Deconstructing the American Road Trip Experience: the "Search" for "American Identity"

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American Culture 302/03: Senior Project
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Introduction: “Something will come of it; tangible or not, something good”

I have a kind of personal history with road trips. The summer after my senior year of high school, my dad decided that he wanted to drive his 1930 Ford Model A Station Wagon to the annual National Model A Meet hosted in Dallas, Texas. He wanted to make the trip a full-scale adventure, and he set his sights for California. My brother, mom and I always thought my dad was a little bit crazy, but I was excited to partake in the adventure and was more than happy to accompany him for a segment of his trip traveling from Colorado to California before flying back home to Massachusetts. It was sort of the perfect ceremony before leaving to go to my first year of college: I got to spend a lot of one on one quality time with my father right before moving out of the house for the first time. I had a whole new adventure ahead of me.

If my dad were to tell this next part of the story, it would go something like this:

"Madeline came to me and said, “Can we do another trip across the country?” and so I said “In a Model A?” and she replied “If you would,” just as my dad explained to countless strangers who inquired about the nature of our trip along the way. I can personally testify that this conversation did not occur exactly like that, but I did approach my dad about taking another trip, of a somewhat larger scale after my sophomore year of college. I had a strong inkling that I would want to write my thesis on something to do with road trips and thought it would be useful to have another road trip experience under my belt. Plus, the trip I took after senior year of high school was really my dad’s trip. It was his adventure, and I wanted my own. Something that was planned and prepared by me, and for me.

So we planned. And what we ended up doing is taking a seven and a half week (fifty two day) trip from Boston, basically straight across to Crater Lake, Oregon, which is just north of the Californian border, down the Californian coast to Los Angeles, where we took a left and drove until we hit the other coast in North Carolina, from where we headed north back home. It was quite the endeavor. Just as the first trip had been the perfect punctuation to my high school experience, this trip came at a time where I was preparing for the most academically strenuous
year of my life, right before transitioning into the real world. It is rare that any two people get to
spend so much time isolated with one another, let alone a father and a daughter. My dad and I
have always been close, but we’re not very good at keeping in close touch while I’m away, and
spending any sort of real quality time with one another on a regular basis is a rarity.

My dad and I obviously came at the trip from different perspectives. He was getting to
indulge in one of his favorite hobbies: driving his Model A, while getting to take off a significant
amount of time from his job, escaping what I would imagine can be a somewhat redundant
adulthood. For me, I got to do some really great firsthand research experience, not have to
worry about finding summer internships or jobs, and do and see things I had never been able to
do or see before. I also had been thinking about a lot of things over the past three years since my
last trip. Why do I care about this so much? Why is this significant within our cultural rhetoric?
How is my experience significant among a sea of road trip narratives, photograph collections or
travel blogs? These questions became intricately intertwined with my academic pursuits, which
further drove my interest in taking the road trip with my dad.

The idea of making my experience on the road into the cumulative product of my Vassar
education was extremely daunting. At the time of the trip, it was so hard to separate my personal
experience from the academic, and I was constantly worrying that I wouldn’t remember
something important when I finally sat down to produce a written product.

But I feel like the connection or history that I have had with the road tripping experience
is not something that is unique to me. That is part of the questions that I have been asking
myself for the past few years since first driving from Colorado to California with my dad: why
am I so interested in the road trip as it fits into American historical narratives and cultural
experiences, and why have Americans been interested in road tripping and the consequent
narratives that have resulted from those travels? My personal experience and questioning of my
own interests and identity were the main drive for delving into the topic of the American Road
Trip Experience for this thesis.
Defining the American Road Trip Experience

A road trip may take many forms. There are many different types of documented narrative tales of travels that also explore themes of notions of Manifest Destiny, American exceptionalism and freedom including the experiences of long distance walkers, hitch hikers, bus riders, or RV vacationers. I want to specify that the type of road trip experience I looking at here is one where an individual or group (family, couple, friends) takes a trip in a car, driving over cross country or inter-state distances for purposes of leisure, escape or discovery. There is a long-standing tradition of this specific type of road trip that I would like to further explore and analyze as an integral part of the American experience.

Furthermore, the documentation of this road trip experience, written or visual, has become a key part of the tradition of the experience and an individual’s perceived connection to their American identity through this experience. J.N. Nodelman explains in his essay “Reading Route 66,” that highways “cannot be experienced all at once but unfold as linear sequences of impressions. As such, highways are in their structural, functional, and imaginative dimensions much like written texts themselves.” Nodelman’s connection supports the link between the driving experience and the act of recording one’s written interpretation or reaction to the driving experience. This concept not only links the two acts but insists that inherently, highways’ “mechanical function calls for the creation of particular narratives to make them readable as coherent, meaningful progressions.” Driving and writing are not only linked, but one necessitates the other. Nodelman’s use of the word “impressions” indicates a very particular characteristic of experience the highway that must be recognized in order to understand the true nature of how the road narrative is formed; the experiential segments being linked in the progression of the highway are merely the impressions in the mind of the road tripper, the way that their minds, individually and biased as such, come to process the passing visual input.

2 Nodelman, “Route 66,” 165.
The works of narrative non-fiction that I will be looking at are pieces of written documentation of this specific type of road trip from the first person narrative of the traveler. This type of narrative specifically allows for a degree of self-reflection and expressions of identity that I think are key in examining the road trip experience as an exercise in solidifying American identity. There are countless travel narratives that have been suggested to me in the process of shaping this thesis, and the reason I have chosen the self-aware and self-referential texts that I have is because they bring these concepts of the road trip experience into a new, specific light.

There are road trips and there are travel narratives and where driving and writing intersect is in the American Road Trip Experience. When I use the word road trip in this thesis, I will be referring to the larger concept of the American Road Trip Experience, which includes the experience of documenting one's cross country travels, typically engaged in by a middle to upper class white male driving in a car across some portion of the country. The narrative is necessary to attempting to substantiate one's supposed increase in knowledge due to the experience or driving and seeing America. Seemingly, to simply take the road trip means nothing unless you have intellectualized and processed your thoughts about the road trip in the way of writing. Another point of creating the narrative is sharing the experience and knowledge you have gained. The written narrative goes to prove what you have done and that you have done it, cementing the experience within a history of road trip narratives written, creating a larger historical narrative of road trip experiences throughout the American experience.

The Texts

I classify the core texts looked at in this thesis as self-aware non-fiction road trip narratives conscious of the road trip as a cultural trope, that reflect the history and framework of Route 66, which I have found to specifically produce the cultural concept of the road trip as I have defined it. Each of these texts will bring to light certain aspects of the tradition of taking
and writing about the road trip experience taking into deep consideration the specific frameworks that they were individually written through.

Because of the author's intimate relationship to the origins of the road trip's institutionalization in American culture, I will look at *Travels with Charley*, by John Steinbeck. This work from 1960, recounting Steinbeck's travels in a large around the country with his poodle Charley in his pickup truck with a drag-along trailer. The work of Steinbeck's is of particular interest to me because of its popular success after its publishing, the time period when it was published and Steinbeck's point of view as the writer of *Grapes of Wrath* with that novel's close relation to the development of the road trip in the American experience. Steinbeck's persona as classic American author lends heavily to my interest in his perspective, as I am interested in how this part of his identity influences his observations and claims about his own American identity or the state of America and American culture as he sees it. I am also largely interested in *Travels with Charley*'s popular reputation and how it has maintained or developed over time, with speculations of the work as fictitious. What did Steinbeck seek out to do with his trip, and what were his intentions in representing his travels? How does American identity play a role in the representation of his experience or with the conclusions he is making? What do the conclusions he makes or how he chooses to represent his experience say about him and his relationship to the United States and his identity as an American? These are all questions through which I will frame the analysis of this text.

Another work that I will look closely at is by contemporary writer Robert Sullivan, who chronicles one final road trip experience with his entire family as they go to visit their family on the opposite coast in his work *Cross Country*. What interests me about Sullivan is his history and experience with taking road trips and his reflective way of writing. This work of narrative fiction stories a trip taken after already having crossed the country a number of times, and so there is a particular tradition and history closely within Sullivan's own experience for him to reflect upon which also informs his writing. This specific perspective will provide a particular
insight in how the road trip as an American cultural act is coming into use in this contemporary moment. I will also ask of Sullivan what I have asked of Steinbeck: what his intentions are in representing his own identity and the country, and why the road trip experience is the chosen forum or setting for these questions. Sullivan’s particularly questioning and self-aware writing style will complicate and enrich this analysis.

Pat Chestnut’s essay “Hours and Days” is of use here in looking, again, at how the road trip is being accessed in the contemporary moment. His essay explores the dichotomy between the road trip and the modern world of a young professional, juxtaposing modern issues with the road trip as a tool for escape as uses a short road trip with a friend to get away from his new job, as a platform for exploring some key aspects of what he names as American culture. The questions activating this text are in the search for the evidence of the awareness of the tradition of the road trip, and what purpose taking a road trip or writing about a road trip played in Chestnut’s life and in his own self discovery. This essay serves as a compelling piece of evidence of the location of this tradition as belonging or applying to a certain sliver of society: academic, professional young white males.

In choosing these texts, I am locating this specific road trip conception within a narrowly defined sector of society: white, educated, upper class males. I also have chosen these specific authors to look at because of the academic or intellectual fields of work within which they preside. Careers as writers prime them in a particularly culturally aware manor that I believe allows more fluid and open discussion of identity and American culture and the intersection of the two. For my purposes, the text and how it is written is just as essential as the type of trip taken in producing the American Road Trip Experience. Each of these authors makes substantial truth and identity claims in the process of writing about their trip. These claims are what make these works engaging to an audience invested in learning about their own American identity and culture, and thus worth questioning. These claims are also what make these works of particular interest to me; they were easy targets of analysis just as anything that states
something as truth. If the road trip in American tradition is what I am questioning in this thesis, then claims that activate the American Road Trip Experience as the reason and support for this claim are worth putting into question.

In taking on this topic to write, I am placing my own experience along side that of those authors mentioned. In keeping with my claims that writing about the road trip experience is a key extension to actually driving across the country on a road trip, I will include narrative non-fiction writing regarding my road trip experiences into this work. I will attempt to locate myself with in this cultural experience and juxtapose my perspective with the authors of the other texts I am exploring. Ultimately, completing this task, writing this thesis is an exercise in locating how I access and come to terms with my own American identity and how my road trip aspirations and experiences play into this identity. My goal is to generally illustrate the conclusions that are made from stringing along these independent narratives has little to do with the experience of finding or performing American identity through the road trip or maybe just that nothing really concrete can be concluded from them. They are just experiences, strung together in a narrative to construct some sort of meaning. The meaning is what we take from them or what we want to see as readers, and potentially what we wish to project as being found as being “American” about the writers found identity.
Michigan

While there were common things that people would ask us while we were traveling, there were also some key questions people would ask us about our trip. I found it particularly challenging to sum up the trip in response to questions like "how was it" because I felt like anything I said would be too reductive. I would always just sort of remove myself from the answer and blandly describe: "It was really awesome, I can't believe it already happened, it went by so fast," or something like that. The most common question for those who were attempting to engage in a conversation with me about the trip would ask: What was your favorite place? Another nearly impossible question to give one concrete answer to. I don't think I could even narrow to ten top places. So I cataloged a response of the heartwarming story of our visit to my mom's hometown of Orchard Lake, Michigan.

It was easy to name this day of our trip as the best, because it was a very multidimensional day. In the morning we got to drive through Detroit, which we were interested in seeing with all of the attention it has gotten in the Recession. My dad looked on with an optimistic eye, insisting that it was actually quite a lovely city. I think Detroit was the first place where I began to understand my interest in the aesthetic of the destroyed or forgotten, something that grew more and more salient as our trip went on. There were a lot of old, aging buildings that I thought were quite charming.

And this is how I would tell this part of the story. So we drove right up Woodward Avenue, the big main street in Detroit. While we were stopped at a light, a purple minivan next to us rolled down its window – this was pretty common, people would stop and comment on our car all the time, so we were not surprised. Until we heard what the driver was shouting: "I love your car. Can we film you? Follow us!" and cut in front of us as the light turned green. My dad and I had one of those moments where we looked at each other, shrugged our shoulders and our eyebrows together and turned our mouths into these upside down smile expressions of consideration and thoughtful approval. We proceeded with some
caution, having more doubt as the purple van turned down an obscure alley. When we saw a quaint little café was our destination we were relieved.

