

## Jack Kerouac's Love Affair with Libraries

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*Memorial Hall and Public Library in Lowell, Massachusetts, circa 1908 (courtesy of the Library of Congress).*

### Le mal d'archive de Jack Kerouac

Jack Kerouac aimait les bibliothèques. Quand il était petit, il lisait tous les livres qui se trouvaient dans la « cabane » ainsi que toute la paperasse que son père, imprimeur, ramenait chez eux.<sup>1</sup> Adolescent, il faisait souvent l'école buissonnière non pas (seulement) pour aller jouer des mauvais tours mais surtout pour se cacher dans un racoin de la bibliothèque publique de la ville de Lowell, au Massachusetts, et y lire toutes sortes de livres—philosophie, littérature, sports, stratégie d'échecs, n'importe quoi—en français et en anglais. Kerouac a même établi un record pour les absences de jours de classes au Lowell High School en 1939, et tout cela parce qu'il aimait trop lire! Cet engouement s'est poursuivi lors de ses études universitaires à Columbia, à New York, où il tomba littéralement en amour avec la New York Public Library. Celle-là même qui, aujourd'hui, a la responsabilité de son fonds d'archives.

Dans son journal intime de 1947, à l'âge de 25 ans, il compose un court texte intitulé « Sur les bibliothèques des grandes villes » :

Les deux bibliothèques de grande ville que j'ai eu l'occasion de fréquenter, celle de Boston et l'autre plus grande de New York, m'ont toujours rempli d'un sentiment indicible de joie quand je m'y rends, une joie qui est

composée des différentes choses suivantes : voir des vieux bonhommes fous déambuler en profonde méditation, voir les pigeons dans la cour de la fenêtre des bécoses, voir des belles filles assises en train de lire, et finalement participer à un sentiment de jubilation générale que ceci est la « culture » de premier ordre et que ceux qui sont ici réunis sont tous des penseurs profonds invétérés. J'aime bien me faufiler partout comme un penseur fou avec mon manteau volant derrière moi.

Mais, Kerouac ajoute, « jamais n'ai-je écrit une bonne ligne dans la bibliothèque. »<sup>2</sup> En effet pour le grand voyageur, la bibliothèque est un endroit de méditation, de pensées, une communauté culturelle de connaissance et de savoir, mais ce n'est pas un lieu où il peut créer son œuvre littéraire.

Et pourtant, l'idée des bibliothèques, des fiches, et des dossiers sont à la base de sa pensée et de sa relation avec la mémoire, et avec l'histoire. Dans *Visions of Cody*, il nous révèle que pendant son sommeil, son esprit tente sans cesse de créer de « belles combinaisons » en « rebrassant les vieilles fiches de l'âme » (15). Sa pensée est tellement associée à la matérialité de l'information organisée des bibliothèques qu'il se remémore ses souvenirs comme étant inscrits sur des fiches. Un peu plus tard dans le même roman, il confirme cette association en imaginant un rolodex de la mémoire: « suppose qu'à chaque fois que tu entends une idée délicieusement originale ou qu'il te soit donné une image qui fait chanter l'esprit, tu pourrais immédiatement la flanquer dans un de ces nouveaux classeurs rotatifs de bureaux » (39). Malgré ce fantasme et ses attentions au classement et à la classification, Kerouac sait bien cependant que la mémoire n'est pas aussi organisée qu'une archive et il est hanté par la spectralité de ses efforts, l'eros et thanatos de ce que Jacques Derrida appelle le « mal de l'archive. »<sup>3</sup> « Je suis conscient de ma propre tragédie personnelle, » Kerouac déclare, « ma chambre même en est hantée la nuit quand je dors ou me réveille, par une série d'images désespérées, me prenant soudainement en train de brasser les fiches de la mémoire ou de l'esprit par en-dessous du paquet » (*Cody* 41). Sa plus grande peur, il continue, serait de « jeter quelque chose que je n'arrive même pas à trouver dans le désordre incroyable de mon être mais qui est en voie de s'échapper avec le détritrus en masse, enseveli dans le milieu, de temps en temps je l'aperçois » (42). Kerouac décrit ainsi son mal d'archive, cette souffrance, cette passion qui le pousse non seulement à parcourir ses fiches de mémoire mais aussi les grands chemins de l'Amérique. Pour Derrida, ce mal de l'archive : « C'est n'avoir de cesse, interminablement, de chercher l'archive là où elle se dérobe. C'est courir après elle là où, même s'il y en a trop, quelque chose en elle s'anarchive » (Derrida 142). Le tout résonne avec une ressemblance incroyable, comme une incarnation de ce que Kerouac exprime dans son oeuvre: « de temps en temps, » il dit arriver à apercevoir, et ce à l'endroit même où un « trop » de fiches en désordre se présente, l'archive qui se dérobe dans le détritrus, s'anarchive vers l'oubli. Voilà ce qui nous aide à comprendre non seulement la montagne immense de mots que Kerouac a réussi à coucher sur papier durant ses 47 ans de vie, mais aussi son affinité et son

