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.

1

Rewriting Prohibitions with Narratives of Possibility

> Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as *environments.*
>
> —Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (1964; emphasis added)

The twentieth century was inaugurated around 1895 by the near-simultaneous invention of the automobile and cinema. Here was an entirely new culture of rampant motion, and this double dose of mobility—both real and represented—offered new ways of situating and experiencing oneself. Soon, automobilists learned to move autonomously, freed from trolley tracks and train schedules. In 1908, writer Oscar Mirbeau had this to say about the experience of automobility: "Life rushes upon you, is thrown into disorder, becomes animated with frenzied movement like a cavalry charge, which vanishes cinematographically like the trees, hedges, walls, and silhouettes which line the road" (Silk 40).[1]

At the same time, cinema audiences acquired the skills of a new kind of spectatorship, drawn as they were to film's thrilling sensation of first-hand movement.[2] For their part, filmmakers quickly moved beyond providing mere sensation to create a cinema invested in narrative, encouraging audiences to identify with a given character's point of view. Even the most primitive movies matched subjectively viewed shots of the inside of a moving train or automobile with exterior shots of that same vehicle. This phenomenon, called "suturing," stitches spectators into stable imaginative positions in the midst of moving pictures.[3]

Together, the motorcar and motion pictures generated new perceptions of self and society.[4] Nowadays, after more than a century of experience with mass media and widespread movement, we like to think we have a sophisticated understanding of mobility, both real and imagined. In the course of a single day, we might interact with images through car windshields, on movie screens, as well as on televisions, computers, Xboxes, wireless PDAs, cell phones, and DVD players installed in the back seat of SUVs. In the postwar years, television first exponentially raised the visual nature of contemporary storytelling, and now digital technology saturates our lives with images created by binary code and satellite transmissions. Games

like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004) go far beyond suturing us visually into a medium by allowing the player to control a character and influence the narrative's outcome. Broadcast, broadband, handheld, and wireless have only upped the voltage in which we move every day. Truth be told, we are still negotiating our sense of self amidst all of these swiftly moving images. This negotiation is the focus of this study. Here, we will examine the ways in which the metaphor of travel—of setting out on the road—has come to signify personal and collective transformation, at least since the Beats.

The trope of travel has long roots (and routes)—the Bible contains road stories, as do the works of Sophocles, Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, Whitman, and other canonical writers. But the road genre shifted radically in the years following World War II. The Beats' road stories of the 1950s hearken back to the Transcendentalist-Romantic tradition that exalts the individual, as literary scholars note, but the *significance* of that nostalgia stems from its presence within a media-filled, decidedly post-Romantic moment in American history. The Beats brought Walt Whitman's visions into the atomic age *and* also into the age of the television and the interstate freeway.

Marshall McLuhan famously defined media as extensions of human identity. As we construct the stories of our lives, we do find ourselves weighing our options both within physical landscapes and media environments. This is where the road story comes in, for our desire for autonomy and mobility unite in narratives of automobility. And when we compare one generation's road stories to the next—and in particular, when we trace the road genre between rebel groups and across different media platforms—we find that the road story, with its persistent inquiries into autonomy and mobility, stands as one of the most significant popular philosophical meditations of our day. With this in mind, we set out to understand how the road genre has helped us accommodate the range of new identities that have emerged in postwar and postmodern times.

MANUFACTURING IDENTITY

Beginning in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, car culture expanded as Americans adjusted to life after wartime. The earliest postwar road stories (which are not part of this study) were dark, *film noir* depictions of this changing society. On the road, risk takers realized that identity could be faked as well as found, as we see in films like *Detour* (1945), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), *Gun Crazy* (1949), and *The Wrong Man* (1956). In Flannery O'Connor's short story, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" (1953), the drifter confronts the malleability of postwar identity:

> nowadays, people'll do anything anyways. I can tell you my name is Tom T. Shiflet and I come from Tarwater, Tennessee, but you never have seen me before: how you know I ain't lying? How you know my name ain't Aaron Sparks, lady, and I come from Singleberry, Georgia, or how you know it's not George Speeds and I come from Lucy, Alabama, or how you know I ain't Thompson Bright from Toolafalls, Mississippi? (174)

One might try to erase a desperate past, escape an onerous future, invent a dead relative, or pass as someone else entirely, but things usually turned out badly. While characters in *films noirs* tend to fall victim to bad fate, heroes in subsequent stories often found that the road offered them a chance to reinvent their past or maximize their future, the opportunity to escape fates otherwise dictated by region, race, family, class, and ideology. For these characters, the automobile, the motorcycle, and even the Greyhound bus served as vehicles of freedom.

