Essay 3 Prompt: Americans on the Road

Steinbeck was ever aware of his own subjectivity while experiencing his great journey, noting that “... there are too many realities. What I set down here is true until someone else passes that way and rearranges the world in his own style” (6).

Throughout the course of the semester we have read the stories of three Americans, in different stages of their lives, taking to the road. These journeys have been undertaken for several reasons, some stated, and some not, but they all have been journeys of discovery--what journey isn’t?

As you are likely to have noticed, the paths of these travellers have often crossed, even though the journeys have all taken place at different times in the American past. In this essay, I would like you to discuss a location where at least two of the travellers have passed. What similarities and/or differences in their experiences, identities, and thoughts exist to paint their perceptions of that time and place? What about these characters, who, some more fictionalized than others, bring the place they inhabit to life?

And how “accurately” does each narrator describe the same place? Do some research on the state, city, or region which is being described. How do historians, locals, and the nation-at-large see the area? How has that history and character of the location possibly influenced the characters’ perceptions of place, self, and America/Americans as an ideal?

Opening up your essay to the bigger picture, then, what can you say about these two (or three) trips in general, regarding the American experience? What do the journeys ultimately say about them? Let us not forget here, that these are all white men, middle-class or higher, a perspective which has long colored the essence of the American experience. How representative is this perspective, and what narratives are cut off by only examining theirs? How have these characters’ points of view themselves been shaped by their privilege and the unseen lives of those less represented?

Your essay, in addition to seriously examining and making some (tentative) conclusions about these topics (i.e., arguing for a specific thematic interpretation), must rely on two types of significant research:

1. First examine the critical literature of both (or all three) narratives, and possibly one that looks at both (or at least two of the three). You should have a total of at least four of these types of sources, and their arguments should support your own thesis. These sources should come from a literary database or a peer reviewed book, written expressly about the primary source (i.e., On the Road, Travels with Charley, or Into the Wild).

2. You must do historical/political research on the city, state, and/or region, coming up with no less than three sources, but from different genres, e.g., newspapers, magazines, almanacs, travel guides, etc. N.B., you may not, of course, use Wikipedia, but it might be a good place to start--they usually are good about citing their sources).
The essay must be *thesis driven*, 1700-2500 words, in MLA format, complete with a “works cited” page. Note that the “works cited” page does not contribute to the total word count.

- A Research Proposal is due on Monday, May 2nd.
- An Annotated Bibliography is due on Monday, May 9th.
- The final draft, along with the digital project, is due on Wednesday, May 18th.

For help with either research or developing your thesis and arguments, or essay draft, you may wish to consult the following resources: the library reference desk, the writing center, your *Rules for Writers* handbook, and, of course, you can always discuss your essay with me during office hours or during your scheduled conference.