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Sunshine Daydreams and Haight Street Nightmares: Autobiography, Postmodernism, and Deadhead Memoirs

Nicholas G. Meriwether

In an 1895 letter, George Bernard Shaw memorably wrote that "I object to publishers: the one service they have done me is to teach me to do without them." As he saw it, publishers "combine commercial rascality with artistic touchiness and pettishness, without being either good business men or fine judges of literature. All that is necessary for the production of a book is an author and a bookseller, without any intermediary parasite" (2009, 28–29). One wonders what he would have thought of print-on-demand publishing, which one business historian has called the pre-eminent "disruptive technology" to challenge the publishing industry in recent years (Picard 2003), and one whose purpose is to provide greater access to printing technology and distribution than authors have ever had before—exactly the kind of access that Shaw seemed to be arguing for, in fact.

Traditional publishers have been quick to dismiss these claims of innovation, pointing out the obvious parallels to earlier so-called vanity or author-subvention presses, and critics have bemoaned the defects and deficiencies that often characterize the products of these presses. Yet there is a shrillness to these dismissals, fueled by the uneasiness that one busi-

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ness theorist called the lesson "haunting the publishing industry. It is the specter of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*" (Odlyzko 1999, 1). As a cultural institution with centuries of tradition and a reputation for excellence, the downfall of the *Britannica* "is more than a parable about the dangers of complacency," two writers observed:

> It demonstrates how quickly and drastically the new economics of information can change the rules of competition, allowing new players and substitute products to render obsolete such traditional sources of competitive advantage as a sales force, a supreme brand, and even the world's best content. (Evans and Wurster 1999, 4)

Two recent memoirs that raise these issues for Grateful Dead studies are Token Jackson's 2007 book, *Haight Street Posse*, and Talia Rose's 2009 volume, *Sunshine Daydream*. Both books represent a useful type of Deadhead narrative, though their presentation raises the question of how best to assess their literary and evidentiary merit. This essay places these works in a broader critical context, focusing on the genre of autobiography and applying elements drawn from postmodernism, oral history theory, and archival studies as lenses for understanding the mechanisms that produced the texts and mediate their meaning. Although no paradigm can obviate a work's intrinsic aesthetic or literary flaws, these contexts provide intriguing ways of viewing both books, and in particular, the self-published, print-on-demand mechanism that brought them before the public. Taken together, these interpretive frameworks can combine in a way that not only highlights both books' scholarly utility as Deadhead texts, but also locates them within the evolving lexicon of Grateful Dead studies.

Paul Paolucci (2010) has written an extensive review of Talia Rose's *Sunshine Daydream*, so I will provide only a brief sketch here. Published in 2009, Rose's 426-page memoir, subtitled *One Girl's Tale of Life on the Bus*, describes her coming of age as a misfit in a suburban, Northeastern, upper-middle-class family. She describes an upbringing by right-wing parents whom she describes as unloving alcoholics, and an adolescence characterized by an emerging worldview fueled by finding

escape in the Beats and other simpatico literary figures, discovering psychedelics, and finally becoming a Deadhead. This is not a carefully structured exposition: we glean these details over the course of the entire book. Hers is far from the polished literary style of Peter Conners' thoughtful intellectual autobiography *Growing Up Dead* (2009), or the delightful pseudonymous *Confessions of a Deadhead* (Starburst Commander 2009). And, as Paolucci points out in his review, Rose's book is heavily slanted toward the prison side of her experience: we go from the liberating joy of Deadhead tour to a sustained exploration of the nightmare caused by the post-"Touch of Grey" implosion of the scene, riven by throngs of heedless newcomers and preyed on by overzealous law enforcement looking for easy arrests.

Despite the book's length, and the occasional flashes of love and wonder that explain the pull of the Deadhead experience and the tourhead ethos in particular, the negatives she describes stand out far more than the positives. Though the narrator's voyage of self-discovery navigates the decline of the scene through the horrors of prison to finally emerge with a strong sense of self characterized by a primal maternal sensibility, it loses any sense of an ongoing engagement with Deadhead ideals, which is the book's ostensible purpose—and one that forms the core of both *Growing Up Dead* and *Confessions of a Deadhead*.

Instead, Rose's memoir is a survivor's story, explicitly making the point that she, as a Deadhead, made many mistakes, and while she remembers some good things from her time as a Deadhead, these are memories of a past she has left behind, a painful transcendence that leaves us with the dominant impression of a Dead scene that failed to live up to its implied promise as a surrogate family for lost souls and wounded young people like Rose.

