

Nabokov, Kerouac, Updike: Exploring the Failed American Road Trip

Elsa Court

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Rabbit, Run (1960) the first novel in John Updike's *Rabbit* tetralogy, was initially intended to be written as a single novel focusing on Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom, a young lower-middle-class American man and former high-school basketball champion coming to terms with the many disappointments of adult domestic life and subservient, unrewarding work in the context of a late-capitalist society. Both the novel and its hero were conceived by Updike in reaction to the publication of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) three years before, which had brought the "spontaneous prose" and anti-conformist ideals of Kerouac and the Beat Generation to national pop-culture fame.

As critics have noted before, the first Rabbit novel was prefigured by a number of shorter pieces of writing in Updike's oeuvre which addressed, often critically, Kerouac's best-selling novel. At the time when he was beginning work on *Rabbit, Run* in 1959, Updike published a short caricature of *On the Road* in the *New Yorker*, and according to Donald J. Greiner, the creation of Rabbit Angstrom was anticipated by the publication, in the same magazine, of a 1957 poem titled "Ex-Basketball Player," which also captures the trope of the restless white American young man, with his frustrations and hopes, in terms of mobility and stasis (Updike, *Collected Poems* 4). Rabbit ages through the novels and each new decade carries him further and further away from the senseless adventures of America's counterculture, yet it seems that Updike never ceased to respond to Kerouac throughout his career: in 1999, a poem titled "On the Road" gave a less corrosive, more nuanced nod to the legacy of Kerouac's postwar

youth culture. Critics have argued that the characters in several of his pre-Rabbit short stories are also, directly or indirectly, inspired by Kerouac's characters and their vision of society. As Greiner convincingly suggests, his impatience over Kerouac had as much to do with content as it did with style, for when he rates him as a scribbler, "hurriedly tossing into a sentence all that comes to mind," Updike establishes that the popularity of books like *On the Road* "must lie in [their] qualities of vernacular epic," for lack presumably of any other notable quality (Updike, *Hugging* p. 554, 573-74).

This notion of the vernacular epic is key when addressing, in fiction or in non-fiction, the historical paradigm of adventure and territorial conquest in American literature, one which finds its twentieth-century expression through the image of the road. In the opening lines of his afterword to *Rabbit, Run*, Updike cites *Moby-Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn*, novels which deal with "marginal situations and eccentric, rootless characters" (265). They are examples of America's canonical texts defined by their narratives of social restlessness, narratives which equate male companionship and movement with freedom, and domesticity with a form of entrapment unfit for the traditional experience of masculinity. Such a tradition, Updike suggests, bears a strong cultural and ideological impression on ordinary American lives such as his, for he writes that, by the end of the 1950s, he was himself, as a young American male, aware that the responsibilities of adult life would curtail the great sense of wonder he had once felt entitled to as an American youth. Following on this topic he writes of the real influence of Kerouac on many young American men in the late 1950s, sometimes to tragic effects. "Without reading [*On the Road*]," he wrote, "I resented its apparent instruction to cut loose; *Rabbit, Run* was meant to be a realistic demonstration of what happens when a young American family man goes on the road—the people left behind get hurt" (268). The idea, perhaps, is that though both he and Kerouac had been exposed to—and seduced by—the male freedom paradigm when studying Melville, Twain, and James Fenimore Cooper, respectively, at Harvard and Columbia University, the essentially uncritical actualization of the same trope by Kerouac in 1957 would have a much more immediate impact on the lives of young men of all social statuses than the American classics could.

This afterword, which marks the completion of the *Rabbit* tetralogy in 1990, suggests that Updike's moral and intellectual response to *On the Road* preceded his reading of the novel itself, a good indication of the iconic status the novel enjoyed upon publication, and of the appeal which made it a cultural text but also a commodity

accessible at least in part through other media than the reading of Kerouac's written words. Television for example, largely contributed to the making of Kerouac's public persona and, by association, to the popularity of the Beats. However, the subtitle of Updike's *New Yorker* parody of *On the Road*, "After Reading, At Long Last, 'On the Road' by Jack Kerouac," suggests that if the *idea* of *Rabbit* preceded Updike's reading of Kerouac, he had read the novel carefully by the time *Rabbit, Run* began to take form.

