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O highway I travel, do you say to me Do not leave me?
—Walt Whitman

In the recent found footage horror film *The Houses October Built*, a group of five young friends set out on a road trip in search of haunted house attractions that contain more visceral and genuine experiences of fear. They desire escape from the falsehood of fake cobwebs, paper ghosts, and carved pumpkins that adorn suburban houses every Halloween. Instead they seek out attractions filled with crowds of dispossessed employees whose sole desire every autumn is to terrify middle-class America out of its complacency and insularity. In one scene near the middle of the film, the group stops at a rest area on a well-traveled interstate and glance at a map before venturing off onto local roads in search of what they call the next “haunt.” The name they use for each attraction blends qualities of both noun and verb, as if the thrill they seek somehow remains in motion with them beyond the stationary entertainment of each house. The handheld camera unsteadily pans across the map, and a few offhandedly question each other as to where the next house might be located. Black lines of rural highways and back roads chaotically entangle the colored spaces on the map. Each road, though, seems to grip the thick and easily demarcated blue line of interstate like the tendrils of a vine. The house they seek may be found on any one of them, but the actual “haunt’ lies on the roads that will lead them there.
The scene succinctly portrays how more authentic engagements with America must always remain somewhere off its easily navigated and well-policed network of interstates. It likewise exposes how a net of roadways constrains the American landscape. The map displays a land virtually buried by means of an automobile’s transport upon it. Entombed by roads—like the final “haunt” that will bury these unsuspecting travelers alive—America seems to suffocate under the burden of its roadways. The journeys its people make on them, too, historically have weighed upon and even haunted the nation’s psyche so much more than its houses ever could.

The subject of the American road trip has thus spread its way across a variety of cultural forms. Its broad cultural reach mirrors the spatial expansion of the automotive infrastructure that inspires and sustains it. In a welcome contribution to a growing number of studies, the recent anthology *Hit the Road, Jack: Essays on the Culture of the American Road* takes a refreshingly interdisciplinary approach to investigate not only how American culture has incorporated the road trip as a signature trope, but also to assess its immense impact on national consciousness.

In their introduction, the volume’s editors, Gordon E. Slethaug and Stacilee Ford, remark how “[m]ost studies of the road have focused on literature, film, automobility, or history of the road, but singly rather than in an interdisciplinary combination” (5); whereas their multifaceted take on the material will give their volume its “special strength” (4). It brings a variety of perspectives to bear on the subject, and it likewise familiarizes readers with a number of the critical conversations surrounding the road trip’s appearance in literature, music, and film.

More importantly, though, the text also closely examines cultural products such as travel guides, reality television, and video games. These seemingly ephemeral, throwaway bits of popular and travel culture tend to get sidelined in scholarly works with a more specific and narrow focus. Slethaug and Ford include essays that spotlight the internal complexities found within them. Each essay showcases how the road trip taken within either guide, game, or program can both simultaneously affirm and reconfigure assumptions about class, race, gender, and even the road itself. Ford’s own chapter on the reality television series *The Simple Life* offers an unconventional insight into a television genre that most consider, at best, frivolous nonsense, while still others regard as a festering abomination of pop culture. Ford looks beyond the seemingly superficial antics of these “privileged celebrity progeny” and instead sympathetically observes the “redemptive aspects” of a show that depicts “moments of rare and unrehearsed human connection” (125,154). Similarly, in one of the most intriguing chapters of the volume, Michael
Truscello highlights the limitations and elisions of current studies on road culture by examining how the very nature and materiality of the road itself demands a driver’s submission to a predetermined set of rules. Observing how that social compact colonizes new forms of media like virtual reality films and video games, he argues that the so-called liberation engendered by automobility is in fact more virtual than real.

Nevertheless, like many anthologies that attempt it, Hit the Road, Jack’s interdisciplinarity can often hamper readers as much as it rewards. By “casting a broad net in its approach to the road” (4), as Slethaug and Ford’s introduction proclaims, their final product has unfortunately left itself exposed to widely fluctuating qualities of scholarship and radical shifts in clarity of expression. Chapters that should have perhaps been cut—or at the very least, been subjected to more editorial rigor—have slipped through its wide disciplinary net. For the most part, the editors admirably accomplish their desire “to balance overviews of certain historical themes with contemporary and textured case studies” (7). The few chapters that lose sight of this agenda have difficulty synthesizing the research material their writers obviously enjoyed going through in order to prepare their essay. Or they spend undue time in plot summary, rather than in analysis of the material. Invariably, these problems lead writers even further astray when it comes to expressing their ideas clearly and succinctly. For Slethaug and Ford, each essay presents its own road trip of sorts, one “that reflect[s] experiences, scholarly expertise, and personality” (5). And therein perhaps lies the source of the anthology’s unevenness. A few essays in here lack a strong guide for the “unique road trips” this anthology offers (5). In spite of their missteps, though, these flawed chapters still reference very high-quality source material, and therefore provide readers with roadmaps to better destinations of scholarship and authoritativeness. There is, however, more than enough authoritative and innovative research in the pages of Hit the Road, Jack to make up for its few shortcomings. In fact, when the editors do achieve the editorial balance they seek, they have done so by including historical overviews that hold tight to a specific theme and argument. These overviews thus retain a point of view, and in doing so, complement later chapters with a more specific focus on television or film. For example, Slethaug’s opening chapter historically grounds the “increasingly complex, metaphor, and icon” of the American road trip. He does so by situating how it evolved “through seminal periods and iconic texts” (13, 14). His chapter anchors the last half of the text very well, although perhaps should have been placed closer to it.