appréciation pour les méthodes de conservation du passé qui se trouvent dans ces temples de la mémoire que nous appelons les bibliothèques.

La relation que Kerouac entretient avec les bibliothèques évolue avec les années. Quelques notes écrites en août 1951 nous présentent un Kerouac qui se souvient des heures qu'il a « passé dans la Lowell High School Library à lire les petits caractères de l'Encyclopédie Britannica (édition de 1911 en papier pelure) et plus tard dans la Horace Mann Library, celle qui avait du lierre en dehors de la fenêtre, » et en conclut que c'est grâce à ces heures qu'il en est venu à finalement comprendre ce qu'était les « jours gris » de la vie (JKP, 16.12). Un mois plus tard, en plein conflit intérieur avec sa « dualité Canuck de merde, » il écrit dans son journal : « L'esprit du *plaisir* venant des occupations solitaires est ce que je dois récupérer de l'enfance pour l'ouvrage artistique de l'âge adulte... l'énorme préoccupation de jours gris avec les fichiers, les dossiers, les systèmes, les petits caractères, histoires éculées dans des tomes poussiéreux » (Cloutier 47). Les « jours gris » sont donc une source de plaisir, et sa préoccupation des fichiers sera donc partie prenante de « l'ouvrage de sa vie. » Il faut souligner aussi que, dans le contexte historique des Canadiens français vivant aux États-Unis, cette préoccupation fait partie intégrante de ce que l'on appelait la survivance, soit cet effort de préserver son héritage, sa langue, et sa culture enfouie au centre du mouvement d'assimilation hostile vécu à l'époque.

Pourtant Kerouac finira par ne plus croire en son propre projet archivistique. Ses doutes referont surface un an plus tard, et il écrira dans son journal d'août 1952 : « je réalise que je n'ai pas besoin de continuer mon journal—pourquoi encombrer le monde avec mes mots de bagatelles quotidiennes, etc., ce sont les esquisses, les histoires et les romans de nouvelle-prose qui videront ma part des choses sales dans la boîte de la bibliothèque pour que les porcs les envalent toutes » (JKP, 15.12). En effet, au fil des ans, le mal d'archive de Kerouac devient de plus en plus problématique. Dans *Visions of Gerard*, écrit en 1956, il affirme directement que le mal s'est répandu : « I'm grown sick in my papers » (545). (Une phrase à temporalité double; en français, ce serait à la fois « je deviens » et « je suis devenu » « malade dans mes papiers »). Malgré tout, pendant son voyage en Europe en 1965, périple qu'il raconte dans le dernier extrait de la Légende de Duluo, *Satori in Paris*, Kerouac cherche à retrouver les traces généalogiques de ses ancêtres français et bretons dans les grandes bibliothèques de Paris.