Basically, the driver was the translator and handler of these two French documentary filmmakers working on a documentary about the revival of arts and culture in Detroit for the French national news network (from my understanding, the BBC of France, but I don't actually even know what it is called). Anyways, the French filmmakers were inspired by the look of our car, and wanted to get us in some footage. The translator, Guy, was hesitant to adhere to our schedule (we did have a whole day of plans to get through, and they were plans we were pretty committed to) because he had set up all sorts of appointments with the most important people in Detroit for the filmmakers. The conversation was going back and forth across the outdoor café table, sometimes in English to include us, and sometimes in French, leaving us out. One of the filmmakers was a woman with short black hair. She motioned for me to write down my phone number and name into her notebook. As the women at the table, I felt we shared a little connection, as her partner filmmaker argued with Guy and my dad struggled to follow along in French. I just smiled and took it all in, sharing knowing glances with this women, whose name I can't remember. I don't think she spoke any English.

My dad and I were only going to help these people out if it worked for our schedule. It was a cool opportunity, but neither of us was starving to be featured in this film, especially if it was going to disrupt our day. It became abundantly clear when the argument between Guy and the French filmmaker came to a screeching halt with the words "Ils sont notre priorité," just how committed the French man was to including us in his documentary. We conceded that we would be at Greenfield Village, Henry Ford's living museum about 40 minutes outside of Detroit at the end of the day, and that we would be willing to film with them when the museum closed at four o'clock.

We drove away with Guy's phone number, half expecting never to hear from the trio again. It was a cool, spontaneous thing that happened. As my best friend Mitchell exclaimed
upon me bragging of the day's events, "This is exactly what I want to be happening to you everyday." It was the kind of unique opportunity that came specifically from the trip that was exciting and encouraging.

But that wasn't everything that made the day great. We continued on Woodward Ave, which if you follow for long enough, just becomes a highway for about 30 minutes of driving, before you hit a really nice part of Michigan. Our first stop was The Cranbrook School, where my mom's brothers, father, and grandfather went to elementary, middle and high school. Cranbrook is known for being one of the most prestigious boarding schools in the United States, one of the largest endowments, and the only school to have its own art gallery on par with university and college museums. I have very little personal connection to it, but it is a part of my family's history, and I thought it would be a sight to see. We just kind of drove through campus, which was enough of an experience for me. We kind of peered into a little world that historically my family has been a part of. Then we continued along our way, to Orchard Lake, where my mom grew up.

My mom lived on the actual body of water Orchard Lake, on a private road behind the Orchard Lake Country Club, which was founded by my great-great grandfather, and where my parents were married. That was really what I wanted to see, the house my mom spent her childhood in, and the Country Club where my parents had their wedding reception. I wanted to be able to conceptualize all of the stories that I had heard about my mom's childhood and my parents wedding.

Something I will acknowledge about myself is that, being from Massachusetts, I am pretty elitist about being from New England, and have come to see the rest of the country, such as the Midwest (Michigan included) as a place for tackier, more conservative, more religious families. This is a vast generalization, but I guess I didn't really know what to expect, never having seen Orchard Lake or any other part of Michigan for that matter. Orchard Lake made an ass out of me: it was extremely nice, the houses exuded wealth and class to every degree.
So I had a much better picture of what my mom's childhood was like and the environment she grew up in: it was a lot nicer than I imagined.

We drove past the club and down the road that my mom lived on. The house my mom actually lived in was torn down but their shed still existed. My dad gave me brief little run downs of who lived where as he tried to assure himself of where and how he thought everything had been. Next we explored the country club. It was empty, so we just walked around. The plaque on the way in to the club has the name of my great-great grandfather, who was the founder of the club. One of my great-great-great-ancestors was a land surveyor of the government many, many years ago. Once upon a time, he surveyed and then went on to own the entire county that the town of Orchard Lake is in. By the time my mom was growing up there, it was just a place they lived, not a place they owned, except that a tiny island in the center of Orchard Lake was still in the families name.

It wasn't like a transformative experience or anything, but it was cool to be able to go there and put things into a context. This is where my family is from, and now I have seen where “from” is.

But that wasn't it. My dad was really excited to go to Greenfield Village, because he was obviously interested in the history related to Henry Ford, and generally was interested in the history of cars and Ford's life. I had a few misconceptions about what the museum was going to be, and was a little surprised when I figured out that it was exactly. Basically, after Ford was at the height of his wealth and career, he decided to collect houses of people that he admired, like the Wright Brothers or Thomas Edison. Henry Ford's childhood home was also in Greenfield village, as well as his favorite watch shop and a former slave's home. You can walk around to each of the buildings, and get a brief history of the person or family involved. It was interesting to me mostly in that it was basically an exceptional, rich, white man's collection of the homes of exceptional, rich, white men. I understand the value in it, historically, to have all of these buildings saved, in one place, where kids can learn about them,
but the absurdity of collecting famous peoples homes does not escape me. You could also take Model T tours around the property. After driving all day in a Model A, this did not really appeal to me.

Surprisingly, just as we left the museum, we got a call from Guy, who was on his way to Greenfield Village to meet us. They pulled up in their purple minivan, and then tried to figure out the logistics of filming the car. Guy was kind of gross in that he kept itching his stomach and he was also eating stretchy stringy candy while doing so. The French people were nice but spoke very little English. Far too much time was spent trying to attach a camera to the fender of the car before they resolved to sit in the backseat with a video camera. We had to rearrange a lot of our stuff so that the woman could fit in the back seat, and they offered to put some of our luggage in their car while they filmed but my dad and I were cautious and politely refused all of their offers. At one point I had to get in to the minivan while both cars were driving and filming, and I texted my dad "I'll text you if anything is weird." During this short time riding around with Guy driving, he divulged to me that this director was one of the most difficult people he had ever worked with and that they had basically cancelled their whole day to figure out filming us and our car. After they filmed my dad driving around, and asked him a few questions, just his name, the model of his car and what we were doing, on camera, they tried again to convince us to go back to Detroit, to which we politely refused, again. It was a very long day and we still had to get dinner and check in to our hotel.

After getting a burger at Miller's Bar, a Detroit institution recommended by a Detroit native, a father of one of my closest friends, we passed out in the hotel. I had lots of pictures, as usual, and lots to write about. The day had been packed, and it had been really cool, for lack of a better word. So that's what I tell people was my favorite place, because a lot of cool and interesting things happened that day and there was a lot of good to be remembered and passed on.
Mapping the Cultural Origins of the Road trip in American Collective Memory

"Imagine a history remembered not as the straight line of progress but as a flash of unforgettable images"

- Kathleen Stewart

When I have mentioned that I am doing this project, people naturally have a base-level understanding of what my thesis is based on, what my sources will be, why the road trip stands as a topic of interest when studying American culture. The concept of the road trip as a specifically American cultural experience exists prominently in America’s collective memory. The definition of road trip is not specifically delineated by historical truths. It consists of layers, with different accesses to factual information, of remembering.

Collective memory, what could also be called cultural memory, is an integral part of a “connective structure” which creates a sense of cohesion among a specific culture or society. It is widely understood and accepted that “memory plays a crucial role in the transmission of cultural and national identity,” and it is the collective nature of this memory, its belonging to a specific social group (Americans), that allows it to have this influence over identity. Collective memory is passed down from older generations to younger generations through a number of different avenues, including but not limited to: oral histories, school textbooks, newspaper articles, television and radio, museums, commemorative rituals, novels, plays and films. This collective memory space generally cultivates a “representations of the past intended to provide an attractive account of the nation’s cultural values and identity,” meaning that pieces of memory that manage to make it into this larger American collective memory fit into what are considered to have societal importance. Brockmeier describes that collective memory’s

“overall function is to guarantee a cultural sense of belonging – in contrast, for instance, to a belonging based on kinship, race, material property or economic dependence. At issue, then, is a sense of belonging that binds the individual into a culture while binding the culture into the individual’s mind.”

This argument secures collective memory and one’s relationship with their cultural identity as inseparable, while also implying that collective memory can become a part of an individual’s experience. This is why, even if someone hasn’t taken a road trip, they can relate to or understand the experience and why I am interested in writing about it. They experience the same connection to the experience as if they have taken a road trip even when they haven’t because the road trip functions as an integral part in the American collective memory space, particularly as a way to access or seek out answers to questions of American identity or culture.

There are several historical lines that can be traced back to being the foundation of this remembered notion of cross country driving experiences. Some writers, when referencing road travel will mark the history of this experience as dating back to the very first inhabitants of this continent, traveling over from the continental Europe. Also noted is the colonial founding of the United States, the pilgrims being travelers themselves, or there is also the idea that this is a country built on immigration, with people that have a natural yearning to travel and move. Westward expansion, exploration of the continent and the concept of Manifest Destiny is also readily accessed as a foundation for the creation of the road trip as a cultural institution.

There are a number of historical narratives that fit into the American collective memory space, but it does not suffice to say that the collective memory of the road trip as a cultural phenomenon is solely derivative of Lewis and Clark’s travels across the country (or any other traveling historical figures). There are many threads connecting them, and aspects of the perception of the Lewis and Clark story that do relate to the modern concept of road trips and where this comes from in more recent history, but the threads of commonality and causality

have more to do with cultural perceptions and the memory of these long ago historical events than what actually happened.

Different parts and pieces of the history of travel in the United States that exist in the American collective memory space that carry through to and influence our understanding of the road trip largely revolve around notions of freedom, both spatial and individual, and possibility for the future. For example, reaching back to collective memory of the foundational moment of the United State: the pilgrims fled from Europe seeking religious freedom, and were greeted with the space and opportunity to do so. This freedom was enabled by movement and travel. Lewis and Clark's expeditions were motivated by the possibility of discovery, something that would conceivably lead to spatial freedom, and the expansion of American civilization, and therefore capital enterprises. Immigrants coming to the country in the 19th century were drawn to the United States for the work and the potential for a certain enhancement of economic freedom. These histories, as they happened, or as they exist in the American collective memory space, are based on notions for the possibility to attain some sort of freedom by traveling to or throughout the United States.

There is a tendency to link and narrativize the role of travel in shaping the American experience, and to equate it with mobility, and therefore freedom, expansion, opportunity. But each of these moments within the American collective memory are historical hotspots, remembered through the framework of these larger notions of freedom, expansion, and opportunity, which is what links them together in this travel centered narrative. The repetition of these societal values and the formation of a continuous narrative based on these values solidify the narrative in the American collective memory space as accepted cultural fact.

Even as I write about these cultural historical patterns, I recognize how influenced I am by American collective memory. The way that I conceive of these historical events revolves around specific, positive notions of nationhood, exceptionalism and the equating of mobility and freedom, which is indicated by my word choice alone. The significance of the American
collective memory in how it affects the way we conceptualize the United States and our own positions in it (and therefore our American cultural identity) is immeasurable. Maybe participating in a national ritual such as the American Road Trip Experience helps to unite us across time and space, and therefore bolsters and utilizes the American collective memory. In recounting the town that he grew up in, John Steinbeck reflects on the multiple, layered historical pasts that have influenced his understanding of the space, “it does make for suspicion of histories as a record of reality. I thought of these things as I read the historical markers across the country, thought how the myth wipes fact.”8 The parts of history that have been repeated *ad nauseam* to us, different depending on our locality, create and perpetuate what Steinbeck calls myth and I refer to as American collective memory. There is no way to measure bias, but I argue, recognizing my own actions as biased and influenced, that because of the existence of collective memory, and specifically American collective memory, notions of history or historical fact are inherently flawed. That is why, in the proceeding thesis, when I have considered historical influence, I have chosen to write mostly from my conception of historical events, and less from sourced “facts.” This practice both goes to push against the notion that there is a more true “true” and that perceived truth or accepted truth has a powerful role in shaping how we, as Americans conceive of any associated national identity.

It should be recognized that these prominent remembered histories revolve around a specific group of people inherently enabled by freedom: collective memory is based on and therefore shaped by its positive attributes and not its negative ones. These travelers are predominantly white males, who have had significantly more freedoms through out American history. The narratives of these histories do not consider women, who were essentially limited in mobility to the space of the property and home owned by their husbands. Also, the mobility of African Americans through out the country’s history is limited, obviously by their enslavement and then by their cultural oppression. Not being allowed in certain places or not

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having the financial means to travel, generally, or to relocate, are examples of how African American freedom was limited by a lack of mobility. The idea that traveling, which inherently requires a level of freedom, somehow has historically given individuals access to more freedom is somewhat ironic. Or at least this notion has been perpetuated by the formulation of a larger traveling narrative in the American collective memory space. The Great Migration in the twentieth century is an obvious example of mobility of African Americans in the United States, but it is important to note that this mobility was driven by the search of economic opportunity in urban spaces instead of by leisure and the desire to travel for leisure.

Written histories (the more true “truths”) that help to construct the American collective memory space have largely been written by those with the most access to freedom (power) and therefore their narratives, their accomplishments, their travels, their found freedoms are the dominant stories that construct the nation’s history in this space. With this being said, American collective memory is inherently imperfect. It is nearly never factual, but based on gestures of ideas or the gist of histories, the feeling extracted while reading, hearing or learning about a certain period, the majority of these ideas or feelings with positive connotations. The non-literalness of collective memory, its fluidity, and its ability to be shaped by human emotion speaks to its potency, and its ability to dictate culture and identity. It is easier to conform around a vague, gist of an idea or a past rather than a string of individual events or facts that have no one given meaning.

