

One and Only: The Untold Story of On the Road and of Lu Anne Henderson, the Woman Who Started Jack and Neal on Their Journey

By Gerald Nicosia and Anne Marie Santos

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Reviewed by Nancy M. Grace, The College of Wooster

Despite its own claims to the contrary, *One and Only* is not a memoir of Lu Anne Henderson, upon whom Kerouac based the character of Marylou in *On the Road*. Nor is it an informed discussion of the role of women in the Beat Generation and post-World War II cultural history, or of the process of Walter Salles making a film adaptation of Kerouac's iconic text.

One and Only is a transcribed long interview that Nicosia conducted in October 1978 with Henderson, who wanted to speak about her relationships with Neal Cassady and Kerouac. Nicosia states that since Henderson was deceased at the time he transcribed the interview (she died in 2010), and thus had no opportunity to correct or change her statements, he tried to be as faithful to the taped conversation as possible. In doing so, he presents as an engaging and forgiving personality who despite repeated illnesses and drug addictions maintained a sharp memory, someone whose recollections constitute an easy and pleasurable reading experience. The wonderful set of accompanying photographs support that characterization, revealing a woman who retained a photogenic "All-American girl" quality throughout her life.

However, if one expects to encounter new revelations reshaping a critical understanding of Kerouac and Cassady, that reader will be disappointed. Nicosia claims too much when he asserts that if it were not for Henderson's "powers of observation" (xxi), one would not, for instance, understand the uniqueness of Kerouac's writing style, Kerouac's compassionate character, Cassady's deeply entrenched uncertainty producing an inability to find direction for his life, and Kerouac's parallel inability to find and keep a paying job (xx-xxii). One need only turn to Ann Charters's stellar editing of Kerouac's letters to learn these things, and other solid scholarly work has long reinforced this knowledge. One must also challenge his claim that Henderson was "the very special key that would unlock Neal and Jack's hearts towards each other" (127) and "the only person who observed the tandem procession of Cassady and Kerouac to their nearly identical, self-induced deaths" (103). Allen Ginsberg, for one, served both of those functions, so clearly Henderson could not have been the "only person."

What Henderson's interview does is substantiate the already known in terms of biographical and composition histories, while adding nothing to advance an understanding of *On the Road* or the character of Marylou, which remains an inviolate artifice. However, in the process, Henderson contributes some charming and poignant anecdotes. For instance, her rendition of the "naked" ride across Texas with Kerouac and Cassady conveys a sweet innocence, as does her memories of Kerouac showing her and

others *On the Road* after it first came out, especially their eagerness to celebrate his success and read the parts about themselves, which she remembers that he explained as fictionalized to various extents. She also recalls that Cassady felt embarrassed by the shady nature of his hammer throwing performance with Ken Kesey's *Merry Pranksters*. Perhaps most touching is her recollection of Kerouac telling her in 1957 that "I don't see anything in the clouds anymore," a sad recognition of the impending loss of his imagination (108).

The Henderson interview may prove most useful as verification of theories and stories others have constructed about Kerouac and Cassady, which is perhaps the best one can hope for with uncorroborated eye-witness testimony. Henderson—and Beat studies as well—would have been better served if Nicosia had simply left Henderson's words as just that. Unfortunately, he built his own interpretive frame around the interview, apparently to apotheosize her as the Beat *sine qua non* and as a second wave feminist. The explication that emerges strongly suggests that both goals are impossible.

First, the scaffolding situating the interview within the genre of life-writing misrepresents the history and function of the genre, especially for post-World War II women. Sadly, Nicosia praises Henderson for telling the kind of story that women have for millennia been relegated to telling: that of their relationship with famous men. In turn, he condemns Carolyn Cassady for writing memoirs "that are more about her than they about Neal and Jack," and he likewise criticizes Joyce Johnson, Helen Weaver, and Edie Parker Kerouac for daring "to shift the focus of the story from Jack [and other Beat men] to [them]selves" (xix). Such condemnation projects a stunning blindness regarding the processes by which feminists have fought to empower women with the authority to use language to construct themselves, to obliterate their social identities as half-formed appendages stitched to the fully constituted male. The power of Beat memoirs such as Johnson's *Minor Characters*, Jones's *How I Became Hettie Jones*, and even Diane di Prima's experimental hybrid *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, unlike Henderson's narrative, resides in their meta-discourse that speaks directly to these struggles.

In the context of applauding Henderson's textual subordination, Nicosia then declares Henderson a "pioneering role model for a woman," specifically for "women's sexuality and personal freedom," and a precursor to Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem (130). Granted, sexual freedom was a major component of both first and second-wave Western feminisms, but to have sex outside of marriage and then to "accept [her lover's] promiscuous sexuality. . . [and then] to welcome multiple sexual partners herself" (130) does not a feminist nor a pioneering role model make. In fact, women have done all of these things long before recorded human history—and not as a feminist action plan. Added to Nicosia's superficial definition of feminism, *One and Only* includes disturbing information from Henderson herself, her daughter Anne Marie Santos, and Beat compatriot Al Hinkle about Henderson's inability to escape from sexually abusive relationships over her lifetime, her willingness to dump her daughter for weeks on end with friends so she could go off a boyfriend (144), and her non-reflective explanation for staying with Cassady despite the fact that he beat her. Like so many people trapped in abusive relationships, she denies the violence: "Neal was not a violent person, and most

of the time he didn't get mad enough to use physical violence—*except with me*. And when Neal would hit me, that was simply emotion. I mean, that's the way it was with us" (editor's italics; 43). Underscoring this evidence of long-term abuse, specifically the inability to recognize it as such, is the inclusion of an unfinished letter that Henderson wrote to Cassidy in 1957. Here, she pleadingly tells him that she has exercised very little agency in her own development: "you'll find I'm a woman you've molded without even being near" (161).

Instead of calling Henderson a feminist pioneer, Nicosia would have done her (and feminisms) more justice if he had acknowledged the significance of the abuse she endured, her complicity in it, the collateral damage that such abuse produces, and her ability to persevere. But his framing narrative ignores (or fails to see) this evidence and thus, albeit no doubt unintentionally, perpetuates the naturalization of women's subordination as part of the sexual contract.

The book's concluding chapter only underscores the underscoring. A first-person narrative by co-author Santos, the chapter includes not only Santos's memories of her mother's struggles with abusive relationships but it also, oddly, takes readers onto the set of Walter Salles's adaption of *On the Road* and the so-called "Beat Boot Camp" that Nicosia and Santos participated in. Santos, to her credit, states that she understands that actor Kristen Stewart plays a fiction character—not the real Lu Anne Henderson (186), but the material about the Beat boot camp and the upcoming film transforms *One and Only* into transparent advertising for the film, compelling one to ask whether the film is a cinematic interpretation of Kerouac's novel or a mockumentary about the principals who brought Beat literature national and global recognition.

Ultimately, *One and Only*'s interpretation of Henderson—through her own words and those of others who knew her, even if for only a few days as is the case with Nicosia—reduces her to simply another vehicle through which the guys can sycophantically talk about "Jack and Neal."