

The
Road Story
and
the Rebel
**Moving
Through
Film,
Fiction,
and
Television**

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Introduction

What Automobility Offers Cultural Studies

In *Sunset Blvd.* (1950), Norma Desmond bragged about the superior quality of her car compared to those made after World War II. Norma owned quite an automobile, a handsome 1932 Isotta Fraschini, which would have been built up from the chassis to her specifications—including the leopard-skin seats and gold-plated telephone connected to the chauffeur's cab (fig. 1). By contrast, she derided “those cheap new things built of chromium and spit.” Yet those two materials, American and low-brow as they are, explain precisely what captured



Fig. 1. Max (Erich von Stroheim) chauffeuring Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) and Joe Gillis (William Holden) in Desmond's custom-built 1932 Isotta Fraschini in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). Directed by Billy Wilder; film copyright © Paramount Studios.

INTRODUCTION

the fancy of the generation that came of age after World War II—the hot rodders, lowriders, and bikers of the late 1940s who were imagining a very different type of automobility than Norma Desmond's.¹ These rebels without a cause built upon prewar cars, which they chopped, welded, painted, lowered and raised via hydraulics, then proudly cruised, bringing new glory to old technology—thanks precisely to chromium and spit.

Like the postwar cars created from prewar models by a new generation wanting to get its kicks on Route 66, so too have road stories been jacked up, dropped down, ripped apart, and recombined—in other words, substantially re-envisioned for a multimedia and multicultural age. We shall see that postwar and postmodern road stories offer a glimpse not only of contemporary automobility but also of the revolution in authority between people clinging to prewar social privileges—to a hierarchy that did not question the power of wealth or seniority, nor buck against patriarchal or white privileges—and those who turned the story of America's open road into a declaration of independence. Insisting on their right to social mobility, many postwar storytellers created from the road narrative a broader vision of autonomy and mobility for all. They are the ones who turned narratives about movement into a genre of rebellion, using whatever medium they could access to tell stories of their differences from the mainstream.

What Norma's disdain for chromium and spit reveals is her objection to the democratization of mobility that characterized the postwar years. The leveling of privilege is at stake in Norma's snobbery—and in the postwar American road story. No longer did one need to be rich to motor around Sunset Boulevard, for the average Joe—as embodied in her companion, Joe Gillis (William Holden)—could scoot up there in a dream car bought on credit, dressed in the image of success even if he were in truth as poor as a pauper. The postwar automobile's shiny chromium surface did symbolize superficial flash, and the spit of the assembly-line workers at "The Big Three" indisputably helped make automobility available to the masses—and herein lies all that Norma resisted, which we ignore at our peril. Road stories chronicle these symbolic changes as well as the evolving face of the storyteller who uses automobility as a metaphor to champion the significant social rebellions of the postwar years. These rebels *with* a cause use any of the mass media available—either the more costly productions like film, the high volume content of television, or the traditional esteem of the novel.

As suggested by *Sunset Blvd.*, the new writers would be not only young, white men like Joe Gillis but also women—like his romantic counterpart, Betty Schaefer—and eventually minorities, expatriates, gays and lesbians, and members of all sorts of communities that have been marginalized in American society. In 1950, Norma could still lord it over Sunset Boulevard, but further east in Los Angeles, over on Whittier Boulevard, second-generation Mexican Americans were celebrating their hybrid ethnic and American identity by turning old Chev-

ies into lowriders. Through the heart of Los Angeles, Japanese Americans were experiencing racism on the buses of Wilshire Boulevard; and down on Central Street, African Americans were challenging real-estate covenants that kept them segregated there. While the boulevards of cities demarcated barriers between different racial groups and socioeconomic classes, the progressive social changes sparked by the war—including widespread employment of women and the eventual desegregation of the military—can be read in the road stories of the postwar years and still in the transformations of this genre today. Like the tricked-out cars created in postwar barrios and suburban garages, road stories serve as vehicles for Americans' sense of the self as autonomous and mobile, two linked qualities that will be condensed throughout this study in the term "automobility."

ROAD SCHOLARSHIP AND "INTERMEDIARY" METHODS

Postwar mobility is a fact that can be measured by social scientists, but in this study of America's fictions of automobility, the data are more oblique, for popular narrative reflects social change within the realm of fantasy and desire rather than statistics and charts. We shall survey here how writers and directors who want to foreground their autonomy and mobility use the road genre to proclaim an emancipation in social relations that began in World War II but flowered throughout the Vietnam era and continues today. Furthermore, this study traces the media by which these remapped narratives circulate among Americans—in movie theaters, on television as well as video and DVD, in print, on the Internet, and even in video games.

