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# Mapping the Self: Reconciling Identity through an Expansion of the American Road Genre

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Mapping the Self: Reconciling Identity through an Expansion of the American Road  
Genre

By

TINESHA K. MIX, B.A.

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Stephen F. Austin State University

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the American road genre. I argue that in addition to the automobile and the highway, a discussion of trains, boats, and walkers and their alternative roads must also be included in the genre. Each method of transportation expands the genre by adding new themes and ideas. Hobos and tramps can take to the road in search of community in order to discover more about themselves; some boatmen can use America's racial history to discover themselves; walkers can go through a state of liminality in order to discover their internal selves. When these travelers complete their journeys, many are unsuccessful and either return home disappointed or do not return home at all.

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## Chapter One:

### The American Road Genre: An Introduction

For centuries, pioneers have explored new territories and spaces. The narratives that are created as a result of their explorations foster within American readers a strong desire for travel and wanderlust. Pioneers are frequently associated with freedom, escape, and discovery, and they oftentimes have heroic like qualities. Because of these associations, travel and wanderlust are heavily romanticized. Americans have thus taken to the road in order to experience the romantic associations of travel. In the process, American culture and identity, both at the individual and national level, have grown increasingly complex. Pioneers undergo psychological, sociological, and spiritual changes while on the road. They are free to explore what it means to be American, free to determine how they fit into the constructed identity and culture of the nation, and free to embark on internal quests.

The desire for travel and movement created a “road genre,” a separate genre from travel literature. There is a complicated relationship between the two genres, as scholars such as Bernard Schweizer note. Both genres have a long and rich history, and many of the same ideas are shared, but as Schweizer asserts, many scholars and post-colonial theorists argue that “travel is seen as an extension of colonialism, and travel writing as an ideological construction of alterity in the service of political and economic hegemony”

(1). Ronald Primeau, a central and premiere scholar of the road genre, published *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway (Romance)*, wherein he defines road literature as “fiction and nonfiction books by Americans who travel by car throughout the country either on a quest or simply to get away” (1). American road texts do not focus on issues of hegemony or asserting one’s identity onto other groups. Road narratives focus on ideas of “wildness,” solitude, and community. While these themes are not limited to just American literature, it is the way they are perceived by westerners and easterners that make the difference. Taking this argument and comparing it to Primeau’s definition of road literature will show that while road narratives can be political, they are frequently more focused on questioning themselves and coming to internal discoveries.

Primeau argues that Americans enjoy traveling because “travel has been seen as the social glue that binds society together, a way to discover one’s real self in a release from everyday constraints, a way to participate more fully in daily events, and a chance to repair...internal mechanisms...[T]ravel is seen as the discovery or achievement of identity through interaction with others, as well as a way to validate one’s vision of the world” (4-5). This is why many Americans are drawn to the road. They see the road as a means of escape. The road represents “a pure quest for something beyond the mundane” (15). The traveler can undergo new experiences. Because of these associations, Primeau writes that most travelers leave home for four reasons, which he later calls “subgenres.” For the purposes of this thesis, I will only go into a discussion of the first three reasons,

which are: “dissatisfaction or desire for change...[the] need for defining a national identity...[and] freedom to explore or redefine themselves” (15).

Primeau’s text focuses on the highway and begins with Jack Kerouac in the 1940s and ‘50s and ends in 1989 with Charles Dickinson’s *The Widow’s Adventures*. Within these subgenres, the reader learns that those who are dissatisfied with their lives leave as a protest “to change the scene, to overcome being defined by custom, tradition, and circumstances back home, and—at least for a while—continue an alternative way of living” (33). Those who set out in search of a national identity do so to find values and ways of life that they believe are diminishing. Nevertheless, the traveler quickly realizes that the American identity is a myth, and they return home frustrated or disappointed (51, 60).

Similarly, travelers who wish to find freedom and explore the road for themselves learn that the assumptions they had about themselves and others are oftentimes false, causing them to end their journey “feel[ing] differently about the world...and their place in it” (88). Their change in perspective leads many travelers to come to new discoveries. As they learn about themselves, they can also come to understand more about the nation as a whole, how social identities are constructed, the meaning of home, or how they operate both within and outside of their communities. Through these discoveries, the traveler becomes a new type of pioneer. Rather than being a pioneer in terms of colonial purposes, the traveler becomes a pioneer for metaphorical or philosophical purposes. Their intentions are not to discover land; they discover their own identities. No matter the

traveler or their purpose, Primeau concludes that all travelers must return home and record their stories. This must be done in order “to restore equilibrium and keep the mythic cycle going, to satisfy the curiosity and jealousy felt back home about those who leave, and to complete the journey in the telling of the story” (127). By recording the traveler’s journey, the author adds to America’s cultural history while simultaneously creating new ideas about what it means to be a pioneer.

While Primeau’s text and definition provide the foundation of this thesis, I have expanded his definition to include other types of travel and goals accomplished by travelers. Rather than focusing on the automobile and the literal highway as Primeau does, I have included discussions of trains, boats, and modern-day walking and the ways in which each mode of transportation adds to the genre. Additionally, I argue that the goals accomplished by these travelers extend to include discovery of self through community, discovery of self through history and race, and a discovery of one’s external self through the internal self.

Even with Primeau’s focus on the automobile, he acknowledges that travelers have been taking to the road for personal and national reasons for centuries, and that there are ideas and concepts that lie beyond the parameters of his text. He acknowledges that “the rootless search for personal and national identity...reaches back at least to [Ralph Waldo] Emerson’s self-reliance, [Henry David] Thoreau’s self-sufficiency [*sic*], and [Walt] Whitman’s self-celebration” (19). In fact, “Thoreau prefigured much of the promise of American road narratives [by contributing] to a long tradition of movement that looks for

its strengths in wildness, adventure, and self discovery” (Primeau 19). In his essay “Walking,” Thoreau not only defines who and what a walker is, but also links the act of walking to Frederick Jackson Turner’s essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” by stating that a true walk will always lead west. The essay opens with the definition of “the Walker,” who “is a sort of fourth estate, outside of Church and State and People” (Thoreau 628). The reader is instructed on what he must do to become a walker. He has to leave behind all obligations, including “father and mother and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends...[and have] paid his debts, and made his will, and settled all his affairs” (628). Without abandoning all obligations (and not thinking about the moral commitments tied to these obligations), the walker will not be able to embark on a “real” walk.

Once a walker begins his journey, he must stray from any roads or cities and the obligations that come with each, and instead walk in nature. After the journey has begun, the traveler must let his inner compass be his only guide, which will guide him west because going east means “to realize history and study the works of art and literature, retracing the steps of the race; we go westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure” (638). The journey west will lead the walker to an ultimate freedom that can only be found in nature. Thoreau believes that the more towns and roads that are built, the more forests will be demolished and animals stripped of their wildness, thus reducing them to domesticity. Tamed men and animals are denied the ability to be

free, and they are trapped in a capitalistic and consumerist society. The ideas of consumerism then have typically been met with opposition by those who “walk.”

In American lore, westward movement has often conjured images of rugged cowboys and ideas of freedom, “wildness” and progress, which can be attributed to Thoreau and Frederick Jackson Turner, among others. Turner states that the “expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces of dominating American character” (2). By moving westward, Americans made radical changes. Farmers settling in the Midwest provided more food and employment opportunities. Medicines were discovered, more homes were built, and their transportation methods were quicker. Overall, the American way of living changed substantially, and a separation between Americans and their European ancestors was created.

Turner actively sought to find a clear distinction between Europeans and Americans. He emphasizes that when America was first colonized, the peoples’ characteristics were not significantly different than those of Europeans, but the farther west they moved, the more “American” they became. The impact of steamboats and trains helped to define what became known as “American.” Trains and boats allowed farers to transport various goods and minerals, such as gold, which caused men to head west towards California. Men of all industries headed west on boats and trains, and in the process traded their various goods with Native Americans,” which explains how “the disintegrating forces of civilization entered the wilderness” (12). Because of trade with

Native Americans, “the [trails] became the trader’s ‘trace;’ the trails widened into roads, and the roads into turnpikes, and these in turn were transformed into railroads” (13). With these advances in technology, less people were traveling by foot, thus they were able to explore the nation and wilderness in new and different ways.

This thesis will explore new and different ways of examining the road that Primeau excludes from *Romance*. In the following paragraphs, I will describe chapters two, three, and four, which will focus on the evolution of traveling by train, traveling by boat, and contemporary ideas of traveling by foot.

One of the major modes of transportation that changed America and the road genre is the train. With economic issues plaguing the end of the nineteenth-century, thousands of unemployed men and women protested low wages. In particular, the railroad industry’s low compensation rates forced many of their employees and their families out of their homes and made them live their lives as hobos. Unlike the hobo, tramps chose to leave home and ride the rails for fun. Even though hobos and tramps took to riding the rails for employment or adventure—among other reasons—their image in newspapers and literature painted a completely different image, as Frederick Feied acknowledged. Originally, “the...stories...make only the slightest use of the materials available to them. They make little or no attempt to develop either the character or the philosophy of the hobo or to understand his position” (Feied 11). The lack of information on these travelers led to stereotypes in which government officials and religious groups

believed that hobos were bums, out to steal from someone's home and hurt them in the middle of the night.

In opposition to these stereotypes, in his seminal work *On Hobos and Homelessness*, Nels Anderson distinguishes hobos, tramps, and bums as separate groups of travelers altogether. Anderson's publication then allowed people outside of the hobo world to understand that the hobo and tramp have a purpose for their travels. Hobos and tramps were able to explore America's wilderness in a way they never had before, thus expanding the road genre to include a new type of pioneer. When leaving home, the train pioneer abandons one community in search for a new hobo community. In doing so, the traveler is able to reflect on his life and his place within both traditional and hobo communities.

In this transition, he can question his place within each group and ask himself whether or not he feels as though he belongs, forcing him to question whether or not he should continue living on the road or return home. He can observe the behavior of the hobo community to see how it operates and if it will operate the same as the home community he left behind. When the traveler continuously moves on the train and joins multiple community groups, he questions not only the characteristics of each group, but the nation as a whole. Therefore, I have dedicated chapter two of this thesis to examine traditional and alternative views of community. I have included three texts to explore this issue further: Jack London's *The Road*, Ben L. Reitman's *Sister of the Road: The*

*Autobiography of Box-Car Bertha, and Cliff Williams's One More Train to Ride: The Underground World of Modern American Hoboes.*

With the invention of boats, travelers could explore the country on water. Rivers such as the Mississippi served as “an essential highway of a young nation moving west,” thus the river served as an alternative road (Smith “Site”63). Traversing the river during the antebellum and Civil War years showed a stark contrast in what it meant to be an American. With their complex placement in society, slaves were still struggling to find their own identities. Travel was practically impossible for them, and if they did travel, it was predominantly for escape purposes. Even the select few slaves who were able to travel on the water did not have the same experiences as the white men and women who traveled with them. Slaves were able to travel, but they could not enjoy all of the luxuries and freedoms associated with the journey or wanderlust. They were forced to work on the boats around the clock, and could only go into towns if they had permission and were accompanied by the boat captain. Additionally, bandits and slave auctioneers could be seen along the shore of the river. Slaves were continuously bought and resold, raped, or murdered. Therefore, the associations that they had with the river were not about freedom or a sense of adventure.

With the coming and progression of the twentieth century, most African Americans were still struggling with their identity. The Mississippi’s violent history—and the racial history of the American highway—still made many of them hesitant to travel. African Americans did travel and write about their experiences, “but not usually

for the same reasons and with none of the reckless abandon of the white male on a quest for self-discovery” (Primeau 117). For years, many African Americans traveled simply to get from one destination to the next; they intentionally wanted to avoid being seen. One prominent example is *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, originally published in 1936. The pocket-sized book—intentionally made small so that it could be carried while traveling—served as a guide for African Americans. In its pages, readers could find safe roads and highways to take as well as African American friendly restaurants, hotels, and gas stations to stop at while traveling. There were also several roads and various places within cities that African American readers were advised to avoid at all costs.

In some regards, traveling by water was the same. Therefore, chapter three of this thesis will explore the idea of race and boating using two different individuals who traveled the Mississippi for similar and yet different reasons. The chapter will include two major texts written by a white man and an African American man: Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi* and Eddy Harris’s *Mississippi Solo*, who traveled down the Mississippi over a century after Twain.

Although traveling by boat and train allowed pioneers to explore their identities in ways that the original pioneers could not, walking still proved to be a popular method of transportation well into the twentieth century, which is evidenced by the three major texts that will be used within this chapter: David Roberts’s *Finding Everett Ruess*, Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild*, and Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild*. Contemporary walkers such as the ones used in chapter four, however, had moved beyond the ideas of Thoreau and Turner,

and thus a new kind of pioneer has added to the conventions of the road genre. Thoreau's text demonstrates the desire to walk at an individual level, but like Turner, he also focuses on the impact of walking at the national level. For twentieth-century walkers, the focus was no longer on the national level. Everything was, as Rebecca Solnit explains, focused on the individual and how the individual was impacted by his journey. In twentieth-century narratives,

walking meant being able to comprehend a place's natural or social makeup; to comprehend oneself; and to set a record; and most are a combination of the three. An extremely long walk is often taken up as a sort of pilgrimage, a proof of some kind of faith or will, as well as a means of spiritual and practical discovery.

[Moreover,] the cross-country expedition had become a kind of rite of passage in American manhood. (Solnit 128-29)

No longer were walkers the pioneers that sought to conquer land. Instead, the twentieth-century walker was concerned with his internal struggles and his own identity. For some, a way to find their identity was to embark on a *rite de passage* where they would abandon all maps and compasses within their possession. In doing so, all mapped land becomes unmapped and the walkers have to rely on their own personal sense of direction to act as their compass. Abandoning the map and letting their internal compass guide them lets the walkers ruminate on philosophical and spiritual questions, and discover more about themselves as well as the world around them. Thus, walkers undergo a transformation in identity.

The ways in which each pioneer experiences traveling are vastly different. While the walker climbs mountains to help him reflect on his life, the hobo passes through the vast countryside and asks himself his own set of questions. As the automobile driver hastily passes across the country, the boatman experiences the open spaces of the water. In this way, the road genre continues to expand. Issues with individual identity as well as the nation and the nation's cultural beliefs are continuously brought into question. What makes each mode of transportation unique is the way in which they add to the genre. Although each mode of transportation creates a narrative about exploration and self discovery, the traveler does not find what he originally set out to look for. Many travelers return from their journeys discouraged by what they discovered while on the road, and others sometimes do not return from the journey at all, thus the road genre typically ends in failure.

## Chapter Two:

### Community and the Open Road as Seen through the Eyes of American Hobos

The idea of a transient community can be likened to the image of a train itself. Like the boxcars, hobos ('bos) are linked together, moving from one place to another. Simultaneously, they can move as individual boxcars. They travel long distances together, undergo many of the same experiences, and share destinations. Yet, they can also be disconnected at any point in time. When one boxcar reaches its destination, it can be detached from its neighboring boxes. Then, after its work is completed and its purpose fulfilled, it is reattached to a new set of boxcars and embarks on a new journey. To demonstrate this image and the progression of the 'bo community, the texts that will be used are Jack London's *The Road*, Ben L. Reitman's *Sister of the Road: The Autobiography of Box-Car Bertha*, and Cliff Williams's *One More Train to Ride*. London's story describes his search for a socialist political community on the trains, whereas Bertha attempts to find a familial community on the trains, and Williams's collection of hobo stories describe a loss of community due to fear that stems from stricter government laws and dangerous 'bo gangs. Although London and Bertha leave home to find community, their searches turn into failures, the outcome of which become evident in Williams's collection.