In this piece, Updike demonstrated an incisive critical awareness of the Beats phenomenon, denouncing not only Kerouac's stylistic posture but also the ethical problems posed by Kerouac's modern reinterpretation of the male American freedom myth. Such ethical problems are shown to include Kerouac's lack of concern for the heroes' female counterparts, his incapacity to address the colonial undertones of the hero's desire to conquer the national territory, and the rambling self-aggrandizement of a young—or seemingly young—middle-class male narrator who is unaware of the social and economic privilege he enjoys. The parody is successful at emulating the style of Kerouac's spontaneous prose, while supplying enough details of the life of the narrator to give us a chance to review the counterculture lifestyle critically.

I was thinking around in my sad backyard, looking at those little drab careless star-shaped clumps of crabgrass and beautiful chunks of some old bicycle crying out without words of the American Noon and half a newspaper with an ad about a lotion for people with dry skins and dry souls, when my mother opened our frantic banging screendoor and shouted 'Gogi Himmelman's here'.

By deploying such skill in exposing Kerouac's stylistic and moral limitations—the turning of radical inaction into make-believe activities, the lack of self-awareness and the tendency to take refuge from daily responsibilities in myth while a (female) caregiver attends to those demands—Updike can be said to have also succeeded in distinguishing himself from what Kerouac represented from a historical point of view in the era's conflation of literature with popular culture. He did so by marking his status as a stylist, demonstrating with this parody that he was a scholar of literature rather than simply a cultural icon taking momentary part in it. It is hard to imagine, conversely, Kerouac writing a parody of another writer, because such an exercise implies the acquisition of a critical distance from the medium which Kerouac did not seem to strive for at any point in his writing career.

Kerouac, to be sure, is not the author with whom Updike is most commonly associated today, no matter what *Rabbit Angstrom* may have borrowed from Sal

Paradise. The fact that few of his contemporaries had an idea of Updike unless they had read his work suggests that he and Kerouac occupy different statuses in the postwar American literary landscape. *Slate's* obituary for John Updike, for example, compared the novelist to Saul Bellow and Vladimir Nabokov for the acute precision and flourish of his prose style. The article suggested that, in fact, if one could disqualify both Bellow and Nabokov as American stylists on the grounds of Bellow's Canadian birth and of Nabokov's transnational origin, perhaps one should in fact hail Updike "the finest American prose stylist of the postwar era" (Patterson and Chotiner). It is the stance that the article decided to take, celebrating his prose as "meticulous, crystalline, and luminously hyperrealist," his language "opulent [...], hanging on austere [American] forms." Arguably, nothing could sound further away from Kerouac than this filiation with an American literary tradition of opulence and formal austerity.

Vladimir Nabokov, with whom Updike is more often associated, also made his way into the American literary canon by writing one of the great road novels of the postwar era, *Lolita* (1955). The novel, initially set in the imaginary New England suburb of Ramsdale, narrates two frantic cross-country road trip episodes in the second half of the novel, which are illustrated with copious descriptions of the landscape and commerce of life on the road. In his effort to become an American author, Nabokov consciously aspired to describe American motels, as well as other roadside services particular to America, and comments he made in his afterword to the novel show that these components are essential to his novel and its use of American English (315). Though it is the style, not the subject of Updike's novels that granted him comparison with Nabokov as a "luminous" and "opulent" prose-writer, the question of narrative content poses itself also, when both writers examined similar aspects of the modern American road in an effort to write about individualism and the social contract. The elements of "vernacular epic" presented, albeit ironically, by *Rabbit, Run*, and its recognition of the car as the symbolic passport to autonomy in postwar America, bear echoes of the cultural analysis provided in *Lolita*, especially that which is supported by the road trip section and the prosaic and spontaneous language of the American vernacular on the roadside. Humbert Humbert's take on his own liberation from the social contract granted him by life on the road is, after all, knowing of the literary paradigm created by James Fenimore Cooper. Robert Roper, in a recent revisitation of Nabokov's American biography, insists on Nabokov's knowledge of captivity

narratives and other American paradigms being implicit in his first truly American novel (152-53).

It is a subject of interest to road scholars such as myself that there should have been so little comparison between two of the great American road novels of the 1950s, no record of an interview in which Nabokov was asked what he thought of the Beats phenomenon, and perhaps it is fair to assume that this disassociation was born out of the assumption that Nabokov and Kerouac belong to two contrasted categories of American writers: one, bearing with him the best of Europe's education, and for whom the elegance and originality of a style was the *sine qua non* quality of a true work of art, the other for whom spontaneity and idiosyncratic perspective take precedence over craft and cultural analysis. Meanwhile, comparisons between Updike's work and Nabokov's, as we have begun to see, have predominantly touched upon stylistic preoccupations. It is possible to suggest, however, that Updike's response to Kerouac in *Rabbit, Run*, showing an awareness of a canon on the American anti-social mobility paradigm, may provide a background from which to think of an overdue comparison of Nabokov's and Kerouac's respective road epics. This paper will now trace Updike's assimilation of Kerouac's vision in Rabbit's aborted drive to Florida at the beginning of the novel. From this comparison, I will move on to suggest that another parallel can be made, one with the road trip episode narrated in the second half of *Lolita*, which provides another example of the failure of the American literary hero's self-realizing adventure. To achieve this comparison efficiently and by raising the question of male identity and individualism in the context of the cultural politics of late-capitalism in the United States, I propose to pay special attention to the landscape of the road—its rules, signage, and services—and the way it is pitched as a symbol of social rules against the factitious sovereignty of the male motorist on the highway.