Tail fins and television were the necessary technological preconditions for the emergence of this more optimistic postwar road genre. Suburbs sprang up around new highways, filled with ranch homes designed for families that watched television. The white flight and eminent domain that came hand in hand with the construction of the new interstates turned traditional downtowns and vibrant neighborhoods into slums. Civil rights protests—intimately tied to these changes in the urban fabric—were brought nightly into homes via television.

Racial politics during and after the war challenged our national ethos, and long-stable identities of home, family, and tradition were further eroded by a variety of social movements, from women's liberation to the Vietnam War protests. Eventually, the idea began to erode that identity could be essential or fixed forever. Minorities had long been familiar with what W. E. B. DuBois called "double consciousness" in 1903—namely, the gap between a minority's empirical experience of identity and the representations imposed by dominant culture. Half a century later, television promoted a milder double consciousness, feeding Americans a daily stream of images of family and conformity that did not square with the messiness of real life. To get around this stereotyped sameness, both mainstream and minority members learned how to "travel" with some emotional autonomy through these narratives, remapping images and subverting genres in an effort to extend identity into less banal territory.

Postwar and postmodern road heroes investigate how one *constructs* a sense of self—somewhere between the map and the mind, between experience and its representation—rather than how one finds an essential self. Such a subject preoccupies artists and philosophers, but even practical people who don't spend a lot of time with "their noses in books" construct their identities too, which is one reason why the road genre has been embraced by popular audiences. The genre encourages us to imagine new lives, teaching us to rewrite prohibitions into narratives of possibility.

Like philosophy, road fiction contemplates the nature of being and the circumstances of representation, but the road story focuses its speculations in the dramas of the mobile protagonist. The intrepid traveler leaves Plato's cave for a look around, hitching a ride on the metaphors of language, the light beams of cinema, the electrons of satellite communication. "In this electric age," McLuhan taught us forty years ago, "we see ourselves being translated more and more into the form of information, moving toward the technological extension of consciousness . . . we can translate more and more of ourselves into other forms of expression that exceed ourselves" (64).

The road genre encourages exploration, inviting generations young and old to improvise new dance steps to the ageless song of the open road. William Least Heat Moon provides one way of looking at this in his memoir *Blue Highways: A Journey into America* (1982):

> On the old highway maps of America, the main routes were red and the back roads blue. . . . Just before dawn and a little after dusk—times neither day nor night—the old roads return to the sky some of its color. Then, in truth, they carry a mysterious cast of blue, and it's that time when the pull of the blue highway is strongest, when the open road is a beckoning, a strangeness, a place where a man can lose himself.

The very idea of losing oneself contradicts the various "habits" of identity we use to anchor our sense of self and our sense of others. It is those very aspects of modern identity—namely, the limiting terms of race, gender, money, sexual orientation, and conformity—that set the wheels in motion, so to speak, for the conflicts explored in road narratives. Road stories usually celebrate rebels who defy the prohibitions that immobilize others. In Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), for instance, the African American character Pilate traveled extensively, even through the Jim Crow south:

> When [her daughter] Reba was two years old, Pilate was seized with restlessness. It was as if her geography book had marked her to roam the country, planting her feet in each pink, yellow, blue or green state. She left the island and began the wandering life that she kept up for the next twenty-some-odd years, and stopped only after Reba had a baby. (148)

These stories about blue highways or pink states use automobility to establish fluidity between state and self, sensation and sign, authenticity and recognition, loss and discovery, immobility and escape. How one extends oneself vis-à-vis the map and the road is always gendered and embodied, and one's expressions of this experience usually compete against alternative vocabularies of the road. Indeed,

road stories call attention to the prohibitions—de facto and de jure—that restrict certain groups, even while the road genre often overturns these barriers. These examples affirm that the road story is intimately tied to the search for identity, offering readers/spectators narrative encouragement to traverse the gap of double consciousness between imposed representations and empirical experience in an age of electronic mediascapes.