Characterized by an increase in industry and economic monopolization, the Gilded Age brought with it a rise in the railroad business as the miles of railroad track expanded from 400 in 1867 (Athearn 54) to 93,000 by 1880 (Depastino 8). With the expansion of railroads interconnecting cities, millions of immigrants came to America developing the nation into an international community. Unfortunately, the country's economy grew too quickly and, in 1873, America underwent an economic depression. With a rise in taxes, big businesses cut employees' salaries. As time passed, the poor continued to work in harsh, backbreaking conditions, building America, all the while receiving continuous pay cuts; in 1893, another depression hit. The gap between the wealthy and poor grew dramatically and the wealth distribution became unstable, forcing millions of families out of their homes, and bringing individuals to new transient families.

Fearing that a rise in homelessness would translate into a rise in such crimes as theft or murder, forty states put forward tramp and vagrancy laws (Depastino 22). These laws allowed officers to arrest anyone "over seventeen years of age who rove[d] about from place to place, begging or living without labor or visible means of support" (22). Once arrested, an individual could be held for up to three years, all the while performing arduous labor. In response, the unemployed turned against those in power and demanded that the government help to resolve high unemployment rates. Thousands of unemployed men banded together in 1877 for The Great Railroad Strike, and later, in 1894, over 2,000 men formed Kelley's Army to protest at the nation's capital.<sup>1</sup>

Although their efforts were unsuccessful, the homeless discovered easier ways to find work. Rather than wander around town looking for absent jobs, many began to ride the rails seeking employment in other parts of the country. These newfound employment opportunities “exposed hoboes [*sic*] to different kinds of work and even provided them with bargaining leverage as they negotiated wages and job conditions” (67). If reasonable demands were not met, hobos had the advantage of turning down the job offer, getting back on the rails, and continue seeking work elsewhere, feeding their inherent sense of wanderlust as well.

Additionally, they could ride the rails to avoid work or to escape the law. Combined with a new found leverage and an escape from tramp laws and bulls (police who patrolled the trains), the industry that was built on the backs of the poor turned into their greatest advantage. This new way of transportation changed the lives of many unemployed hobos as they recognized the differences between themselves and average working-class Americans. Hobos and tramps began to understand that many of their political, religious, and cultural beliefs did not align with most others. For example, not all male hobos wanted to get married and be the head of household; some went to the road to intentionally avoid women. Additionally, some female hobos did not want to bear children or be confined to the home. Like the men, women also wanted to be able to ride the trains. When hobos took to the rails, they found the things they wanted in life were similar to other hobos and tramps they met along the way, and a communal bond began

to form. What happened then is the individual left behind their old community in order to belong to a new one that aligned with their own beliefs and interests.

Unfortunately, when scholars look at standard 'bo stories, much of their focus is given to the individual as opposed to the community. There is too often the belief that all hobos and tramps leave home for the same reasons and just want to live a life in solitude or exile, thus making the assumption that the hobo, tramp, and bum are all lumped together. Todd Depastino and Nels Anderson, however, show that there is a completely different grouping. According to the work done by Anderson and other noted sociologists, many Americans saw tramps and hobos as bums. In his seminal research, Anderson cites St. John Tucker's definitions of the three groups, stating that "a hobo is a migratory worker. A tramp is a migratory nonworker. A bum is a stationary nonworker" (qtd. in Anderson 61). Culturally, Americans believed that 'bos leave home and live a life of exile and/or solitude, but this is not always true, as Anderson notes in his research (69). After interviewing hundreds of hobos, tramps, and bums, Anderson argues that there are six primary reasons why these men and women leave home. The reasons are (1) "unemployment and seasonal work, (2) industrial inadequacy, (3) defects of personality, (4) crises in the life of the person, (5) racial or national discrimination, and (6) wanderlust" (69).

Anderson's six reasons help those unfamiliar with the hobo subculture to recognize that not all hobos and tramps live in solitude. Of his reasons listed, (1), (2), (3), and (5) are typically associated with hobos and tramps. For example, political cartoons

such as *The Fighting Hobo* and *Happy Hooligan* depict hobos as aimless wanderers with bindles on their back who are always getting into trouble. But these reasons do not portray images of community. They show hobos and tramps as individuals that have either failed in their employment lives or are, in some way, different than others, which drive them to leave home.

On the other hand, (4) and (6) go unrecognized by many people, and yet these are the reasons that acknowledge camaraderie. For example, if two hobos were hurt or traumatized by a related experience, they would be able to form a bond. They may not have anyone else to talk to about the crisis. Wanderlust is the same. If someone takes to the trains due to wanderlust, they are going to find other 'bos along the way who share this desire for travel. This shared interest will help to establish camaraderie. The distinction of Anderson's six reasons is important because it shows that some men and women take to the road willingly and that not all homeless individuals are forced out of their homes. Hobos were proving that homelessness was not necessarily an act of exile and/or solitude. Instead, "'hobo' came to signify a new kind of homelessness, one so pervasive...that it actually fostered a transient community of its own" (Depastino 65). For example, community can be found in hobo jungles, an area where people would set up homes and congregate together, as well as hobo colleges, which fostered educational and political activism as well as camaraderie. One of the first texts to explore the life and community of 'bos and tramps is Jack London's *The Road*.

In his essay “What Life Means to Me,” London explores his relationship with capitalism and socialism in terms of both economy and community. When thinking about these economic terms, there remains the idea of the individual versus community. Gilded Age capitalism has produced a mindset that is geared towards the individual; a mindset in which self-interest and greed are more important than the needs of others; whereas socialism encourages the idea of community and the well-being of everyone. As Richard Swedberg argues in *The Economic Sociology of Capitalism*, “While the superiority of capitalism as an economic system and growth machine has fascinated economists for centuries, this has not been the case with sociologists. For sociologists capitalism has mainly been of interest for its *social* effects—how it has led to class struggle, anomie, inequality, and social problems more generally” (3). Therefore, according to authors such as Swedberg (and London), capitalism is the opposite of community, and as a child, London felt he had to climb the rungs of the capitalist economic ladder. His dreams of climbing this ladder were filled with the belief that successful businessmen were clean, noble, and intellectual, all of which he could be too, he thought (392). As he grew older, his dreams began to fade. He worked odd jobs with vigor and diligence, but after he realized that one of his employers hired him to replace two workers, he quit his job. Infuriated, he states, “I thought I was learning a trade. In reality, I had displaced two men. The two men I had displaced had received forty dollar each per month; I was doing the work of both for thirty dollars per month” (394). After this incident, he stopped working,

gave up his dream of climbing the capitalist ladder, and turned to the road hoping to discover community and camaraderie within Kelley's Army.

While tramping, he learned everything he needed to know to survive living a life on the rails, and wrote an essay titled "The Road" amongst a few other short sketches that described his tramping adventures. These writings were sent for publication, but were repeatedly rejected. After six months of riding the rails, he abandoned the trains and returned home, where he continued to write other pieces that would help launch his literary career. As time passed and London's nautical wanderlust grew, he expanded his original tramping sketches into the collection that in 1906 became *The Road*. Shortly after *The Road* was published, he noticed that magazine, newspaper, and biographical publishers stated that the reason why he left home to pursue a life on the trains was to study the sociological aspects of the tramp, which he disputed. Instead, he claimed that the reason for the trip was because "of the wanderlust in [his] blood that would not let [him] rest. Sociology was merely incidental"<sup>2</sup> (67). Despite this claim, nearly every essay included in *The Road* deals with the socio-political facets of the hobo and tramp life. While he recognizes wanderlust, he chooses events that focus on community and he forefronts issues of politics.

It is evident that despite London's claim, he took to the road in search of a political community, specifically a socialist community. Socialism is perhaps the most important part of community for London. Whereas capitalism suggests a survival of the fittest mentality, socialism argues for community over the individual. Therefore, London

would not be able to successfully join any group that practices capitalism, which he finds is a common occurrence within the 'bo community. He becomes disappointed and frustrated with each community because he realizes that their morals are no different than the rest of America, which causes him to question his socialist beliefs.

Before London comes to this realization, he is eager to begin his tramping lifestyle. He leaves home on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1894, to join Kelley's Army. The army, based in a foundation of socialist ideas and manned by working men, planned to march to Washington, D.C. in order to protest the government's lack of concern of high unemployment rates. In the essay "Two Thousand Stiffs," he describes the time he spends with the Army, recounting both the high and low points of their journey. When he first joins the group, London states that the group's plan is to take a train to D.C. for free, but they learn that the railroad company "hadn't the slightest intention of giving free transportation to two thousand hoboes [*sic*]," and soon "preparations were [made] to form a mob" (77). Kelley, not wanting the group to earn a negative reputation, decides they will walk instead. Along the way, the men befriend each other and build relationships.

London joins the group late but is quickly overcome by the hospitable nature of the other men. He stays with the group for several days, building camaraderie, participating in events as they occur, all the while looking for a socialist community within the group. Along the way, he finds himself bonding with "the hospitable Iowa farmer-folk [who] turned out with their wagons and carried [their] baggage; gave [them] hot lunches at noon by the wayside" (78). The men continued to march and occasionally

walked into a “hospitable” city where “the good citizens turned out by hundreds, locked arms, and marched with [them] down their main streets” in support of their political protest” (78).

Although he enjoys the group’s merriment and down-time, he writes that he grows tired of the group. There is a lack of excitement or confrontation, and each time the group is approached by the Law, Kelley insists on talking the group’s way out of any physical altercation, which annoys London. He notes that “that day went by, and the next, and nothing moved,” and shortly after leaving the group, he claims that their falling apart was “natural” (84). By the way he describes the events that led to his departure, readers have reason to believe that his departure was, in fact, natural. Nevertheless, if one takes a look at London’s *Tramp Diary*, readers can see that London left the group for other reasons, primarily the group’s underlying capitalist impulses, which demonstrated a lack of community.

In his diary, he writes about three issues that repeatedly occur within the army: the pain he feels in his sore and blistered feet, a lack of food, and the distribution of power within the group. On several occasions, he is forced to stay behind everyone else because he cannot tolerate the pain in his feet, and when he asks Kelley if he can ride in the wagons, Kelley ignores his request. To complicate the matter, the group’s food and commissary supplies dwindle, and eventually, each man is only given one small meal or no meals a day.

While these problems lead to his departure, his primary issue lies within the group's distribution of power and their capitalistic actions. Within each group, there are captains, colonels, lieutenants, and company men. While an army's ranking system implies that those in positions of authority are supposed to guide and protect those below them, Kelley's Army does the exact opposite. There are frequent arguments and fights between the men, and those with little to no power cannot tolerate most of the men above them. Rather than ensure the safety of each member, they fight over who will have the power and ability to control everyone else. Most of the men are looking out for their own desire for power. At one point, London's group votes to change their captain, and in the process a fight almost erupts. The change is made, but it does not fix the problem, and the fights continue throughout the remainder of the trip.

Then, on Thursday, May 24<sup>th</sup>, a tired, hungry, and impatient London determines that he is "going to pull out in the morning [because he] can't stand starvation" (*Tramp Diary* 54). With the knowledge gained from reading London's diary, it is evident that his reasons for leaving the group extended beyond boredom. The Army's capitalist tendencies are enough to push London away from the group. This departure, however, is only the beginning of his failed desire to find community on the trains.

In a separate essay titled "The Pen," he runs into issues with the Law, and is placed in the Erie County Pen for thirty days, having been sentenced—along with other 'bos—for vagrancy laws. On his way to the pen, London befriends a man who helps him survive while in prison. Because of this man, London learns the ins and outs of the prison

community. He hopes to find a community that works together to ensure that everyone is fairly and justly treated. While the prison does offer this community, it too fails. Just as with Kelley's Army, there is a hierarchy of power, and if inmates do not comply with the rules, they are punished and beaten by other inmates. Furthermore, the prison guards assist the inmates in their crimes. In their greed and self-interest, the guards help establish a bartering system, and if they get what they want, they open select cells at night in order for prisoners to "man-handle" other inmates (46). Now, they are lawless.

Although London partakes in the system and participates in the bartering, he is uncomfortable with the mistreatment of the inmates. He knows that the inmates' actions are not those of a socialist community. Instead, the inmates partake in their own form of capitalism. Rather than check to see if everyone is getting enough food or proper hygiene items, the inmates are interested in getting these items for themselves, and if anyone prevents them from getting these items, they are beaten and tortured. For example, London witnesses a man, "who got the insane idea into his head that he should stand for his rights" and is pushed down five flights of stairs; a young Dutch boy who stays locked in his cell and howls uncontrollably in the middle of the night; a man who becomes mentally unstable and is taken away (46). The inmates are obsessed with power and must assert their dominance over other prisoners in order to survive within the prison's hierarchy, and London knows that he must navigate the hierarchy until the end of his sentence. After he is released from the pen, he knows that the socialist community he was hoping to see while in prison does not exist, and he takes to the trains once more.

In a different essay titled "Pictures," while waiting for a train, London hopes to find a socialist community with a group of gypsies, yet once again, he does not find it. He begins the essay by stating that "the greatest charm of tramp-life is the absence of monotony. The hobo never knows what is going to happen the next moment" (25). While this statement portrays romantic images of the tramp/'bo life and wanderlust, the adventures that London finds quickly cause him to become angry and frustrated. As he is waiting for the next train to come through, he spots a community of gypsies enjoying the weather and decides to join them. He sits with the other men on the grass and takes pleasure in the peacefulness of the day until two young boys break a community rule. They try to run away, but their attempts are useless, and they are whipped for their actions. As the chief whips the boys, the mother of one of the boys intervenes and is repeatedly flogged on her arms and shoulders. All the while, London must sit and stay silent, despite his desire to help.

London is appalled by the man's actions. The chief assumes the role of "the Law...pitiless and omnipotent" (28). Like the Law, he has complete power over everyone in the community, and knows that he can punish those who are powerless without any consequences. After this realization, London believes the gypsy community is no different than the rest of America. Like society, the community's tribe "punish[es] [their] criminals, and when they escape and run away, [they] bring them back and add to their punishment" (28). What adds to this disappointing realization is the fact that none of the community members try to stop the chief. No one stands to help the children or the

woman, and London believes that this is not what a community should do. Communities are meant to support each other, and a socialist community, one that he is searching for, ensures that power is distributed equally amongst its members. He cannot tolerate sitting quietly by the sidelines and watch a brutishly powerful man exert his power over those weaker than him.

It is not until after he hints of an attempt to stop the cruelty that he is forced by another male to acknowledge that he is not a member of their community and he does not know their rules and laws. Like the others, London understands that he is powerless, and he believes that “man is the only animal that maltreats the females of his kind. It is something of which no wolf nor cowardly coyote is ever guilty. It is something that even the dog, degenerated by domestication, will not do. The dog still retains the wild instinct in this matter, while man has lost most of his wild instincts—at least, most of the good ones” (31). While humans still live in communities, their communities have devolved over time. Unlike their animal counterparts, they do not stay in their communal packs to ensure the safety and survival of each member. Humans still run in packs, but the good instinct that has been lost is the value of the pack. Humans now stay in packs for leadership and power purposes. They are capitalists who are concerned with their own well-being, and in the process, have lost most, if not all, of their socialist characteristics. Consequentially, there is little of value in their communities.