The travel narrative that has been constructed in the American collective memory space is one dominated by the notion of freedom, and this fits into the idea that the United States was a country founded on freedoms, a comfortable and supportable narrative for most American citizens, but one that clearly leaves out significant histories of oppression and restriction of movement and freedom, generally but also in regard to histories of specific type of travel spaces. Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart outlines the history of “a space on the side of a road,” inherently imbedded in notions of traveling and mobility, yet almost sacrificed in the name of
positive collective cultural memory. West Virginia (which she names as “the space on the side of the road”) as “an occupied, betrayed, fragmented, and finally deserted place,” becomes “a shifting a nervous space of desire immanent in lost and re-membered and imagined things.”

The way that West Virginia is conceived of by non-natives of this transient space is as this “old timey place indexing a nostalgia for a time and place apart from cities and post industrial present of life in the hills,” but in categorizing this space as specifically this way, it generalizes the existence of this space through out history and incidentally misplaces and forgets any histories that contradict the historical narrative of this place serving any purpose other than to be “the space on the side of the road.”

My task is not just to look at and find the more true “truths”, to locate the exact point along this narrative string of historical moments at which the notion of the road trip entered as a cultural point of interest in the American collective memory space, but to explore what aspects of collectively accepted histories conjured up these notions of reality, of memory, or of nostalgia, that lead us to remember and presently think of the road trip as the vehicle for freedom, discovery of self and culture it is thought of. I will consider how the road trip fits into this larger, constructed travel narrative as it exists in the American collective memory space, but more importantly locate more recent histories that have brought this notion of the road trip for the sake of road tripping, for self-discovery and for discovery of national cultural identity, specifically into this space. I will also look at how exactly these recent histories are remembered in order to understand how the road trip enters the American collective memory space and how the road trip as a piece of American collective memory is being activated in contemporary life.

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9 Stewart, *Side of the Road*, 17.
A Piece of Collective Memory: As Route 66 Exists in the American Memory in the Modern Moment

As we turned out of L.A., finally got out of the slow moving traffic of downtown, I opened up my map book to try and locate a place to hop on Route 66, as that was the plan for heading eastward. My eyes scoured the little lines on the map, but the iconic 66 marker was nowhere to be found. “I can’t find it,” I complained to my dad, giving up as I had many, many times with that damned map book. I was expecting my dad to push me further, to offer some advice as to where I would find it, but instead, he responded with a much more vague answer: “Well, it’s not exactly on the map.” My dad is famous for ambiguous statements such as this, probably because he likes to think he is invigorating us (his kids, his friends, anyone listening to him speak) with a sense of powerful curiosity. Years of hearing him expel these mischievous tidbits have primed me for skeptical, frustrated reactions. “Well I don’t get it,” I retorted, indignantly. “What is Route 66 then.” He went on to explain:

“It was a highway at one point. Route 66 is like, its sort of like, you know, sometimes they call it the Mother Road, its one of a number of a roads that they created when more modern automobiles were being developed. It gave people a way to travel, a way to travel recreationally. People learn about it, you hear about the song, peoples’ journeys across the country, from Chicago to Santa Monica beach. Basically to LA, through St. Louis, Santa Fe where we stayed, Clinton Oklahoma. As the automobile was being developed, business, commerce developed along side the major highways. So Route 66, we saw the relics of it, but there were motels shaped like teepees, there were attractions to get people to spend their money there, Indian artifact stores.

Part of what developed was the road trip as a recreational adventure, people would pack up the car and go on the family vacation. I suppose it started in the 30s in earnest, people were traveling before then but with the advent of the road and service stations people could
buy things, they felt more comfortable. In the earlier days of driving, the driver had to be the mechanic and the driver, it was something new, and as the cars got more advanced and there were more of them, there were service stations and gas stations and souvenir shops and museums and whatever else was there. And another road that we rode on was the Lincoln highway and there was a project that put that road in and it was sponsored by some of the automobile companies and some of the tire companies as well. But there was a big competition to have the roads go through your town. Like with the railroads, if you decided that the railroad went through your town it would open up a bunch of commerce.

But you know, in terms of Route 66, it was memorialized in songs, recorded by tons of artists from the Rolling Stones to Natalie Cole. It's evocative of older generations, and it has to do with the automobile in some ways. It represented freedom for those who grew up in conservative homes, kids could just buy cars and fix 'em up and head west. You know, even for you, getting your license and getting your wheels, you could get your independence. You know like your Uncle Rick after he graduated college, him and his friend Mark drove west to California. Families used to do it. My aunt Jo still talks about it, she says it's the one vacation she ever went on. They hopped on the Mohawk trail, went across the Frenchman's Bridge, through Adams, Massachusetts, which was much more rural then. It was a scenic roadway. They went out to Lake George, they had lunch and turned around and came back, and that was their vacation. They saw the mountains and the lakes and stuff.

Route 66 was a connector between cities, in some ways it opened up the way west to the Everyman. You know, you think about before, let's just say, 1930, the Model A is a little more reliable than the Model T, and if you wanted to go from Chicago to California or from Boston to California you took a train. In 1849 you took a wagon. You know, like I said, through 1920 motoring was half engineer and half pilot, and there were guide books you could buy that had directions like "take a left at the old oak tree." There weren't good roads, and then highways started to be marked, and there were a few roads that went east to west eventually,
like Route 20 or Route 30. We were on those in New York and Iowa, you can see them on the map. These were sort of the roads that people took. What those roads did then was provide people who had access to a car, which were relatively inexpensive; people could afford them with the wages they were being paid. California was the Promised Land, the “land of milk and honey.” There was the promise of adventure, and people would go to it.

Part of it was, you know, I think probably parts of it I can’t say for sure, but it probably was public works projects that came out of the WPA, but I don’t know what the government was doing to encourage people to travel. There were cars, there was industry, and people were traveling west as well. As people started to recover from the Great Depression, commerce started to pick up, the Interstate Highway System was one of the things people did to pick up the economy, to transfer the labor from older saturated markets to newer growing markets. It was following the Depression, it was really World War II that provided a giant stimulus to the economy, in terms of production but not in terms of consumption. There was a pent up demand for services, for goods and services.

Post-World War II, so what you had was the soldiers returning from war, all of the factories turning their production from military to consumer goods, including automobiles, things like that. You know, baseball was back, all the things that were normal, so you had this great Post-World War II experience. If you think about it in terms of the pinnacle of automotive design, it is the 1948 Chrysler Town and Country, these beautiful wood panel cars, these woody wagons. There were these big cars, the ’57 Chevy, the cars were bigger, fancier, the big grills and fins, it’s almost grotesque, it’s almost too much. People were back, employment was full during those times, and people were taking vacations and going on road trips. And they were buying cars, and the car was the symbol of the success, people would trade in their car every 2 years. They would use their cars and go on road trips.

To the extent that there is a generation of folks that were deprived or without as kids during the depression, and then they were sort of sacrificed through World War II, and there
was this pent up demand for fun, for adventure. It sort of mirrored in recreation the whole concept of track housing, of the Levittown, and the expansion of Long Island, and everyone getting a house in the suburbs. The standard of living was everyone getting a new car every two years, and the family vacation is a part of that, and the road trip along with it. And the freedom to be able to do that.

I don't know if the sense of adventure was fostered by people traveling through Europe during the war, I don't know that but I think generally, from the day that the pilgrims landed here, people have been moving west.

Route 66 is sort of the Mother Road, if you could have seen in 50 years ago the roadside was littered with these places that were competing for the tourist dollars, teepees and motels like teepees and you know its like the bookstores now, when the Eisenhower Interstate Highway System came in, this just got erased.

And it wasn't people from say, Florida heading West. It was people heading from Boston, Washington, New York, getting over the Appalachian Mountains to Chicago.

I think I've got the facts pretty good. That's my impression of it.

Route 66 is a peppy little song and the contrast is 'are we there yet?'

My father's explanation of Route 66 stands as a tangible piece of collective memory, and as it left his mouth and entered my ears, and furthermore, my consciousness, it became part of my experience and how I came to conceptualize my own relationship to road trips. As far as I could see it, based on what my father had told me, this was when people started taking road trips, and Route 66 was where they did it.

My father has a tendency to romanticize and see things in a very simple, perhaps purist, way, and his knowledge and affinity for cars obviously informs this history. Also his library of roadmaps and books on scenic roads definitely helped inform his history. Maybe asking someone who didn't care at all about cars about Route 66 would produce a different history, but my dad's perspective is a part of my own history and my own perspective. I think
maybe the vague conceptions of things we keep in our heads, the very inadequate and brief understandings we have for unquestioned concepts or periods and sequences of history are essential in how we figure out how to navigate large concepts like the history of a place and how it fits into our conceptions of national history and identity. Maybe this is a far from perfect explanation of what my father's narrative explanation of Route 66 signifies but for me it's hard to say why any moment in history or our understanding of it at least has any significance at all besides for that we want and need it to.
The History, The Memory

The concept of the road trip, as I am framing it, most precisely emerges in the 1950s, in a Post-World War II era, and derives from the specific memory of pre-war Highway development. One of the roads that existed most prominently is Route 66, the famed and the storied.

Pre-War Route 66

"Proponents of the road that was a combination of old trails – the Federal Wire Road in Missouri and the Osage Train in Oklahoma – wanted it to be Route 60 but had to settle for Route 66"

- Robert Sullivan

Route 66 was one of the first highways as a part of the U.S. Numbered Highway System, the legislation for which was finally enacted in 1925. The road was specifically commissioned in 1926, and joined together a slough of other privately funded auto trails, specifically The Lone Star Route (from Chicago to St. Louis) the main Ozark Trail (from St. Louis to New Mexico) and the National Old Trails Road (from New Mexico to Los Angeles). The prominence of these auto trails demonstrates the popular need for auto roads and the degree to which people were traveling during this time: Car culture was thriving in the 1920’s. The government implementation of a highway system streamlined (to a certain degree, which is perfected upon the creation of the Interstate Highway System later) these roads, constructing many roads running north to south and east to west throughout the United States, responding to the popularity of automobiles and travel, as well as a need to create jobs in during the Depression.

Route 66’s early popularity and prominence in particular was cultivated by a number of factors, geography being a major influence. The land covered by this road was extremely flat, making it an easy road to travel on (although there were some dangerous areas) and the environment was well-tempered, allowing for consistently good weather securing safer traveling conditions. The geographical location of the highway resulted in a mass exodus in the Great

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Depression as impoverished families looking to escape their fate in the Dust Bowl of Arkansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma had easy access to the road, and it lead them to the supposed wealth and prosperity available in California.

The geographical location of the road helps in creating its narrative of significance. For poor farming families in the late 1930's traveling on Route 66 would lead them to California, a symbol of economic freedom. The road itself became a gateway to economic prosperity for those who lived along it, as travelers could support little "Mom-and-Pop" shops. It is of note that even during this time of economic distress, peoples' use and ownership of cars did not decrease: statistically there were two cars for every three people, which is similar statistically to the period prior. One might even say that cars were of heightened significance at this time, as they might be a family's most prized possession, or even their only semblance of a home. John Steinbeck's writing of *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939 was one of the forces that solidified Route 66 in this moment into the collective memory of the nation, even if it was, ironically, in a somewhat negative manner. His portrait of this period of Dust Bowl migrant strife highlights highway travel, and what has come to be thought of as specifically Route 66, as the writer refers to the road traveled by his characters as the Mother Road, which has been recognized as the highway's unofficial name. Steinbeck's naming of the Mother Road cultivates a symbolic significance of Route 66 and American traveler's relationship to it: seemingly the road helps take care of, fosters some sort of protection and guidance over the many driving families, for many their cars, the road was their new home (even if the Joad family's experience of living on the road was less than nurturing. The naming also signifies Route 66 as a superior road, the one road of all of the new U.S. Highways. Steinbeck's naming is also representational, meaning that his name is also a projection of how travelers thought of the road: as harvesting a life for them. Although generally the fate of Steinbeck's characters is not enviable and this is partially due to the road that they travel, it is the hope that the road, specifically Route 66, brought them that is ultimately remembered and celebrated.
The Forgotten War Years

“Good to see ya, soldier. Come on by Sarge’s Surplus Hut for all your government surplus needs.”