This study is organized chronologically, showing how, in the time that has passed since World War II, people in the margins have responded culturally to social change and new opportunity via the road genre. The case studies and close readings that follow treat the scores of American road novels, television shows, and films that have amassed since Jack Kerouac wrote *On the Road* in 1957 as an important archive of evolving ideas about power and agency.

In contrast to the chronological order that structures the rest of this book, this chapter looks holistically across the past sixty years of this genre of rebellion. Self-proclaimed misfits with various motives persistently remap the road story in order to proclaim their emancipation, register complaints, and invent utopic solutions. This exploration of the self can easily be exploited by corporations and even people with tremendous privileges who imagine themselves as rebels, typically for commercial ends. The constant cycling from rebellion to exploitation, from innovation to commodification, is also a key part of the road genre, and in fact, the genre returns persistently to questions about selling out, even while holding out for the modernist dream of inventing something brand new.

By unstitching us from a fixed identity, road stories—more than any other postwar genre—help us see ourselves as agents of our destinies, as protagonists rather than passive characters. As do individuals, subcultures also use the road story to manifest new identities. With each new communications technology and each new political movement, questions arise about autonomy and mobility: Who has the freedom to move? In works of this genre, audiences learn how self-image can be constructed dynamically in response to social movements, media innovations, and political shifts—how autonomy can be retained even while we are utterly enmeshed in a global economy of images, narratives, and commodities. At its heart, then, the road story helps readers balance immediate experience and the nurturing influence of narrative.

NARRATIVE AND SELF IN VARIOUS MEDIA ENVIRONMENTS

As early filmmakers realized, we rely upon narrative to help orient ourselves in the world. We tell stories that help us understand evolving social relations, and these stories help us welcome the future.

Autonomy and mobility are core issues of modern life, which is why they play a key role in literature, film, and popular culture. In both postwar and postmodern times, stories about motorized travel—via car, bus, or motorcycle—have inquired

into the changing balance between self and community that informs our increasingly multicultural nation. These road stories have taken up movement as a plot device, passing us through different virtual scenarios in order to produce a well-traveled identity. This transportation by means of film, fiction, and television gives us new perceptions of both our home communities and exotic possibilities. No doubt road stories will continue to prove relevant in the twenty-first century, as social and political changes as well as new storytelling technologies all challenge us to evolve our understanding of people, privilege, and power.

Simply put, a road story shows that experiences away from home—perspectives gained on the road—reveal and even transform identity. The road presents a way to experience life, affect others, and change ourselves—and the road *story* dares us to dream of a better life. Of course, road films or novels are far more complex than this simple definition would suggest. The road story sweetens up our daily routines and responsibilities with a taste of freedom and spontaneity. But the appeal of this genre lies in something more complicated—a hunger for new experience and meaning, a hunger that drove Beat writer Jack Kerouac to claim "the road is life."

The postwar American road genre has an additional challenge. It leads us not only through space but also through a media environment rich with information. This begins with an extension of the self into space, as in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965):

> She looked down a slope . . . onto a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up all together, like a well-tended crop, from the dull brown earth; and she thought of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. . . . there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. (24)

Yet this projection goes beyond the landscape to encompass the negotiation of identity with others. For instance, in his road novel, *Americana* (1971), Don DeLillo creates a protagonist who speaks of this process of identification with image as self and space:

> When I was a teenager I saw Burt [Lancaster] in *From Here to Eternity* . . . for the first time in my life I felt the true power of the image. Burt was like a city in which we are all living. He was that big. Within the conflux of shadow and time, there was room for all of us and I knew I must extend myself until the molecules parted and I was spliced into the image. . . . That night, after the movie, driving my father's car