Because of this, London knows it is useless to intervene. If he tries, he will only anger the man further and will be whipped himself. All he can do is sit quietly and reflect

on the man's actions against his own people, even the young ones, whom London sympathizes with the most. Rather than berate the boys for wanting to run away from the chief, he understands their instincts to flee. His experiences with the Law enable him to understand the boys' logic. Once he becomes aware of the group's unwarranted politics, he decides to leave, but even after leaving, his mind continues to play out the events. He contemplates the atrocities that happen to America's children and instructs his readers to "read the reports on child labor in the United States...and know that all of us, profit-mongers that we are, are typesetters and printers of worse pages of life than that mere page of wife-beating," and rather than tolerate a community in which children are mistreated and the politics are no different than all of society, he believes he is better off without them (31).

Ultimately, his desire to discover a community on the trains fails for two reasons: because all of the communities that he finds are off of the trains and because he learns that power is rarely distributed equally among its members. With each group of people he finds, he becomes disappointed and frustrated. Through witnessing the brutal and unjust actions that are rampant within each community, he understands that there will always be a caste system. He is discouraged by the totality of the politics and morality of the 'bo community. Then, the moment he finds what he believes is a socialist community with Kelley's Army, he cannot tolerate their capitalist impulses. Despite his searching for a socialist-based community, he abandons his tramping life and ends *The Road* alone.

As decades passed and America suffered through the Great Depression, the number of hobos and tramps rose higher than ever before. With a new wave of hobos, the need for community remained apparent, but with a dramatic rise in the number of female hobos, the communities underwent major changes. One infamous female narrative from this era is *Sister of the Road: The Autobiography of Box-Car Bertha*, written by Ben L. Reitman.<sup>3</sup> Like London, Bertha is looking for a community. Initially, she too states that what drives her to the road is a sense of wanderlust. She is looking for “freedom and adventure...with maybe a few other things thrown in” (Reitman 17). As she is traveling, however, she realizes that her wanderlust is tempered by a desire for community and intimacy, or rather, a nuclear family. She is driven to the road because of wanderlust, but within that wanderlust she is still carrying the idea of leaving home to want something better than what her own mother had, which is a failed nuclear community. While on the trains, she becomes conscious of the fact that she is searching for a nuclear family, but after traveling for fifteen years and having several failed relationships with different men, it becomes apparent that the train cannot fulfill her desires for both wanderlust and community. As she rides the rails, she stops in different cities where she thinks she will be able to find someone to fulfill her desires, but after the weeks and months pass, she questions why she keeps stopping, and eventually, she learns that the train can offer her a familial community, but not the specific nuclear one she wants.

When Bertha and her sister Ena announce to their mother that they want to leave home for a life of hopping trains, their mother is thrilled with their decision, and shortly

after Bertha is introduced to a political orator named Enrico Mallettini, who organizes hobos together to form a political community. She instantly falls in love with Mallettini and hopes that he too will fall in love with her. Together, they hop a train towards Los Angeles to attend his next lecture. After his lecture, she tells him that she will continue to hop the trains to attend his lectures in both New Orleans and St. Louis. Despite the fact that Bertha is hopping trains to stay connected with a politically motivated man, her intentions do not align with his. While she may seem interested in the politics of Mallettini's lectures, it is obvious that she is more interested in wanting a nuclear family. When she describes the time spent with him, she does not mention any politics. Instead, she talks about her fantasies and how her life "became a dream" when she was hopping trains to see him (32).

After the New Orleans lecture, Bertha, Ena, and Mallettini must split ways, and the girls take their own train route to get to St. Louis. Shortly after they arrive at Mallettini's speech, bulls infiltrate the building and they are forced to stay one night in jail. Eventually, Ena is forced to live in a Juvenile Detention Home, where she contracts scarlet fever. The sudden illness tears Bertha away from Mallettini, and it is not until several months later that the two are reunited and Bertha falls in love with him all over again. Unfortunately, however, Mallettini tells her he has no place for love in his life, and when he asks her what she wants from him, she cannot answer. She argues that she does not want to marry him or have a child with him; however, she questions her own motives. She asks herself, "What did I want from him? What did I want from all of the men to

whom I was drawn” (153)? She asks herself this question and has no definitive answer, yet it is obvious that she wants a nuclear family *and* the ability to ride the trains. She wants a world that will offer her this dual combination, but this cannot happen.

After Bertha learns of Mallettini’s murderous political plans, she becomes horrified and finds the fastest way to get out of town. Of all the men she meets while hopping trains, Mallettini is the only one who continues to live a life on the trains. However, his radical political actions prove to Bertha that he is unsuitable as a husband and a father. Additionally, she knows that his political unrest would never allow him to raise a family and spend adequate time with them, which would therefore cause Bertha to raise their children alone most of the time. Because Bertha’s own father was never around for her and her family, she knows that Mallettini would place their future family in the exact same position. Bertha refuses to raise a family in those conditions, and when she knows that Mallettini will force her into this position, she has no option but to leave him and search for another man who can give her the community that she longs for.

After taking a train to Chicago one night with her friend Lucille, Bertha is introduced to a group of thieves. The group lives together in an apartment that is filled with various items that each group member has stolen. Bertha is fascinated by a man named Big Otto, and within the first few hours of knowing each other, Bertha falls in love and promises Otto that she will stay with him for as long as possible. This promise is broken within a few weeks as she realizes that she is uncomfortable with the group’s thievery and their attitudes towards their relationships.

She questions their behavior and rather than join them on their adventures, she decides to stay at the apartment or on her own in hotels. She argues that she “didn’t like being part of a gang of crooks. Something in [her] heart rebelled against it,” and shortly thereafter, she starts to find the group’s activity monotonous (109). Their days consist of doing the same things over and over: stealing, drinking, and having careless sex with each other. For Bertha, their lack of desire for something greater or for stable relationships is disconcerting. She even tries to talk about the issue with Otto, but when she suggests that they leave the group to start their own family, he becomes angry and yells at her. He tells her that she should be grateful for everything they have, and when Bertha advises that he get a job and she will become a house wife, he asks her, “What have you been reading lately...*Good Housekeeping*” (110)? Although it is possible that Bertha may be reading *Good Housekeeping*, the ideas behind this magazine are important to her, and the fact that Otto is mocking her desire for a nuclear family shows that he does not want the same things in life as Bertha.

Once again, she knows that her attempts to settle down and have a family are worthless. She decides that she “could find no permanent satisfaction in living his way,” and she “would never be satisfied with the casual, impersonal attitude all of the mob took toward their love lives” (112). Her desire to find a community that would allow her to have the dual combination of family and tramping has once again failed. To live with Otto would mean that she could maybe one day have the traditional family that she wants, but she would have to give up riding the trains. Because she cannot have the dual

combination, she and Otto decide that she should leave, and so she takes the next train out to Providence before arriving in New York.

Once she arrives in New York, she decides that she would be better off in a hotel than on the city's busy streets. After a few days, she learns that there are many prostitutes living in the hotel with their pimps. She also learns that her neighbor, Ethel, works for a man named Bill and the Globe community, as do several other prostitutes who are in with him. Soon enough, Bertha too falls in love with Bill and becomes a prostitute. She claims that she joins the Globe out of curiosity, but again, it is the desire for family that keeps her there.

When Bertha spends her first day with Bill, she is not happy that a pimp wants her to work for him. Nevertheless, the moment she is welcomed as a member of the community, she looks forward to her place within the group. After having spent just one day with Bill, she is "at peace" and feels like a "mother, child, and lover, all in one," which is what she wants (166). Bertha remains with the group for two months, and within those two months she services over 1,500 men. Of these customers, she finds herself more at ease with some more than others, and of all of the men whom she serves, she makes it a point to mention two specific customers that stand out.

One of the men pays her for her services, but never says a word to her. Instead, he "rest[s] a few minutes in [her] arms when he was through, and when he went out he gave [her] a look like you've seen on the face of a hungry dog after you've fed it" (277). For this man, Bertha is able to assume the role of a wife. She is able to give him love,

something that he probably does not have much of in his personal life. Even though she feels no real love for the man, he pretends that she does. She makes him feel important, and she does not even have to say a word to him to make him believe that. Judging by his expression, it is obvious that the moment he leaves Bertha, he already misses her and the connection he felt towards her.

Another customer is a younger man, who, to even enjoy himself, drinks until he is intoxicated. Then when they are done, he cries and admits that “he’d never been in a place like that before” (178). For this young man, Bertha is able to act as a wife by offering him sexual favors and also caring for him. In the short amount of time she spends with him, she lets him pour out his emotions without the fear of judgment, an act most men would only feel comfortable doing in front of someone they really care about. These men are important to Bertha because they make her feel as though she has assumed the role of a caregiver and a wife, someone who belongs to a family and a community. These men further her appreciation for the Globe community and help her feel connected to the others while she still remains an active member.

The women in the group also help Bertha feel like a wife and a mother. Most of the prostitutes live together and cook and clean the house, while also raising their children together. As Bertha spends more time with these women, she learns that many of them began as hobos and tramps, but decided to become members of Bill’s familial community because they always feel safe and well taken care of. What began as a life of movement for these women has become stagnant and secure, and while Bertha wants the

security of a loving family, she still wants the spontaneous and adventurous lifestyle that riding trains would give her, thus she questions whether or not she wants to stay with the Globe. She forgets why she wanted to join the group in the first place, and eventually it becomes obvious that her love for Bill has diminished. She knows that the lure of the boxcar is too strong, and wants to return to the trains, but she still struggles with the duality of what she wants.

Soon enough, however, the Globe is raided by bulls and she is arrested. Bill claims that he will send her bail money, but she knows that he is lying. With no love left for the Globe or Bill, she feels alone and alienated, but when she is tested and learns that she is pregnant, she is afforded the opportunity to start over with her own family. She has mixed reactions, at first claiming that, "I'm not the kind of woman to whom these things happen" (189), but she also believes that being a mother will be her "greatest experience" (192). She fulfills her role as a mother, and enjoys spending time with her daughter and her family back home. It does not take long, however, before she feels the pull of her wanderlust and the lure of the boxcar, thus she leaves her daughter behind and takes to the trains once more.

Throughout her narrative, she argues that she takes to the road for different reasons: wanderlust, curiosity, and experiencing how other groups of people live. Yet, at the end of her hobo experience, she finally becomes cognizant of her desire for a nuclear family, and her naïve belief that she could find it while simultaneously hopping trains. She discovers that her decision to leave behind her daughter can only partially fulfill the

duality of her desires. She now knows that she “had been trying to escape [her] own natural need to be responsible for someone...[She] knew now that [she] had been rationalizing [her] need to be a mother, dissipating it over the fact of the earth when its primary satisfaction lay within reach of [her] own arms” (278). Once she takes to hopping trains, she joins various communities that welcome her as one of their own, and at various points, she assumes the role of sister and wife, but once she becomes a mother, it takes her a while to realize that she started (and abandoned) her own familial group.

In fact, it can be argued that she intentionally chooses to ignore the idea of having her own family. Because her involvement with the Globe makes her unaware of who the father is, she does not want to acknowledge that she and her daughter are the start of a new community. The shame she initially feels by not knowing the child’s father makes her apprehensive to start a new family because it forces her to realize the parallels between her child’s life and her own. Because Bertha never knew her father growing up, she believed that she would never abandon her own family. She even acknowledges this, stating, “I thought of my baby and how I had said that I would never leave her. I thought of my condemnation of my own father for having left me (238). She is quick to rationalize her decision for leaving, claiming that she belongs with labor groups and political activists because with these groups, she can do more to advance humanity than she can as a stay-at-home mom.

The thought of her following in her father’s footsteps is overwhelming because it leads to a life filled with wanderlust, but no family, and as Joan Crouse argues, “personal

problems and/or the wanderlust that had stirred Bertha might still be there, but they were now secondary” (115). On the other hand, some scholars such as Christine Photinos argue that the end of Bertha’s narrative is pessimistic because she stops riding the rails (680). It can also be argued that Bertha did not give up her hobo life. Joanne Hall suggests that although Bertha assumes the role of a mother, “it is too simplistic a reading to suggest that *Sister* betrays itself or undermines its liberal elements. This shift necessitates further negotiations, and Bertha’s life continues to embody the survival strategies and counter-strategies utilized by the female hobo” (233). Bertha simply understood that the train could not satisfy her wanderlust and give her a nuclear family, and she believed that family was more important.

After coming back home, Bertha concludes that her years as a hobo made her a better person. She argues that she finally understood everything she wanted to know about hobos and the groups she encountered. She is happy, stating that “there were no tragedies in my life. Yes, my prayers had been answered” (280). Throughout her travels, she encountered various familial community groups, but as her time passed with each one, she found herself leaving each group alone and disappointed, yet she recognizes that the time she spent with the thieves and the Globe were necessary in order for her to realize that she wanted to be a mother more than she wanted to hop trains. While she ends her journey off the road and in a position she originally neglected, she is content with her new role as a mother. What remains, however, is the sad fact that she could not have the nuclear family while also living as a hobo.

Since Bertha and the Great Depression era, the number of hobos has dwindled, and their communities have become smaller. In 2009, Cliff Williams published his book *One More Train to Ride*, which, through twenty-eight interviews with hobos, describes the loss of their community throughout the last two or three decades. The loss of community can be attributed to a rise in fear, from both within and outside of their community. Government laws have become stricter and the rise in dangerous railroad gangs has left many of them injured or murdered. As the issues continued over the years, many no longer felt safe or satisfied with their community, and they began to view the community as an extension of the rest of American society. These 'bos came to see more directly what London and Bertha saw, which are too often the capitalist ideas and a lack of a desire for family or intimacy. This realization became a disappointment for modern 'bos, who saw no other alternative but to abandon their community and return back home to the life they left behind.

As the 'bos travel together, most are aware of the issues their community faces with law enforcement officials. They hide in the woods or secluded areas to avoid being arrested. However, as years have passed, their situations have become increasingly difficult. Just as with the forty states that enacted tramp laws in the 1860s and '70s, new state laws allow the bulls to arrest 'bos for additional charges and increase their jail time. One of the more well-known veteran 'bos, Frog describes his hesitation for staying on the rails and having to join another community. He states,

[i]t's getting tougher and tougher on the rails. The railroad bulls make it harder.

The city police make it harder, particularly in the areas of large cities where there are many hobo jungles. They're just cleaning up the jungles, constantly cleaning up the jungles, ridding of them, bulldozing them in and over, sometimes with people's gear in there. It's awful. It's a sad reality today. (Williams 46)

Another 'bo, New York Grizzly, states that he finds traveling, for the most part, easy. However, he acknowledge the fact that other 'bos have more difficulty riding "because the laws are changing" (110). When he first began hoboeing in 1986, the charges pressed against a hobo were only for trespassing, which was only a violation, in which case the individual had a good chance of not going to jail. At the time of his interview with Williams, the law changed from trespassing to criminal trespassing, which is a misdemeanor. For this offense, an individual can be fined and sent to jail for up to one year. Additionally, there is a law known as theft of service, a crime in which an individual freely uses services that require payment, which is also a misdemeanor (110). After getting stopped by an officer, New York Grizzly was told that he could be charged with criminal trespassing, theft of service, and littering, which would have landed him in jail for ninety days. The thought of this punishment instilled fear into him and he formed the mentality that he has "to keep moving all of the time [because] for somebody to lock me up for ninety days might put me over the edge" (110).