« J'essayais de trouver des choses à propos de ma vieille famille, » il nous raconte et rajoute, avec fierté, « J'étais le premier Lebris de Kérouack à retourner en France depuis 210 ans » (Satori 34-35). Malheureusement, dès son arrivée, Kerouac ne rencontre que des restrictions, des dossiers détruits, et des réactions peu encourageantes, terminant sa première journée à la Bibliothèque Nationale de France avec une plainte immature : « Tu peux pas fumer même aux toilettes à la Bibliothèque Nationale et tu ne peux même pas dire un mot avec toutes les secrétaires autour et il semble y avoir une fierté nationale à propos des « savants » qui sont tous assis-là en train de copier » (22). À sa deuxième journée, sa paranoïa s'amplifie, et il s'imagine

que les gendarmes veulent « abattre ce rat du Québec » qu'il représente (30). Kerouac s'installe à une table de travail et trouve maintenant désagréable, contrairement à son expérience antérieure, l'environnement de la bibliothèque. C'est pourri « de milliers de chercheurs et des millions de livres et d'étranges bibliothécaires-adjointes [...] qui admirent une belle *calligraphie* plus que n'importe quoi chez un chercheur ou un écrivain » (32). Les bibliothécaires se rendent compte rapidement que M. Kerouac avait bu : « Bien sûr, » Kerouac souligne, « ils ont tous senti l'alcool sur moi et me pensait fou » (32). Quand on lui demande de quitter les lieux, il se défend en expliquant qu'il « connaît les bibliothèques! » et, plus précisément, « la plus grande bibliothèque du monde, la New York Public Library, » et que donc il ne devrait « pas être regardé avec suspicion dans la Bibliothèque de Paris » (33). Son problème, pourrait-on dire, est qu'il est trop familier avec les bibliothèques; il s'y sent chez lui et se comporte en public comme on devrait seulement le faire en privé.

Plus tard, face à l'échec total de ses recherches dans les archives françaises, Kerouac semble perdre toute confiance de retrouver les traces de ses origines mais aussi avec tout projet archivistique. Sa dernière description de la Bibliothèque Nationale est comme un grand désaveu:

La bibliothèque entière gémissait avec le débris accumulé de siècles de folie enregistrée, comme si t'avais besoin d'enregistrer la folie dans le Vieux ou le Nouveau Monde de toute manière, comme mon armoire chez nous avec le débris incroyable de vieilles lettres en désordre par milliers, de livres, de poussière, de magazines, de résultats de courses d'enfance, tel que quand je me suis réveillé l'autre nuit d'un sommeil pur, m'a fait gémir juste à penser que c'était ça ce à quoi j'avais passé mes heures éveillées : me bâdrer avec des bigotes que ni moi, ni personne d'autre voudrait ou ne pourrait vraiment se souvenir... (35)

Ce passage, tiré de la fin de la Légende, est une renonciation remarquable à tout ce que Kerouac avait jadis préconisé. L'histoire du monde et l'histoire privée de l'homme sont réduites ici à la folie, et l'habileté de pouvoir s'en souvenir est considéré indésirable. La bibliothèque tout comme l'écrivain « gémissent, » les deux ayant accumulés trop de « débris » et de « folie, » La description de son mal d'archive en 1965, « le débris incroyable des vieilles lettres en désordre par milliers » rejoint l'image qu'il offre dans *Visions of Cody*, « le désordre incroyable de mon être. » Au bout du compte, et ce malgré sa passion pour l'organisation méthodique, que ce soit dans l'archive, dans l'armoire, ou dans l'âme, Kerouac n'arrive plus à se retrouver. Au moins, aujourd'hui, nous lecteurs chanceux et privilégiés, pouvons le chercher et le retrouver sans problème grâce aux fichiers bien organisés et archivés du catalogue de la bibliothèque la plus proche... ou la plus éloignée.