> along the country roads, I began to wonder how real the landscape truly was, and how much of a dream is a dream. (12–13)

This molecular intermixing of the self and the image is a key part of road stories in our electric age. Some narratives consider this to be positive, but many depict the media environment as nightmarish. In the novel *Going Native* (1994), for example, Stephen Wright's character loses all sense of self while watching television and attempts to escape in his car, turning the in-dash radio dial as restlessly as he had channel surfed at home: "Sometimes he imagined he could even feel the media microwaves bombarding his skin, as if he were being literally baked by encoded clichés" (282). Protagonists like this hit the road, hoping to gain detachment and autonomy by stepping outside of the range of such media, if that is indeed possible.

On the road, people have experiences that change them, but are individuals ever free of the media-filled expectations that drive them out of the house in the first place? Can one hit the highway, "looking for adventure and whatever comes our way," as Steppenwolf sang in the *Easy Rider* soundtrack, without any presumptions about the discoveries one will make? This question is not specifically modern (or postmodern, for that matter); even Don Quixote, besotted by books so long ago, believed he was meeting on the road the fictional characters about whom he had read.

Miguel de Cervantes' seventeenth-century road story *Don Quixote* was written soon after the invention of the printing press had created a new mass medium. People were learning to live in a world filled with books, particularly tales of romantic quests churned out by the new publishing industry. Don Quixote is literally the prototypical fool who seeks on the road everything he has read in romances and chapbooks. Print, in other words, inspired Quixote to lose his wits. Provocatively, Cervantes taunts his "idle reader," claiming to favor the protagonist who is knightly enough to "translate . . . desires into action" (33). Yet his character Quixote only recognizes experiences that superficially duplicate those he had read about, and thus his "translations" are faulty and foolish. In this way, Cervantes crafted a novel that fostered detachment, so clever readers could enjoy stories told in the new medium and yet, unlike the hapless Quixote, exercise some autonomy over print's charms.[5] *Don Quixote* emphasizes that every story negotiates between immediate experience and mediated expectation.

How does reading a novel contrast with traveling through a landscape? Since we project our own desires onto the world outside us, what sort of transformations can or should a text induce? Can active readers exercise some autonomy over narrative's magic, and do those techniques of distancing ourselves paradoxically increase our investment in the fictional world? Does immersion in narrative lead to madness? Questions such as these might be expected in the seventeenth century,

when the first novelists were struggling to differentiate their narratives from the romance genre, but we find the same questions being asked by the "Quixotes" of the twenty-first century, who take issue with films, television, the Internet, and video games. DeLillo's character tries to come to terms with his identification with Burt Lancaster, and Wright's character reminds us of all the times we've felt colonized by electronic advertisements. In 1964, McLuhan suggested that electronic media were even harder to escape than print: "In the electric age . . . it is no longer possible to adopt the aloof and dissociated role of the literate Westerner" (20). How *do* we understand ourselves in space, when the landscape gives way to mediascape, now enhanced by satellite? Who are we in the mediated environment? Such postmodern riddles are often posed in road stories.

The term automobility used here highlights the concepts of *autonomy* and *mobility* with regard to both *physical* and *representational* spaces. One of the main goals of this book is to understand how modern media help us "travel" through different levels of cognition or knowledge as well as in the relations we form with others. In recent years, the Internet—which truly does open the world for us—has provided a range of spatial metaphors, such as "netscape," the "world wide web," and "cyberspace." But we should realize that every postwar generation has been forced to contend with a virtual landscape created through media. In this book, we will distinguish between four periods of mediated landscapes, beginning with the "cinemascape" that the Beats inherited from Depression-era films like *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). These films powerfully influenced the Beats' image of the road, and informed the ways in which they cast themselves as actors within that psychic space. Secondly, once television became a dominant medium, the virtual space constructed therein will be referred to as the "mediascape" to account for the expanding media networks that envelop us, even if we don't watch TV. Next, there is the familiar postmodern "netscape," which presents us with the myriad worlds available on a personal computer. Finally, there's what I am calling the "transmediascape," to refer to a virtual environment created when a narrative extends over several media environments, like a video game and Internet and TV, for example. All of these "-scapes" have, at one time or another, felt lifelike and three-dimensional, even though they have also always clearly been understood as mere constructions. As we shall see, the full meaning of America's road genre only becomes evident by understanding how the genre has evolved within each of these media formats.