For Preacher Steve, the bulls and the younger and more disrespectful 'bos are the primary reason for the disintegration of the hobo community. The bulls, he argues,

approach a 'bo jungle, see the litter and filth that many of the young 'bos are responsible for, and claim that they have to get rid of the jungle to maintain city cleanliness and order. This outlook makes it difficult to maintain the 'bo community and lifestyle because "people out there...don't respect things" (98). As Roger Bruns notes in his book *Knights of the Road: A Hobo History*, "jungle behavior was [traditionally] limited by a code of ethics and enforced by ad hoc groups. Crimes such as jackrolling, wasting food, destroying equipment, and leaving dirty utensils were all punished by expulsion, forced labor, and head busting" (18). Now, it appears that this code of ethics is nearly extinct. Once again, society casts the same ideas of negativity associated with hobos and their lifestyle as they did during both London and Bertha's eras, but now many societal stereotypes are true. Hobos are still perceived as exiles and bums, and "not surprisingly, much of the new reporting and commentary on homelessness...drew heavily upon the symbols, icons, rhetoric, and conventions of depression-era social documentary" (Depastino 248), despite the fact that "homelessness in the late twentieth century...challenged Americans to redefine and reaffirm the values of home, family, and community" (251). Between tighter government restrictions and the affirmation of stereotypes, 'bos like Preacher Steve have concluded that "it's worth it do it once in a while, but it's not worth it for me to be out there all the rest of my life," and without veterans like Preacher Steve to help keep the community alive, a complete disintegration of the community cannot be prevented (Williams 98).

Even the younger 'bos have difficulty with the bulls, which, as "B" argues, makes a life of hopping trains less enjoyable and more about political issues. In fact, B is caught and arrested after he rides a train for the very first time at the age of eighteen. Both B and a friend were eager to ride a train, but as soon as they exited the boxcar, the cops were already waiting for them. Despite this incident, he continued to jump trains, and for a while "it was just an adventurous thing, doing trips for fun. But now freight train riding has a lot of different resonance for [him] than when [he] first started" (83). After so many encounters with different members of the 'bo community and law enforcement, his opinion became more jaded. Now, he believes that newcomers do not realize the danger they put themselves in when becoming a member of the 'bo community. After learning about the difficult and dangerous lifestyle that is required of 'bos, he contends that "when a cop sees you, poor and homeless, they're going to treat you like that. All the world you left behind is irrelevant at that point. You feel not a part of this world. You learn very quickly that this country is not as free as it professes to be" (85). Rather than feeling as though they can escape their old communities and enjoy a life of wanderlust, they now live in constant fear from tighter law restrictions.

If 'bos leave their initial communities to find a new one, tighter government restrictions prevent them from being able to join these community groups, forcing them to abandon their road life, return home, and be stripped of the freedom that the 'bo lifestyle provides. While strict laws can be attributed to the loss of the 'bo community, they are only a fraction of the problem. In addition to the bulls, there is a rise in gang and

criminal activity among many of the younger 'bos, as well as individuals outside of their community.

Because of the establishment of the gangs, the 'bo community is dismantling from the inside. The community is destroying itself. Many 'bos leave their communities back at home due to violence and mistreatment, and now the younger 'bos are bringing the negative aspects of their home communities to the railroads, making the 'bo community no different than the rest of society. To combat the rise in criminal activity and violence, many 'bos avoid travelling to certain states and cities, or travel with dogs for added protection, and avoid staying in targeted areas such as jungles. The fear the 'bos have is stripping them of their freedom, and many are abandoning their freight-hopping lifestyle because they do not want to risk being injured or murdered.

Iwegan, a veteran 'bo of twenty-five years, insists that 'bos do not travel alone because "it's foolhardy to think that you can, because it's not funny out there. There's too much...happening" (120). He insists that if a 'bo wants to continue riding the rails, it is best to ride with people he/she has known for several years (120). Now, 'bos are forced to build a community, but it is for safety purposes, which is not the definition of community. The communities that London and Bertha were searching for may not have existed, but at the same time, they were able to at least find people with whom they could establish camaraderie or intimacy, but even these are no longer available. Now, 'bos only travel together to ensure their safety and survival.

To highlight the dangers further, Iwegan informs Williams that seven hobos were murdered within forty-eight hours in Denver the previous year, “and they were nineteen-year-old kids, eighteen-to nineteen-year-old kids, that were doing it” (121). Then, his brother was shot in Iowa by a nineteen-year-old, whom his brother had never spoken to or even met. Rather, what happened was the “kid had seen the [hobos] in the camp and decided from a hundred yards away with a rifle that he needed to shoot a hobo” (121). A few months later, as Iwegan was sleeping peacefully in a jungle, he wakes up the next morning covered in blood, his hand sliced open, with a dead body lying on top of him. He had been framed for first degree murder and was put in jail for six months until police officers realized that he was innocent and caught the woman who did it. Since this incident, Iwegan is afraid to carry any weapons that could protect him in any future altercations. He refuses to have a weapon out of fear of hurting someone or having to go back to jail and have his freedom stripped away from him.

Like Iwegan, Stretch acknowledges the difficulties of riding the rails in the last few years. He travels with a dog, which he argues is for both protection and companionship, and as his interview continues, it is evident that his dog is used primarily as a means of protecting both him and his belongings. Because of his dog, he has been able to avoid spending time in jail. It is obvious that his dog is a tactic. Whenever he is spotted by the bulls, they just tell him to “stay out of sight” (62). Once the officers see his dog, they do not arrest him because they know that if he “goes to jail, [his] dog goes to jail, and after a certain amount of time they’ll put him to sleep” (62). Owning a dog is a

way to ensure that both he and his freedom are kept alive. Moreover, the dog keeps away criminals and members of the FTRA, a well-known hobo gang. Because of the dog, Stretch travels alone when need be, although he still travels with others. Yet, as the level of violence rises, the number of 'bos are retiring, which forces older 'bos such as Stretch to travel alone, and furthers the dismantling and disappearance of the 'bo community.

Shayla, a twenty-first century Bertha, travels with a dog to avoid being sexually harassed or taken advantage of. Nevertheless, even the protection of a dog is not enough for some 'bos. Even though she has her dog, Shayla admits that she never travels alone because "there's a big risk of something happening to [her]" (52). Over time, she has had encounters with both the young and old 'bos groups, and even though she is only nineteen years old, she realizes that she will not ride with the younger 'bos because they are judgmental, and therefore tear apart the groups that stay together out of fear. They demand that everyone belongs to certain groups, and to prove which group they belong to, they require 'bos to wear certain colors, particularly black. If they see another 'bo not wearing their color, they know that that individual does not belong to their group, and because the individual is an outsider, gang members see nothing wrong with causing the outsider pain.

At one point in her interview, Shayla tells Williams that she has travelled throughout most of the west, but the furthest east she has travelled to is Minnesota and Iowa. Although she never goes in to detail about why she stays in the west, it is clear that she avoids going east to avoid large cities because she does not want to be spotted by

bulls, violent 'bos, or any other dangerous individual. Earlier in her interview, she tells Williams that while she and her friends wait to board a train, she avoids sleeping in a tent, and instead searches for a more secluded area. This is also to avoid being seen. Then, she argues that they only ever ride the trains at night, which again, is a tactic to avoid being seen.

After interviewing twenty-eight hobos and joining them on their travels, Cliff Williams's *One More Train to Ride* portrays the reality of the disappearance of the hobo community. Increasing both patrolling of the boxcars and jail time forces the community to live in fear of being placed back into the community they left and having their freedom taken away from them. The rise in criminal activity has also caused fear within the community, forcing many 'bos to retire from their lives on the rails. As the 'bos argued in their interviews, the risk and danger of being a member of that community is no longer worth the trouble. The purpose for leaving home for these individuals is to abandon their communities in search of a new one. However, with the changes that occurred over the past few years, they have come to realize that their community is no different than most of society, just as London and Bertha both came to realize. The capitalistic need for power and violence that drew London away from hoboing can still be seen more than one hundred years later. The intimacy and togetherness that Bertha tried to find during the 1930s also does still not exist. If 'bos cannot be safe and happy within their own community, then they see no alternative but to abandon their life on the rails and return home.

## Notes

1. Although Kelley's Army did partake in the protest, Kelley and his followers were a smaller part of Coxe's Army. Kelley and his men were forced to leave before Coxe because law enforcement officials had been notified of the group's plans and were on their way to disband the group.

2. In his introduction to *Jack London on the Road: The Tramp Diary and Other Hobo Writings*, Richard Etulain notes that in 1967, I.O. Evans reorganized the order of the essays in *The Road*. In this new order, the first essay became "Road-Kids and Gay-Cats," wherein London states that he took to the road because of wanderlust. This new order then changed the way the text was interpreted by readers. The essays follow no chronological order, despite individuals' attempts to reorganize them. Therefore, I will be following them thematically, not chronologically.

3. The novel's legitimacy has been debated and AK Press announced in 2001 that the novel is, in fact, fiction. However, while Bertha herself is fictitious, the events throughout the novel are historical. The events are based off of statistics that Reitman gathered from countless interviews and other encounters with female hobos and tramps. For this reason, I will be treating Bertha's narrative as creative non-fiction.

### Chapter Three:

#### Wanderlust, Race, and Discovery along the Mississippi River

I've known rivers:  
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood:  
in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.  
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.  
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.  
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans,  
And I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:  
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

—Langston Hughes  
“The Negro Speaks of Rivers”

As the second longest river in the nation, the Mississippi is often referred to as “the spine” or “backbone” of America, connecting the north to the south, serving the nation as its geographic pillar. However, most of the travel that has occurred down this river has been made by colonizers or white Americans. In fact, the Mississippi “had been plagued, since its European discovery in 1541, by colonial strife, countless failed adventures, and scores of unrealized dreams” (Smith *River* 14). At the same time, Native Americans and slaves encountered the river, and thus the “dreams and meanings of the river” were continuously shifting (Smith *River* 14).

When the Spaniards came to America in search of gold, Hernando de Soto and his men stumbled upon the river. In their search, however, they dismissed the river's potential benefits and saw it as nothing more than another dangerous obstacle. By the time they had reached the Mississippi, "every plague of the wilderness, great and small, fell upon them: clouds of midges; showers of arrows; violent storms; dysentery, and death, prolonged and painful" (Childs 4). The agonizing events that led to their discovery of the river made the sight of a large body of water unbearable.

Attempting to avoid the river, the Spaniards travelled north, eventually losing 250 men—and 150 horses—to a cold winter (4). Following this tragedy, de Soto ordered a group of his men to find a way to escape somewhere along the river. Unfortunately, the men returned eight days later with the grim news "that travel was all but impossible because of the bayous, marshes, and dense forest" (4). There was no way out, and after fighting a grueling battle with fever, de Soto perished. For three more years, the Spaniards found no gold and returned home, leaving the river uncrossed and free from colonizers for another 150 years.

After the Spaniards retreated, French colonizers heard about the mysteries surrounding the river. Soon, "cartographers scratched a vague river that led into a vaguer sea upon their maps," but as the maps were drawn, the thought of creating a western empire began to worry other French colonizers (5). Despite that fear, Samuel de Champlain and a group of Jesuit men were determined to conquer the river because they were fascinated "by the idea of the New World, its great river, the sea that should lead to

China, [and] the persistent cities of gold” (5). After their arrival, de Champlain ordered one of his men, Jean Nicolet, along with the help of seven natives, to see what lay ahead. Following these instructions, Nicolet set out and was later told by one of the natives that the group would soon encounter the river. Without seeing the river with his own eyes, Nicolet, overjoyed by the news, returned to de Champlain. The news then spread to Father Claude-Jean Allouez—a Jesuit missionary and leading French explorer—who then named the river “Missipi” in 1665 (Childs 6). Despite everyone’s excitement, problems arose as de Champlain and his men learned that even the Native Americans never tried to find the mouth of the river or even get in the water at all because they were afraid of “monsters” (8). Ordered by Father Allouez to continue their journey, they did, and on June 17, 1673, they finally reached the Mississippi, where they floated south down the river without complication. Written accounts of the journey even show the men mocking the natives’ fear of the river, but the farther de Champlain floated, the more concerned he became. He heard the Native Americans using words from the Spanish dialect and saw such material items as clothes and cooking pots that were made by the Spaniards. The more traces of Spanish influence he found, the more de Champlain discovered that they were not the first colonizers there. He was convinced that he and his men would be captured by de Soto. Between the fear of the Spaniards and thoughts of both the long journey to the end of the river and the journey home, de Champlain came to accept that the river was unconquerable.

Long after the retreat of both the Spaniards and the French, the river became an important landmark for Thomas Jefferson. With the Louisiana Purchase and the addition of new states, the river would impact America's economy as well as Jefferson's "conception of America as the 'Empire of Liberty'" (qtd. in Smith *River* 15). However, the acquisition of the river and more states also meant an expansion of slave trade. In this regard, it is useful to look at the common comparison between slavery, the Mississippi River, and the Nile, just as Langston Hughes emphasized in his poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," which I have used as the epigraph for this chapter. Hughes links various rivers and regions of the world that have a history rife with slavery and oppression, yet he also writes that the Congo "lulled me to sleep" (6) and he "heard the singing of the Mississippi" (8). Hughes recognizes that these rivers are both beautiful and ugly at the same time.

The recognition of the contrast between beauty and negativity is seen in statements such as those made by Emerson, who once wrote to Margaret Fuller that gaining control over the river was necessary because it "had become symbolically linked to important aspects of the national character" (Smith "Site" 67). While Emerson believed the river represented progress and beauty, others saw the river as "the jugular of slavery" (Smith "Site" 69). For example, Charles Dickens viewed the river as a "foul stream" that portrayed nothing but "liquid mud...monstrous bodies...giant leeches...and slime on everything" (Dickens 101). Similarly, this opposition also existed among slaves, too. Some slaves saw the river in the same way as William Makepeace Thackeray, who

remarked that the river “was ‘dreary [and] funereal,’ and gave him ‘pain’. It could only exude a ‘great fierce strong impetuous ugliness’” (qtd. in Smith “Site” 68). At the same time, however, “black men and women who lived and worked along the Mississippi in the antebellum years frequently wrote of finding something more resonant in its waters” (Smith *River* 11) and, like Hughes, these slaves also saw the river’s “muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset” (Hughes 9-10).

These statements not only offer readers opposing viewpoints of the river itself; they also tell readers that travel and wanderlust were also viewed differently by whites and slaves. White men and women were able to travel the river freely, utilizing it as a way to temporarily escape their lives and enjoy the freedom and leisure that the river could provide for them. For the slave, the river became a way for him to escape the south and obtain his freedom in the north. Unfortunately, white individuals such as John Murrell—a notorious slave hunter—were determined to ensure that slaves feared the river.

Initially, Murrell acted as if he posed no threat when meeting a slave. Disguised as an emancipator, he would pretend to be traveling the river to help slaves, doing so to gain the slave’s trust and get money by reselling them. He hunted, penned, and slaughtered slaves to accomplish this goal, allowing him to establish his reputation. The threat that Murrell and his men posed continued to grow over time and instilled fear into slaves. The river became a constant reminder of the physical limitations imposed upon slaves and travel; a reminder that wanderlust was inaccessible for them.