Thanks to postwar technology, the road story flourished in ways that are truly incomparable to its prewar counterpart. We shall consider the road story as a popular narrative form, and find in its postwar remappings and postmodern evolutions the subtext of contemporary identity politics. For this task, we rely upon an interdisciplinary, multimedia approach, which runs counter to the lingering tradition of studying genre by scholarly discipline. Because the methods used in this project are hybrid, this chapter will review the well-trod techniques of each discipline's "road scholarship," then suggest what an "intermediary" approach offers to scholars willing to go off the map. Historiography will help us fill in missing information about women and minority contributors to the road genre.

Hence, this chapter moves from the literary scholars who focus specifically on the theme of the car and road in fiction and nonfiction written works (Dettelbach, Stout, Lackey, Sherrill, Primeau, Paes de Barros) to film scholars working on the road film (Corrigan, Cohan and Hark, Laderman, Sargeant and Watson) by way of genre theories drawn from rhetoric (Devitt, Beebe, Cohen) and media scholars trying to navigate the meaning of our netscapes and sense of self (Morley, Jenkins). This overview provides the road map for my methods in the following chapters, which will move decade by decade through the evolution of the novels,

films, and television shows in order to demonstrate that the modern American road story is a multimedia genre that goes through cycles of rebellion and co-optation that affect all of us, even if we have not seen any of the recent road films or played *Grand Theft Auto*.

Literary scholars first acknowledged a road genre, for literature has a deep-rooted tradition in the picaresque as well as the pilgrimage or journey narrative and the African American migration narrative.² Even today, many literary scholars cling to the idea that one need only look back at Homer's *Odyssey* or Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to understand the modern-day road story, as if it were possible to ignore how electric media alter the narratives that circulate and the diversity of people who purchase and create them.

In 1976, Cynthia Golomb Dettlebach wrote perhaps the first full-length monograph on the theme of the automobile in American fiction and pop culture, for which she found a wealth of examples, especially in the works of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. In 1983, Janis P. Stout followed up with *The Journey Narrative in American Literature*, studying how "the characteristic journeys of American history influenced our literature by providing images and a framework of values associated with movement and direction" (5–6). Literary scholars have recently added to this work, with Ronald Primeau's *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway* (1996), Kris Lackey's *Road Frames: The American Highway Narrative* (1997), and Rowland A. Sherrill's *Road-Book America: Contemporary Culture and the New Picaresque* (2000), the latter two studying nonfiction books. In 2004, Deborah Paes de Barros focused on the fictional work of women authors in *Fast Cars and Bad Girls: Nomadic Subjects and Women's Road Stories*, as will be discussed later in this chapter. In this thirty-year period of literary study, scholars have moved from the mobilities of the car to the space of the highway to the fluidity of identity as a representation.

Film scholars have only been writing about the road genre for the past fifteen years, although the cult-oriented book, *Road Movies* (1982) by Mark Williams, offered an early compendium of these films. Other books for fans include *Races, Chases and Crashes: A Complete Guide to Car Movies and Biker Flicks* (1994) by Dave Mann and Ron Main, as well as *Two Wheels on Two Reels: A History of Biker Movies* (2000) by Mike Seate and Matthew Gagnon. Jack Sargeant and Stephanie Watson's *Lost Highways: An Illustrated History of Road Movies* (2000) offers a cross between fan appreciation and journalistic insights. More recently, and of central importance to this field, is David Laderman's *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie* (2002), which adds scholarly insights to Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark's landmark anthology *The Road Movie Book* (1997). These studies have grown out of the formative discussions of the road film genre found in Timothy Corrigan's *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (1991).

Later in this Introduction, we will consider Corrigan's work within the context of the late 1980s.

Even museums merge the scholarly and popular fascination with American automobility. Shows range from the California Museum of Photography's 2000 exhibit and catalog, *Rearview Mirror: Automobile Images and American Identities*, edited by Kevin Jon Boyle; the Getty Museum's "The Open Road: Photography in America 1850–Now" (2001); and Ulrich Keller's exhibit and catalog, *Highway as Habitat: A Roy Stryker Documentation, 1943–1955* (1986). Back in 1970, *The Highway*, organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, gave some early shape to this work. In all, however, it is plain that the theory to explain this postwar genre has come relatively recently, in contrast to the long-standing presence of road stories in pop culture.