- Sarge

But this Depression, pre-war moment is not where Route 66’s history ends, this is just the very origin of its cultural presence. The many popularity-inducing factors (like geography, mentioned earlier) further perpetuated its usage as the government responded to its demand: it was the first of the U.S. Numbered Highways to be fully paved, which occurred by 1937. Because it was one of the fully paved roads, it was a popular route for truck drivers, and once the war started in 1939, this pavement was utilized as a military road as well, as many of the war-production industries took place in California (which also drew in people looking for work). Route 66’s history as a military road is somewhat underwritten. Some have found that the use of road by the military is sort of the antithesis to the Route 66 road trip narrative that is created: “The military’s mission and techniques, after all, tended to address the continental United States a single landmass to be defended in a unified matter, thus de-emphasizing the differences in scenery and state of mind from one region to another,” the differences in scenery and states being an integral part of the Route 66 experiences as this long stretch of road fundamentally allowed American access to this different spaces as one single experience, meant to explore the differences of the United States, creating a “spiritual quest narrative.” The ability to create a narrative of the joint experiences of Route 66 travels is an integral part in the highway’s existence in the collective memory of the United States, and its military history, as it is not conducive to this collaged narrative, is excluded from our notions of what Route 66’s existence means. But, its military history, does, in fact exist, and it is of interest most prominently for the implications the that post-war era had on the road’s use and what this meant for the cultural access to road trips.

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14 Ibid.
Post-War

"National tourism became a kind of ritual of citizenship, albeit for the most well-off citizen – packaged as a two-week summer driving vacation”

-Robert Sullivan

The Post-War 1950’s revitalized American’s love for automobiles and leisure traveling. Just as World War I drove Americans in the 1920’s to travel around Europe, the 1950’s were a time of heightened nationalism and patriotism, reinvigorating families to vacation in their own country, visiting many of the sights and National Parks that were a product of the Depression’s New Deal. As Nodelman describes, “After the war, Route 66 was thought to provide travelers with something between a sacred spiritual passage and a glorious cornucopia of consumer goods,” a clear move back to this “spiritual quest narrative,” that was lost during war-time.

The 1950’s were also an era of mass-suburbanization and cultural institutionalizing of the nuclear family. Family car vacations were a part of this suburban, family-central, highly moral life style. During this time, Route 66 provided the perfect access to these National Parks like the Grand Canyon. This is the moment when tourist culture is most vigorously cultivated. The first fast food restaurants, diners, service stations popped up in vast numbers along the roadside, creating the ultimate consumer experience for those finally experiencing economic success in the post-war industrial boom, the attraction being “not only the difference of all these places, but the opportunity of experiencing difference within a rubric of assured common standards.” There was a standardization derivative of consumerism on a mass scale, with the illusion of a unique experience in the differences between each fast food restaurant, motel, or service station.

This post-war period was identifiably the height of popularity and success for Route 66. This honeymoon period of the highway’s use was interrupted substantially by the Interstate

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15 Sullivan, Cross Country, 217.
16 Nodelman, “Route 66,” 170.
17 Nodelman, “Route 66,” 173.
Highway Act in 1956. Route 66 was disbanded piece by piece as the new Interstate Highway 40 completely redirected the flow of travelers through the southwest. The disbandment of Route 66 only strengthened its presence in the American collective memory as it was now something to be remembered. Its existence, not only in the 1950s, but the idea of its existence as a cultural monument since the 1920’s, cultivated a strong sense of nostalgia around its memory.

It is notable that Route 66’s largest and most notable cultural moment comes during a time of heightened prosperity and patriotism. America’s triumph in World War II, as well as with the hardships it had faced, strengthened and unified national morale and therefore individual’s national and cultural identities, specifically around narratives of democracy and freedom. With the standardization of consumer culture, national identity was also standardized, as explicitly positive and patriotic. This honeymoon affect after the war was probably a large proponent of these Route 66 vacations; people were invigorated with a love for their country and were inspired to go see it. This is one of the key factors in the road trip’s entrance into the American collective memory space. Strong positive memory of something after a traumatic event like World War II cements the road trip with the American collective memory. In this moment, taking a road trip becomes almost a patriotic act, solidifying the road trip as the cultivation and exercise of core American values.

**Moments of Remembering**

"The people who find time holy sleep like babies. They know the Mother Road is there. Old and proud and free"

- Michael Wallis

Reportedly, most of what is understood about Route 66 comes in remembering it. Even the foundations of Route 66’s commercial success, unique buildings such as teepee shaped motels or service stations with Greco-Roman architectural facades, what Nodelman names "idiosyncratic means of delivery," were based in “historical falsehood,” and conjuring an

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19 Nodelman, "Route 66," 166.
ahistorical activation of memory and nostalgia. With this at the core of Route 66's existence, it
seems fitting that popular and accepted collective understandings of Route 66 are based in the
remembering of its existence. Considering how short of a lifespan the highway had in its largest
moment of popularity, it seems as if although the most patriotic and emotionally-potent
memories were formed in these Post-War years, it is the memory of these experiences which has
truly solidified Route 66 in to the American collective memory space, alongside the road trip, as
now the highway "can lead to more place now than ever before," in activating infinite
"imaginative possibilities."\textsuperscript{21}

Music has played a significant role in the creating the Route 66 historical narrative as
well has worked, numerous times in cultivating a deep, layered memory of Route 66. The song,
"(Get Your Kicks On) Route 66" was originally composed and recorded in 1946, made popular at
first by Nat King Cole. Reportedly, composer Bob Troupe had no trouble coming up the song's
tagline, "get your kicks on Route 66," but struggled in filling in the rest of the lyrics. The lyrics
majorly consist as a list of the places along Route 66, stringing the listener along the road,
almost as a traveler: "Now you go through Saint Looey/ Joplin, Missouri/ And Oklahoma City is
mighty pretty/ You see Amarillo/ Gallup, New Mexico/ Flagstaff, Arizona/ Don't forget
Winona,/ Kingman, Barstow, San Bernardino."\textsuperscript{22} The general tone of the song celebrates the
experience as a search for "kicks" as a "vague, mystical" leisure that was "unprecedented" and
then "suddenly available to Americans at the time."\textsuperscript{23} The song's general existence signifies the
popularity of this experience. The number of times it has been covered, by Chuck Berry in 1961,
the Rolling Stones in 1964, Depeche Mode in 1987, and again by Chuck Berry in 2006 for the
animated movie \textit{Cars}, as well as many other times by other artists, demonstrates how the
musical number has facilitated a cultural remembering of the experience of traveling on Route
66, and traveling, specifically road tripping, for leisure. All of these versions add significance

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{21} Nodelman, "Route 66," 172.
\textsuperscript{22} Bobby Troup, "Route 66."
\textsuperscript{23} Nodelman, "Route 66," 171.
and meaning to what Route 66 is in people's memories, as these later versions are largely a reflection of a time in the past. Each time the song is heard by a new generation of listeners, a new layer of understanding of Route 66 is added to it as a piece of American collective memory.

Each one of the major re-recordings symbolizes a specific moment of remembering. The first re-recordings, by Chuck Berry and the Rolling Stones in the 1960's are a part of a larger moment of Route 66 reflection. Route 66, the television series was on air from 1960 to 1964, pulling in viewers each week along for driving adventures all over the country and even in Canada. The show did not take place on Route 66 specifically, but instead built off of the cultural obsession with the adventurous road trip experience associated with Route 66. The experience of Route 66 was generalized in its remembrance. John Steinbeck, who once established Route 66's Dust Bowl era presence in American culture as the Mother Road, published *Travels with Charley*, a piece of narrative non-fiction road trip literature in 1960 as well, adding to the cultural presence of the road trip within the American canon. Kerouac's *On the Road* could also be categorized in this first general moment of Route 66 and road trip remembering, especially because Kerouac wrote the novel in 1951, at sort of the height of Route 66's moment, but the work was not published until 1957. Its late publication allows the novel to be more reflective. Largely, the way that Route 66 was celebrated in the reflective, commemorative way that it was in this moment added most prominently to how the road trip has become to understood in the American collective memory.

The Eagle's hit song “Take It Easy,” from 1972 also activated memories of Route 66 in its reference to “Standing on a Corner/ in Winslow, Arizona,” a town along the road. The Jackson Browne and Glenn Frey lyrics conjure up notions of leisure and freedom associated with the road: “Well I'm running down the road trying to loosen/my load” and the repeated “Take it easy” clearly equate driving and being on the road with solving or escaping troubles. The mention of Winslow, Arizona, and the association of the song with Route 66 in its wake, brings

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these narratives together: Route 66 is the place for road trips, and road trips are a place to free yourself of worries and "take it easy."

In the late 1980's and 1990's there was another moment of cultural remembrance of Route 66 as many revival associations were started in an attempt to rediscover the road's history. The timing of this moment of remembering comes with the adulthood of those who experienced Route 66 as children on family vacations in the 1950s, or as college-aged adventures in the 1960s. Due to popular demand and efforts by the National Historic Route 66 Federation, President Clinton passed the National Route 66 Preservation Act in 1999, which aided in marking parts of the old road with Historic Route 66 signs.26 This $10 million in matching grant funds allowed for the reinvention of the highway as a commercial tourist resource again for the towns surrounding the highway. One New Mexican Representative, Republican Heather Wilson stated her reason for supporting the bill, "I believe this road still serves a purpose. By preserving the road for future generations, getting your kicks on Route 66 will be an experience our children and grandchildren can enjoy,"27 highlighting Route 66 and the leisure experience associated with Route 66 travel and road trips alike to be an invaluable, historical American experience to preserve. Ultimately the act allows people to more easily access Route 66, as there was clearly a cultural yearning for. The act also helped to preserve many of the cultural monuments associated with traveling on Route 66. Along with this act was the start of the John Steinbeck Award, given out by the National Historic Route 66 Federation to an individual outstanding in the preservation of Historic Route 66. 28

The road trip has been engaged with as a cultural phenomenon in many ways other than strict deployment of Route 66 remembrance, but the specific moments when this happens show how powerful and fully realized Route 66 is as a cultural phenomenon, and as a cultural memory. The latest moment of remembrance is in the 2006 Disney animated film Cars. The movie accesses Route 66 from the modern day, demonstrating how pieces of it exist, mostly

28 "National Historic Route 66 Federation."
untouched, but decaying and mostly overlooked. The movie’s producers and writers were aided by Route 66 historian Michael Wallis in writing the movie to help enrich the detail of the story, but the film largely relies activating parts of the American collective memory. For example, one of the cars character from Radiator Springs, the fictional Route 66 town, is a VW van hippie character, which activates a very specific, vivid historical moment of associated with Route 66 and road tripping. For a younger generation, a film like this remembering Route 66, further cements the road and the road trip associations with it into the collective memory of the nation by perpetuating its history of remembrance. The way that these moments of remembrance have come and gone demonstrate Nodelman’s claim that “66’s story is only remembered in order to forget again.”

Route 66 in the Modern Moment

Traveling on the road now, it was difficult at first for me to discern what was wreckage from long ago to what is more recent devastation from the recent economic downturn in the country. Many of the places and cities we passed through were ridden with slumping facades; chipped paint and grass overgrown creeping through the parking lot pavement. There was a specific eeriness along Route 66 in its emptiness, as we would pass a row of four or five gas stations in a row, or countless U-shaped motels with maybe one broken down car in the vast lot. It made me to sad to think of how dependent these places were on tourist commerce, and made me think about how impractical it is to have a tourist based economy or livelihood. Why didn’t these places try to be more self-sustaining? Maybe the allure of the road trip experience was so seemingly powerful and time-withstanding that the idea that the hearts of American travelers could be bought with a simple timesaving streamlining could override, or totally erase this vital experience.

30 Nodelman, "Route 66," 173.
The Work of Framing Histories

Robert Sullivan's text sets out to be an informed retelling of his road trip experience. It seems unlikely that a five or so day journey would warrant a four hundred-page text, but this is because of the task that the work seems to take on. It should be mentioned that there is a clear tension in the book regarding Sullivan's relationship to road tripping. The demonstration of multiple narratives, telling of different positive and negative road trips he has taken, disarms a romanticization of the road trip experience. There is also a specific disconnect in the nature of the road trip he is currently describing in the work, one that is by nature somewhat grounded by necessity and utility (needing to travel cheaply and at one's own whim and pace), and his clear passion and deep interest in the histories of road travel and all that that could possibly entail.

Although the work is framed and structured like a narrative, Cross Country is really an involved history of American's crossing the country. Sullivan recounts the history chronologically and in keeping with where he is located along his drive. The narratives, the historical and the personal, intertwine thematically and make up his book. He names a number of specific moments in American history that relate to cross-continental traveling. The first, and clearly personally significant moment for him is Lewis and Clark's expedition. His road trip starts out following Lewis and Clark's reported path back to the east, and Sullivan's family's trip has a great emphasis on finding some of the more important stops along the way. It is clear that Sullivan is completely infatuated with the expedition and that it has influenced his own understanding of himself and why he likes to road trip.