The conflicting viewpoints and emotions that whites and slaves had towards the river also fed into more national negatives that came with the Civil War. Because of the war, the river became a way to transport soldiers, and in doing so, “the Mississippi’s role as simultaneous borderline and connective tissue—between North and South, between free and slave—was no longer symbolic” (Smith *River* 177). During the war, the river was a place of cruelty and death for both whites and slaves, including the young steamboat apprentice Mark Twain, who was forced to delay his boating apprenticeship due to the Civil War as well as his piloting license and the publication of both his canonical text *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as well as his lesser-known biography, *Life on the Mississippi*.<sup>1</sup>

Prior to the war, Twain and his friends felt the irresistible pull of the river, and his greatest aspiration in life was to become a steamboatman and live on the boats that traversed “the great Mississippi, the majestic, the magnificent Mississippi” (Twain 64). Each time the steamboats passed through his hometown of Hannibal, Missouri, his nautical wanderlust grew. As his wanderlust grew and his closest friends left home to join the profession, he decided to run away to become a crew member on the Paul Jones boat, where he and the crew headed for New Orleans. Suddenly, his boyhood fantasies of escape and freedom were upon him. His excitement grew as he exclaimed, “I became a new being, and the subject of my own admiration. I was a traveler! I had an exultant sense of being bound for mysterious lands and distant climes which I never have felt in so uplifting a degree since” (Twain 70). When he joined the crew, he was eager to climb the

ranks. He “longed to acquire the least trifle of notice from” the older and more established boatmen, going as far as to embarrass himself in front of the entire crew (Twain 72). For both white and African American men, ranks within the profession were pertinent to power and abilities. White men were able to climb their way up the hierarchy, where they would start out as “cub-pilots” (apprentice engineers) and earn the rank of captain. In his first years as a cub-pilot, Twain was under the guidance of Captain Bixby. Under Bixby’s direction, he learned everything. He came to know all of the smallest details of the river, though he may not have had interest in them. The information he cared about was the information of the legend and the lore, such as Murrell, which he believed would satisfy his feelings of nautical wanderlust. He did not care about the land. Yet, Bixby demanded much of Twain’s attention and required him to keep a journal that contained all of the factual and scientific information he learned, thus making it feel like a job. Disheartened, he states, “I began to fear that piloting was not quite so romantic as I had imagined it was; there was something very real and work-like about this new phase of it” (Twain 84). He was required to memorize all of the information and repeat it back in a moment’s notice. Because Twain’s expectations did not align with the reality of the situation, his love for boating began to dwindle.

Additionally, Twain also had to learn about the crew members on the boats. He discovered that slaves were only allowed to work as “firemen, deck hands, and barbers” and though they worked in lower ranked positions, Twain thought that these men “were distinguished personages in the grade of life, and they were well aware of that fact, too”

(Twain 170). Despite the fact that African American men were ranked lower, Twain constantly referred to all of the workers as his “boat family” (Twain 72). As readers would come to know through his later works, Twain had a complicated relationship with slavery, and although there are no moments in the text where readers see him spend time with the slaves (when he is not sleeping, he is under the watch of Bixby), he vocalizes his concerns about their safety; thus his wanderlust is tempered by this new knowledge of the slavery enterprise. He also learns that slaves were treated differently than those on land and comes to the conclusion that those who work on the boats are less likely to be severely tortured. Despite this low risk, they were still mistreated and ran the risk of being kidnapped by Murrell’s gang or other white bandits.

As Twain and his boat family pass the edge of Tennessee, he hears stories about the lore of the river and events that occurred in and around its shore. Although many of these stories were not well-known to individuals unfamiliar with the Mississippi, the stories were extremely popular among boatmen and slaves, and it is because of his affiliation with the river that Twain came to know much of the legends, lore, and realities of the river. While passing through a particular area in Tennessee, Twain and the crew come across a territory once used by Murrell and his men. Twain shares a story that recounts one of the tragedies that occurred at this point along the river. The story comes from a previously published novel—*A Diary in America*, written by Captain Frederick Marryatt—that describes who Murrell was and some examples of the horrors Murrell committed.

The story begins by stating that Murrell “appears to have been a most dexterous as well as consummate villain,” and from here the details become quickly grotesque (Twain 313). Three slaves are deceived by Murrell’s guise as a Union preacher, and as the slaves travel with him and his men, they learn that Murrell plans to sell them repeatedly while never actually helping them escape to the north. They attempt to run away, but are captured and murdered. After the first slave is pronounced dead, they take “take out his entrails and sunk him in the creek” (qtd. in Twain 319). The second slave is resold for almost two thousand dollars. After they recapture the slave, Murrell learns that there is an advertisement looking for both the slave and Murrell. To ensure they do not get caught, Murrell “then put [the slave]... forever out of the reach of all pursuers... [who] can never graze him unless they can find the negro; and that they cannot do, for his carcass has fed many a tortoise and catfish before this time, and the frogs have sung this many a long day to the silent repose of his skeleton” (qtd. in Twain 320). Although no incidents occur while Twain and the crew are passing through this notorious section of the river, he is haunted by the river’s history. Again, his wanderlust is tempered by his growing knowledge of racism on the Mississippi.

In order to further understand the place of racism within boating, readers must also pay attention to the stories that involve only white males and females, which comprise the majority of Twain’s biography. The bulk of the positive stories that make their way into the biography describe interactions between Twain and the river or Twain talking to other white people. Each time Twain reflects on a story that involves a slave, it

is to portray the injustice and negativity they continually face, both on land and water. As a white man, Twain has the ability to travel from one boat to another, go into any city he wants to run errands without having to ask for permission—slaves are allowed to run errands, but under the permission and watchful eye of the boat captain—or socialize with any of the crew members whenever he wants. Each time Twain has a brief moment to sit down and relax with other crew members, it is always with the white men. Despite the fact that the slaves oftentimes did more grueling work than any of the white crew members, they are never allowed to sit down, relax, or socialize with white crewmen.

The socializing of the crew is important because it demonstrates that at this time whites saw the river as a place to explore, but slaves could only connect to the river in a philosophical or metaphorical sense, just as Hughes does in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” He “bathed in the Euphrates,” “built [his] hut near the Congo, “looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it” and “heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans” (5-8). In the poem, a single day for Hughes encompasses thousands of years, thus enabling his “soul to grow deep like the rivers” (12). He realizes that his connection to the rivers is done in a manner accessible to African Americans. He looks at these rivers in terms of their relationship to oppression, not wanderlust.

To further emphasize this disenfranchisement are the illustrations placed throughout each chapter.<sup>2</sup> When Twain writes about socializing, the sketches that accompany the story depict white men sitting around and drinking, smoking cigars,

laughing, and gambling. While there are slaves in these pictures, they are all in the background, working with axes, sledgehammers, and saws, or rolling large barrels from one place to another. The illustrations show that traveling on the river was exhausting and physically demanding for slaves. In fact, there is only one illustration that shows a group of slaves celebrating while traveling. In this image, the slaves are now the center focus, and a group of white men are in the background, two of whom are looking at the slaves with tight-mouthed contemptuous expressions. The two groups are not socializing together. These illustrations continue to appear throughout Twain's antebellum boating memories and readers can see how racially separated boating families really were. As the message behind the illustrations becomes apparent, Twain's dwindling love for boating becomes apparent, too.

As Twain ages in his boating experiences,<sup>3</sup> he learns more of the realities of the river and the boating profession before having to step away for several years. When his journey first began, he took to the river because his nautical wanderlust and desire for escape and freedom were too strong to resist. However, the more he learns, the more he loses his love for boating. Bixby's strict rules for learning the science of boat navigation and the contrast between the socializing of whites versus slaves forced Twain to realize that slaves could not succumb to any desire for wanderlust. After he is able to make sense of this knowledge, he finds it difficult to move past the racial issues, thus causing his wanderlust to lose its appeal. "No, the romance and beauty were all gone from the river," he bemoans, "All the value any feature of it had for me now was the amount of

usefulness it could furnish toward compassing the safe piloting of a steamboat” (Twain 120-21). He then compares himself to a doctor who loves when a cheek blushes, but after receiving a proper education, and learning the science behind the blush, the doctor loses his belief in its mystery. After the romance has diminished, he undergoes the final stages of his training. However, just before he is able to earn his piloting license, he is required to take a twenty-one year hiatus due to several events, including the Civil War and the death of his brother.

The Civil War forever changed the Mississippi River. The war required “all commerce, all traffic, [and] all life [to give] way” (Childs 106). Unfortunately, “the Mississippi was at the heart of the rebellion, the scene of important battles by land and water” (106). The thick marshes and wilderness that surrounded the river’s shore made it nearly impossible to swim through. After the war was over and Twain’s hiatus came to an end, he hastily learned the drastic changes that had been made to the river, to the towns along its shore, and to those traversing the water. With railroads being used more frequently, fewer and fewer people were using boats as their main transportation method. The river was also now filled with sunken vessels that were destroyed by the war. Additionally, river towns had been completely ruined. To guarantee that boatmen could still navigate the waters freely and safely, lights were put all along the sides of the river in order for government boatmen to remove any stray logs, trash, or other debris. All of this made for a very quiet and lonely trip down the river, Twain laments. He was certain now that the lights were the final touch that “knocked the romance out of piloting” (Twain

300). The lights took away the thrill of having to rely on his instincts to navigate through the dark. Most of the dangers that lurked in the river had been removed by government boatmen. The thrill was gone because the lights along the river literally and figuratively brought light to a dark situation.

Twain also notes that the laws have changed and African Americans are now free to travel. “These poor people,” he writes, “could never travel when they were slaves; so they make up for the privations now” (326). Even though they were now allowed to travel, this travel was complicated. African Americans

have simply been bound by history in ways that white travelers have not. Their subjectivity has been dominated by awareness and fear of the white observer who wields both psychological and material power. Unlike the boss or family or routine the white traveler abandons to discover America or himself, the black traveler cannot shed his blackness, for it is a condition impervious to distance.

(Lackey 119)

Following the next few decades after the Civil War, African Americans were still cautious. To guarantee their safety, they traveled in groups and with dogs. Using extra security measures allowed African Americans to enjoy their journeys, but at the same time, they still experienced a limited amount of freedom. Their history would forever impact the ways in which African Americans interacted with the river, which has been demonstrated in texts such as Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and just as

Huck and Jim traveled up the river for escape, African Americans would continue to seek this freedom within the waters of the Mississippi.

Even with the passing of a century, Eddy Harris's memoir *Mississippi Solo* demonstrates how engrained race is within the river in the memoir's opening line: "The Mississippi River is laden with the burdens of a nation" (1). Although the book was published in 1988, "Harris was the first black writer to produce a travel narrative of the Mississippi since its antebellum appearances in fugitive slave narratives" (Smith "Site" 74). The time lapse between Twain's travels on the river and Harris's shows a contrast between the ways in which both men begin and end their journeys. Unlike Twain, whose purpose for traveling the river was for wanderlust, Harris's journey begins with issues of race and writing. As he prepares for his departure, Harris's friends try to convince him not to go simply because he is African American. When Harris tells one of his closest friends about the trip, the man asks Harris where he plans to begin and end his journey, and when Harris says that he will go from Minnesota to Louisiana, the man replies "From where there ain't no black folks to where they still don't like us much. I don't know about you, but I might be a little concerned about that" (Harris *Mississippi* 7). Harris contemplates what could happen to him; he thinks that "the river flow[s] with the tears and sweat of slaves," and he "can hear the beating of Indian drums and the singing of slaves resting in the shade of plantation willows on the banks of the old man river" (Harris *Mississippi* 7-8). Even though Harris's journey begins with issues of race, he also acknowledges that he wants to travel for other reasons.

Like other road travelers, Harris states that he also wants to “travel to discover myself...and be a different Eddy Harris” (Harris “Mississippi”). Travelers often take to the road “for the freedom to explore or redefine themselves; they then tell their stories as a way of finding out who they are so far and where they are or could be going” (Primeau 15). Harris says that when he transforms into this new Eddy Harris it happens “in the same way when people go off to Tijuana, they’re letting their hair down in order to become who they really are as opposed to the façade they put up for normal life” (Harris “Mississippi”). The letting down of one’s hair is “a ‘letting go’—a kind of free floating surrender—[which] has always been a part of the American road narrative’s healing power” (Primeau 84).

In addition to trying to discover himself, he argues that many of his books “have an underlying theme of race,” and as he states in an interview with David Talbot that discusses his book *Still Life in Harlem, Mississippi Solo* also explores the idea of “what...it mean[s] to be black in America” (Harris “Black”). “Suddenly” he writes, “being black, as well as being tall, took on new meaning,” and soon, questions, doubt, and caution cloud his judgment (*Mississippi* 13). He thinks that “for obvious reasons, blacks don’t lie on the beach much or hang out by the pool,” and just as the illustrations in Twain’s biography depict slaves, Harris argues that “travel magazines seem not to want blacks to travel, or think that blacks don’t travel...The advertisement photos rarely—extremely rarely—show blacks enjoying exotic holiday destinations” (*Mississippi* 14). Harris’s realization is not too far from Twain’s argument that African

Americans “could never travel when they were slaves” (Twain 326). Because they have been restricted in their traveling opportunities for so long, many African Americans are still hesitant to go out on their own.

Eddy Harris suggests a number of reasons for this. According to Harris, African Americans are hesitant to go out on their own because “there’s...another element which comes from the early experience of black people in the Deep South where being in the woods was a scary thing” (Harris “Mississippi”). Additionally, he believes that African Americans “never think about...canoeing down the river...or many other activities of that nature. It doesn’t cross their minds” (“Mississippi”). With all of these thoughts, he knows that he if he is going to explore the issue of race on the river and write *Mississippi Solo*, he has to take the trip. Thus he canoes down the river from Minnesota to New Orleans, alone—a modern day Jim without his Huck.

What awaits him is a mixture of caution, freedom, and self-discovery. He is nervous and expects to be confronted and harassed. However, after the first couple of days, he learns that he enjoys being alone. During the day he is “so totally alone and the day is so serene and noiseless, [he] can hear the whooshing of the wind through the tall grass...[He is] doing fine” (Harris *Mississippi* 23). Yet as the night approaches, the same fears that plagued both runaway and newly-freed slaves unsettle him. He becomes aware “of a creepy suspicion” that he had during the day and questions why he wanted to canoe the river in the first place (28). He is able to answer his own question when he looks at the river and “see[s] a symbol of America, the spine of the nation, a symbol of strength

and freedom and pride, wanderlust and history and imagination” (30). He is aware of the river’s history, but the less that race appears, the more he discovers about himself.

As he makes his way down the river, he is able to focus more on the beauty of nature and the river. In doing so, he personifies the river and begins to call the river his best friend. After this first of couple days, Harris finds connections between himself and the river. He believes that “the river has grown. He’s a different river now; he wears a new face. He’s a young boy struggling with his youth, learning himself, getting used to his power and size and getting ready for the work ahead” (*Mississippi* 49). The river’s new face is the equivalent of a “different Eddy Harris” (“Mississippi”). The parallels between Harris and the river continue the growing sense of wanderlust. Just as he finds peace while alone on the river, he also notices that the people he was initially weary of are not as rude as he anticipated.