Genre tends to be studied in universities by medium, for few departments are yet interdisciplinary. This modernist practice reflects the goal of the first half of the twentieth century to push each medium to its uniqueness. In rebellion, some artists of the fifties and sixties embraced a philosophy of "intermedia," as we will see in chapter 2, on the Beats. The term "intermedia" describes an artist's use of media that willfully ignores boundaries between film and literature or art or music, in contradistinction to modernism's emphasis on the differences between each medium.³ Intermedia is a concept that benefits postwar and postmodern cultural studies because it helps us to see how minority groups or marginal communities may be responding to mainstream stories by using less-expensive and more-accessible forms of media production. As such, intermedia opens up methods for these postmodern times, when storytellers and their protagonists travel readily from one medium to another. With the goal of finding a methodology that will account for the ideological uses of narrative in a media-saturated America, we shall review some attempts to apply cultural studies to the magical mystery tour of road stories throughout these postwar decades. Hybrid methods are still being invented forty years after Marshall McLuhan noted: "Program and 'content' analysis offer no clues to the magic of these media or to their subliminal charge" (34).

Rhetorical theory focuses on how genres function among users to create part of a group's identity; in turn, this offers a way to consider how dissenting communities have used genre to frame or constitute their cultural rebellion.⁴ In *Writing Genres*, Amy Devitt sums up current genre scholarship as moving away from categories or structural analysis in order to study a genre's "rhetorical purpose and social contexts. . . . As ideological as groups are, so are the functions of their genres" (51). Devitt expands on how genres function:

Genre, in its role as a social structure, can be seen as tool and agent, both constructed and constructing, always constructed by people but not always by the same people who are acting with it at that moment.

... Cultures and situations, like genres, are constructed by humans responding to material conditions and perceiving similarities [and also perceiving differences]. As people interact with cultures, situations, and genres, they are shaped by those contexts and reaffirm those contexts [or rebel against them]. Even as people use a particular genre to mediate between context and text, they both operate within and recreate that genre.⁵ (49)

Hence, we shall see how storytellers use the road genre to recycle certain tropes in order to highlight the differences in identity between a new type of protagonist and its predecessors, or to exploit the similarities. Devitt adds to this concept in noting that people “recognize genres are the roles they are to play, the roles being played by other people” (12). Thus, we will ask what the discourse of “liberty and freedom for all” meant to African Americans as the NAACP organized the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955–56, as well as to Toni Morrison as she remaps the road story in *Song of Solomon* (1977) with her politically ignorant black character, Milkman. How are artists responding to political history and cultural tradition via the road genre? This question is especially important when minority and marginal communities have so many more opportunities to influence genre in our multimedia age.

In 1986, rhetorician Ralph Cohen asked “Do Postmodern Genres Exist?,” and road stories offer a unique case study for answering with an emphatic yes.⁶ We will see throughout this book that postmodern genres have intermediary and multimediary characteristics. Genres reveal themselves as postmodern when they are studied across media platforms. By following changes in road stories in film as well as television and print, for instance, we will discover the debates voiced by storytellers who are alienated from dominant culture rather than merely at odds with its prevailing values. Working with and against genre, subcultural storytellers use it as an ideological space through which their marginalized characters “travel” in order to overturn old hierarchies and assert new meanings. A postmodern genre recognizes its role in identity politics.

Because the road story offers a thematic way of looking at postwar cultural production and postmodern genres, scholars of other genres will hopefully find here some constructive ways to traverse critical theories in their own work. Thanks to the overt theme of mobility and autonomy, road stories explicitly demonstrate the autonomy of storytellers to exploit the mobility of narrative on various media platforms, but these qualities are by no means the exclusive terrain of the road genre. Thus, my intermediary study joins works like David Morley’s *Home Territories: Media, Mobility, and Identity* (2000) with a goal of matching “the analysis of modes of communication and of the circulation of messages with the patterns of residence and mobility of the audiences who consume them” (6) by focusing

on the social history of peoples and stories. Morley faced many similar challenges in studying the meaning of “home” in our electric age. He also uses adventurous methodology: “It is the articulation of a variety of disciplinary perspectives which is my objective” (6).⁷ A similar consideration of transportation and perception shaped the interdisciplinary methods of Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s *The Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the 19th Century* (1977). Increasingly, our genre theories will need to address what Henry Jenkins calls an age of “media convergence”:

We are living in an age when changes in communications, storytelling and information technologies are reshaping almost every aspect of contemporary life—including how we create, consume, learn, and interact with each other. A whole range of new technologies enables consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content and in the process, these technologies have altered the ways that consumers interact with core institutions of government, education, and commerce. (“Media Convergence”)

Morley apologizes in advance for blurring methodological differences in “my attempt to seek out parallels and analogies amidst such a disparate body of work in different disciplines” (8). Yet he welcomes the debate and critical engagement that will come as interdisciplinary scholars create tools capable of addressing what I will call the “media matrix”—the constellation of medium, message, and messenger—as well as the autonomy and mobility afforded by narrative and genre to the postmodern reader/spectator.

Only through such borrowings and adaptations does critical theory progress, as Edward Said argued in “Traveling Theory” in 1983. But new scholarly approaches inevitably upset traditional modes of understanding. Our aim here will not be to define the road genre, articulate a canon, or stay within the disciplinary borders of any academic department, but to trouble all of these concepts—not for the sake of rebellion, but simply because the contemporary road story, as a uniquely postwar and postmodern genre, requires new approaches before its social significance can be fully appreciated. Through the synthesis and juxtaposition of critical theories, we can open up familiar texts to new meanings by demonstrating what they reveal about technological advances and identity politics, adding this to the aesthetic and commercial influences that most scholars study.

Rather than inventory passages that celebrate the road, then, we shall look at the types of stories told via the narrative device of the road and automobility, the types of new technologies or civil rights laws that alter the genre or open up distribution channels for new audiences, as well as what happens to this genre of rebellion when authors, filmmakers, producers, or critics see themselves as even more marginalized than the rebels who created the earlier road stories. There are many patterns evident, for instance, in the different motives for hitting the

highway or the sorts of destinations and dreams pursued en route, which could help build a semiotic study of the genre; yet our focus will be to analyze how those patterns are reinforced or subverted depending on the gender, race, and sexuality of the narrators and authors/directors. We will concentrate less on generic paradigms than on their changes, noting for instance the sexual content of the story and the sexuality of the audiences “poaching” upon the story, or tracing how socioeconomic class serves as a covert subtext to the types of travel or tasks accomplished on the road.

Given the broad scope of this study, there are by necessity many gaps awaiting the work of future scholars. Most notably in need of study is the long history between rock ‘n’ roll and postwar automobility,⁸ as it is also important to survey in greater depth the contribution to the road story made by the Internet, comic books, graphic novels, video games, and children’s culture. Although I acknowledge the influence of international films or aesthetic movements, there simply is not enough space here to consider in any detail the international shape of the road genre.⁹ Another vital relationship to trace would be the theme of road trips in commercial advertisements and political activism, especially in emerging economies (as in China, where Ford is producing some of the nation’s popular TV shows, which feature its cars).¹⁰ Furthermore, each road scholar emphasizes a different set of texts, so this field affords many the chance to contribute new texts, methods, and meanings that build a broader understanding of this multimedia and multicultural genre. This wide-ranging survey of sixty years’ worth of road stories is an open invitation to dialogue about genre and cultural studies in the postwar and postmodern years.

IDENTITY POLITICS IN ROAD STORIES AND ROAD SCHOLARSHIP

In *Driving Visions*, David Laderman defines “the fundamental core impulse of the road movie [as] rebellion against constrictive social norms” (1) and “a break away from unwelcoming or downright oppressive social circumstances rooted in modernist rebellion” (2). His book seeks to answer the question, “What does it mean to exceed the boundaries, to transgress the limits of American society?” (2). In contrast, we shall ask a related but qualitatively different question: How does the road story, with its themes of rebellion and transformation, offer certain subcultures at key junctures in American social and technological progress a pretext for revising, remapping, or reimagining the narrative of that group’s autonomy and mobility? This work complements Laderman’s despite the different questions asked and the variety of media examined. Laderman acknowledges a tension in the road genre’s “neomodernist” impulses, “a concurrence of conformity with a suspicious disillusionment with dominant cinematic, cultural, and political institutions” (6). We will find the hallmark of postwar road stories, however, in the embedded debates about the political and ethical significance of using the very

conventions that one is criticizing. This study measures disillusionment with any one aesthetic medium by looking at the media matrix—that is, the message, messenger (storyteller or narrator), as well as the medium (including its manifestation in intermedia, multimedia, and/or transmedia interactions).