Declarations of Independence

One of the bigger differences between our day and Cervantes' is the toppling of hierarchies of identity in narrative—today the lower-class servant Sancho Panza is as likely to be a hero in a road story as is the privileged Cervantes. (Later on, we will note how author Kathy Acker hijacked this classic tale and transformed

Don Quixote into a female knight in search of an abortion.) McLuhan referred to media only as "the extensions of *man*," but in this book we shall see how "-scapes" are equally strategic for extending and expressing the identities of women, blacks, gays and lesbians, Latinas, Asian Americans, and other minorities.[6] Along with McLuhan's insight that the "medium is the message," this book also explores other "messengers," like Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, Barbara Loden's hapless Wanda, and Gregg Araki's HIV-positive lovers. These and other variously gendered, raced, and sexed figures travel through mediated landscapes, too.[7] Who do we measure ourselves against? Burt Lancaster? Jack Kerouac? Thelma and Louise? The Lone Ranger?

Transgressive storytellers use the road genre to explore the personalities of all kinds of rebellious characters and to escape the influence of myriad earlier road travelers. In Erika Lopez's *Flaming Iguanas: An Illustrated All-Girl Road Novel Thing* (1997), Tomato Rodriguez takes a road trip soon after falling in love with another Puerto Rican lesbian:

> Ever since I was a kid, I'd tried to live vicariously through the hocker-in-the-wind adventures of Kerouac, Hunter Thompson, and Henry Miller. But I could never finish any of the books. Maybe because I just couldn't identify with the fact that they were guys who had women around to make the coffee and wash the skid marks out of their shorts while they complained, called themselves angry young men, and screwed each other with their existential penises. (27)

Consequently this project is less concerned with the question of auteurism—such as the specific contributions to the road genre made by John Steinbeck, Walt Whitman, Jack Kerouac, or Peter Fonda, for that matter—than it is with how these pioneers stimulated subsequent generations of rebels. In general, these remappings *celebrate* the gap of double consciousness, as characters project themselves into pre-existing representations to understand their own historically specific identities and shout out their differences. Author Sherman Alexie noted, "Simply having Indians as the protagonists in a contemporary film [like his road film, *Smoke Signals*], and placing them within this familiar literary and cinematic structure, is groundbreaking" (West and West 29). As a genre, the road story is ripe for remapping.

Newly visible social "outlaws"—whether feminists, drag queens, or American Indians—thus become rebels *with* a cause simply by taking to the road genre. For example, in *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1987), Maxine Hong Kingston reimagines the Beat road story in terms of racial Otherness. Although it is not set on the road, her novel expresses both homage and hostility to the Beat legacy when her male protagonist, the Chinese American man Wittman Ah Sing, thinks: "What do you know, Kerouac? . . . . I'm the American here. I'm the American walking here. Fuck Kerouac and his American road anyway. Et tu, Kerouac.

Aiya, even you" (70). In her documentary *My America, or Honk If You Love Buddha* (1996), Renee Tajima-Peña admires the Beats for defying definition even as she maps the changing landscape of Asian American diversity. The road genre is usually about rebellion, but the heart of the road story comes typically from a desire born of contrasts—the Hells Angel in leather and the gay adolescent who fantasizes about him, or the Indian artist who always felt a kinship with Ginsberg's *Howl*. Kingston, Lopez, Tajima-Peña, and many others move through the "double consciousness" of a genre that fails to recognize their difference, offering en route a canny dissection of generic roles. This is how the road story functions at the edge of entertainment as a deconstruction of America's political investment in "liberty and justice for all." This remapping of previous works of the road genre—rarely as explicit as Kingston's or Lopez's passages above—is part of what *characterizes* this genre.