He expects people to give him a hard time, and although people stare at him as he paddles down the river, he comes to the conclusion that “the staring is not hostile,” thus his feelings of doubt are tempered by reality, allowing once again for wanderlust to develop (*Mississippi* 43). Yet, when he stops in different towns to gather supplies and eat, he still keeps his distance because he wants to ensure that he does not get involved in any trouble. When he stops in Wisconsin for food, he makes the decision to find a restaurant and eat as fast as he can. Just as he is about to leave, a man approaches him at the cash register and makes small talk before eventually directing Harris’s attention to a group of men wearing jackets that read ‘River Rat’ on the back. The man tells Harris “You should

have a jacket like that. Instead of River Rat it should say River Nigger,” and the man “thought it was just the funniest thing and he laughed so loud that everyone looked in [their] direction” (*Mississippi* 70). The man’s words upset Harris and Harris knows that he must stand his ground and defend himself; he “could not ignore this man and let him slide by unchallenged” (70). This is the racial moment he has been expecting and is ready to encounter. Reacting quickly, Harris remarks, “I put on my toothiest grin and my best African accent and I said repeatedly, ‘I’m from Nigeria. You mean River Niger. Aha-aha-aha’” (70)! Even though Harris intended to make a sarcastic response, he does recognize the possibility that the man did not mean to be insulting, for “it might, after all, have been a real attempt at friendly though misshapen humor. So why scream and shout” (70)?

After Harris leaves the restaurant, the man chases after him to apologize. The man exclaims, “‘Hey! I didn’t mean nothing by it. It was just a joke...I know I shouldn’t have said it but you know how it is. You hear things and you repeat them and you get used to it. You don’t even stop to think.’ Then he stopped to think. ‘Unless,’ he said and his head hung a little lower, ‘you’re the one who’s offended. Then it’s a different story, isn’t it’” (71)? The moment the man hangs his head in shame, Harris recognizes that even though this is the racial moment he has been waiting for, it has defied his expectations.

Soon, the conversation flows from one topic to another, some of which include the man’s naval experience and an intimate relationship he once had. The more the man opens up to Harris, the more the tension washes away. As the man talks, Harris comments, “I began to feel compassion for this man when only moments before I was

feeling contempt. It saddened me that I had made him feel so rotten over a harmless little joke” (72). Harris listens to every word the man says, giving him his full attention, asking him questions and engaging in dialogue that shows he cares about what the man has to say, and he no longer considers race to be an issue with this man.

In an interview with “Eleven Visions,” the interviewer asks Harris about the people he meets on the river, noting that Harris is able to form bonds with complete strangers. The interviewer asks Harris, “Why is it that, when somebody is traveling, relationships that normally take weeks or months or years to develop can happen in the space of an hour?” and Harris replies, “Everybody has a story, and it’s easier in many ways to open up to a stranger than to somebody you know...What happens between me and this stranger will stay with us because he’s going to disappear. And part of it on my side is my openness...I’m open to their stories and I’m open to that kind of exchange” (Harris “Mississippi”). Without Harris being open to the man’s stories or acknowledging that the man meant no harm, Harris would not have been able to move past the issue and properly reflect. When he walks away from the man, he continues to feel compassion towards not only this one gentleman, but also every other person whom he has met thus far on his journey. He thinks, “I suppose every man out here who has waved at me so far and wished me luck would get to carving at the core of American racism that lies inside if given the chance. The chance to be helpful. The chance to be friendly. The chance to know that we’re not so very different, none of us from the others” (Harris *Mississippi*

73). His fears and doubts continue to subdue as he gets back in the canoe and paddles onward, thus enabling him to enjoy the freedom that he is now able to experience.

His newly discovered optimism and compassion permits the river to become his greatest friend. He comes to the conclusion that he enjoys “the river to the company of men...Men talk too much and they say the wrong things. They intrude on your feelings. The wind and the trees and the river, the mountains and birds, they talk, but they whisper. They talk through you. They speak to your feelings and let you feel what they have to say” (113). When he is alone, he can enjoy the journey. He has time to stop and reflect on topics other than race. In these moments, he talks of the romance of nature, Thoreauvian ideas, and is able to explore the idea of self-discovery. Just as road scholars have noted,

In one way or another, every highway hero wants to get away from the distractions of everyday life and drive into a time and place where the inner self can emerge. Some drivers want to start over somewhere else and with new people where they can establish a new identity. Others follow the road to ethnic and racial awareness or to local and regional values that contribute to a national mythos. (Primeau 69)

This racial awareness is exactly what drove Harris out to the river and then led him to discover even more. Another theme commonly found in journeys of self-discovery is the idea that “narrators often begin with certain assumptions about their lives and the society in which they live. The journey, however, leads them to think and feel differently about the world they find and their place in it” (Primeau 88). Harris is slowly learning to find

how he, as an African American male and his own self, fit in to not only his own hometown, but the nation as a whole. His constant combative nature with his race and wanderlust is necessary to allow for self-discovery. This internal struggle forces him to stop, ask questions, and reflect about himself on a daily basis. When he finds the answers to his questions, he is learning more about himself.

The true test, however, arrives when “two greasy rednecks” (both white males) invade his camp site late one night on the shore of the river in Tennessee (Harris *Mississippi* 206). When they approach Harris one of the men asks the other “what’s he doing out here all by himself? Don’t he know it can get right scary all alone like that. And dangerous too” (207). Harris responds in a cool and collected manner, responding that the trip has not been dangerous at all so far. The men ignore him and when they remark that they have been hunting all day, one of the men says “we ain’t shot at nothing since early morning. Seems kind of a waste, don’t it” (207)?

He is reminded once more as to why he prefers the company of nature to that of men when the sound of a moving shotgun sends him into a panic. He kicks the fire and runs through the trees, and as he hears the men “howling with glee,” he lands face first on a boulder (207). When he hears them again, they talk about the canoe and tent. At this point, Harris’s journey is almost done, and if the canoe is stolen by two white men, then the journey would end with race overpowering all of his other thoughts and moments of discovery. He would return to Minnesota only to tell his friends that they were right. He cannot let this happen, and he takes out his revolver and fires off four rounds. The

rednecks run away in fear and Harris, also out of fear, hastily packs his belongings and continues to canoe in the middle of the night.

The incident is enough to convince him to spend the night in an old shack. Even while he is in the shack, he is terrified again when he awakens from his sleep and thinks he sees and hears people outside with flashlights. Unsure of whether or not he had dreamt the situation, he stays awake for the rest of the night, watching and listening for anyone outside. When he gets back in the water the next morning, he is still sore from hitting the boulder, and for a while he is angry and he wants “off this damnable river and out of this idiot adventure” (210). Yet when he later becomes tired and other people tell him what lies ahead, he thanks them and calms down. Eventually, he “got a handle on [his] emotions” and realized that the reason why he was afraid was because he was not in control of the situation (212). However, as he reflects, he “realized now how futile it is sometimes to want to control everything...When mosquitoes attack you, you get away from them. When other pests and goons try to upset you, you do what you have to do, but you don’t let any of these things ruin your life” (213). Thus, he is able to progress beyond the issue of race and return to nature and embrace wanderlust.

Immediately after this realization comes his epiphany: “There is no color that separates us, no race, no issue deeper than humanity to bind us” (221). No longer is race an issue for him. He can focus on the beauty of nature and solitude. He can focus on what the journey means to him on a personal and spiritual level. The connection between race, the river, and Transcendentalism are also reflected in Barbara Eckstein’s connection

between Harris's memoir and Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," wherein she asserts that Hughes's trip down the Mississippi

[i]s a figurative immersion in the African diaspora and the global network of water. His 'soul has grown deep' in the experience. These rivers have dangerous histories that Hughes implies only about the Mississippi, dangers aplenty for the production of nightmares. Yet the young Hughes's first crossing of the Mississippi...inspire in him feelings of connection, not of catastrophe. (146)

Hughes's poem and Harris's memoir both end in feelings of connection. Just as Hughes believes that his "soul has grown deep like the rivers" (12), Harris's eventually realizes that the river itself "does have a soul" (Harris "Mississippi").

Unlike Harris, Twain does not end his narrative by embracing wanderlust. In a metaphor between race and his journey, he concludes that, "You get yourself all worked up an excited...and then all of a sudden, just when a happy climax seems imminent, you are let down flat" (Twain 592). He is left feeling saddened in the journey because it did not meet his expectations. He wanted to join the ranks of steamboatmen and travel on the river's waters because of wanderlust and adventure. He believed that the river was a place for escape; a place where people can leave behind the realities of life and simply enjoy themselves. As he spent more time on the boats, he realized that this is not the case, even after the Civil War. Although slaves had been freed, they still had to be cautious when traveling. Travel for slaves was possible, but the way in which whites could travel was not the same for slaves.

His “unsentimental outlook competes with the desire for heroic grandeur that...drew Twain to a career on the river” (Howe 10). The entire purpose of Twain’s trip was for him to be able to feel as though he did not have a care in the world. He wanted to relax and enjoy his time on the river, and even though he had moments of relaxation, he still felt uneasy throughout most of the trip. Unfortunately, after he had learned the scientific aspects of boating and about racism on the river, he stated “I had lost something...I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry, had gone out of the majestic river” (Twain 119)! Contrastingly, after Harris leaves the river, he feels that he is “still not human yet, still angry and wild” (Harris *Mississippi* 250). Then, to commemorate the journey and the bond that he established with the river, he orders two drinks, one of which he drinks and the other he pours into the river.

The contrast between Twain and Harris lies in the transition from their original expectations of their journeys to the final viewpoints. Twain began with wanderlust and ended with a fixation on race, whereas Harris began his journey with a preoccupation on race and through small moments along the way, was able to discover wanderlust. In part, this is due to the time periods in which each text was written; however, the contrast largely occurs because Harris is able to accept the idea that race is not an issue. He is able to discover himself as well as his place in America. In the end, he is satisfied. Everything that happens to him has “nothing to do with black or white or anything else. The sum total of the experience of my life has brought me to a comfortable place within myself”

(Harris “Mississippi”). Because he is comfortable with where he is in life, Harris can, unlike so many African Americans before him, enjoy his journey.

## Notes

1. While scholars debate whether or not to refer to *Life on the Mississippi* as a memoir, biography, fiction, or creative non-fiction, I will be referring to it as a biography.
2. The edition used in this chapter is the 1996 Oxford Mark Twain, published by Oxford UP.
3. In scholarship, Twain's biography is often referred to in two parts. The reason for this is because the Civil War brought an abrupt halt to his adventures. In a single page comprised of four small paragraphs, Twain summarizes his twenty-one year hiatus. This one page summary concludes part one. The next page, titled "I return to my Muttons," is considered the start of part two.

## Chapter Four:

### “Killing off the False Being”: Liminality and Walking

In John Steinbeck’s “The Leader of the People,” Grandfather, the central character, becomes upset when he learns that his family no longer cares to hear his stories about his western travels, and in an attempt to make him feel better, his grandson Jody says that maybe he can go west one day. Grandfather dismally replies, “There’s no place to go...No place left to go, Jody. Every place is taken. But that’s not the worst. Westering has died out of the people. Westering isn’t a hunger anymore. It’s all done...It is finished” (Steinbeck 192). In this dialogue, Grandfather is separating westering from the frontier. In saying that there is no *place* to go, he is implying that westering and the frontier are not the same. The frontier is about place, whereas westering is about action and movement. Westering is the desire to travel; it is a concept. A place may end, but a concept never will.

The desire to travel, whether on the highway or the alternative roads mentioned throughout this thesis, has always been a prominent feature in American road narratives. Even Ronald Primeau highlights the fact that “the rootless search for personal and national identity...reaches back at least to [Ralph Waldo] Emerson’s self-reliance, [Henry David] Thoreau’s self-sufficiency [*sic*], and [Walt] Whitman’s self-celebration...Thoreau prefigured much of the promise of American road narratives” (19).

And while the rising use of automobiles in the twentieth century continued the expansion of the road genre, many travelers still held on to Thoreau's preferred method of transportation: walking. As the world has become more and more mapped, though, walkers have struggled to find that "unknown" territory that tests or allows for thought. When setting out for their journey, walkers pack a number of essentials, including a map and/or compass. Some walkers, however, have made the decision to not pack maps and/or compasses at all, to destroy them, or to abandon them in the middle of their journey. The reason for this logic is perhaps best explained by Jon Krakauer in *Into the Wild*. He writes that,

[i]n coming to Alaska, McCandless yearned to wander uncharted country, to find a blank spot on the map. In 1992, however, there were no more blank spots on the map—not in Alaska, not anywhere. But Chris, with his idiosyncratic logic, came up with an elegant solution to this dilemma: He simply got rid of the map. In his own mind, if nowhere else, the *terra* would thereby remain *incognita*. (174)

To McCandless, being in the wilderness without a topographical map was the only way in which he could go off-grid in on-gridded locations. McCandless is also not alone in this endeavor. Unlike their roadster counterparts, walkers have, for over a century, gone "off-grid" in the wilderness with little to no direction or idea as to where they are going. For many, this is the ultimate goal. The most prominent example of this is Thoreau and his essay "Walking." Known for his love of the natural world, Thoreau was a devout walker. He believed that "every walk is a sort of crusade" (627). He writes, "When I go

out of the house for a walk, uncertain as yet whither I will bend my steps and submit myself to my instinct to decide for me, I find, strange and whimsical as it may seem, that I finally and inevitably settle southwest” (637). This inner compass of his always points west, he argues, because “the future lies that way...and the earth seems more unexhausted and richer on that side” (637). Whether or not America was, in fact, richer in the west, Thoreau’s words fit into Turner’s beliefs held at the time. In the same year that “Walking” was published—1862—the government encouraged Americans to settle west by instituting the Homestead Act, where 500 million acres of land were distributed.

Thoreau took notice of the attention that the nation was giving the unmapped land. When describing the beauty of the west, he notes, “I should not lay so much stress on this fact, if I did not believe that something like this is the prevailing tendency of my countrymen. I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe. And that way the nation is moving, and I may say that Mankind progress from east to west” (638). Thoreau maintains a beatific tone throughout the essay, wanting to affirm the common belief that when moving west, the traveler will experience absolute freedom from their old lives, world responsibilities, and obligations. The beauty that Thoreau describes is, to this day, a key characteristic of walking narratives in which the walker’s intentions are for philosophical, spiritual, and ruminative purposes.

Unlike the casual, every day walker whose purpose is to simply move from point A to B, scholar and author Rebecca Solnit states that other walkers, such as pilgrims, move “to make walking into an investigation, a ritual, [or] a meditation” which becomes

“a proof of some kind of faith or will, as well as a means of spiritual or practical discovery” (128). In order to engage in the process of discovery, walkers must leave behind all family, friends, responsibilities, and obligations. But for some walkers, leaving behind others is not enough. Some walkers also need to leave behind their own constructed and external identity.

To leave behind the external identity, some walkers adopt *nom de plumes* in an attempt to become a new individual. A change from constructed to non-structured identity allows walkers to enter what anthropologist Victor Turner called the liminal stage, where walkers are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions” (Turner 95). In this state, walkers can “start over and discover one’s inner resources and potential” (Primeau 69). The life and self that the walker leaves behind becomes the walker’s external identity, while the new self becomes the walker’s internal identity. The external self is left behind and with rumination and exploration of the wild, the internal self becomes the walker. As this new person, the walker is no longer confined to the duties, obligations, or expectations from their past. They are becoming free from the shackles and baggage of their old lives, thus walking acts as an erasure of one’s constructed identity.