The next big moment in cross-country history is of the Mountain Men, fur trappers and traders working for to supply the popular trend of beaver fur hats in the 1820s to 1840s. Sullivan qualifies: "Mountain men were not cross-country travelers in the purest, modern-day sense; they did not travel the United States from east to west but mostly from north to south, in part because the United States did not yet stretch all the way from the Atlantic to the Pacific....They were independent contractors who were not tied to one piece of land but roamed
over vast stretches, from valley to valley." (Sullivan 82). He mentions them in the interest of
detailing a history of individualism and travel in congruence with one another in the United
States. Sullivan, in a way, tries to foreground his story with a complete and total history of the
travelers before him, to paint a more detailed conception of the traditions that his traveling pulls
from. Here he is specifically highlighting the aspects of individualism and exceptionalism.

The next piece of history is of covered wagon families venturing to new territory, via the
Oregon Trail narrative. Sullivan self-awareingly admits “As I’ve mentioned, we are not the first
family to cross the country: well known is the story of the families who first crossed the country.
These were the country-crossing families who took part in the overland migrations between
1839 and 1860.”31 An important note here is that Sullivan name the narrative here as “well-
known” activating the American cultural memory and presuming a level of familiarity with a
certain history. He is also admitting his own participation in a history and a tradition, and
outlining the limitations to this, saying that he realizes that what his family is doing is not
original or without historical tradition. This recognition is an important part of Sullivan’s
writing style and what makes his text a relevant piece of literature to analyze as the modern
moment of road trip narratives, especially in contrast to the other parts of history he mentions.

There is a marked turning point in the history that Sullivan outlines, and this comes with
the introduction of cars in the decades following the Civil War. In congruence with a movement
to unite the country after the disruptive Civil War, several companies and executives came
together to create and promote a movement called See America First, looking to persuade those
interested in luxury vacations to Europe, commonly known as the Grand Tour, that the same
high culture could be found domestically. Sullivan names that this American vacation
experience became more accessible to the masses later when cars were being mass produced
cheaply: “Americans first began to travel America in large packs just after World War I. It was a
time when the car had begun to be ubiquitous”32 allowing people “to discover America and

31 Sullivan, Cross Country, 97.
32 Sullivan, Cross Country, 147.
become Americans. In the mid-1920s, estimates for a number of people auto-camping ran between ten million and twenty million.\textsuperscript{33} This period that he outlines coincides with the start of the history that I have delineated as essential to the Route 66 narrative of the American road trip experience.

Sullivan's historical narrative outlines aspects of American history from the early 19\textsuperscript{th} century to mid 20\textsuperscript{th} century, before the Route 66 experience became prevalent after World War II, and so I think this historical narrative demonstrates the build up that results in the contemporary narrative. The melding of his narrative with these other histories positions his own stories, as he integrates a number of his own histories, combining the tales of many trips across country, Cross County can truly be classified as a meta-narrative. The road trip meta-narrative is what the American Road trip experience has become in our contemporary moment, a result of the combination and compilation of all of our collective memories of these specifically named moments in American history.

Santa Fe

Navigating our travels was an amalgamation of maps, technologies and communication. As the passenger, navigation was mainly my job, and it sometimes it was what I did all day long. We used a 2007 Randall McNally United States Highway Map, a 2007 Garmin GPS system, as well as some miscellaneous books and pamphlets that we would pick up locally. The paper map was used to find the roads that we wanted to take, to plan out the overall day’s distance and get the larger picture of the route, as well as being able to see all of the options available. This was important because we didn’t really take the main interstates, we would preferably travel the thinner green lines with little green dots along it, symbolizing a scenic drive. These roads usually took longer to drive, because they were curvier, less direct, but they were generally less trafficked and had lower speed limits. This took the pressure off of us to drive a speed beyond our means. We generally tried to shoot for 300 to 350 miles per day on 40 mph roads.

The problem with the GPS is that it really is not programmed to do exactly what you want, just to tell you what to do. Reconciling this difference was the key to getting where we wanted to go the way we wanted. Sometimes it was a battle. That is to say, sometimes it would take me all day, reprogramming and re-planning to go the way that we wanted. My dad would always say that it was just to be used as a tool, and not as an all-knowing guide, which is clearheaded and generally a good rule of thumb. Sometimes it took all my patience when the technology would not just bend to my every need and thought. After returning home, it became more apparent that some of the GPS’s biggest faults lay in that it is an outdated piece of technology, even at only four years old. Our Garmin was certainly functional, but not as simple to use, it required patience and manipulation. Generally, we could only plug in our route a few hours of traveling at a time, about a hundred miles at a time. By the time we were getting to the end of the hundred miles, I would scramble to remember the route that we had found before for the next portion. By that time, my dad’s opinion about the route probably
already changed, or I would at the very least have to give a detailed description of the next portion of road to make sure he understood it. This communication was probably the most frustrating in navigating.

What enforced this frustration and general communicative disconnect was the disparity in my father and mine senses of direction. I have resolved that my entire sense of spatial location is from my mom's side of the family: my dad could get turned around in a cul de sac. As the one who was generally directing, this was extremely disappointing and required a lot of repeated, detailed explanations of roads. The only real solution to this problem was usually letting my dad look at the map completely by himself, and then memorizing all of his preferences. Sometimes we would have to do this a few times a day, sometimes only once.

My dad's lack of directional sensibility was not all that apparent until we had traveled through a few cities together. It was more intuitive, easier for me, while he struggled, reluctantly following me when I surged ahead, hoping to understand before proceeding. It was an experience that probably agitated both of us. What probably didn't make it better was my incessant need to alleviate my own agitation by making jokes about it. If I didn't express my frustration in some way, I knew I would just explode with it, so I tried to let it out in little, harmless jokes. It turned out that that was the exact opposite way to avoid a confrontation about direction and navigation.

When we got to Santa Fe, it was just a few days after spending time with my mom and brother in Arizona at the Grand Canyon. My dad and I had been on the road for about four and a half weeks already. That was a long time to spend with one person, and luckily seeing my mom and brother was a welcomed break from that. My dad and I had our own anxieties about that experience: we had about four weeks of routine nailed down together, and then my mom and brother got thrown into the mix. Ultimately it was fine, if only a little foreign and patience testing in moments. I was unusually irritated with my brothers need to buy
sunglasses and vanilla wafers (why did he need those), but it was also the Grand Canyon, which was beautiful and the week as all in all a nice little vacation from our larger trip. The physical reminder that my home existed, far away, somewhere where I wasn't was the first instigation of homesickness that I felt since the first and second day of the trip.

Anyways, we were excited to get to Santa Fe. We had a nice place to stay, neither of us had been to the city, and there was reportedly good food and art in store for us there. The first night we explored the city only a little, but there really isn’t more than five square block that make out the downtown area, and they are oriented around a square plaza that is centrally located: very simple to navigate. So the next morning when my dad and I rushed out of the hotel because we got confused by the time change (we had been in New Mexico for two whole days and not realized) and were late for our Santa Fe food tour. I think the first strike probably came when I almost burst out laughing as my dad rushed off the hotel property in the exact opposite direction of the center of town – didn’t he remember, we were just there last night, not even 8 hours ago! Even though we had been traveling together for four and half weeks already, and this was not a first time occurrence, it was just hard for me to conceptualize that he really didn't know which where we were or which way we were going.

We had a really great day, going on an accidentally private tour with the owner of Food Tour Santa Fe, which took us to a string of delicious and distinctly Santa Fe restaurants while simultaneously exploring the city. Like I said before, the city really isn’t very large, so on the tour we pretty much saw the whole thing, not that we got a close look at everything. So later that evening, after resting from walking around all day, we went back into the downtown to look for gifts for people at home. The first thing that seemed to be off was when my dad rushed out of the hotel, almost leaving me behind, telling me to meet him there (implied that my other option was hurrying up). He was a man on a mission, and for a while we enjoyed shopping together in the stores that were still open: it was getting late. We
brainstormed ideas about where to go to dinner based on the food we had tried earlier in the day: my dad had been intrigued by this tapas place that I was not as intrigued by.

He remembered this pair of shoes that he saw in passing during the tour that had seams that looked like baseball laces and he wanted to find them to show them to me. At first we were just walking casually, and as it got darker and darker our steps became more hurried, my agitation growing with every time I walked the same block twice. My dad also got more and more impatient with himself as he felt my patience running out and I tried to jog his memory and recount different parts of the tour, running ahead of me, and constantly trying to get his bearings as we rounded the same corners over and over. At one juncture, he basically ran ahead of me and I came to a full stop, threw my arms to my sides while exhaling: “you need to communicate better with me, where are we going? Wait and let’s walk together.”

Eventually we had just about given up, when I made one snide remark about how we had been walking in circles and my dad sped up away from me, and I could tell by the intensity with which he was clenching his jaw that he was not happy. “I’m sorry, I’m not trying to be an asshole” I said quickly following him, and he said in a sort of hurt, exasperated tone “You are being an asshole, I’m just trying to find the shoes.” We finished crossing the street and there the shoes were. It was really anticlimactic. I asked what he wanted to do for dinner and he said, let’s just find sandwiches and bring them back to the hotel. I got a bagel. He got a roll that he was gonna make a sandwich with back at the hotel. I sat on the bed and munched on the bagel as he sat at the small table. I asked him three times maybe how his food was. He responded in one-word answers before leaving with out a word with his guitar and telephone and iPad. It was late so I watched a movie on my computer and pretended to be asleep when he came in and fell asleep crying when he didn’t even say good night. I felt awful. I couldn’t stand him being so mad at me. I hoped it would go away tomorrow.

The thing is, I really do have a positive memory of Santa Fe all in all. As debilitatingly shameful my father’s anger for me was in the moment, I think I’ve pretty much disassociated
that emotional experience from the place where it happened. Maybe not completely, as I sit here writing the story, centered on our issues with navigation and directionality.
Accessing “Otherness”

"He must have felt so unoriginal."

- a friend of mine, hearing about my dad’s first road trip

Although the American road trip tradition is deeply engrained in the 1950s vacation history, which is largely popular to white, middle class America, the specific type of American road trip experience that emerges from this era is embedded in the rhetoric of “otherness.” Although it has been established that the road trip is somewhat of a cultural experience in the United States, making it an institution or cultural pillar, notions surrounding the experience are doused in the aura of otherness, in the sense that it is an (American) exceptionally unique experience for each individual who participates. This otherness exists in one’s own self-perception as an other as well as an external view of the road tripper as an outsider. The road trip is not a popular vacationing institution, but instead seen as something one does as a kind of right of passage, maybe once or twice in a lifetime. The experience is elevated over other types of traveling; it is in its own category.

One could argue that “otherness” and one’s unique individuality is considered a deeply engrained part of American tradition, in the first “otherness” of the English and Dutch seeking religious freedom in a new land, and later any “otherness” of anyone’s traveling to a new and undiscovered place, whether it was settlers in the west, “Okies” en route to California in search of work, vacationers on Route 66, or anyone going somewhere new for the first time. The sense of individuality and “otherness” seems to come hand in hand with adventurous traveling experiences, like the road trip experience.

So, the road trip as an expression of “otherness” is complicit and intimately related to the road trip as a tradition in American cultural experiences. Participation in the “other” becomes tradition, although these designations occurring simultaneously seem completely impossible. The road trip experience lays in this specific space between being traditional to American culture and being unique in comparison to the everyday that the “otherness” felt or perceived of
or pressed upon road trip travelers is complex and unclear and perhaps non-specific as we can
not definitely point to and identify the experience as one or the other: traditional or
untraditional. I think that the notion that the experience can be both simultaneously is
distinctly American and is what makes the road trip distinctly American in its contradictory
nature.

A large part of this contradiction is that the road trip experience appeals to the American
in both ways. As a traditional activity, the road trip allows road trippers access to a cultural past,
allowing them to access their American culture by participating in something that is a distinctly
American tradition. (Let us remember the longer overarching history of travel embedded in the
American memory, and most recently, histories of Route 66). In the way that it is untraditional
or countercultural in its rejection of the everyday mode of living in the modern world, it is still in
tune with American narratives of individuality, thus giving road trippers another access point to
this presumed American cultural identity. The road trip is an access point to the identity of the
exceptional American, unique and rugged in their “otherness,” while it is also literally allows
visual access to the physicality of the country, and seeing it with one's own eyes allows some sort
of personal or individual ownership of the experience, so that even if it has been experienced by
others, it feels unique. Having this physical and visual first hand experience gives the road
tripper some sense of authority over the road trip experience as a whole, and as an extension of
the road trip experience, some sense authority over what defines and makes America what it is.