The first half of the book offers two other historical overviews that provide an interesting counterpoint to the last half. Max J. Skidmore’s historical survey, “Politics, People Moving, and the American Myth of the Road,” does so much more than simply chart the course of events that led to the current state of the nation’s transportation infrastructure. He uncovers how the country’s foundational Jeffersonian ideals underpin
Americans’ love for highway travel, thanks in part to the personal freedom it garners. Those same ideals, though, philosophically straitjacketed Americans to their automobiles. They likewise caused their government to prioritize automotive infrastructure over other forms of communal transport like rail, leaving congested highways and urban gridlock in their wake. Skidmore’s essay, at times, alternates between the guises of jeremiad and nostalgic recall, and those dual roles set up an important thematic link to other chapters. Near the end of the essay, he references how the rise of the American Interstate Highway System constituted both a blessing and a curse to the nation it eventually striated. It may have granted swift travel across great distances, but it severed a more intimate connection to the country and its people.

Cotton Seiler supplies *Hit the Road, Jack* with one of its more trenchant assessments of the irrevocable change the American interstate brought to both dominant and marginalized groups. In this deceptively specialized chapter on mid 20th century African-American guidebooks, he broadly outlines the social, political, economic, and even diplomatic imperatives for constructing “what arguably,” in Skidmore’s estimation, “became the greatest public works program in world history” (50). For African-Americans, this feat of engineering advertised greater mobility within the nation as a whole, allowing them to bypass states and local communities that still carefully controlled and restricted their range of motion in an automobile. African-American automobility was perceived as a threat “because spatial mobility,” Seiler notes, “has often been a means to or evidence of the social mobility of racial Others” (80). The interstate thus provided access to the abstract privileges of citizenship withheld from them. Yet Seiler accurately observes how this essentially federalized thoroughfare “enabled the African-American driver to pass as the anonymous liberal subject, and to effect, under certain circumstances, the privatist withdrawal that has been such an extravagant and problematic characteristic of American citizenship” (97). Erasing difference, then, enhanced mobility. But what Seiler actually shows is that the interstate does not simply pass through the nation it came to represent in all of its abstractions of citizenship. It instead overpasses it.

What the interstate overpasses resonates aptly with the later chapters of *Hit the Road, Jack*, many of which tackle the subject of difference in road films and television. Ford enumerates the many complex issues of gender *The Simple Life* explores in spite of its superficiality and pop-culture status, and Gina Marchetti discusses how the film *Transamerica* “open[ed] the queer highway to gay and straight audiences” alike (213). In another later chapter, Slethaug shows how recent “buddy and solo road films” such as *Brokeback Mountain* and *Smoke Signals*, for instance, undermine long-held and entrenched notions of hegemonic masculinity and instead showcase “pluralistic masculinities of reconciliation and reconstruction” (168, 170). In many of the films he investigates, the characters take unconventional roads and embark on
uncharacteristic journeys that often lead to epiphanic discoveries, newfound relationships, or at the very least, ensure a momentary glimpse of an altered perspective and a means to personal change. He unearths each film’s inherent value as a quality piece of road culture. These are indeed road films. Like The Houses October Built, they enjoin their audiences that to enter America is to exit the interstate.

In the introduction to Hit the Road, Jack, Slethaug and Ford impart a telling anecdote about when Slethaug took their Chinese students on their very own American road trip. Sadly, but not surprisingly, the students got to witness first hand what is like “being the ‘ethnic other’” on the country’s roads (5). Perhaps a bit chagrined, the authors nevertheless unflinchingly maintain that their students “saw the diversity of the USA, but also experienced being the targets of ethnic slights and racial slurs,” and finally all “came to understand both the exploration and exploitation that has characterized the road over time” (5). The roads they travelled no doubt frightened and thrilled them, and the students’ memories will likely continue to enlighten with the passage of time. Yet there is the sense that they may haunt as well. The American road trip, too, both haunts and holds innate value within the many culture forms it now thrives within. The degree to which it does either of those things will remain a subject for debate. Like a well-placed sign on the highway, Hit the Road, Jack directs readers’ attention to important facets of that ongoing critical debate. Most of all, though, it interrogates an indigenous cultural trope that informs Americans’ conception of themselves as such. The volume therefore offers a worthy interdisciplinary approach to investigate how American exceptionalism may, for good or ill, remain inextricably bound to the country’s preferred and cherished mode of transportation.

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