That same theme of a past left behind informs Token Jackson's *Haight Street Posse*. Published two years before Rose's book by the same print-on-demand publisher, Lulu Press, Jackson's much briefer account—197 pages—is also much darker. Hard drugs play a role in Rose's account, but that is only one theme, and less of a negative than the pressure the DEA and other law enforcement agencies brought to bear on the scene and on her tourhead circle. In Jackson's account, hard

drugs provide the major organizing theme. Jackson also served time, but his prison experience is something he explicitly disavows as a narrative purpose for the book; for him, drug addiction—first crack cocaine, then heroin—provides the real focus of the book.

Jackson is younger than Rose, coming to the scene without her literary awareness and historical understanding of the scene and its roots in the 1950s Beat generation and 1960s Haight-Ashbury, and his background is lower middle class/working class. His upbringing is in the South, unlike Rose's Northeast, but this does not inform but rather cements his alienation, since his parents are not Southern, nor is his worldview shaped by that perspective. Like Rose, he is estranged from most of his peers, using his emerging Deadhead sensibility to try to find and forge a sense of belonging in the Dead scene.

Jackson's time in the scene is after "Touch of Grey," and unlike Rose's focus on tour, his is mostly off tour. Even while on tour, his focus is away from the shows, in the motels and parking lots where he first vended grilled cheese sandwiches and concert tapes before graduating to dealing marijuana, LSD, and finally heroin. But mostly, Jackson's Deadhead experience is in the Haight-Ashbury, where he finds a community of Deadheads who survive by selling marijuana. Over time, several of his friends become addicted to crack cocaine; eventually, even more succumb to heroin—80%, by his estimate. Rose describes a similar decline in her scene, but the death toll in Jackson's book is much higher, and the general tenor much bleaker.

So what do these largely negative accounts mean, and how do we treat them critically? In a broad sense, even the darkness they describe can be seen as a real impetus behind both narratives—a literal evocation of Garcia's comment in 1991 that Deadheads "get something" at Dead shows:

> It's their version of the Acid Test, so to speak. It's kind of like the war-stories metaphor: Drug stories *are* war stories, and the Grateful Dead stories are their drug stories, or war stories. It's an adventure you can still have in America … You can't hop the freights anymore, but you can chase the Grateful Dead around. You can have all your tires blow out in some weird town in the Midwest, and you can get hell from strangers. You can have

> something that lasts throughout your life as adventures, the times you took chances. I think that's essential in anybody's life, and it's harder and harder to do in America. If we're providing some margin of that possibility, then that's great. (Goodman 1989, 118)

Yet if these are Deadhead war stories, there are a number of traditional critical problems they raise, and some interesting more recent issues; and for Grateful Dead studies, perhaps what is most interesting is how those can be bridged, and what this means from a broader scholarly standpoint. We can start by assessing them as examples of the genre of autobiography, which also allows us to treat both works from an explicitly postmodern perspective. From that basis, we can apply concepts drawn from oral history theory and archival science to tease out a more general sense of their evidentiary value for Grateful Dead studies.

How to critique autobiography is not a new problem. Even a brief survey of the literature reveals the issue as not only perennial but endemic. Even the term autobiography is disputed: its first use occurs at the end of the eighteenth century, when it also embarked on its long identity crisis, marked by confusions with its predecessors, memoirs and confessions. Since then, literary scholars have compounded the issue of genre by alleging that those earlier forms can best be viewed as examples, subgenres, or even ur-genres of autobiography. Classifying the two works discussed here according to these rubrics might be an interesting exercise, but it is not my purpose, in part because that tends to invoke conventional literary standards that foreground their flaws. By those standards, both books suffer from flaws in structure, narrative, and character development, and even more fundamental issues with grammar, syntax, and vocabulary.

However, those questions can be recast by focusing instead on reception: how we read, interpret, and construct these books as Deadhead autobiographies—as evidence of the Grateful Dead phenomenon. Such an approach has been well defined from a postmodern perspective, allowing us to abandon the attempt to discern authorial intent and focus instead on the text itself. When we do, those problems become interesting on several levels—for the texts themselves, and for us as readers, as responsive and

responsible critics of the Dead phenomenon. It is worth mentioning here that to some literary scholars, this mandate is considered an essential part of the role of a critic of autobiography:

> Forming a canon of autobiography depends on agreeing with a particular narrative of history and choosing autobiographers who reproduce it. Such a construction is always a political retrospective with the following limitation: what were once rather more clearly ideological and political criteria get recorded as aesthetic criteria. This process also confers on the writer the frequently dehistoricizing status of artist and allows, even requires, one to view textual production in familiarly generic ways, even when this interpretation is at odds with the broader discursive practices within which the writer was working. (Gilmore 1994, 74)

And as explicitly Deadhead autobiographies, these books invoke similar challenges that literary critic Betty Bergland has identified with ethnic autobiographies: "Because of such representative status, the burden of these texts becomes enormous, and how we read these texts raises profound questions;" for her, "it becomes imperative to develop a theory of autobiography that acknowledges the importance of marginalized voices, but avoids essentializing individuals and groups; that takes into account complex relationships between cultures and discourses that produce the speaking subject, but avoids viewing language as a transparent representation of the imagined real" (1994, 131).