While most road story remappings imagine the rebel protagonist in the driver's seat, some stories get their power by depicting those who stay stuck by the side of the road. Hisaye Yamomoto's short story, "Life among the Oil Fields: A Memoir" (1979) views the privileged mobility of Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald from the perspective of Japanese Americans run down by American racism, not in the internment camps during the war but upon their postwar return to civilian life. After her brother is injured in a car accident, the narrator balances her parents' "helpless anger" at the drivers with her own awe at the power of this couple's mobility: "I gaze after them from the side of the road, where I have darted to dodge the swirling dust and spitting gravel [of their speeding car]. And I know that their names are Scott and Zelda" (95). Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony* (1977) also uses a similar trope, as do the films *Gas, Food, Lodging* (1992) and *Tender Mercies* (1983).

Each postwar American generation has sought to redefine for its era America's foundation of liberty—be that the right to free expression, to vote, to rebel, or simply to party or act irresponsibly. In road stories, though, the concept of liberty is most consistently defined as freedom of movement. Free movement is a key political right, and not surprisingly, the centerpiece of the civil rights protests of the 1950s and 1960s—the same dozen years that established the postwar road story as a genre of rebellion (i.e., the years between the publication of *On the Road* in 1957 and the release of *Easy Rider* in 1969). For instance, civil rights leader Lillian Smith discussed the Freedom Rides of 1961 in these terms: "[The young student activists of the Freedom Rides] set up a new way of acting, the beginnings of a new ritual; one of human acceptance, of—*not* freedom (that word is too big)—but *free movement in the public places of the earth*" (emphasis in original, 8). Likewise, when any foundational tenet becomes too big to fathom, narratives like road stories create comprehensible spaces for action wherein characters can work out conflicts over their rights.

History confirms that once a marginalized community gains access to media *or* to transportation, it renegotiates its relationship to America's traditions of freedom, liberty, and justice. In *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004), the main characters' investment in America as a "land of plenty" (where one's favorite brand of fast food is available 24/7) pushes the heroes to the film's climax, where they confront racist whites and embrace their own racial differences within the "white castle" of their dreams (fig. 2). The problem in studying this genre of rebellion is that few people see independent films like *Harold and Kumar,* which aims for a college-aged, stoner audience. Low-budget films like this or short stories like