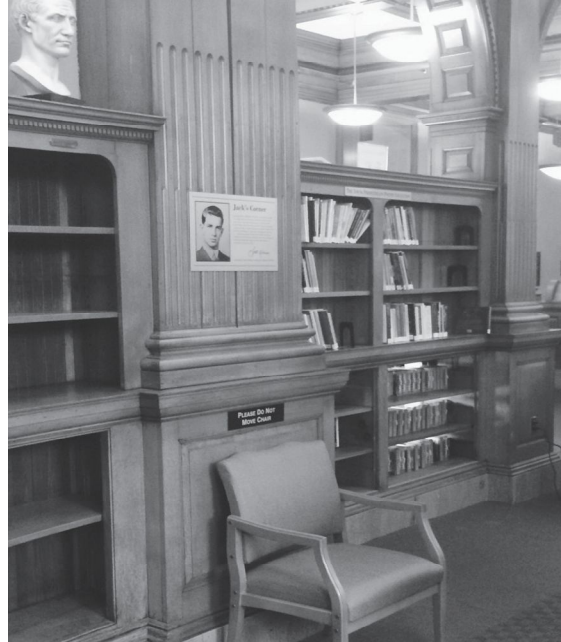
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<sup>1</sup> En entrevue au *Sel de la semaine* avec Fernand Séguin, à Radio-Canada, le 7 mars 1967, Kerouac se sert du mot *cabane* pour dire *maison*.

<sup>2</sup> 54.1. Jack Kerouac Papers, Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library. (À partir de maintenant, JKP). Toutes les citations de Kerouac sont tirées des textes en anglais; les traductions sont les miennes.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Mal de l'archive* (Paris: Galilée, 1995).



*Kerouac Corner in the Pollard Memorial Library in Lowell, Massachusetts (courtesy of the Pollard Memorial Library).*

### Jack Kerouac's Archive Fever

"I'm grown sick in my papers"  
—Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*

Jack Kerouac loved libraries. When he was a boy, in the late 1920s and into the 1930s, he'd read any book lying around in the house and sift through the print matter and ephemera that his father Leo, a local printer in Lowell, Massachusetts, brought back home from the shop. As a teenager he ritualistically played hooky, not (only) to pull a few pranks with his chums around town but also so he could hide away in a secluded corner of the Lowell public library and devour all sorts of books—philosophy, literature, sports, chess strategy, anything—in either French or English. In fact, Kerouac went to the library so often that he eventually established a new record for missing classes at Lowell High School in 1939. Today in the Pollard Library in Lowell you can find a "Kerouac Corner" in honor of the local legend's devotion to reading and books. Kerouac's infatuation with libraries continued during his university studies at Columbia in New York in the early 1940s where he fell in

love with the New York Public Library—the same building that today houses the bulk of his archive.<sup>1</sup> In this brief reflection, I suggest that the library is a central site—both figurative and literal—for Kerouac and a crucial context for his overall literary project.

In a 1947 diary, at the age of 25, Kerouac scribbled a short text entitled “On Big City Libraries”:

The two big city libraries that I've had occasion to frequent, the one in Boston and the bigger one in New York, always fill me with an unspeakable feeling of delight when I go to them, a delight that is compounded of these various things: seeing mad old men wander around in deep meditation, seeing pigeons in the court from the window of the library john, seeing pretty girls sitting and reading, and finally participating in a general gloating feeling that this is “culture” of the highest order and that all we who are gathered here are inveterate deep thinkers. I like to stalk around like a mad thinker with my topcoat flying behind me.

“But,” Kerouac concluded, “I never have written a decent line in the library” (JKP 54.1). It seems, then, that for this great traveler the library is a site of meditation, of thought, a place where a cultural community of knowledge gathers. Yet this most democratic of institutions is not where he can create his literary oeuvre. That topcoat has to fly, the writing comes “on the run” as he explains in his preface to *Big Sur*—in other words he is a running Proust. And yet, as the extent of the Berg Collection's Jack Kerouac Archive quickly demonstrates, the mad road days were always followed by private months of tedious craftsmanship at his desk, facing his typewriter, surrounded by his filing cabinets brimming with notebooks, letters, newspapers, photographs, and all kinds of ephemera.