The “otherness” of the road trip experience does not only have to do with the person
accessing the road trip, but the space accessed by the road trip as well and its identity as “other”
Kathleen Stewart outlines how “other” spaces, like “space on the side of the road,” (West
Virginia) appeal to and draws in a “main stream” American gaze and intrigue:

“Imagine how people search for an otherness lurking in appearances. How they find
excesses that encode not “a meaning” per se but the very surplus of meaningfulness
vibrating in a remembered cultural landscape filled with contingency and accident,
dread and depression, trauma and loss and all these dreams of escape and return.
Imagine the desire to amass such a place around you, to dig yourself into, to occupy it."34

There may not be a specific, locatable draw, or “a meaning” to these “other” spaces that create an “other” experience, but a discernable “meaningfulness” in their “otherness” that makes them intriguing, desirable. And for every place that has this meaningfulness and desirous quality, there will be a willingness to occupy that space, to accumulate, by association, some of this otherness through the “othering” experience of traveling through these specific spaces. Pat Chestnut names the “otherness” of certain spaces in a straightforward, colloquial way, referring to his upcoming drive through Nebraska, “I thought how people on the coasts call it “flyover country.” I tried not to care: I still loved it, and for a time, I found comfort in its peaceful, ceaseless repetition.”35 Pat locates that culturally, this space is considered differently than the space of the West and East coasts, as a space not utilized, allocating a certain “otherness” to it. It is the space you fly over, but not go to, because it has no worth. Yet, Pat’s ultimate expression of adoration for the space he is about to drive through, that which has been deemed unworthy of traveling through, is indicative of the appeal of the “other,” and how the road trip is essential in accessing otherness in this way.

The expression of otherness in Cross Country occurs twofold. A previously mentioned, Sullivan constantly brings up these shorter narratives of individuals, pointing out their achievements, which emphasizes the culture of individuality and exceptionalism that is inherent in a tradition of otherness. But the other way that he emphasizes otherness is in the telling of his individual story. He is highlighting his family’s endeavors and this act, writing of a road trip experiences is inherently pointing out the author’s own exceptionalism. Beyond this, you can tell in the way he writes about his family that he is putting emphasis on their own exceptionalism. The titles of his chapters are over-emphatic, describing their own experiences as “The Worst Road Trip Ever Part 1,” which supposes that their experience is somehow singular.
or worse in comparison to all others, and also somewhat epic in that it has multiple parts. He also aligns his narrative with these other exceptional narratives, implying that his history is just as important to the history of road tripping in America has say, the inventors of the Interstate Highway System. That is not to say that one has more historical or cultural worth than the other, but the way that Sullivan has structured his text elevates certain narratives in this way, and the placement of his own narrative among these elevated histories brings his own story to this same "exceptional" status.

Again, what makes Sullivan's text so rich is his own self-awareness, which is present in the conversation of otherness. In his experience of shopping at a Wal-mart while on the road, he comments "we think we're different from everyone else, so apart from the masses and their trends, especially when we cross the country, but we are not. We are just riding along with the traffic." He is describing that his otherness exists outside of his participation of the road trip experience, but that this factor also amplifies his self-identification of otherness was enhanced and supported by going on road trips. In this moment, as his son refuses to enter Wal-mart, Sullivan comes to this realization that "We are just looking for a better price because a company has caused us to think that that's what we want even if it's more like merely what the company wants. That was the last time we went to a Wal-mart"\(^{36}\), which is what ultimately debunks his sense of otherness. His realization is not exactly that he recognizes the road trip experience as a tradition that he is participating in and therefore it is not as othering as he has prescribed it to be, but rather that his self-identification as an other is flawed and perhaps an unfounded or falsely preconceived notion inherently tied to our presumed identity as Americans and therefore automatically assumed. This would explain why participating in the road trip experience would enhance his feelings of otherness. Inherently, self-identifying Americans are engrained by dominant culture with the rhetoric of exceptionalism, and this is one reason why there is a tendency towards the road trip experience, because it involves and enhances this inherited sense

of self. The road trip experience then becomes a reaffirming sense of selfhood in one's identification as an other. For many it may be that the documentation of one's road trip experience is an exercise in reaffirming one's own presumed American identity (if participating in the experience is a performance of American identity and participation in an American tradition) because the experience of writing about oneself helps to shape and manifest the experience as exceptional. In any case, the America road trip experience links back to the inherent, and presumed American quality of being exceptional, individual, and other, a perceived “American identity.” Sullivan's questioning of his own “otherness” further probes at the strength, durability, and authority of this identity.

This sense of “otherness” also is a result of two intersecting factors. Each reason complicates and compounds upon the other, further accentuating the otherness and exceptionality of the experience. One conception of otherness is the way in which partaking in a road trip is countercultural in its difference from everyday life. The other factor is the individualism related to road tripping, the choice of isolationism in one's traveling or escapism. The assumed “otherness” of the road trip experience and the experience as a tradition conceptually interrupt one another, and this is where these two identities of the experience are complicated and inherently complex. The reason why I use quotation marks in regards to the word “otherness” is part of my argument that the sense of the road trip as an experience bred out of otherness is completely contradictory to the road trip as an American tradition and cultural pillar, and therefore non-existent in any way other than in people's impressions and imaginations.

Pat Chestnut’s essay “Hours and Days” very carefully outlines his road trip experience in contrast to the ongoing, fragmented and overlapping life he has developed since entering college and then the working world. This contrast starts to really get at the heart of at some of the factors of “otherness” that intersect. The essay basically frames two distinct ways of life. The first is has two distinct and separated periods of work and leisure, which Chestnut largely
associates with his youth. He would go to school and after coming home he would devote his
time solely and completely to the pursuit of his leisure activities: namely videogames. He
describes these games and this leisure time as pure and totally devoted to the world of the game.
This experience for him contrasts with his college experience where a lack of such a dually
segmented structure exists and tasks and relaxation blend into one elongated and unrelenting
experience, what he refers to as “an amorphous, unending present.”

Chestnut describes a number of experiences that act as examples of each type of life and
experience of leisure, commenting on his and America’s love and obsession with baseball,
expansive fantasy book series such as Harry Potter and exploratory video games such as the
Zelda series, naming that each of these in its own way creates its own little world with in which
the interested, the reader, the player can be completely consumed. He names these as serial
narratives, as each has an elaborate narrative that linearly unfolds in the creation of the story or
stories and world they create. This seems necessary in the modern world “with fewer periods of
uninterrupted focus and less linear progression though the day.”

Chestnut likens his road trip experience to these same serial narratives. His own road
trip experience is described in a series of segments, separated by other sections of analysis of
everyday life in an attempt to set up some sort of contrasting structure. He writes first about
leaving and the experience of driving in the morning, and then of watching a group of men
eating in at a truck stop, and then staying with his friend in Colorado, and then later, lists other
stops along his journey on the way back to Chicago. Chestnut seems to suggest that his tendency
towards escaping in road trip is tied to a societal appreciation or tradition of seeking satisfying
leisure from what he calls serial narratives.

In taking his road trip, a weekend escaping the normal pattern of his life, Chestnut is
momentarily subsuming to a specific, abnormal subset of normal modern leisure practices.
Something about experiencing the world in a way outside of the usual digestion of time and

37 Chestnut, “Hours and Days.”
38 Chestnut, “Hours and Days.”
space lends to the feeling of newness and originality. Even if participating in a road trip is partaking in tradition, following the steps of others, even directly down Route 66, the act is so refreshing in contrast to the mainstream structure of modern life that it perceived as a unique, original activity. The road trip takes Chestnut farther and further from the everyday activities and tempo of modern life by physically traveling through space. The other world, the serial narrative that Chestnut is losing himself within on this “long drive with nothing to do,” does not solely exist in his head, prompted by words or by a television screen, but he is traveling through it physically with his body and his mind in real time and real space. The experience is just as visual and internal, requiring contemplation and mental digestion, yet it is more extreme, and requires more commitment and is less readily visited, which allows it to fit within the realm of the other.

In the serial narrative experience of the road trip, the main character is the road tripper, which obviously makes the serial narrative as a leisure experience of the utmost importance to them. Steinbeck refers to the unique quality of “very long trips, a large area for day dreaming or even, God help us, for thought,” marking road trips as a time to being able to divulge in our own thoughts and day dreams, to imagine the limits of possibility for ourselves. The road tripper drives, they see, they go, they do, and they digest what they are doing. The experience is completely and totally involving. They are invested in the outcome of the narrative because they are the outcome. It’s not just Link or Harry, it’s you. There is really no other way that we have to lose ourselves in our own serial narrative experience. This is the singular event that offers that experience of leisure.

Chestnut frames his road trip through his interests in baseball and other serial narratives and against the ongoing and persistently present existence of his everyday reality in order to demonstrate the road trip as the ultimate escape of the modern life. He tells of watching baseball games and sitting in silence while the television plays at the end of the day in order to

39 Chestnut, “Hours and Days.”
40 Steinbeck, Travels with Charley, 829.
relax and attempt to escape, but ultimately it seems as if he finds his rejuvenation, more than once, in partaking in a road trip. The trip, beyond any other serial narrative, is the ultimate contrast to everyday life, and his partaking in this counter-culture movement of sorts places him as an other for the time that he is road tripping.

What is interesting and complicated about the serial narrative structure that Pat Chestnut sets up is that a road trip, as an attempted serial narrative, then becomes part of a larger tradition of societally accessed modes of escape and leisure. I would argue that, as a part of a larger tradition of modes of leisure, the road trip is inherently mainstream in that it is in keeping with ways that modern Americans access leisure. It has this position as a simultaneously traditional and untraditional experience which gives access from two distinct perspectives to some conception of American cultural identity and any meaning that could be assigned as being the "essence" or substance of what is America. I think that in some cases, having a more confident sense of authority over what American means or is (hypothetically) is directly tied to one's own American cultural identity and the road trip is used to access both.

Pat Chestnut's assessment of serial narratives as the primary way that modern Americans' access leisure is fitting with Nodelman's assessment of the road trip as inherently prone to linearly and narratively constructed interpretations of experience. The presumed linearity of the road trip comes from the experiencing fragmented sequences of visual and physical stimulus, and the subsequent linking of these fragments to make a meaningful, whole experience out of these fragments. Nodelman points to why this is inherent to a driving trip: "their innately fragmented viewpoint renders the physical world as a glimpsed series of surfaces. It is difficult to enjoy a panoramic view of scenery from an automobile, not only for the drivers, who must pay attention to the road, but for passengers," which he attributes to riding low to the ground and blocked from seeing long distances. Furthermore, long highways, such as Route 66, become tied to the narrative experience because "the only thing that stays in focus is the

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41 Nodelman, "Route 66," 168.
42 Nodelman, "Route 66," 167.
center of attention, the highway itself”43 and subsequently “if the only thing people in cars can see in any detail is the oncoming stretch of road itself, what keeps the experience from being an endless sameness are the things to be seen by stopping and getting out,”44 which means that the road side becomes a defining part of constructed road trip serial narrative. The difference in Chestnut and Nodelman’s thoughts here is that Chestnut does not take issue with seeing the road trip as a serial narrative, whereas Nodelman’s focus on the fragmentation of the journey complicates this notion.

The formulation of a “meaningful” narrative constructed from these fragmented experiences of the road “[implies] that a single strip of asphalt... running through a changing landscape has some conceptual unity— a unity that travelers can only realize over the course of a long, linear journey.”45 In attempting to de-fragment the visual, physical, and intellectual input, road trippers that narrativize their experience “thereby mystify spatial experience as much as they attempt to clarify it, calling for new accounts of the road to sort out the apparent confusion and capitalizing on the vague promise of revelation inherent to the intersection of road and text.”46 Stewart points out how ultimately impossible the American Road Trip experience is in that it attempts to solve something that was never in fact puzzled. Perhaps what this could mean is that in attempting to make some sort of cultural or identity-based meaning out of the road trip experience by narrativizing it, this presumes that there is any American culture or identity to be found out.

In the end, Pat Chestnut does not seem unaware that his conception of the road trip as an equivalent serial narrative leisure experience in the modern world is inherently flawed. He seems to recognize the limitations of the road trip, especially as it applies to his life as a temporary state of being. He finishes his essay, “But by the end, we were back to where we started, and I was back in my apartment, on my couch, on my computer. I woke up on Monday

44 Nodelman, “Route 66,” 168.
45 Stewart, *Side of the Road*, 3.
46 Stewart, *Side of the Road*, 3.
and went back to the office. This episode of my life was over. I was ready for the next one to begin.⁴⁷ He is physically confronted with the temporary nature of his escape when he has to return to work. And in this conclusive paragraph he offers no other knowledge but the acknowledgement that the experience happened and now is over. The experience did not inform him in any particular way, of any identity or cultural "truths" as he concludes of it. The only thing that he takes away from it was that it happened and it happened in contrary to his everyday life. Even though he chose to construct his own written narrative to show his experience, road trips, for Pat Chestnut, are this counter-cultural embodiment of defying the every day in one capacity, but not an access of otherness as it relates or equates with the American cultural identity, as some might argue road trips are.