Whether or not the adoption of a *nom de plume* is a common practice for pilgrimage walkers, the adoption of a pseudonym is not a recent tradition. Everett Ruess,

who walked in the wilderness from 1930-1934, adopted three nom de plumes over the course of five years before ultimately deciding on the name “Nemo,” which, when translated, means “no man” or “nobody.” Then, in 1990, Christopher McCandless left home and immediately became “Alexander Supertramp” and walked across the U.S. and parts of Mexico for two years before walking into the Alaskan wilderness. Five years later, Cheryl Nyland legally changed her name to Cheryl Strayed, left her one-bedroom studio apartment in Minnesota, and traveled 1,100 miles along the Pacific Crest Trail. All three of these walkers need to adopt a nom de plume to take the first step in their quest for a new identity. As Solnit observes, walkers need to transform themselves (45).

Everett Ruess, at the age of sixteen, left home to walk through the southwestern region of the United States. He traveled from 1930-1934, walking with no final destination in mind, writing poems and crafting countless watercolor paintings, all the while moving through the liminal state to find his internal identity. In 1934, he mysteriously disappeared and his remains—as well as three years worth of journals and other items—have never been found. Then, in 2011, *National Geographic* writer David Roberts published *Finding Everett Ruess*, a biography that tracks what is known of the vagabond’s walking journeys. Externally, Ruess struggled with his identity at home and school. Unsatisfied, Ruess decided to travel throughout the southwestern states immediately following his high school graduation. Ruess’s journeying began when he hitchhiked from Los Angeles to Carmel, California. Filled with pride and excitement, he befriended people that he met along the way and even participated in a group hike. He

walked to popular destination sites, like Big Sur and Yosemite, wrote frequent letters to his loved ones and poems in his diaries, and painted several portraits of the landscapes. Ruess was optimistic and eager to continue walking. Over the course of the next four years, however, Ruess's optimism would waver and his need for companionship would fluctuate.

While the first year of his journey was full of interaction with others, Ruess soon discovered that he also enjoyed the solitude of his journey. He wrote that, "these days away from the city have been the happiest of my life" (47). Ruess struggled with the binary of companionship and solitude; he does not know which one is more important to him. In a letter to his family, he announced that he needs them to "respect" him and his decision to change his name to "Lan Rameau" because "it is hard to lead a dual existence" (39). Roberts theorizes that "Everett articulates the link between solitude and pain, treating both as if they were his inevitable burden as an artist. That tension may have been at the heart of what he called his 'dual existence'" (47). This change in identity is his way of attempting to reconcile his duality. Ruess wants companionship, but Rameau wants solitude. Because he is in a liminal state, and therefore "betwixt and between" identities, he does not yet know how to move beyond the struggles of his dual existence (Turner 95). It was not until his final journey in 1934 that his writings and paintings reflected a reconciliation of his dual existence.

Despite the fact that the only writings scholars have from Ruess's last year of travels are a total of seven letters sent to family and friends, these few writing samples

show how important Ruess's final months of travel were for his discovery of the internal self. In this time, he was able to discover more about himself and who he wanted to be. In one of the first letters of 1934, Ruess writes to a former love interest, telling her,

I was sorry, though, that our intimacy, like many things that are and will be had to die with a dying fall...But much as I love people, the most important thing to me is still the nearly unbearable beauty of what I see. I won't wish that you could see it, for you might not find it easy to bear either, but yet I do sincerely wish for you at least a little of the impossible. (157)

This quote, complex and mature in thought, reflects Ruess's discovery of the internal self. He wants companionship, but he knows that a life of walking in nature's beauty is what he wants and needs to exit the liminal state. Beauty is solitude. He tells her that he thinks she would have difficulty living in a world constantly surrounded by beauty, thus arguing that she would not be able to enjoy a life of solitude. Yet he tells her that she would not be able to bear it *either*, implying that he struggles with solitude himself. Everything in his letter is contradictory.

Even his emotions towards her contradict themselves. Ruess writes that he does not want her to see the beauty, but at the same time he wishes that she could. He is upset that their relationship had to fall apart, but he then argues that their falling apart had to happen. As upset as he is by the fall out, he understands that it was necessary. He could not be with her and have solitude at the same time, and if his desire for solitude is stronger than his need for companionship, then he could not have a love interest. Any

emotional attachments could hinder his wanderlust and his discovery of the internal self. Therefore, cutting off his ties to her lets him continue walking throughout the west and ruminating on his life and his adventures.

Although Ruess's optimism comes and goes while walking, the wilderness is the only place that makes him feel comfortable and free. The wild allows the internal self to roam, unlike civilization, where he cannot stay for long periods of time because "he found them [cities] empty of beauty" (157). The more beauty that he is able to see within nature and the wilderness, the more he writes to his family and friends about his increasing desire to continue traveling. Ultimately, he declares his manifesto in a letter to his brother. He states:

As to when I shall visit civilization; it will not be soon, I think. I have not tired of the wilderness; rather I enjoy its beauty and the vagrant life I lead, more keenly all the time. I prefer the saddle to the street car and the star sprinkled sky to a roof, the obscure and difficult trail, leading into the unknown, to any paved highway, and the deep peace of the wild to the discontent bred by cities. (189).

Even though Ruess's remains were never found and his final diary is missing, this quote tells readers that Ruess had at last accepted his identity and finished his transition through the liminal state. He overcame the struggles of his dual existence by accepting the fact that he preferred solitude over companionship. Solitude thus brings him back to a state of stability, which is, as Victor Turner stresses, needed in order for the individual to complete the journey.

Until the publication of Roberts's book, Roberts believed that "[n]o single event...ratcheted up the megawatt power of the Everett Ruess cult like the publication in 1996 of *Into the Wild*" (281). Writing about the idealistic Christopher McCandless, Jon Krakauer believed that "Everett Ruess's correspondence reveals uncanny parallels between Ruess and Chris McCandless" (Krakauer *Into* 91). In regard to this recognition, however, it is important to note that like Ruess's text, McCandless's narrative is only ever told through the viewpoints and opinions of outside individuals and never McCandless himself. Because he never returned from his trip, McCandless's narrative has been predominantly told through three different texts: Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, a collection of McCandless's photographs and writings gathered and expanded on by McCandless's parents and their friends titled *Back to the Wild*, and *The Wild Truth*, by McCandless's sister, Carine McCandless.

After his college graduation, McCandless packed the few belongings he owned and began his journey. He traveled towards Arizona in his yellow Datsun, which contained various supplies, food, camping gear, and sports equipment. Shortly after his adventure begins, however, he decided to abandon the car and most of the belongings in it, including his only map, and changes his name to Alexander Supertramp. Literally and metaphorically, the abandonment of his car and his possessions is McCandless's way of shedding the baggage of his previous, external identity. Now, he can enter the first phase of the liminal state: detachment. At this point, McCandless has left his external self behind, but has not yet fully discovered his internal identity, thus he is "neither here nor

there; [he is] betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and [ceremony]" (Turner 95). Because his position is ambiguous, he can truly explore a wilderness unknown to him and further his transition into the liminal phase and his internal identity as Alex.

For the next two months, Alex walked throughout the entire western half of the country, letting his internal and wild self guide him, all the while taking photographs to document his experiences. The photographs portray a physically, emotionally, and spiritually happy individual. It becomes clear that he is enjoying his time away from home and from the baggage of his old life. He writes in his journal, "Can this be the same Alex that set out in July, 1990? Malnutrition and the road have taken their toll on his body. Over 25 pounds lost. But his spirit is soaring" (Krakauer 37). By recognizing the changes he has undergone, Supertramp continues his transition through the phases of his *rite de passage*. It is at this point that he has entered the second stage of the liminal phase: margin/threshold. In this stage, "the characteristics of the ritual subject...are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (Turner 94). He no longer has the mentality or the physicality of his external identity. He no longer cares that his physical appearance is changing. Instead, he embraces it. His appearance now matches his mentality; he looks and thinks like Alexander Supertramp, and as Turner acknowledges, a "disregard for personal appearance" is typically attributed to those in transitional phases (106). By embracing these changes, he solidifies his decision to become Alexander Supertramp. He is nomadic

and is not tied down to anyone or anything, allowing him to ruminate on his life and his decisions.

While traveling, Supertramp meets many people, some of whom he grew closer to than others. In particular, there are four individuals whom he continued to keep in contact with until he entered the Alaskan wild: Jan and Bob Burres, Wayne Westerberg, and Ronald Franz. All of these provided Supertramp with food, security, and love, and Westerberg employed McCandless on more than one occasion. But even though Supertramp had grown close to all of them, he never became too attached to them. He never told them of his previous life or anything about his family, despite Jan's attempts to convince Supertramp to call and talk to his loved ones. But Supertramp could not call his family or talk about his old identity. To do so would be to bring back his old identity and suppress his new, emerging internal identity.

Even when he took a few weeks off to stay with his friends, he spends much of his time alone. When he is with the Burres's, he spends time reading and walking around the surrounding areas. When Westerberg invites his employees to go out for drinks and dancing, Supertramp goes with them and drinks, but instead of dancing, he chooses to sit and play the piano, which none of the crew even knew Supertramp was capable of. With Franz, the two travel around and grow close, but the moment Franz asks to adopt him, Supertramp becomes uncomfortable with the request and denies the offer. Rather than allowing Franz to become too attached, Supertramp encourages the man not to "settle down and sit in one place. Move around, be nomadic, make each day a new horizon"

because “[t]he very basic core of a man’s living spirit is his passion for adventure” (Krakauer *Into* 57). Supertramp wants the best for Franz. He does not want Franz to become sedentary because he feels as though that is a life without meaning. He wants to convince Franz to enter the liminal phase too because he believes that a life on the road “will at first appear to you to be crazy. But one you become accustomed to such a life you will see its full meaning and its incredible beauty” (Krakauer *Into* 57). This letter reflects Supertramp’s growing mentality and discovery of himself. He is once again learning that beauty is discovered through solitude, and now he is trying to convince Franz to live nomadically so that he too can see beauty.

Even though he can confidently tell Franz to live alone, Supertramp must also remind himself. He tells Franz, “You are wrong if you think Joy emanates only or principally from human relationships. God has placed it all around us. It is in everything and anything we might experience” (Krakauer *Into* 57). This shows readers that much like Rues, Supertramp must remind himself that the beauty he desires cannot be seen or achieved while with other people. He had to realize that Joy could also come from the wilderness to keep moving and continue moving through the liminal phase. This is why he avoids the offers for material items, transportation, and long-term employment. If he took these offers, they would be a hindrance to his transformation. He refuses to slow down his journey for anyone.

After realizing that he cannot stay with people for much longer, Alex decides to work for Westerberg one final time before heading to his final destination in Alaska.

While at Westerberg's, Alex comes to one of his biggest realizations while on his journey. He declares that he is reborn and his "[r]eal life had just begun" (Krakauer *Into* 168). He comes to the conclusion that "conscious attention" to one's immediate environment makes for a purposeful and deliberate living experience" (168). Reality, he finds, is constructed out of one's personal, subjective experience and he makes a list of what constitutes deliberate living. Among the list, he writes, "ABSOLUTE TRUTH AND HONESTY" (168) and at the bottom of his creed is a triangle with words written at each point: PERMANENT LEGITIMACY, LOVE, AND PURITY" (David and McCandless 148). For a vagabond, words such as absolute and permanent seem out of place. However, Supertramp came to know that he could not remain a walker for the rest of his life and that he had to return to civilization once more. He would need stability and permanency again, but because his epiphany was realized in South Dakota he could not return home right then and there. He had to complete his journey in Alaska and complete his transition from the second to third, and final, stage of the liminal phase: aggregation.

Supertramp spent his final few days with Westerberg before trekking west through Montana and then north through Canada. After eleven days, he arrives at Fairbanks, Alaska. As he walks towards his destination, Supertramp gets in a car with a man named Jim Gallien, who, just like everyone else, tries to convince him not to go. Just as the Burres's "thought Alex had lost his mind when he told us about his 'great Alaskan odyssey,' so too, had everyone else" (45), but as Westerberg notes, "Once Alex made up his mind about something, there was no changing it" (67). Gallien's attempts to scare

Supertramp were futile. Supertramp merely responded the same way he had with everyone else: he ignored them.

For Supertramp, Alaska represented the culmination of all of his efforts and his wanderlust. If this trip was going to mean something to him, nothing could prevent him from completing the journey. When Gallien drops Supertramp off at his destination, Supertramp offers the man some of his personal belongings, such as a watch, comb, and the rest of his money. He “cheerfully tells Gallien that ‘I don’t want to know what time it is. I don’t want to know what day it is or where I am. None of that matters’” (7). Supertramp is preparing to be completely cut off from the rest of society. He sends postcards to the Burres’s and Westerberg with his final remarks. He is ready to walk into the wild.

As previously mentioned, abandoning his Datsun and changing his name was Supertramp’s way of beginning his *rite de passage* and stepping into the liminal phase. For Supertramp (among others), scholar Casey R. Schmitt argues that:

[t]o enter the liminal period is, in a very clear way, the same action as to venture ‘into the wild’...[i]n folktale and legend, we often see this liminal stage echoed...in the journey away from home, as the hero plays the role of the individual in passage, experiencing the incredible through supernatural encounters at marginal locations...Wilderness locations, as distant, unfamiliar, and generally uninhabited environments, find frequent associations with spiritual qualities of otherworldly encounters. (38-39)

To apply this argument to Supertramp's journey then requires readers to understand how Supertramp was able to associate his surroundings with spiritual qualities of otherworldly encounters.

When he discovers "the Magic Bus"—a bus that was left behind in 1963 by construction workers—he carves his ultimate manifesto onto a piece of plywood:

Two years he walks the earth. No phone, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes. Ultimate freedom. An extremist. An aesthetic voyager whose home is THE ROAD.

Escaped from Atlanta. Thou shalt not return, because 'The West IS The Best.'

And now after two rambling years [c]omes the final and greatest adventure. The climactic battle to kill the false being within [a]nd victoriously conclude the spiritual revolution. (163)

This manifesto is the culmination of Supertramp's thoughts and rumination from his entire journey. He is living up to the words from his credo. His relationship with nature and himself reflects that he believes nature is honest and pure. To "kill the false being within" is to symbolically recognize that he has come to accept the failings and baggage of his old life. He is no longer Christopher McCandless, a boy who did everything he could to escape his problems. Instead, he is enjoying his final days as Alexander Supertramp. Now that he has accepted everything from his previous life, he must kill Alex in order to be reborn as a new Christopher McCandless.

When in Alaska, his diary entries become shorter, most only noting the food that he has caught for the day. This shows that Supertramp was completely engrossed in his

surroundings. He had seen and experienced nearly everything that he wanted to on his journey. It is at this point that he is killing off the remaining pieces of the old Christopher McCandless and is symbolically reborn as a new and separate Christopher McCandless. At last, his “final and greatest adventure” was over (163). He was, readers and scholars assume, ready to return to civilization, thus getting ready to complete his *rite de passage* and enter the final stage of the liminal phase.

Unfortunately, however, McCandless never made it home. The Teklanika River that allowed him to cross with ease a few months before had thawed out in the summer months and the currents were in full force. Without a map, McCandless was unaware of the fact that if he traveled a mile down the side of the river, he would have been able to safely cross. Stuck on the bus, and unable to find large game, McCandless was forced to eat small berries and wild potato root, the seeds of which caused him to starve to death.