Indeed, Kerouac's organizational acumen, the fact that he developed and designed his own original alphanumeric classification system for the majority of his writings, reflects his investment in library science writ large.<sup>2</sup> The library of Kerouac's day, with its file cards and bulky metallic postwar filing cabinets, lies at the foundation of his thought and of his vocational relation to memory, to record-keeping. In the popular imagination, Kerouac is often conjured as a not-so-distant embodiment of some American mystique of the open road and bohemianism, precursor and midwife to the 1960s countercultural revolution. This mediated Kerouac is often (ab)used by critics, many of whom prefer to treat him as some kind of hollow literary piñata that can be whacked in passing as they make their way toward authors whose personal failings they deem less reprehensible than the alcoholic “King of the Beats.” After many decades of such easy reification, Kerouac's true literary project largely remains understudied, even invisible, in the United States—with notable exceptions—in part because his archive had not yet been made accessible to the public.<sup>3</sup>



Thankfully, Kerouac is now enjoying a belated and necessary reassessment. While cars and the open road are indeed central to Kerouac's most famous novel, *On the Road*, this focus is part of an ongoing Americanist discourse that has tended to elide for far too long other fundamental sites in Kerouac (not to mention his status as a native French speaker and son of French Canadian immigrants). As I argue in this essay, Kerouac's road narratives are rather centripetal skeins, each one moving or tending toward a center in which the author sits at his desk flanked by his ever-growing archive—what he will later call the “incredible debris.” As I hope eventually to show in my current book project, to relocate Kerouac in the archive is to eclipse most critical and popular misconceptions of both his biography and literary contributions to post-World War II American and global literatures. Despite developing a “spontaneous” style, Kerouac is also a revision machine, a careful keeper of records, a cautious comber of details, an “arranger in the manger” with a craving for tracing everything back to its source (*Cody* 29). Douglas Brinkley, the first scholar to be given access to Kerouac's archive in the 1990s—almost a full decade before the Kerouac Papers were opened to researchers in 2006—put it this way: “Kerouac was a fastidious, old-fashioned *craftsman*. For every day he spent ‘on the road’ during his lifetime, gathering material, he toiled for a month in solitude—sketching, polishing, and typing his various novels, prayers, poems, and reflections” (51). Clark Coolidge offers a more pithy statement: “Kerouac's is not a style. It *is* a practice” (“Jack” 20).

Ann Douglas further judiciously reminds us of the “meticulous and extensive records Kerouac kept of his career and his times; he meant his work to be in some sense verifiable” (12).<sup>4</sup> Verifiability has long been a principal evidentiary function of archives; literary papers reflect not only the labor of a life dedicated to the production of literature, but these proofs of work are also simultaneously proofs of life. Considering the extent of Kerouac's carefully detailed recordkeeping—including countless character charts, event logs, inventories, maps, and diary entries that directly address future readers—Kerouac was not simply seeking the reification of his life and work, but rather hoped that further decryption would one day lead to truer understanding, even for a life as examined as his own. Indeed, even though “Kerouac's life is one of the most chronicled of any twentieth-century author” (Adams 150), his archive continues to yield new texts and new revelations. Thus, although there is much more to unpack in this complex dynamic between Kerouac and the archive, for the purposes of this essay, I offer a concentrated look at his evolving relation to libraries and library technology.

The very idea of libraries, of card catalogues, filing systems, modern record management, provides Kerouac with the shape of his thought and of his relation to memory, and thus to history. In *Visions of Cody*, Kerouac repeatedly offers metatextual reflections on his writing process, namely the excavation of memory *and* of the present moment for literary output. Here is an early example: “the moment is ungraspable, is already gone and if we sleep we can call it up again mixing it with unlimited other



beautiful combinations—shuffle the old file cards of the soul in demented hallucinated sleep” (15). With this peculiar turn of phrase, Kerouac suggests that the structure of his own memory is modeled on library technology; for him, the past has taken on the materiality of “file cards” that may now be reshuffled into aesthetically pleasing combinations. As lived moments are “memoried”—Kerouac’s verb for a process akin to archiving or, to use a more contemporary analogy, “saving” onto a hard drive—they become remember-able and thus retrievable.<sup>5</sup> They enter Kerouac’s card catalogue—what he called his “steeltrap brain,”<sup>6</sup> presumably available for subsequent shuffling. In a way, then, when Kerouac does undertake this shuffling process to extend the Duluoz Legend in written form, he is essentially conducting archival research in the library of his mind. In other words, Kerouac’s novelistic method relies on careful record management. Kerouac returns to the “file cards” image later in *Visions of Cody* when he fantasizes about such an organizational system for obtained ideas: “supposing each time you heard a delightfully original idea or were given such an image that makes the mind sing you immediately slapped it over like one of those new office roller files” (49). Ideas and images are filed away in the great rolodex of Kerouac’s mind, becoming a dynamic internal archive.