Bergland's remarks could be taken as a manifesto for Deadhead autobiographies and the critics who read them as representative texts, but it is her comment about language that is especially interesting for the purposes of this essay. By focusing on language, and in particular its relation to an imagined real, she opens up the possibility of applying oral history theory to these works, with its well-developed body of theory regarding truth in testimony. This builds on the work of anthropologist Michael M. J. Fischer, who provides a compelling rubric for reading autobiographies as social, and specifically anthropological, texts; together, these critics' theories can forge an approach that not only encompasses the marginalized voices of Deadheads, felons, women, and the working class—all sobriquets that apply to these two authors—but one that also undercuts what Fischer has noted of autobiography as a whole, that it represents

"a privileged genre where the reflexivity of human storytelling is foregrounded" (1994, 82). With these two books, and the means of their production, that privileged genre has been undercut—what Bergland means when she writes of Emma Goldman's autobiography as one that "occupies forbidden spaces" (1994, 153). Goldman's reflections on prison resonate with Rose's, and with the explicit absence of that part of Jackson's narrative. When Jackson identifies its elision, he is emphasizing its status as forbidden space—forbidden by society, and by extension, in his own narrative and his own life. Yet in Rose's account, it is hard not to hear an echo of Goldman's contention that, "For people with ideals, prison is the best school" ([1931] 1970 I, 116).

And prison is where Rose crafted the first draft of her book, a context that imparts a particular piquancy to Bergland's suggestion that,

> Because autobiographical subjects reproduce prevailing ideologies, the issues raised by autobiography are not simply literary or historical, but cultural ones. If we consider culture in the broadest sense to be what is prescribed or prohibited, then as autobiographies naturalize certain subject positions they serve to prescribe these positions and guarantee social relations implied by the subject. (1994, 160)

Yet these books don't reproduce prevailing ideologies, at least not completely, despite the fact that both books finally present a narrator who has left the Dead world and is, at least in places, self-consciously reflecting on his/her experience within it from a perspective born of hindsight and, to a degree, of mainstream reassessment, as suggested by Rose's "Author's Note" (2009, 5) and by Jackson's "Epilogue" (2007, 196–97). That failure—or refusal—usefully invokes Leigh Gilmore's contention in the introduction to her coedited anthology of critical essays, *Autobiography and Postmodernism*, where her claims for the essays in that volume I believe apply equally well to these two books: "Rather than articulating a shared vision of postmodernism's possibilities and liabilities," they "expose how postmodernism's performance of questioning not intersects with but powerfully structures contemporary interest in autobiography" (1994, 3). And, for our purposes, we might say that this contemporary interest is that of Grateful Dead studies, where postmodern-

ism has already proven a useful tool for assessing a wide range of topics by scholars such as Jon Ney (2012), James Tuedio (2003), Mark Tursi (2012), and others. This essay builds on that work by applying postmodernist theory already highly developed in one literary genre, autobiography, but deployed here specifically to address the means of production that produced these publications. This ultimately has implications for how we view that literary performance, connecting author and audience, performance and reception, in ways that are not exclusively postmodern; and that blending of traditional and innovative, modern and postmodern, is very much in keeping with the evolving conceptual lexicon that describes Grateful Dead studies.

Applying postmodernism to these works is not simple. Interestingly, there is even a way in which the difficulties of applying literary genre theory to autobiography more broadly mimic the complexities of subcultural identity in authorial voice in these books, echoing Jacques Derrida's contention that:

> Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging. And not because of an abundant overflowing or a free, anarchic, and unclassifiable productivity, but because of the *trait* of participation itself. (Derrida and Ronell 1980, 65)

Both Rose and Jackson's memoirs illustrate that complex give-and-take between author and subject, between Deadhead and mainstream, an illustration rendered all the more powerful and even poignant because of the print-on-demand publishing environment that put them before the public. Thus, both by nature and by virtue of the means of their production, these two works fit what Leigh Gilmore has called postmodernism's ability to identify and articulate a theory of self-representation that both resists and produces cultural identity (1994, 4). In so doing, postmodernism allows us to view a text's utility and achievement despite its literary and aesthetic flaws: it gives us a rubric that enables us to look beyond conventional metrics of narrative efficacy and literary quality to locate the evidentiary value of the books as products of a unique Deadhead sensibility—or sensibilities, since the two works discussed here differ markedly, in many

respects. This is what Gilmore suggests when she notes that "postmodernism is most useful to the study of self-representation when an ensemble of cultural, historical, and textual practices are viewed in their specific performances" (1994, 4).