McCandless’s death stirs debates as to whether or not his quest became a failure. In traditional folklore and road narratives, some scholars argue that a return and reentry to home is necessary in order “to restore equilibrium and keep the mythic cycle going...and to complete the journey in the telling of the story” (Primeau 127). Schmitt, however, counterargues this belief, stating that “others...not[e] that ‘Alexander Supertramp’ began once again signing his writings with the name ‘Christopher McCandless’ in the days preceding his death,” and in doing so, “[McCandless] had returned, after the most important transformation—that from life into death itself—was

made complete” (51). Since the walker’s external identity, Christopher McCandless, did, in fact, resurface, he is following the guidelines of Turner’s final stage of liminality.

Turner argues that an individual has completed his *rite de passage* when he is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and ‘structural’ type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions.

(95)

When Supertramp completed his journey and returned as McCandless, he came back into a stable and structured state of being again. By signing his birth-given name on the notes he wrote, he is following societal norms. His behavior also stabilizes. He attempts to do what most individuals would do by scavenging for food, leaving notes for people who could possibly help him, and fighting to stay alive. Since McCandless returned, his actions reflect those in a stable and normal state of being, thus the argument can be made that he did complete his journey.

Only three years after the death of McCandless, another walker set out to leave behind her external identity and hike along California’s Pacific Crest Trail, after which she would write her memoir: *Wild*. After undergoing several life-changes, Cheryl Strayed’s life spiraled out of control. Then, when waiting in line at an outdoor store one day, she discovered *The Pacific Crest Trail: Volume 1: California* (PCT), and decided that she would spend ninety-four days walking, alone, for a total of 1,100 miles along the

PCT in order to find herself. Unlike Ruess and McCandless, Strayed is not a walker. At the same time, however, she can still become one. Although the PCT is a man-made path and she used a guidebook to assist her, the trail was still new to her. Strayed needed the PCT and the guidebook to provide a sense of structure and direction for her. She was already lost, and if she traveled without any sense of direction, the journey itself would become a reminder of the life she was trying to flee from. The PCT literally kept her on track and provided her with a sense of direction for her new life. Her internal identity was even wild because she is trying to find out who she is. Like other walkers in a liminal state, her internal identity is not yet constructed. Walking on the PCT with a wild internal identity is necessary for her to end her journey with a constructed external identity.

In some regards, Strayed is a combination of Ruess and McCandless. Ruess was completely reckless and traveled along remote locations for most of his journey. McCandless was reckless, but not to the degree that Ruess was, and he traveled to the remote wilderness, but also into mapped places. Strayed acts as a combination of the two because she is on a trail, a two foot wide map, but for her, she is still in the wild. She has the freedom to do whatever she wants, but she is not as reckless as Ruess or McCandless (perhaps this could, in part, be attributed to the fact that she is the only one of the three walkers who lived to tell their own tale). Being in the wild while also having the freedom to do whatever she pleases allows her to get closer to finding the woman that she is meant to become.

Denotatively, her name is literally wild. Following her divorce and needing to change her name, she knew that she “couldn’t continue to be Cheryl Hyphen-Hyphen, nor could I go back to having the name I had in high school and be the girl I used to be” (96). When she looked “Strayed” up in a dictionary, it read, “to wander from the proper path, to deviate from the direct course, to be lost, to become wild, to be without a mother and father, to be without a home, to move about aimlessly in search of something to diverge or digress” (96). The word’s “layered definitions spoke directly to my life and also struck a poetic chord” because Strayed felt that she “had diverged, digressed, wandered, and [became] wild” (97). Until the death of her mother, Strayed had tried to live a traditional life. As a response to her mother’s death, however, Strayed started doing drugs and having careless sex. She literally became wild, but just because she started acting out did not guarantee that her life will become negative. Walking the PCT allows her to ruminate and explore more about her wild identity in part, because the trip is physically and mentally exhaustive; it is, as she argues, hell.

While Ruess and McCandless both knew that they were walkers, Strayed’s decision was made rather abruptly. In a sense, she was not ready to heed Thoreau’s advice. She was not prepared to “leave father and mother and brother and sister . . . and never see them again” (Thoreau 628). She had not “paid [her] debts” or “made [her] affairs” (628). In fact, she was doing everything in her power to stay with her loved ones and proceed with her life as normal. Yet when she saw the PCT guidebook in the outdoor store, she discovered “[a] world I thought would both make me into the woman I knew I

could become and turn me back into the girl I'd once been. A world that measured two feet wide and 2,663 miles long" (4). By walking on the PCT, Strayed could have the structure and stability that she had as a child. At the same time, she would have the time and ability to mentally and spiritually mature, thus she would also be able to feel the same love and happiness that she had as a young girl. For Strayed, walking along the PCT is not about wanderlust or embracing change; it is about change that ultimately leads to more.

When she begins, she is confident and naive. After taking her first few steps on the PCT, Strayed ruminates on the acts of walking and hiking. She asks, "What is hiking but walking after all? *I can walk!*...I walked all the time...I walked for pleasure and purpose" (50). Fifteen minutes into her walk, however, she quickly realizes that her journey is not just the simple act of walking that she has done her entire life. Instead, she comments that what she is doing "resembles walking less than it does hell" (50). Strayed *is* just walking, but the walking that she performs is a physical and mental test that gradually gets worse; once she can get past the more grueling aspects of the journey, she can come to accept her internal identity.

At several points in her journey, she contemplates abandoning the PCT and returning home. Yet these moments of doubt and frustration are the turning points in the self-discovery process. As she tries to convince herself "that this whole PCT hike had been an outlandishly stupid idea," all of the emotions she had been harboring from her past life come to the surface (84). She asks herself, "Why...had my good mother died and

how is it I could live and flourish without her? How could my family, once so close and strong, have fallen apart so swiftly and soundly in the wake of her death? What had I done when I'd squandered my marriage with Paul...? Why had I gotten myself in a sad tangle with heroin and...sex with men I hardly knew" (84)? These questions make the journey feel like hell because she second guesses all of the past decisions she has made. The questions remind her of her past shortcomings and actions; they cause her to doubt herself and whether or not hiking the PCT is worth all of the pain she goes through. At the same time, however, these questions force Strayed to reflect on her journey in a way that she has not been able to do yet. She is gradually learning that to become Cheryl Strayed, she has to live without her family, friends, and ex-husband, thus the questions may be hell, but in a Dantean manner, she is walking herself out of hell.

A few days into the trip, she says, "I realized I was having a kind of strange, abstract, retrospective fun. In moments among my various agonies, I noticed the beauty that surrounded me, the wonder of things both small and large" (67). Within this realization, Strayed is able to find beauty in both her own life and in the wilderness around her. The struggles that she goes through are all part of the liminal phase, as Turner explains:

The ordeals and humiliations...to which neophytes are submitted represent partly a destruction of the previous status and partly a tempering of their essence in order to prepare them to cope with their new responsibilities and restrain them in advance from abusing their new privileges. They have to be shown that in

themselves they are clay or dust, mere matter, whose form is impressed upon them by society. (103)

By seeing the beauty around her and within herself, she recognizes that her status in the liminal phase is, as Turner writes, tempered. She can have fun because the pain is not permanent. The trip may be hellish, but she is able to look into the pain and see beyond it. Eventually, she enjoys being alone. She writes, “I saw no one, but strange as it was, I missed no one. I longed for nothing but food and water and to be able to put my backpack down” (70). Her situation is very similar to Ruess’s and McCandless’s. She has to travel alone to complete her journey through the liminal state and become Cheryl Strayed.

To become this woman, Strayed also had to undergo all of the grueling experiences that occurred while preparing to take the trip as well as the experiences that occurred while on the trip. When she started preparing for the journey, Strayed had no idea what to pack or even how to pack everything. She sought the advice of store employees who had undergone their own hikes, but when it was all said and done, she had packed too much. She packed so much that the water alone weighed an exhaustive 24.5 pounds. While this much alone would be difficult to carry for more than a few hours, Strayed’s pack proved to weigh nearly too much for her. When she put it on her back and tried to stand with it for the first time, the pack would not even move. Then when she is walking along the PCT, nearly every individual that she encounters comments on the size of her pack, with men making statements such as, “Are you sure you can lift that?...Cause *I* barely can” (49) or “That’s one heavy pack...Much heavier

than mine” (88). But the farther she walks, the more items she leaves behind at different cache stations along the way, and her pack becomes lighter. The more she carries the pack, the stronger she becomes.

In reading this, the pack becomes the central metaphor and symbol for walking. Nicknamed “monster,” the pack represents the weight and pressures of Strayed’s external identity and previous life. When she first began, the pressures of life were too much, but as she traveled and learned more about who Cheryl Strayed was, the weight lessened, all the while she was becoming stronger. This is the primary focus for walking and reflection. Walking is about leaving the pack behind and growing stronger. The process is grueling and hellish, but the discoveries made while going to this metaphorical hell can allow an individual to become wild, discover their internal identity, and grow in strength.

Half-way through her journey, she becomes more attune with herself, and her desire to remain on the trail is further evidenced by “homesickness” that she feels one night. While staying in a motel, she reflects on her walk thus far. She is homesick, but now that she has had time to reflect on larger questions about her past and her life, she tells her readers that, “I didn’t know if [my homesickness] was for the life I used to have or for the PCT” (126). Strayed never tells her reader for what exactly she is homesick, but it becomes clear that she is homesick for the PCT and for discovery. The trail has become her home.

The final stretches of her journey provide constant reinforcement of hope that she will complete her journey and exit the liminal state. While heading back to her campsite

one night, she becomes aware of the fact that she misses her old life, but she remarks, “I didn’t want to go back to it either” (189). She continues to reflect before coming to believe that the death of her mother, her divorce, and her drug addiction were all necessary in order to become Cheryl Strayed and understand who Cheryl Strayed was. Even though these issues were difficult to handle, she remarks, “I didn’t feel sad or happy. I didn’t feel proud or ashamed. I only felt that in spite of all of the things I’d done wrong in getting myself here, I’d done right” (189). Then, shortly after coming to terms with her emotions, she contends that, “Maybe I *was* more alone than anyone in the whole world. Maybe that was okay” (189). In the final days of her journey, Strayed has learned to cope with the issues from her former life that had plagued her for many months. She is content without her family or a significant other, and she is happy to be sober, thus she is wild in nature, and yet mapped at the same time. Her internal spirit has reached its full potential and she has completed her *rite de passage*.

The argument can then be made that the purpose of walking is not necessarily to find definitive answers to readers’ or walkers’ questions. All three of the major texts used in this chapter demonstrate that walking has more to do with rumination, just as Thoreau demonstrated. Walkers return (if they return at all) from their journeys with new perspectives and insights about themselves and those they meet while traveling. Thus walking, like westering, is not about place. Both walking and westering are about movement and travel. They have a purpose, but they do not always require maps or a sense of direction.

Nothing is definitive, which Cheryl Strayed demonstrates. Of the three walkers, she is the only one who makes it out alive. She is the only one who can directly offer insight into the answers to the questions she asks herself, but because she does not fully understand the answers herself, she does not disclose this information with her readers. Strayed even admits this in an interview with Jonathan Derbyshire from Atlantic Books. When asked how much of an impact the notes she took while hiking had on the memoir itself, Strayed replies, “I wanted to bring to bear everything I could offer as a storyteller, which is essentially the consciousness that I came to have about what that trip meant to me. What does that hike mean? I didn’t know what that hike meant until I’d gone further and deeper into my life. I couldn’t have written *Wild* two years after I hiked” (Strayed “Myself”). Still, even after admitting that she did not know what the purpose of the trip or *Wild* was until years later, she never shared the purpose with her audience. Likewise, Ruess and McCandless will, unfortunately, never be able to share their discoveries or answers with their readers either. As previously stated, Rebecca Solnit argues that “[a]n extremely long walk is often taken up as a sort of pilgrimage, a proof of some kind of faith or will, as well as a means of spiritual and practical discovery” (128). After analyzing the narratives of Ruess, McCandless, and Strayed, we know that these walkers set out for self-discovery purposes, but what it is they discovered remains unknown.

## Notes

1. “The Leader of the People” is the final story of four in Steinbeck’s larger work titled *The Red Pony*.

2. In May of 2008, the remains of a skull were found and were believed to belong to Ruess, but after several months of investigation and DNA tests, scientists concluded that the remains did not belong to Ruess. Instead, they belonged to an unidentified Native American male.

3. To this day, there is much controversy surrounding Ruess’s letters and diaries. While Roberts is only able to include seven letters from Ruess’s 1934 travels, many of Ruess’s letters and a few of his diaries are still in existence. In the 1950s and ‘60s, Ruess’s brother and mother sent the letters to Larry Kellner, who promised the Ruess’s that he would need to borrow Ruess’s writings in order to publish a book and help write a movie script, both of which he promised would be about Ruess and his travels. The promises fell through and Ruess’s letters have since been sold to an unknown buyer in Indiana. Although the Ruess family has tried to reclaim the items, their efforts have been unsuccessful.

4. In its entirety, the PCT is 2,663 miles. It stretches from the bottom of California's border with Mexico all the way into Canada. Strayed, however, walks for 1,100 miles, from Tehachapi Pass in southern California to The Bridge of the Gods at the northern border between Oregon and Washington.

## Conclusion

When reflecting on *Romance*, Primeau asks a series of questions, such as “Who are these road heroes?” and “When and why do they set out and where are they going” (141)? Just like the walkers mentioned in the final chapter of this thesis, Primeau never directly answers his own questions. Instead, he acknowledges how complicated the answers can be. If one tries to find the answers to the questions, he will have to “reflect [on] the many perspectives expressed in the genre” (141). The only way to do this is to continue reading, but when the reader immerses himself in the texts, he will only have more questions. The reader is never going to be able to know everything about the genre or individual narratives, in part because those embarking on the quests do not know everything. Thus the road genre is not about finding answers; it is about asking questions in order to learn and grow as an individual.

As this thesis has also shown, the genre’s conventions and parameters grow with time, too. Road narratives stretch back for centuries, and yet travelers are still finding new ways to explore. Hobos and tramps challenge the meaning of community and what it is like to belong to a group outside of the dominant and standard type of community. Boatmen can also have a variety of different experiences, such as Twain and Harris

learning about culture and race through the history of the Mississippi. Walkers can experience a change in identity through states of liminality. The journeys that all of these individuals embark upon have similarities, but there are also many differences. The differences in their journeys are caused by a multitude of factors, such as gender and race.

With *Boxcar Bertha* and *Cheryl Strayed*, readers can see what it is like for women struggling to find what they want in life when issues with family affect the decisions they make. If Bertha had not asked herself, “Just what did I want?” then she may not have been able to come to the realization that she could not live a life on the road and simultaneously have the nuclear family that she wanted (Reitman 152). If Eddy Harris never asked, “What’s that [his race] got to do with anything?” then he might not have been able to move beyond issues of race while traveling down the Mississippi or any other place in his future. The questions that these travelers ask themselves affect how they travel and what they come to discover about themselves.

How many of the hobos from Cliff Williams’s collection of interviews abandoned their life on the road? Did Twain regret the fact that his wanderlust was tempered by his newfound knowledge of racial issues on the river? What exactly did hiking the Pacific Crest Trail mean to Cheryl Strayed? Did any of these travelers accomplish everything that they wanted to while on the road? Because we may never know what became of many of these travelers or the discoveries they made, the ideas in this thesis cannot—and will not—stop here. When writing this thesis, it has become clear that there are

alternative avenues of discussion that need to be discussed further. There are also other modes of transportation that have yet to be explored, such as bicycles and motor homes. Only when we ask questions and engage in discussion will we be able to see what the road genre has to offer.

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## VITA

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