And yet, despite this fantasy and his real-world concern for classification with his own writings, Kerouac was well aware that memory rarely attains such pristine arrangement, and he is haunted by the spectrality of his efforts, the Eros and Thanatos of what Jacques Derrida calls *le mal de l’archive* (archive fever): “I am conscious of my own personal tragedy,” Kerouac admits, “my room itself is haunted by it at night when I sleep or wake from a series of restless desperate images, catching myself in the act of shuffling the file cards of the memory or the mind under the deck” (41). Kerouac’s greatest fear—tied, crucially, to “the persistent feeling that I’m gonna die soon”—is to be “throwing away something that I can’t even find in the incredible clutter of my being but it’s going out with the refuse en masse, buried in the middle of it, every now and then I get a glimpse” (41-42). Kerouac thus describes his *mal d’archive*, that trouble, that evil, that insatiable feverish passion that propels him to scour not only the file cards of his memory but also the hidden roads of America. For Derrida, this archive fever means “never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there’s too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself” (91). Derrida’s impassioned description is thus embodied, with an uncanny resonance, in what Kerouac expresses in *Visions of Cody* when the narrator catches himself “shuffling the file cards of the memory,” and realizes that “every now and then I get a glimpse” of that place where it slips away and “anarchives” itself into forgetfulness in “the clutter” of his being (right where “there’s too much of it”). The passage helps us understand how Kerouac ended his 47 years of life having accumulated such manuscript mountains, unable to stop himself from digging through that excess clutter, trying to “file” it all away as it ceaselessly expands to form the basis of his novelistic output. It also clarifies

his affinity and appreciation for the twentieth-century record-keeping technologies ensconced in those temples of memory we call libraries.

The relation Kerouac entertained with libraries evolved through the years. A few scribbled notes from August 1951—a few months after having typed the *On the Road* scroll—begin with a riff motif of “gray days” and reveal a Kerouac sweetly remembering the childhood “scholarly hours spent in the Lowell HS [High School] library reading the small print of the Encyclopedia Britannica (1911 edition with the onion skin paper) and later in the Horace Mann library that had ivy outside the windows facing the raw air with the brave certitude of prep school deans, gray days—” (JKP 16.12). It was through these library hours, Kerouac adds, that he “had come to appreciate the Atlantic Seaboard sense of grey days” (JKP 16.12). A month later, while in the midst of one of his most intense periods of physical and psychological identitarian conflict—he was convalescing from a severe attack of thrombophlebitis in the Kingsbridge Veterans Affairs hospital—Kerouac writes in his journal that there is “one thing” he “must always remember in this Canuck dualism crap,” namely: “The spirit of *pleasure* in solitary occupations is what I’ve got to recover from boyhood for manhood’s work of art...The huge gray-day preoccupation with files, records, systems, small print, hoary histories in dusty ledgers” (*Unknown* 117). The “gray days” of childhood—which we know from the earlier entry are those spent in libraries—here return not as a source of gloom but rather a source of pleasure, and the basis of his work of art as an adult. Since this insight comes to him while further reflecting on his dual, bilingual identity as both French Canadian and American writer expressing himself mostly in English, it should be stressed that in the wider historical context of Quebec diaspora, such “preoccupation with files, records, systems” was vital to the project of *survivance* which sought to preserve the French Canadian heritage, language, and culture in the midst of the hotbed of assimilation in which Kerouac grew up.<sup>7</sup>