Consequently, we will focus on *fictional* texts that have been highly significant as cultural milestones—the obvious choices being *On the Road*, *Easy Rider*, *Thelma and Louise*—or those unjustifiably forgotten by time.¹¹ While the characters in such works inhabit the margins and subcultures of America, the bulk of the texts considered here are not marginal or “scarce and unfamiliar,” nor are they largely nonfiction, as are the works covered by Lackey in his *Road Frames* (ix). Rather, we will concentrate on novels, films, and television shows that continue to influence the genre today. The power of these texts must be understood not just historically but also in terms of their ongoing impact on subsequent generations. The authority of the mainstream road story is both affirmed and subverted to illuminate the price of autonomy and mobility for the marginalized social group it represents *or* ignores.

Because the Beat vision of the road is at the heart of road stories that still register on the national consciousness, this study is anchored on Jack Kerouac’s 1957 novel *On the Road*. Prior to Kerouac, the early postwar road stories put desperate people among average, law-abiding citizens—as is evident in the great *noir* films like *They Live By Night* (1949) and *The Hitch-Hiker* (1953).¹² In contrast, the poet LeRoi Jones (now Amiri Baraka) distinguished the type of characters created by him and his Beat companions, Kerouac and William Burroughs, as

people whom Spengler called *Fellabeen*, people living on the ruins of a civilization. They are Americans no character in a John Updike novel would be happy to meet, but they are nonetheless Americans, formed out of the conspicuously tragic evolution of modern American life. The last romantics of our age.¹³ (*The Moderns* xiv)

The reference is to Oswald Spengler, German historian and cultural critic, who envisioned “history as a picture of endless formations and transformations” (Hundert 104), an image that serves aptly for the study of this postwar intermediary genre. Indeed, even today, road stories largely persist in romanticizing the underdog, especially the type that rose up in the civil rights and women’s liberation movements—namely, those who demanded in the postwar years not only representation but also the right of self-representation. Often, these newly emerging voices found in the road genre’s tropes of autonomy and mobility a way to speak of their discontent.

By grounding these studies in how minority storytellers alter the road narrative as much as do commodity producers catering to mainstream audiences, this work recontextualizes early studies about the road genre, giving historical perspective

to a number of truisms that have already fossilized as truth—especially regarding gender and the road genre. For instance, in 1991 the pioneering film scholar Timothy Corrigan voiced a standard view of road films, that the genre is “traditionally focused, almost exclusively, on men and the absence of women” (143). Such a view made sense when offered in 1991, but now that we study the genre in its full scope, we shall find in the following chapters plenty of contradictions. Because films are the most capital-intensive form of cultural production, they tend to represent dominant groups, and the road film is no exception, despite its gestures towards the “*Fellabeen*”; yet, by looking beyond films to books, which are less expensive to produce and thus more available to minority storytellers who seek to create a road story of their own, we can see that the multimedia road genre is broader and more democratic than heretofore appreciated. In particular, the significant role of women as characters, creators, or producers is likely to surprise many.

Thus, one of the goals of this book is to help complicate some of the early hypotheses about the road genre by situating ahistorical arguments within their historical context. How else to explain repeated overgeneralizations that the road genre features men and marginalizes women? For instance, we will see in chapters 6 and 7 that the road films of most the 1970s, like the “indie” films of the 1980s, use a female protagonist and play up her automobility, even though these films were not feminist in design or impact. By historicizing accordingly, it becomes clear that the road film *does* exclude women in the late 1980s, particularly in films like *Midnight Run*, *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*, and *Rain Man*, which came out while Corrigan was most likely writing his argument. But Corrigan is not accusing these High Concept, Hollywood road films of being masculinist, for he suggests instead that genre itself is hysterical and that the road genre specifically reflects “male hysteria.” Corrigan’s essay contains many valuable insights into genre, yet this particular aspect of gender needs to be questioned. For instance, Corrigan states: “the contemporary road movie (and its first cousin, the buddy movie) responds specifically to the recent historical fracturing of the male subject . . . and the hysterical but impossible need to stabilize male identities within history” (138). Why is the need to stabilize identity hysterical? Or masculine?