There is a political edge to this application as well, for both of these books do not fare well according to conventional literary metrics. Each has obvious literary defects, from structural to thematic to editorial; it is unlikely that scholars without a particular critical need would devote time to serious analysis of either. Yet if these works had remained unpublished, and scholars were to uncover them in manuscript form in fifty or a hundred years, then these accounts would invoke very different metrics of analysis and achievement, recasting their flaws in a substantially different light. Here, too, postmodernism allows us to set aside those proscriptive metrics in favor of what Gilmore notes is "an emerging critical focus on the mechanism of value by which some autobiographers and autobiographical practices had been marginalized" (1994, 4). And no thoughtful reading of these books would suggest that their narrators are anything but marginalized.

If postmodernism offers us a way of reframing how we view these texts and the issues they raise, that still leaves the question of how to evaluate them. What do they mean as Deadhead memoirs? What do they add to our knowledge of the scene as literary and historical evidence? And how useful are they from a scholarly perspective? Ultimately, both books get at the question of what did it "mean" to be a Deadhead in America in the last five to ten years of the band's career. Here, the books' focus on life off tour as much or more than on tour is especially interesting, since "the world of shows," as Shenk and Silberman put it (1994, 332), is presented as a given, which makes their major achievement the explication of the uneasy relationship between Deadhead subculture and the mainstream: the steady, corrosive friction between the tourhead ethos and the responsibilities and ties of family, school, and work, and the brutal collision of the Deadhead experience with narcotics laws, informers, and prison.

Just as postmodernism provides a way of viewing these works in a way that can help us reframe their achievement critically, oral history

offers an interesting way of getting at their evidentiary value, which also reconnects us with genre theory. As a discipline, oral history has been shaped by pioneering historian Alessandro Portelli's observation that,

> Oral sources are credible but with a different credibility. The importance of oral testimony may lie not its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge. Therefore, there are no 'false' oral sources. Once we have checked their factual credibility with all the established criteria of philological criticism and factual verification which are required by all types of sources anyway, the diversity of oral history consists in the fact that 'wrong' statements are still psychologically 'true' and that this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts. (2006, 37)

That subjectivity and its implications for veracity are issues that Jackson addresses directly, as he notes toward the end of his book: "This story is my perception of what we were, and I didn't want to leave out the truth" (2007, 197); earlier, he explicitly states that "I've been known to tell a lie, yet you can count on what I say" (2007, 188).

While these works are not oral histories (though Jackson's language certainly captures the Haight Street patois of the early 1990s), their unmediated and largely untutored exposition shifts in a revealing and useful way when viewed through that lens; and, like oral history, which as a field has stressed what Portelli notes are "nonhegemonic classes … linked to the tradition of the folk narrative" (2006, 35), this invokes Stephen Spender's thoughtful critique of autobiography as a genre:

> When we look at modern literature, we see that it is swamped with the material of confessional autobiography, though very few intimate revelations are written … Yet few autobiographies of a man's two lives are written … Why is this? I think it is because the inner life is regarded by most people as so dangerous that it cannot be revealed openly and directly … All the same, when an Andre Gide or a Henry Miller comes along and says "I am I, and not a hero of fiction. I have thought unspeakable thoughts and done unspeakable unthinkable things," he is measuring the capacity of human beings to tell the truth about themselves, and indirectly, by virtue of what he reveals, he is commenting on the values of the age in which he lives. (1980, 122)

Or perhaps, in these books, their authors are commenting on their subculture at the time in which they came of age.

Spender's literary, erudite meditation has its echoes in the critical literature as well. Autobiographer and Nobel laureate J. M. Coetzee has remarked, "But what is truth to fact? You tell the story of your life by reselecting from a reservoir of memories, and in the process of selecting you leave things out … So to call autobiography—or indeed history—true as long as it does not lie invokes a fairly vacuous idea of truth" (1992, 17). Roger Rosenblatt amplifies on this idea, extending it to the entire genre: "Whatever else it may be, autobiography is the least reliable of genres—one person in relation to one world of that person's manufacture, which is that person in macrocosm, explained and made beautiful by that same person in the distance, playing god to the whole unholy trinity" (1980, 169). When we cease to look at Rose's and Jackson's books as polished literary constructs, they do indeed present scholars with significant, even rich, Deadhead narratives.