Ultimately, however, Kerouac would lose faith in his archival project. His doubts resurface roughly a year later in August 1952 when he writes: “This is the shortest diary ever kept, tho, because I realize I don’t have to keep one—why clutter up the world with my words of daily trivia, etc, it’s the sketches and histories and new prose novels that will dump my share of the dirty things into the library bin for the pigs to gobble up” (JKP 15.12). The goal of leaving a “complete record” behind, as he puts it in *Visions of Cody* (99), to “resume commemoration of daily dates, as in hospital promised,” no longer seems necessary or destined for the eventual archive (“library bin”) (JKP 15.12). Indeed, as the years went by and he accumulated more and more unpublished novels in his rucksack and filing cabinets, Kerouac’s archive fever became more and more problematic. In *Visions of Gerard*, composed in 1956, he baldly affirms that the sickness has spread: “I’m grown sick in my papers,” a phrase that holds a revealing double temporality, at once present and past tense (*Visions of Cody, Gerard, Big Sur* 545). Despite the fever having reached a new sickening pitch, Kerouac nevertheless went on to undertake his 1965 European trip, as recounted in

the last entry to the Duluoz Legend, *Satori in Paris*, with the express goal of finding the genealogical traces of his French and Breton ancestry hidden away in the confines of the great libraries of Paris.

"I was trying to find things out about my old family," he explains in the novella, adding with pride: "I was the first Lebris de K rouack ever to go back to France in 210 years to find out" (*Satori* 34-35). There is a sense of excitement visible in the early entries of the trip, such as when he writes: "Got the library cased...and am ready for real business Monday" (Diary #47, JKP 58.13). Kerouac even preserved his library card from the National Archives that discloses the seat he occupied on May 30, 1965: No. 329 (Diary #47, JKP 58.13). Alas, as he begins requesting specific material, the "head librarian patiently explains to me that the Nazis done bombed and burned all their French papers in 1944, something which I'd forgotten in my zeal" (*Satori* 22).<sup>8</sup> The library, a site that Kerouac had loved and revered since childhood, has turned into a site of restrictions and ridicule. He ends his first day with an immature lament: "You cant smoke even in the toilet in the Biblioth que Nationale and you cant get a word in edgewise with the secretaries and there's a national pride about 'scholars' all sitting there copying" (*Satori* 22).

The next day, the archive suddenly grows elusive, and the local authorities seem bent on preventing his access to it. Lost in Paris, Jean-Louis asks directions from a middle-aged *gendarme* (beat cop), but his particular French dialect<sup>9</sup> presents an obstacle to finding—and thus entering—the archive:

While looking for the library, incidentally, a gendarme in the Place de la Concorde told me that Rue de Richelieu (street of the National Library) was thataway, pointing, and because he was an officer I was afraid to say "What?... NO!" because I knew it was in the opposite direction somewhere—Here he is some kind of sergeant or other who certainly oughta know the streets of Paris giving an American tourist a bum steer. (Or did he believe I was a wise-guy Frenchman pulling his leg? Since my French *is* French). (*Satori* 29-30)

Kerouac's paranoia only amplifies as he speculates that the gendarme was trying to lead him to a spot where they could "shoot down that Qu bec rat" (*Satori* 30). When he finally makes his way to the Biblioth que Nationale, the deterioration of his relation to the library intensifies. He suddenly finds himself oppressed by the reading room environment—long gone is that "unspeakable feeling of delight"—the place is now lousy "with thousands of scholars and millions of books and strange assistant librarians with Zen Master brooms (really French aprons) who admire good *handwriting* more than anything in a scholar or writer" (*Satori* 32). Despite appreciating his calligraphy, the librarians are clearly wise to the fact that Mr. Kerouac has been drinking: "Of course," Kerouac self-consciously underscores, "they all smelled the liquor on me and thought I was a nut" (*Satori* 33). When they ask him to leave the premises, Kerouac tellingly defends himself by explaining that

he “know[s] libraries!” “and specifically the greatest library in the world, the New York Public Library,” and so should not be “regarded with suspicion in the Paris Library” (*Satori* 33). Kerouac’s problem, one might say, is that he is, in fact, all too familiar with libraries; he feels so at home in them that he acts in public in a way that is usually only suitable in private.