In the age of identity politics and “historical fracturing” of all sorts of subjectivities, why not study how media help us all to construct or stabilize a twenty-first-century sense of self? Looking back at Corrigan’s statements, it seems that hysteria was located not in film genre, but in the discourses of scholars of the late 1980s.¹⁴ Gender *is* in crisis then, but in the academy as much as in the movie theater. Seeking ways to discuss gender and power, scholars revitalized psychoanalysis, especially feminists, who had recently exposed hysteria to be a highly patriarchal diagnosis.¹⁵

It is important to belabor Corrigan’s passages, historicizing them not only within the discourses of postmodernism and feminism but also the road films

of the Reagan era, because Corrigan’s essay is now excerpted into brief quotes that eliminate his specific close readings to become truisms about the entire road genre—and not just simply road films. Building on a quote from Corrigan, for instance, *The Road Movie Book* states in 1997: “the road movie promotes a male escapist fantasy linking masculinity to technology and defining the road as a space that is at once resistant to while ultimately contained by the responsibilities of domesticity” (Cohan and Hark 3). Writing in 2002, Laderman intervenes in the deepening genre debates by noting:

Whether in traditional exaltation of machismo or as an exploration of masculine identity crisis, the bulk of the road movie genre seems to presuppose a focus on masculinity. This presupposition often bears patriarchal baggage, which both the feminists and gay road movies of the 1990s explicitly challenge. (21)

As Laderman notes, the recent road films debunk this tendency. Now scholars must do so as well.

Because of the ways in which gender conflicts were discussed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, at the same time the road story was beginning to be theorized, it is perhaps no wonder that some feminists dismissed the road genre as unwelcoming to women. For instance, scholar Janet Wolff, in her 1993 essay, “On the Road Again: Metaphors of Travel in Cultural Criticism,” warned against the “vocabularies of travel” (227) used during the 1980s by male cultural critics. She cautions: “Just as women accede to theory, (male) theorists take to the road. . . . The already-gendered language of mobility marginalizes women who want to participate in cultural criticism” (234). Wolff objects to Edward Said’s term “traveling theory,” James Clifford’s notion of theory as travel or “displacement,” and Fredric Jameson’s idea of cognitive mapping. Wolff rejects these vocabularies because “the practices and ideologies of *actual* travel operate to exclude and pathologize women, so the use of that vocabulary as metaphor necessarily produces androcentric tendencies in theory” (224). Wolff warns that women who use travel metaphors may find themselves frozen into static positions of marginality, pathology, or degradation, despite their conscious efforts to salvage or modify such language. For Wolff, there is no safe passage between representation and experience.

Yet we cannot afford to overlook the road stories and metaphors of mobility created or enjoyed by women and other minorities. Both Wolff and Corrigan fail to see the counter-narratives of female mobility that existed even as they made their arguments. A lesson can be learned from Hélène Cixous’ essay “Sorties,” which was translated and circulating in America in 1980. Clearly, Cixous played with the metaphoric meanings of the French word “*sortie*” as escape and departure in addition to its military meaning. Cixous notes: “Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is coupled with the same opposition: activity/passivity” (288).

In envisioning a world free of just such oppositions, however, Cixous predicts that “another thinking as yet not thinkable will transform the functioning of all society” (289). This power of the imagination is at the heart of the road story, which serves as an extended narrative metaphor about the alternatives to binaries of active/passive.¹⁶ By studying the postwar road story, we witness protagonists who move past gendered binaries, who find the “*sortie*” in what seems, on the surface, “incalculable” (Cixous 289). We need a critical theory that can address both the *literal* and the *literary* movements of subcultures. Metaphoric mobility is a condition of rethinking representation, a way of gaining the autonomy to ask “what counts as experience and who gets to make that determination?” (Scott 407).

All literature builds upon the power of metaphor, which uses connotative language to move readers from literal meanings to figurative insights and emotion. Mass media also is understood through metaphor—often through the metaphor of the highway, from the nineteenth-century nickname for the telegraph as the “highway of thought” to the present-day “information superhighway,” the Internet (Standage viii).

Identity also has its spatial metaphors. According to Guillermo Gómez-Peña, we live in a situation he calls “a new cultural topography”:

For me, the only solution lies in a paradigm shift: the recognition that we are all protagonists in the creation of a new cultural topography and a new social order, one in which we are “others” and we need the other “others” to exist. Hybridity is no longer up for discussion. It is a demographic, racial, social, and cultural fact. (13)

Along these same lines, Susan Stanford Friedman argues that “One axis of identity, such as gender, must be understood in relation to other axes, such as sexuality and race. . . . Identity depends upon a point of reference; as that point moves nomadically, so do the contours of identity, particularly as they relate to the structures of power” (22). The driving force of road stories is questions about autonomy, mobility, and identity, whether that identity be threatened or expanded by being on the road. The road genre offers a pop cultural forum for imagining a fluid self and new genres of relating with others.