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⁴⁷ Chestnut, "Hours and Days."
Obituary For a Shirt

I never thought I'd be so broken up about a shirt. Single tears streaked reluctantly down my cheek as I shed my heavy bed sheets and found a more comfortable spot positioned with my neck propped on a towel on the white tiled bathroom floor. I'm almost certain I woke my dad as the incorrectly hung door scraped against the floor, but the bed just wasn't the place for me. The tile was cool against my lower back and arms, as I arched, staring up into the light, my legs up on the toilet, as I wondered to myself why this was somehow a more adequate mourning place.

I miss people most of all. As we approached Santa Fe, we sat in traffic just outside the city, where I watched people my age, or probably younger, boys and girls, engage in a game of soccer together. The delicate dribbling back and forth between one boy in silky red and one girl in silk white, her triumphant, teasing smile as she faked passed him and the way they laughed about the moment together...I yearned for this casual interaction with my peers.

In the absence of some familiarities, people tend to cling to others. For me, routine was a major part of this, as routine can normalize any unknown environment. I would yank my bag from its spot in the car, perfectly fitting in between the library (a milk crate filled with books, covered with a towel upholstered seat) and my dad's guitar case, atop my dad's wider, heavier bag.

Every day certain things would come out of the bag. First, usually the phone charger from my backpack. My phone would most always be dead from feverish texting or incessant roaming, searching for service in those niches of the country that just don't seem to have it. One of my two chargers would come out, then my computer second. My duffle bag didn't usually get opened unless I needed to immediately change out of a sweat-soaked shirt or shorts, and if not, I waited until comfort called and it was time to get on some pajama-type clothes. Those consisted of one pair of shorts or one of two pairs of stretchy yoga pants if the
hotel was blasting the A/C too much, but not so much that it bothered my father (which would be reason enough to shut it off). Any shirt would do.

The last time I remember seeing my shirt is clinging inside out to my sweatshirt, a perfect mold of my inside out body, sitting at the foot of the bed I was sharing begrudgingly with my brother, tangled up with bed sheets, just as I had taken it off.

Somehow, every piece of clothing in my bag seems to make it out to meet the hotel room, every place we stopped. There is something impossible about finding one specific thing in a packed bag (which is exactly why I emptied my bag twice since realizing the loss of my shirt, hoping that by some chance I missed it and was really still there, with me). So out everything comes out, and in the morning gets carefully (varying degrees of carefully) packed away again. Never leave my gallon zip lock of shower products, those go in the side pocket, and my two pairs of shoes I’m not currently wearing in a secret bottom pocket of the bag. It’s easier to pack these things when the clothes aren’t in the bag, perhaps another reason why all of my clothes would end up inevitably on the floor.

Every piece of clothing had to be carefully picked out. I could bring one pair of jeans, so I brought my favorite, most comfortable pair. Shirt had to be made for sitting in the hot hot heat, so the chosen few were flowing, oversized shirts, including this grey-green worn-in soft Splendid shirt.

I bought it back in December, and I can honestly say I think that I’ve worn it everyday. Although I would wear it during the day, or even out at night on certain occasions, I slept in it almost every night. It was easy to pull off and on. I could wear it with out a bra and walk down the hall to the bathroom before bed without feeling self-conscious. It was so soft, so thin that even tucked under my black down comforter I would stay cool in it. It was perfect.

The feel of the fabric is so familiar to me now that nothing could possibly replace it, even a new shirt of the exact same would feel imposter. The feeling is so familiar that as I groped through my half-unpacked bag in the dark I was certain it was not there because I
could not feel it. I knew any lamp-illuminated searches would be in vain, but for my sorry, broken heart I searched.

What a silly thing. I told myself, it's just an object this is nothing to be upset about. But, like I said, without the normalcy of waking up in your own bed, or the sounds of your roommate watching Buffy the Vampire Slayer through your closet wall, without these people in your life that you have come to think of as your own in some way, these objects, these piles of fabric hastily folded into my bag each day became my comforts.

Taking these things out, and then putting them carefully back in place again became a very important part of my day. These things and this routine were the part of that hotel room and every hotel room that are my life and it is my responsibility to carry them carefully with me.

As I laid awake in bed, I pictured myself talking about this situation with someone else. I am embarrassed for my tears, think they are stupid and superficial, but also know that they come from some place real. Or are they a product of my heightened hormones, imbalanced for what seems forever by my birth control pills, another important and engrained part of my routine that I perform, always first thing upon waking up, half asleep as I stumble to the bathroom for some water to wash them down with.

I still feel sad upon remembering that the shirt is no longer mine. I feel like I let it down, feel incredible guilt for having failed my routine and I know that the loss is entirely in my hands.

But, it was just a shirt.
On “Authenticity” and “Authority”

Truth claims are one of the most significant ways that those participating in the experience prove the worth of the American Road Trip Experience as a way of finding or learning more about an American identity. I refer to them as truth claims because often these are delivered as statements of truth that are inferred to project some larger meaning onto an American identity. These claims also often depend on a very specific attribute of the American Road Trip Experience to validate or support the weight of the claim as fact. This is the conception, from the participants in the American Road Trip Experience and the projected audience of these potential written texts, that this partaking in the Road Trip experience automatically allows for a greater authority on the subject of American culture and cultural identity, due to authenticity of experience.

The discussion of authenticity, authority and truth claims occurs in a very complex way in John Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley in Search of America*, due to many interconnecting forces that come together in the production of this narrative. Steinbeck, as a renowned American author already has a certain perceived authority on issues of American identity, in that he has written some of the most pivotal books in American history, adding significantly to the American canon. His contributions to American culture give his public readership faith and confidence in his word. On one level Steinbeck constructs a narrative by linking all of these separate incidents (just as all other road trip narrative authors have done as well). Steinbeck shows his awareness of this process by admitting “I tried to reconstruct my trip as a single piece and not as series of incidents,” (878) while also admittedly leaving out visits to his son’s school, or visiting with his wife in Chicago because they “contribute to disunity” (848) in his narrative. By admitting the act of “reconstruction” he is showing that in trying to understand, relay and therefore make meaning of his road trip experience, he has fallen to the process of stringing along incongruent experiences. Constructing a more fluid narrative, a serial narrative, makes for the construction of a stronger argument for claims of defining American culture or identity.
The narrative that he constructs is then inherently a kind of truth claim. He is claiming that these incongruous events that occurred sequentially are intricately related with one another by virtue of offering them as the narrative experience of the “Search for America”. This gives an authenticity to the events he writes of, especially when he has the ability to do so with such brilliance. This is particularly relevant in the way he relays dialogue and encounters with strangers he meets along the way. Every new person he meets emerges as such a fully developed and complex character. He offers definition of personality and character that would be no way observable during the short conversations described. I believe it goes beyond the natural inclination to embellish in descriptions. Each of these conversations seems to be the sculpting of a specific character. For example, Steinbeck describes an elderly woman he encounters, “her voice rattled on as though she was terrified of the silence that would settle when I was gone.”

The degree to which he assigns her an inner psychology goes so far beyond the content of their conversation, which seems to be purely casual small talk. I would even go as far as to say that her great depth of character is necessary in this moment in creating a more personal image to South Dakota. He states that he met very few Bad Landers, and the one man that he presents actual dialogue with is very sparse. He needs this woman to be desperately welcoming of him into her home, and he needs to have some sort of authority or certainty about her character in order to create a knowing or convincing account of his time in the Bad Lands. It seems particularly likely that Steinbeck would be driven towards this sort of character-creating knowing the number of strong and memorable characters that he has written entire novels on. Creating these characters not only creates a more convincing road trip narrative for Travels with Charley, but somehow it also validates the characters he has already created, like Tom Joad, in their realness and complexity.

Steinbeck also constantly makes references to the instability of the truth. This is one of the ways that the stability of the claim of authenticity of this experience is uprooted. In making

48 Steinbeck, Travels with Charley, 870.
some conclusion about his ventures through the Dakotas, where he encountered the desperate, talkative old woman, he states, “and I thought how every safe generality I had gathered on my travels was cancelled by another. In the night, the Bad Lands had become Good Lands. I can’t explain it. That’s how it is.”49 He remarks on how his perceptions of things actually ended up being rather fluid. The general truths that he was rounding up on his travels were inconclusive in that they were constantly being rebutted. But just as he says that, he concludes, “That’s how it is,” making this authoritative claim that this is the stringent and unyielding reality: he is making the truth claim that no true truth claims can be made. This seems problematic or at the very least ironic. He admits another complication to projecting or even perceiving the truth when thinking about his hometown. On that issue he remarks, “I find it difficult to write about my native place, northern California. It should be the easiest, because I knew that strip angled against the Pacific better than any place in the world. But I find it not one thing but many – on printed over another until the whole thing blurs. What it is warped with memory of what it was and that with what happened there to me, the whole bundle wracked until objectiveness is nigh impossible,”50 naming a lack of objectiveness regarding his awareness and his portrayal of his travels through the place he grew up. I would argue that this lack of objectiveness and the warping of memory are both affecting of his perceptions of every place he travels, as his American collective memory is intricately interwoven with these perceptions. The argument there is that American collective memory is just as integrally related in one’s mind as any other familiar or personal memory. It’s hard to ignore this factor affecting his perception when he names it as diminishing the stronghold of his authority in one aspect of his storytelling already.

Despite this, Steinbeck, as the text begins to conclude, makes many directly contradictory truth claims, stating first, “The American identity is an exact and provable thing,”51 while then later making statements that “I realized by now I could not see everything.”52

49 Steinbeck, Travels with Charley, 871.
50 Steinbeck, Travels with Charley, 895.
51 Steinbeck, Travels with Charley, 906.
52 Steinbeck, Travels with Charley, 906.
and about how "deeper in my perceptions was a barrel of worms." These admissions reveal the instability of these statements as reliable, authentic truths, but the authority that Steinbeck's perceived audience trusts in him has allowed some authenticity in making these truth claims. He also engages in another tactic to portray his claims as specifically authentic, in framing things by saying, "it is carefully observed fact," referencing the fact that by taking this road trip and seeing things firsthand, that makes them undeniably and authentically true.

So on the bare surface of Steinbeck's text, there are all of these contradictions about truth and the weight and strength of the authenticity of his claims. Beyond that, studies have largely found that much of Steinbeck's trip was completely embellished, down to places he went, places he stayed and people he talked to. After following the path that Steinbeck lays out in Travels with Charley, writer Bill Steigerwald finds the impossibility of some of Steinbeck's simple claims, such as where he was at certain times. Steigerwald illuminates the ridiculousness of some of Steinbeck's stretches of the truth: "It's possible Steinbeck and Charley stopped to have lunch by the Maple River on October 12 as they raced across North Dakota. But unless the author was able to be at both ends of the state at the same time—or able to push his pickup/camper shell "Rocinante" to supersonic speeds—Steinbeck didn't camp overnight anywhere near Alice 50 years ago." Steigerwald also claims that some of the people that Steinbeck met with were extremely fortunate and perhaps too-rare-to-believe circumstances, such as the sophisticated Shakespearian actor Steinbeck encounters in North Dakota: "Travels With Charley is loaded with such creative fictions." Some of the facts that Steigerwald found he compared to claims made on the back of the book jacket, what could be considered the definition of the book, or what the public would be expecting upon buying it (which they did): "Travels With Charley: Novelist John Steinbeck and his poodle spend three months alone on the American road, roughing it and camping out each night like hobos as they carefully

53 Steinbeck, Travels with Charley, 905.
54 Ibid.
55 Steigerwald, Bill, "Sorry, Charley," Reason Magazine, April 2011,
56 Steigerwald, "Sorry, Charley."
57 Ibid.
document the soul of a changing nation and its people."58 To challenge these claims, Steigerwald finds in his research that Steinbeck stayed with his wife 45 out of 75 days traveling, 17 days in motels with other friends and a grand total of only 13 days camping on his own, which pares in comparison to the claimed "three months alone."59

The deviation from fact to what Steinbeck portrays as truth about his journey has had little affect on scholars of Steinbeck's literature, and clearly on the book's readership as it is still esteemed as an American classic, but I think that in terms of Steinbeck's attempting to cultivate an authentic portrait of America, this certainly tints Steinbeck's work as a fraud. Especially if you consider the tactics that Steinbeck used to infuse his tale with authenticity, like the depth of the dialogue or his "observations" of place. Now knowing that these things probably didn't even occur, this further erodes any claims that Steinbeck may have made. If Steinbeck took this trip and "recorded" this account of it in order to find out something specific about American culture and identity, than it can only be assumed that any claims he makes on those issues are as fraudulent as his "trip" and his "record" of the trip.

The point of showing all of the ways that Steinbeck's "authenticity" and "authority" fall flat is to illustrate a crucial part of the American Road Trip Experience that is integral yet not yielding of anything concrete regarding conclusions about American identity or culture. Essentially everything that he says is a contradiction or opposing something else. Furthermore, the effort put into invention, of dialog and descriptions of places he had never been shows the incessant need for something to be made out of the trip, even if it is not found by observation. He did not find the answers he was looking for, so he made them up by creating a specific narrative.