Later, when his encounters in the French archives prove such a failure, Kerouac not only loses faith in his initial dream to reconnect with his origins, but also in his own lifelong archival project. His final description of the Bibliothèque Nationale stands as a total disavowal:

The whole library groaned with the accumulated debris of centuries of recorded folly, as tho you had to record folly in the Old or the New World anyhow, like my closet with its incredible debris of cluttered old letters by the thousands, books, dust, magazines, childhood boxscores, the likes of which when I woke up the other night from a pure sleep, made me groan to think this is what I was doing with my waking hours: burdening myself with junk neither I nor anybody else should really want or will ever remember in Heaven. (*Satori* 35)

This passage, culled from the end of the Legend, is a remarkable renunciation of everything Kerouac had once advocated. The history of the world and the private history of a man are here reduced to folly, and the ability to remember is now considered undesirable. Both archive and novelist “groan” with the surfeit of “debris” they have accumulated over the years. The articulation of his *mal d’archive* in 1965 as the “incredible debris of cluttered old letters by the thousands” hauntingly echoes the image of “the incredible clutter of my being” he had offered in *Visions of Cody*.

“Debris,” “rubbish,” and “junk” had gleefully littered the novelist’s earlier, grandiose narratives: in *Visions of Cody* Kerouac had lovingly described “the ordinary city debris of a field” and “the rubbish in the weeds of an empty lot” (70, 40). *Visions of Cody* also describes what was then nothing less than a divine mission to “go groan, go groan alone” (295). But now the groans of man and library seem to express only a “mal d’archive,” with Kerouac looking back at his “recorded folly” in dismay; “this is what I was doing with my waking hours?” he sadly asks himself. Now, his painstaking “complete record” seems to have lost its value, haunting him, preventing him from attaining “pure sleep”—that sleep when, in his youth, he used to “shuffle the file cards” of his soul. In the end, and despite his passion for meticulous organization—whether in his files or in his soul—Kerouac could no longer find himself.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Kerouac Papers, Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, New York Public Library (from now on, JKP). Significant holdings from the *fonds* Kerouac are also housed at Emory University's Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Atlanta, GA, and at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, TX. Smaller collections can also be found elsewhere, such as Columbia University's Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

<sup>2</sup> The JKP at the Berg Collection has retained the original order Kerouac had brought to a large portion of his writings. The Series is entitled "Kerouac's arrangement of his archive." See the Jack Kerouac Papers, 1920-1977, Finding Aid: [archives.nypl.org/brg/19343#content\\_structure](http://archives.nypl.org/brg/19343#content_structure).

<sup>3</sup> I'd also like to underscore the early pioneering studies on Kerouac's oeuvre by Ann Charters, Clark Coolidge, Nancy M. Grace, Tim Hunt, Gerald Nicosia, and Regina Weinreich.

<sup>4</sup> See also Ann Charters's groundbreaking essay "Kerouac's Literary Method and Experiments: The Evidence of the Manuscript Notebooks in the Berg Collection," *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, vol. 84, no. 4 Winter 1981, pp. 431-50.

<sup>5</sup> Variants of "memorying" appear in several moments in *Visions of Cody*, notably on pages 4, 13, and 17.

<sup>6</sup> In his *Paris Review* interview, Kerouac says that "a girl once told me that I had a steeltrap brain, meaning I'd catch her with a statement she'd made an hour ago even though our talk had rambled a million lightyears away from that point..." (*Conversations* 70-71).

<sup>7</sup> For more on Kerouac, bilingualism, and *survivance*, see Melehy.

<sup>8</sup> In his Paris diary, Kerouac does not say that he had "forgotten," but rather that he didn't know: "many of the national records of France were bombed out, which I didn't know" (JKP 58, 13).

<sup>9</sup> Kerouac grew up in a French Canadian household in New England and did not speak English until he was six years old. The type of French Kerouac spoke—one he often called "patois" or "Canuck," and even "Cajun"—would have been considered heavily accented, even arcane, by European standards. For more on Kerouac's spoken and written French, see Cloutier, "Translator's Note," in *The Unknown Kerouac* (xxiii-xxxiv). See also Melehy; Cloutier, "Avant-Propos: Les Travaux de Jean-Louis K rouac," in *La vie est d'hommage* (9-48); and Kerouac's letter to Yvonne Le Maitre, 8 Sept. 1950, in his *Selected Letters: 1940-1956* (227-229).

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