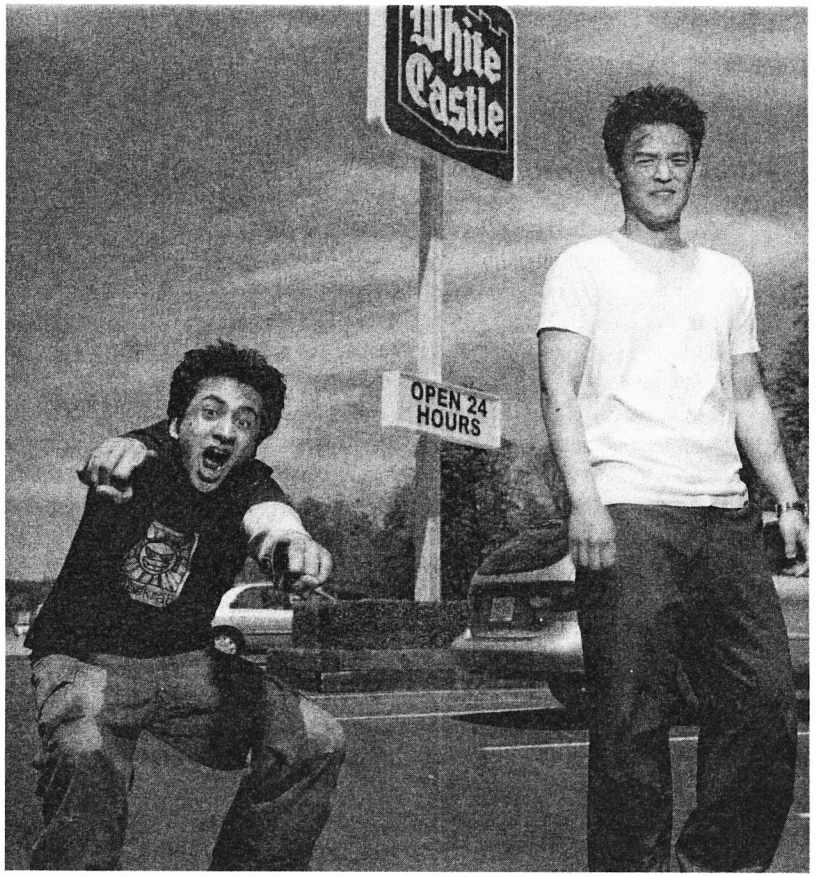

Fig. 2. Kumar (Kal Penn) and Harold (John Cho), driven by the American Dream to finally embrace their immigrant identity, in *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004). Directed by Danny Leiner; film copyright © New Line Cinema.

Genre can legitimate *and* invalidate certain types of experiences and characters. The historian Joan Scott has argued: "What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straight-forward; it is always contested, and therefore political" (412). Nontraditional protagonists put into a traditional genre thus call attention to the gap between experiences sanctioned by a genre and those that are rebellious. We see this debate even in a classic like *Lolita* (1958), when Vladimir Nabokov's hero Humbert Humbert turns the metaphors of the courtship genre: "I have never seen such smooth amiable roads as those that now radiated before us, across the crazy quilt of forty-eight states. Voraciously we consumed those long highways, in rapt silence we glided over their glossy black dance floors" (139). (In contrast, Nabokov's contemporary Simone de Beauvoir, the French feminist, rejects such poppycock when she describes America's smooth highways "as spick-and-span as the tiled floor of a Dutch kitchen" [8].) As Humbert "dances" his stepdaughter Lolita from the "ballroom" to the bedroom, he in turn insults her metaphors as illegitimate: "The log kind [of motor court encountered on the road], finished in knotty pine, reminded Lo, by its golden-brown glaze, of fried-chicken bones" (147). Humbert views their struggle as a clash between his pedigreed education and her pop cultural corruption, but the novel makes clear that Humbert is the one out of his element in a world of cars, movies, and postwar American girls that had not been addressed by the classics upon which he had staked his identity. In Nabokov's brilliant remapping of the European romance by way of the American road story, Lolita is the model victim—doomed for years to serve her stepfather's sexual needs—and the model rebel—subverting Humbert's control to escape on the road (if only to die in the end). All of this points to *Lolita*'s larger goal of remapping genre—not to fall into a psychological drama about Humbert, but to paint in generic strokes the larger social transformations in power and authority taking place in postwar America.

Minority characters like girls, women, street hustlers, and American Indians learn street smarts not only in nontraditional ways, but often from sources dismissed as inferior. We saw this in how Humbert disparages Lolita's fast-food metaphors of the road, but this is also evident in the following passage from Sam, the young heroine of *In Country,* who brings lowly cultural references to bear upon her empirical experiences of the road:

> On the road, everything seems more real than it has ever been. It's as though nothing has really registered on her until just recently. . . . The feeling reminds her of her aerobic instructor, Ms. Hot-pants—she had some hard-to-pronounce foreign name—when they did the pelvic tilt in gym last year. A row of girls with their asses reaching for heaven. "Squeeze your butt-ox. Squeeze tight, girls," she would say, and they would grit their teeth and flex their butts and hold for a count of five, and she would say, "Now squeeze one layer deeper." That is what the new feeling is like: you know something as well as you can and then you squeeze one layer deeper and something more is there.[9] (7)

As a retort to Kerouac's riff, "What's your road, man?", Sam's passage demonstrates that road stories tend to contest different sources of knowledge between people in power and those who lack power. In *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), Rizzo's fantasies about taking a road trip to Florida are shaped by radio commercials for orange juice. These road story examples reveal the larger negotiation between the legitimacy of high art and the low-brow nature of commodity culture. As scholar Juan A. Suárez has written:

> Popular culture developed to a great extent in isolation of "legitimate" cultural antecedents; yet its strategies of negation and opposition were analogous to those of the historical avant-garde. Popular forms therefore operated as symptoms of dissent within a society which touted its consensual nature. Marginal communities (teenagers, youth groups, ethnic groups, gays, and other urban subcultures) cemented around these forms, clearing up a *space* of their own within the social practices and rituals accompanying popular music, comics, and film cults. (emphasis added, 109–10)

Disenfranchised characters in road stories always find a way to act—even if only within the commercial spaces in which they are welcomed, like aerobics classes, drive-in movies, and convenience stores. Through these spaces of popular culture, the low-brow protagonist finds the authority to speak up or locate the metaphors for describing transformative experiences.