Yet the very fact of their publication complicates a scholarly reading of the texts, conditioned as we are to the largely hidden mechanics of a centuries-old publishing industry in which every step in the chain— from acquisition to editing to typesetting to printing to distribution—is codified, measured, and controlled. But print-on-demand publishing disrupts this sequence entirely, aping only the final results of the process—printing and distribution, with only a minimal nod to the mechanics of typesetting and registration of copyright. Its products are, in effect, published typescripts, but ones whose production challenges textual scholar Fredson Bowers' critical injunction to generations of scholars, which was to minimize the intrusion of the editorial hand to the point that a trained reader could reconstruct the manuscript from the published work (Bowers 1975).

Applying that standard here has fascinating implications. In scholarly terms, if we were to stumble across these two works in manuscript form in a hundred years, our response might be much like Robert Darnton's, whose reaction, upon discovering a trove of works dating back to the *Ancien Régime*, recorded his wonder in terms that invoked Sir Howard Carter's discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb: "I walked into a historian's dream: an enormous cache of untouched archives … it is an

extraordinary sensation to open a dossier of fifty or a hundred letters that have lain unopened since the eighteenth century" (1982, vi; vii). It was an experience that shaped his work and career in profound ways. Darnton would later write, "We constantly need to be shaken out of a false sense of familiarity with the past, to be administered doses of culture shock. There is no better way, I believe, than to wander through archives" (1984, 4). If nothing else, print-on-demand publishing makes it easier for us to go wandering.

Darnton's injunction underscores the relevance for the archival context implied here; Coetzee's comment even carries that into archival practice itself, where the activities that he ascribes to autobiographers, and that bring their work to the public through the traditional publishing industry, broadly mimic the fundamental archival processes of appraisal and representation. Even the transparency of the archival mandate can be said to mimic the Fredson Bowers' philosophy of textual clarity—no surprise, since the underlying theory conforms to the foundational archival principles of original order, *respect des fonds*, and provenance, the linchpins of modern archival theory (Shellenberg 1956). But, as Darnton's comment reminds us, if archives are a shock to scholarly complacency, they are also a source of wonder.

That sense of wonder is what I want to end with, for it goes to the heart of our obligation as responsive and responsible readers of hidden, proscribed, or otherwise marginalized cultural moments and the communities that create, experience, and are defined by them. There is an ethical dimension to our critical stance, in other words, one that invokes Bergland's conclusion when she writes:

> Finally, how do we read and understand the speaking subject of autobiography? Clearly, in the context of our postmodern world, we reside in multiple and contradictory discourses; the historical and economic conditions in which human beings live are also multiple and contradictory. To posit an essential self denies those contradictions and conditions. (1994, 160)

But these two books, by virtue of their topics and their narrative choices, and the means by which they reached their audience, embody those multiple and contradictory discourses; an integral part of their

achievement is precisely the fact that they do *not* deny them. This can help us achieve precisely the kind of sympathetic reading that the Dead phenomenon challenges scholars to achieve on a meta level: rather than dismissing these two works as poorly written memoirs, in large part due to the fractured and often absent narrator, instead they challenge us, as scholars and readers, to identify the multiplicity of selves that so many critics have aptly described as a function of postmodernism. As Bergland explains, "the desire to find a self in autobiography inevitably fails because of the impossibility of language to represent a whole" (1994, 161). She believes that "To claim an essentialist self is to deny the way in which historical conditions, material forces, and cultural discourses shape articulations of the self. A theory of the subject in autobiography must posit the existence of multiple and contradictory subjectivities as the effect of multiple discourses at a particular historical moment" (1994, 161).

And this makes it possible to read these Deadhead memoirs as documents of the Deadhead experience, however dark. By virtue of the multiplicity of selves they both express, they, too, find a place in Deadhead literature, exemplifying what Sidonie Smith claimed for women's autobiography, that "only in the fullness of membership can the fullness of rebellion unfold" (1987, 9). Viewed properly, these two challenging, flawed, but fascinating texts represent a useful distillation of the still-emerging problematics and rewards that the evidence of the Dead phenomenon poses for scholarly understanding. If the books' presentation complicates assessment, it also echoes and reaffirms the twin poles of traditionalism and innovation that inform the Deadhead experience, in all of their complex, nuanced opposition. The experiences that shaped the authors' participation in and understanding of the Deadhead experience, and their expression of that through the print-on-demand mechanism that brought their work to the public, make these books noteworthy examples of the core of the Grateful Dead phenomenon: the inspiration, agency, and autonomy it provided to its fans.

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