In this way, not only do metaphors of travel and the road enrich cultural studies by imagining alternatives beyond an active/passive binary, but so do tales of automobility. Road stories usually narrate a conflict, some disruption in a preexisting power dynamic, which motivates a character to go on the road; consequently, a study of the road genre reveals how conflicts change over time, thereby providing a useful chronicle of changing “power trips.” Furthermore, when writers or filmmakers exercise their agency by reinterpreting popular genre in order to reflect their subcultural identity, they often revitalize traditional tropes

of autonomy and mobility, falling back purposefully upon those vocabularies in order to speak new meanings.

While road stories often celebrate white automobility, some of the finest examples of the genre, such as *Song of Solomon* (1977) by Toni Morrison, depict people of color. Other novels feature automobility as a narrative tangent, as in Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo* (2002):

Uncle Fat-Face’s brand-new used white Cadillac, Uncle Baby’s green Impala, Father’s red Chevrolet station wagon bought that summer on credit are racing to the Little Grandfather’s and Awful Grandmother’s house in Mexico City. Chicago, Route 66—Ogden Avenue past the giant Turtle Wax turtle—all the way to Saint Louis, Missouri, which Father calls by its Spanish name, San Luis. San Luis to Tulsa, Oklahoma. Tulsa, Oklahoma, to Dallas. Dallas to San Antonio to Laredo on 81 till we are on the other side. Monterrey. Saltillo. Matehuala. San Luis Potosí. Querétaro. Mexico City. (5)

This study will thus problematize ideas like those implied by bell hooks in *Black Looks* (1992), when she warns against the “imperialist nostalgia” inherent in the term “travel.” Hooks says: “Travel is not a word that can be easily evoked to talk about the Middle Passage, the Trail of Tears, the landing of Chinese immigrants, the forced relocation of Japanese-Americans, or the plight of the homeless” (173). While travel might be a word easily deployed to evoke middle-class white privilege, it *also* describes, as this project demonstrates, a far more wide-ranging set of people. For instance, there have been Japanese Americans who never stopped relocating after the internment camps closed, as depicted in *The Floating World* (1989) by Cynthia Kadohata, just as there have also been workers like my mother, who was a traveling saleswoman on the road throughout the 1950s and 1960s. What counts as evidence of a genre or an intellectual stance is contestable not only among critics, but also within the road story itself.

The very communities whose movements and spontaneity have been restricted by dominant regimes *nonetheless* have repeatedly deployed the language of mobility in American culture. Furthermore, people at the margins of society who find their freedom curtailed because of gender, class, income, race, or sexual orientation have *always* found ways to “get around,” despite the barriers or prohibitions imposed upon them. Critics like hooks and Wolff overstate power’s privileges of mobility and overlook the travels, both literal and figurative, of women and people of color.¹⁷ Rather than argue to what degree “*actual*” travel practices marginalize people, we shall see that the “*vocabularies* of travel” reveal how subcultures often use images, metaphors, or narratives of mobility in richly creative ways, crafting tales of agency regardless of the restrictions on their movement. Toni Morrison,

for instance, claims she uses expressive language to escape being “preserved in the amber of disqualifying metaphors” (Afterword 216).¹⁸ As important as is the ability to move freely, the uplifting power of *discursive* mobility should not be disparaged as a poor substitute for “*actual*” freedom of movement.¹⁹

On the other extreme, however, our feminist and subcultural interventions must find some way to transcend the binaries that can swing the other way, toward fantasies of movement and rebellion. Whereas Wolff imagines women paralyzed by the vocabularies of cultural studies, Deborah Paes de Barros more recently argued the opposite view, claiming that “the road woman, the nomad is subversive” (17–18). She states that “not only do women travel, but they also negotiate the road in ways that differ dramatically from traditional masculine strategies of momentum” (4). Paes de Barros thus perpetuates a binary between women travelers and male momentum. Women—“bad girls”—in Paes de Barros’s book are as powerful as Wolff represents them to be weak. Paes de Barros says, “nomadic women may refuse this co-option. They stand outside popular narrative. . . . Through subversion and absence they remain at the margins” (183). In this way, *Fast Cars and Bad Girls* (2004) slides the mythology of the creative rebel over to women without historicizing or critiquing it.

