm Cowley and Jack's editor at Viking probably read this typescript and secured an acceptance of the book provided that Kerouac make significant revisions to tighten the plot and prevent libel and obscenity litigations. [Slide 29] Like Melville, Kerouac complied with these editorial interventions. In 1955 he composed a second typescript, which differs substantially from the scroll text. And on this document, Jack used pencil and crayon to make Cowley's cuts, but also revisions of his own. [Slide 30] But this was not the text Kerouac submitted to Viking. Earlier, probably in 1953-54, Jack had composed another typescript also different from the scroll, onto which he later added material from Typescript 2 and other revisions. This third typescript also shows copy-editing performed by Viking editors, and is the copy-text for the 1957 *On the Road*.

When you consider all three documents and the revisions on them, we can discern at least six versions, each conveying a significant moment of authorial composition, editorial intervention, and what might be called both complicit and coerced collaboration with editors. Evidence of these versions appears in Kerouac's opening line. [Slide 31] You'll notice that the scroll version does not disguise autobiography. Dean is not Dean but Neal. And indicating its centrality in Jack's life in 1951 is the parallelism set up with the death of Sal's father, his own serious illness, and his sense that everything is dead. There is no reference to Jack's split up in the scroll opener. [Slide 32] But the Second Typescript is different. To get at Jack's original typing, we excavate beneath Jack's crayon deletions. There we find the shift in name from Neal to Dean—but more importantly, the removal of the father's death, leaving Sal's illness as a suggestive emblem of existential alienation. This version seems almost anti-autobiographical. [Slide 33] And yet, Kerouac's pencil and crayon revisions restore the father, removes the illness, and thereby magnetize the father's death and Jack's alienation without mediation. The new sentence announcing the “beat generation” seems to be the concluding line of an autobiographical argument reduced to a syllogism: Father—Death—Dean—Beat. [Slide 34]

But if we take the original and revised texts of Typescript 2 [Slide 35] and compare them to Typescript 3, we find another evolution. First, the “beat generation” sentence is gone. But, so too, again, is the father: this time the “miserably weary splitup” substitutes for the father's death. Is this a denial of his father, an emergence of sexuality, or a submergence one into the other: a transformation of a son's

sense of loss into that of a lover's. One absence evolves into another. [Slide 36]

Pulling together all variants, a Revision Sequence of Kerouac's "father" revision provides readers with Kerouac's evolving text. It makes his otherwise invisible wordings visible. We also see the oscillation of variants from Father to some variant and back. Then, too, we recognize that we now must read Kerouac differently. Although Jack settled on the split up as the variant for his first edition, that word contains a genealogy. Split up no longer means split up; it now means the sum of its ancestors: for us, it is something that can only be articulated through sequence and narrative: it means "my father which is my illness which is my divorce."

To find the fluid texts that constitute the Father Revision, I inspected the texts directly, wrote out what I saw, set them side-by-side, and compared them. This is painstaking collation. But technological advances will make the job easier. [Slide 37] Recently the online research site called NINES released its collation tool JUXTA. Into it, you enter each version of *On the Road*. You then choose one to be a base text and a second for comparison. The tool then pinpoints all variants. Here, the collation of the scroll and Typescript 2 shows the deletion of the father. [Slide 38] And this collation with Typescript 3 shows the substitution of the split up for the father.

Obviously, our electronic edition of Kerouac would want to include a collation tool like NINES's Juxta. But Juxta cannot generate Revision Sequences and Narratives. [Slide 39] With an NEH grant, a team at Hofstra and I are developing TextLab, a two-step tool for marking revision sites and composing sequences and narratives. In the first step, a primary editor prepares the text by pulling down a manuscript image [Slide 40], designating a revision site [Slide 41], and coding the site's additions and deletions.

[Slide 42] Next, a secondary editor or reader enters the edition's workspace to create a revision sequence, on the fly. For instance, when the reader selects this revision site in *Billy Budd*, the site's additions and deletions will appear in the upper box, and the user constructs a sequence in the lower box. In addition, TextLab will exist in a Wiki, so that multiple users can work on a single revision site, sharing their arguments in support of their proposed revision sequences and thereby placing restraints on erratic or irresponsible editing.

[Slide 43] But a fluid text edition of *On the Road* must address other concerns. We know that Jack's early sketches including Cody, Pic, and Sax are not rewrites so much as attempts to put a massive creative event into a forward gear. Even so, all of these baked and half baked versions exist as texts, which necessarily lend themselves to thematic as well as linguistic collation. [Slide 44] Once reliable digital images of the manuscripts and typescripts are assembled, editors must transcribe the texts into a searchable format. [Slide 45] To search Kerouac's versions thematically, editors must determine the categories to be searched: character, image, and episode are only a start. Whatever the categories, editors must apply them through a flexible, open-source mark-up language like TEI's XML. [Slide 46] This also means adopting a flexible, open-source database like MySQL that will contain the images, texts, and categories. [Slide 47] Finally, by situating the edition's database in a collaborative environment, such as a Wiki, users will be able to work together and become more engaged in the process of editing as a critical endeavor; so that when the need for new categories arises, these and other necessary changes can be performed with ample discourse.

With the discovery of *Billy Budd* in the 1920s, readers witnessed a Melville Revival. Today, Kerouac scholarship is on the threshold of its own Revival. With the Kerouac archive now available, scholars must work to make these documents accessible to everyone, but in ways that will allow them to witness Kerouac's vast book. [Slide 48]

Textual scholars, digital scholars, students of revision, lovers Kerouac, and lovers of language: it is time, you angels, to cross the threshold and get on the road.