Of course, that doesn't mean that pop culture spaces are *always* productive for minority remappings. The road story gets caught up in the cycle of rebellion and commodification, as does any genre. Because, ultimately, nobody owns the road genre, it goes through periods celebrating the mobility of rich white people, followed by periods in which rebels subvert narratives of privilege. For every rebellious remapping of the genre, there will be some cool-hunting corporation that appropriates its "look and feel" to attract the very people who resist being absorbed into the fashion economy. While PBS is airing the new season of Roadtrip Nation's *The Open Road* (a documentary that features college grads driving around the nation interviewing interesting people), other networks are airing a new Coke commercial, one with a "documentary" feel, that features young adults driving around the nation interviewing interesting people. It is easy to lament this cycle, but it is more important to understand it. Each twist and turn moves the genre along. Inevitably, the cycle revolves, as in the independent film *The Talent Given Us* (2005), which remaps TV's reality genre road story with its fictional narrative

about a real family driving cross-country—thereby replacing the spontaneous Oedipal rebellions of MTV's *Road Rules* with its scripted parody of family structure and psychological transformation.

The road story has evolved into a powerful multimedia genre, in part because changes in our concepts of identity, narrative, and technology have altered the nature of rebellion and added significance to the practice of remapping genre. Because of its content, the road story is a particularly restless genre, perfect for times of change, as new cultural producers and audiences actively construct new identities, remixing the matrix of medium, message, *and* messenger. As we study the genre now in depth—decade by decade, generation by generation—we shall see how road stories have augmented the philosophical search for the self by providing accessible stories that challenge old prohibitions, stories that excite us as readers or spectators (and now, participants) to expect something better down the road.

2

Before the Road Genre

The Beats and *On the Road*

This cultural history begins with the Beats, for their Dionysian celebration of autonomy and mobility set the values that still shape the road story today. In Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* (1957), his narrator Sal Paradise represents the perpetual optimism of American youth who hope to slip free of constraint and expand instead into the unknown:

> At this time, 1947, bop was going like mad all over America. . . . And as I sat there listening to that sound of the night which bop has come to represent for all of us, I thought of all my friends from one end of the country to the other and how they were really all in the same vast backyard doing something so frantic and rushing-about. And for the first time in my life, the following afternoon, I went into the West. It was a warm and beautiful day for hitchhiking. (14)

Restless, rebellious, spontaneous, ecstatic, and reckless—the Beats embodied these characteristics in their lives and literature. Their excitement rolls right over the complaints of older road stories, such as the cranky travels of Henry Miller in *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945), the discontent in John Steinbeck's novel, *The Wayward Bus* (1947), or the ominous tension of *noir* films like Ida Lupino's *The Hitch-Hiker* (1953).

The Beats rejoiced in the "song of the open road," recasting Walt Whitman's passionate nineteenth-century poem as a paean to postwar freedom and twentieth-century automobility. Under their creative influence, the road called out to people to escape the commonplace and immerse themselves in life's grand mysteries.[1] Eager to put the past behind them, the Beats turned their questions about postwar renewal into road quests: "'Whither goest thou, America, in thy shiny car of the night?' . . . There was nothing to talk about any more. The only thing to do was go" (Kerouac, *On the Road* 119). They believed they were exploring an America they were simultaneously creating, for their spontaneous writing—like the road trip—was equally a form of invention and discovery.

The intoxicating quality of the road story arising in early postwar America *is* its portrayal of life as an adventure, waiting to be experienced in "the auto of our fate,"