Just as Norma Desmond suffered by failing to accept a world in which automobility and television were transforming standards of identity, so too will cultural studies stall if it does not adapt new materials and methods to the changing media environments, not only the “mediascape” of the postwar years but also the “netscape” of the postmodern era and the “transmediascape” upon which narratives will increasingly move. To follow the contemporary road story through its accelerated evolutions in our electric age, we need to discover the “back roads” of these familiar texts, to exit the main highways that all lead to the ivory tower, rigid with disciplinary divisions, in order to find in the margins of these narratives evidence of how we negotiate identity, autonomy, and mobility.

It is time now to move away from studying road films and road fiction as separate entities and, instead, contemplate genre in terms of how its functions and ideologies are altered by people. If we are ever to track the contributions made by minority or marginal storytellers, we need to be able to study how genres move between mainstream and margins in the form of different media—some less expensive to produce than others. Furthermore, we no longer have the luxury of overlooking the low-brow, market-driven evolutions in genre storytelling, where people with fewer resources remap commodity goods in order to express themselves, even though these developments may be as distasteful to traditional scholars as chromium and spit were to Norma. We will see in the following chapters that television and drive-in theaters were disdained by die-hard modernists during the 1960s, but that did not stop these media from contributing to the road genre’s

evolutions that we now celebrate. Today, PlayStation’s *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* and other new forms of media offer the next generation of storytellers a chance to expand upon popular genres to tell of their hopes and dreams.

CHRONOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE POSTWAR AND POSTMODERN ROAD GENRE

The rest of this book details the evolution of this genre of autonomy and mobility by storytellers ever able to awaken in us just a little bit of restlessness or even a ray of optimism about social change. The migrations caused by the Depression in the 1930s and the overall demographic relocations that followed World War II are important to the development of road stories, but our present-day investment in the genre begins with the publication of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* in 1957. Thus this study starts with an overview of the multimedia road genre’s changes over these past sixty years, as rebels remap the road story and corporations then capitalize on the raw exuberance of automobility. By tracing the genre’s metamorphoses through different media, the first chapter shows that storytellers from all walks of life use the road story to encourage others to explore identity boldly in this age of media expansion and social change. The historical grounding of these observations begins in chapter 2, which shows that the Beats used the road story as an opportunity for artistic experimentation, a way to rewrite the tragic narratives of Dust Bowl migration into optimistic postwar transformations. But this is the dawn of the television age, and the next chapter demonstrates that the road story travels from the Beats into the mainstream via the CBS series *Route 66* in the early 1960s, thereby commencing a cycle of commodification that follows each period of innovation. In the early sixties, psychedelic vagabond Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters update the road trip with the acid trip, and chapter 4 considers Tom Wolfe’s account, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, to ask who best tells the story of a transformative journey—the original pilgrim or a storyteller? In chapter 5, set in the mid-sixties, the genre oscillates between art and commodification, as we explore by comparing Kenneth Anger’s underground homoerotic film *Scorpio Rising* to Roger Corman’s drive-in biker films of the late 1960s.

The turning point of this postwar genre came in 1969 with the tremendous success of *Easy Rider*, for this was when the road *film* finally became aware of itself as a genre *and* an artistic statement of rebellion.²⁰ This film catalyzed the New Hollywood revolution of young auteurs in the early 1970s, a time when many of America’s most famous contemporary directors established their reputations through road films. Chapter 6 details this while also demonstrating the overwhelming presence of female protagonists in this allegedly “male” genre. The 1980s was a period of backlash against rebellion, which clearly affected both Hollywood and independently produced road films, confirming once again the genre’s cycles of rebellion and commodification, several of which are detailed in

INTRODUCTION

chapter 7. When the topic of race and rebellion returns to the road film in the 1990s, for reasons covered in chapter 8, we see a renaissance of the genre, as rebel storytellers twist the roles and rules of genre by means of gender, sexuality, and race. We end this study by thinking ahead about road stories in new digital media, for people are—for the first time ever—easily able to put themselves into a road story within a virtual environment, over which they have more narrative control than ever before. With this hybrid methodology at hand, we are ready to consider how the road genre remains important as new technologies and new generations remap it again and again.