What is it specifically about being on a road trip that somehow grants the participants this supposed of authority on American culture. For Steinbeck the "authority" is derivative of his identity as a distinguished American author. For Sullivan it may be that he has driven across

58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
the country so many times. But these aspects don’t really speak to why there is the deeply engrained notion that the truths that lay at the heart of American culture and identity can be found along the roadside. Kathleen Stewart touches upon this in her theoretical study of a town in West Virginia, *A Space on the Side of the Road*. The study can be effectively seen as the opposite of a road trip narrative, where the road tripper is glimpsing a little piece of everything and making some conclusive statements about the experience. Stewart’s work documents an expansive study of one particular place, West Virginia, in great depth over a large period of time, as an attempt to capture the rhythm and texture of the local culture which she views as being vastly overlooked. She wants for there to be a larger consideration of this local texture in defining American culture: “It is an attempt not to set the story of “America” straight but to open a gap in it so that we might at least to begin to imagine “America” and the “spaces” within it.”

What she sets out to do is not to conclude anything specific about the space, but to at least include the cultural narrative of West Virginia into the American cultural canon. The way that she avoids conclusion, or tends more towards non-conclusive observations and performances of culture is captured in her statement, “This is the space of the gap in which signs grow luminous in the search for their elusive yet palpable meanings and it becomes hauntingly clear that, as they say in the hills, “thangs are not what they seem.”

This statement allude to her personal familiarity with the local culture, which she utilizes to demonstrate that you can not make hard, conclusive comments based on observation. She is questioning her own authority and ability to make meanings of specific experiences, even when the signs are there, even as she demonstrates an in depth understanding of the place and culture of West Virginia.

Every single one of these texts presumes some type of authority that is related to shear instance of them partaking in the physical act of driving and seeing. There is an air of authenticity to having physically seen, and therefore “experienced” that place, person or thing. In moments where that authority is completely assumed and goes majorly unquestioned, like

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60 Stewart, *Side of the Road*, 7.

with Steinbeck's work, their observations become problematic, and also more remarkably so. Sullivan, in his conclusive remarks on his trip, he suggests how he can see the future of road traveling playing out, "I can envision a future built on history, a path unengineered, unstreamlined – a path mostly just considered. I can envision all kinds of things happening in and to and on the country, especially after crossing the country via road." But he recognizes his own positionality, and questions his authority on the matter by adding,

"Then again, I’m just a driver driving the same roads over and over, and I’ve probably been driving too long. I’m no clairvoyant. I’m a guy in a car with his wife who has been in the car with him many, many times. Maybe too many times, though I hope not. I’m just another dad trying not to drive his wife and his kids crazy. I’m just another driver." With each sentence he breaks down facets of his identity and his position in relation to the narrative he has just laid out for the reader, and he completely divorces any sense of authority by saying that he is just like any other driver out on the road. He is claiming a complete lack of exceptionality, which he has pretty much claimed upon himself and others through out the entire rest of the text. What this signifies is that what the journey has told him, ultimately, is that he really has no authority, there is no authenticity of experience that gives him any special insight. He recognizes the limits of the road trip, and the limits with in himself.

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Music became a pretty integral part of our days. Really all we did was sit and listen to music and watch the road and the rest of the scenery fly by. My dad hooked up these speakers to our extra battery in the back, which hooked up to an iPod that I got to control. Through out my entire life I have always been extremely over conscious to play music that I think will not offend my parents. So I tried to pick an even mix of artists and genres, and made sure to ask my dad who he wanted to listen to every once and a while. A few days I decided to show him artists that I knew he wouldn't know, like Nicki Minaj, who he apparently recognized by voice (although not appearance, surprisingly) at the Superbowl Halftime show. We also had a Madonna and Lady Gaga comparison day. I think he at least got a kick out of it.

I'll usually listen to music in little thematic pods: I'm not good at stick to albums or artists, but there is usually a group of songs that I've listened to repeatedly together. One set on my iPod specifically corresponds to tour songs for my rugby team. These are songs we're required to learn the words to and should be able to sing on command at any given moment if one of our eighty other teammates, man or woman, decides to break into song.

This meant that every time we had the chance to be drunk and on the beach at night together all as a group, it would only be a matter of time before someone would slowly chant the first few words, “Is this the real life?” “A long, long time ago, I can still remember,” or “Almost heaven, West Virginia.” We would all stand in a group and sing our very loudest mostly out of time and out of tune but hearing us all sing together was what made the songs so beautiful and fun and memorable.

So when my dad requested John Denver I couldn’t wait for Take Me Home, Country Roads to play. It was, in fact, the one song from that album that I knew all the words to. We were driving in Connecticut then, after leaving Vassar, our last stop before home. My dad and I were aching for home, he was practically pacing outside the car by the time I made it out of the room we stayed overnight in. The air was incredibly humid; if you stopped for too long the
beads of sweat would start to roll, and so the wind through the car winds felt incredibly freeing. The trees were ones I knew and recognized, and the roads were ones I had driven on, probably, once before.

Well so then Take Me Home, Country Roads did come on and I just remember the cool rush that infiltrated my entire body: “Country Roads, take me home. To the place, where I belong.” That high note on the end is the like the sound of the back of my throat pinching and my tear ducts welling up. The melody is so incredibly heart wrenching, my chest pulling with each word. The funny thing is that I had never even been to West Virginia until a few days before arriving back home, and I'm not even from the “country.” It didn't feel like home to me. But hearing the song, and the memory of those dozen off key voices screaming up into the air and to each other, the song that was so specifically American, that's what made the song feel like home.

I don't even know most of the words, I realize as I try to sing with out the music backing me up. There is something about rivers and mountains and Mountain Mommas and I guess those are the things that make it American?

I'm not sure if this story is even really about my road trip.

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Conclusion

What I have hoped to demonstrate with the pieces of italicized narrative and photographs from my own road trip experience is how these stories and little pieces of experiences that have occurred during a road trip should be taken at face value and for the individual meanings they conjure and express. The notion that the fragmented sequence of experiences can form this larger, seamless road trip narrative experience that produces or concludes in a more intimate and inclusive understanding of what “America” is or what it is to be “American” is completely constructed. Nodelman suggests that this construction is driven from our need to “conceptually arrange space”\textsuperscript{65} through travel narratives, which perhaps means to also locate oneself within this space. As each of my stories stood isolated between unrelated text in space, and in a non-logical, non-chronologically arranged sequence, the meaning of these stories stand alone, unaffected by one another, dislocating their meaning to me from the space they occurred in, as well as the trip as a whole. They may portray some development of my character individually: how my relationship with my father developed or was affected by the road trip, my impressions of Route 66, feeling more connected to my mother’s side of the family, etc., but these developments say nothing about my understanding of my American identity or give me any real authority on American authenticity. I hope that in reading these pieces you have not strung them together, trying to find where to fit each piece in the puzzle, to find some sort of meaning out my seven and a half week journey. The only purpose that these stories hold in conjunction with one another is as the glue to this thesis, stringing you along from section to section, while also breaking up the thoughts, relocating you each time you try to find yourself drawing conclusions from my arguments. I have hoped that each of these personal pieces of writing, over the course of this thesis has demonstrated this meaning more and more saliently, ending with the list of unsubstantiated claims based on surface skimming observation of a place or a people or a theme.

\textsuperscript{65} Nodelman, “Route 66,” 167.
The greatest danger of the road trip is not all of these individual experiences gained by the road tripper, but the collecting and organization of this knowledge into the confidence of identity and expertise in answering the question: what is America? What I have found is that the patterns of claims, mostly unsubstantiated, largely over generalized and overconfidently stated are all a symptom of a more complex problem with American identity. All that can be found, realized or learned about America from a road trip across it is that participating in the experience does not illuminate any answers. The American identity is not this innate desire to adventure, or even a drive to travel, but when broken down, it appears to be more of just a tendency to search for an identity, one that is assumed can be found. Steinbeck frames that in this capacity, “we are a restless species with a very short history of roots, and those not widely distributed. Perhaps we have overrated roots as a psychic need. Maybe the greater the urge, the deeper and more ancient is the need,”66 to search for those roots. This is has less to do with the traveling part of a search and more to do with there being nothing to find. The search for American identity has been going on since the inception of the United States, and with this search has been the many, largely and loudly announced claims of identity finding.

The history of the United States is actually quite short in comparison to the rest of the civilized world. For what is lacked in quantity is made up for in what could be construed as quality: great depth in details and enthusiasm for these details. In comparison to the thousands of years that some civilizations have existed, maybe three hundred or so years is not enough time to develop or concretely conceptualize of an adequate identity, something archetypal for citizens for years and years to come to be able to hold on to. Steinbeck remarks in regards to this short history, “at least in my own satisfaction, that those states with the shortest histories and the least world shaking events have the most historical markers.”67 The United States, as nation, some what overcompensates for its lack of history. In the short time of development of culture in the United States, perhaps a few identities have emerged, a few so contradictory to

66 Steinbeck, Travels with Charley, 837.
67 Steinbeck, Travels with Charley, 820.
one another and inherently underdeveloped that they exist separately from a national, archetypal identity that Americans can universally relate to. The dichotomous and perhaps opposing identities that have emerged, the hypermodern and then the more wholesome, small town agrarian are evidence to the lack of a strong and concrete American identity that is out there to be found for those road tripping. Unlike many nations with a much longer history of civilization and therefore thousands of years of development of a unified national identity shaped by common experiences, exposures to the same art, food and general cultural norms, the United States has not reached this mature state as a nation. There is no one identity to find or to relate to, and this lacking has perpetuated the search for one. Stewart comments on being able to make a concrete conclusion on culture, utilizing her in depth familiarity with West Virginia, “the point is not that culture is a “complex” “thing” but rather that it cannot be gotten “right” that it is, as they say in the hills, “nothin’ but just talk is all,” or the tense rhythm of action and “just settin’” or a hunting for “signs” in the face of the inexplicable.”68 The search, and the resulting narratives affirming the purpose of the search are a way of validating an inane and unrelinquished conquest. Claims of gained knowledge and perspective on American identity and the question “What is America?” are an overcompensation on the part of writers and travelers partaking in the American Road trip Experience. The experience is an exercise in validating an insecure and unsure citizenry obsessed with finding something that does not yet exist with the minimal scope of our history. Nodelman even suggests, in relation to Kerouac’s On the Road, “the search for moments of mystical revelation destroys its own possibility.”69

As a nation, we hold dearly onto these little pieces of history, individual people who have mattered, but in longer histories of older countries these little details are lost and the most important details remain, forming a firm and sure national identity. Roads, and specifically Route 66, which is practically the first American ruins, stand as a testament to any depth within our own history. It has been remembered and eroded and forgotten and remembered again.

68 Stewart, Side of the Road, 6.
69 Nodelman, “Route 66,” 171.
Ultimately, it's existence only spans within the last century. We, as a nation, are far too close to our own history and the larger scheme of the nation's history to know what our identity is yet, but still we yearn for it, and this is manifested in the American Road Trip Experience. We will search, because when there is no answer, all there is left to do is search for the answer, and question and search and probably make some conclusions, some may be accurate but ultimately will not really reflect whatever “identity” of America that may exist in 1000 years.
No narratives, just conclusions

Most of the roadtrip was about changing my completely unbased pre-conceived conceptions of the places we went.

Idaho is really mountainous and not just a flat potato field. The Maine of the west coast, perhaps.

Santa Fe is the perfect place for artsy, rich, old white people who "appreciate" "culture."

California is just not home, no matter how liberal it might be.

California is ruined by a lack of clarity of air; what is the point of a pretty view if you can't see it through the smog.

Michigan is actually pretty nice; maybe there are places in the Midwest that are just as nice as the East Coast.

Plantations make me really uncomfortable, even if they are now just pretty mansions on big manicured properties.
Trip by numbers

52: days
7: weeks
9,092: miles
2,170.51: dollars on gas
503.809: gallons of gas
18.046: average mile/per gallon
4.31: average price per gallon
74: times buying gas
28: states visited
10,076: pictures taken
22: chapters
16: sources
80: pages written
24,043: words written
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Abstract
The American Road Trip is something that, inherently, most Americans have some cultural understanding of, even if they have not personally taken one. This inherent understanding has been constructed by facets of cultural or collective memory. Using a group of self-aware non-fiction road trip narratives conscious of the road trip as a cultural trope that reflect the history and framework of Route 66, I will look at how these works function as a historical and cultural reenactment, testifying to many of the themes and traditions within road tripping culture. This analysis will aim to show readers how individuals attempt to access the road trip as a means of connecting to their own American identity. Using these narratives, I argue that the road trip and the road trip narrative, an access point to nostalgia and a way to create a more fluid, narrative experience to escape the tires of modern day life and construct a more meaningful, tangible effort to connect to their American cultural identity.

Keywords: road trip, cultural identity, narrative, collective memory, American identity, nostalgia.