Rabbit on the Road

Twenty pages into the novel, Rabbit Angstrom, a disillusioned twenty-six-year-old trapped in an unhappy marriage and a frustrating job, decides on a whim not to go home to his infant son and pregnant wife but to drive out of town instead where freedom and the more clement climate of the South seem to call out to him. As he exits the town and finds himself on the highway to Philadelphia, Rabbit navigates the road without knowing where he is going other than out of Pennsylvania altogether, and possibly far away from it. Much in the fashion of a Kerouac character, Rabbit drives through an

idealized landscape rather than the territory itself, of which he possesses no map and chooses to ignore direction signage while only relying, at first, on his intuition. In this way, Rabbit relies on a mental map: he believes that he can drive all night and go “south, down, down the map into orange groves and smoking rivers and barefoot women” (23). The pursuit of this misty, pastoral, sexualized ideal leads him to believe that he can simply rely on “an animal feeling,” one which tells him that a Florida sunrise awaits at the end of the drive, for he has read somewhere that Highway 1 “goes from Florida to Maine through the most beautiful scenery in the world” (28). But the superlatives of Updike’s free indirect speech do not quite match the relentless, blind enthusiasm of Kerouac’s narrators. In comparison, the third-person narration which filters Rabbit’s thoughts already give a sense of the unsustainability of his enthusiasm, giving a sense that the main character’s confidence is already about to wear out.

Rabbit’s general lack of orientation at first seems glorious, but once exposed to the laws of highway navigation, it is revealed as irresponsible and self-failing. The discrepancy between his dream of the highway and the consequences of his mindless navigation is first brought to light in Rabbit’s interaction with a gas station attendant early on in the trip. Trying to locate his position in the absence of a map, Rabbit is put on the spot when the middle-aged man confronts him about his plans: “Son, where do you want to go?” The question suggests that driving in just any direction thinking his intended road will find itself goes against pure common sense, a common sense which defines a historic Protestant ethic on which, it is implied, America was built. Upon hearing the question again, it is said that Rabbit “suddenly realizes that he is a criminal” (29). From would-be self-reliant adventurer, Rabbit suddenly sees himself, through the eyes of this weary roadside attendant, as an outlaw on the run, a judgement which anticipates reprobation from society as a whole. This episode offers a first reality-check, it exposes the lack of solidity of Rabbit’s resolve which has so quickly turned to paranoia. Perhaps Rabbit also realizes that his lack of resolve makes him culturally out of place on the road, and this is enough to spoil the highway for him. As if the road was a cohesive world which he had already failed to rise up to, people subsequently encountered in small diners look at Rabbit strangely, the radio in the car plays tunes that he imagines are sung for young married couples such as the one he has just deserted, and his stubborn persistence to aim for the South only leads him to a dirt road. Only there does he finally lose hope of making it to Florida and decide to head back to where he has come from, if he can.

This awkward, failed road trip is ripe with descriptions of roadside stations and diners. Minor encounters with locals, every time Rabbit makes a stop on the roadside, reveal a separation between life among rural communities and the traveler's experience. Rabbit is no actual criminal, but his lack of direction symbolically makes him an outlaw, a vagabond, someone who turned his back on responsibility. As a result, Rabbit seems uncomfortable everywhere; and even young people in diners look at him suspiciously. It should be remembered that in *On the Road*, Sal Paradise never travels alone. He either hitchhikes or drives in the company of his peers. The occasional solitude depicted in Kerouac's work—such as in the opening sections of *The Dharma Bums* (1958), when the narrator is riding freight trains alone—is redeemed by a hobo community of the traveling poor. The lower middle-class citizens described on Rabbit's aborted drive presumably cannot afford—time-wise or money-wise—this bohemian vision of road companionship. It seems therefore as if Rabbit had fallen from the grace of a classic, Whitmanian road narrative in which addressing “the open road” alone was a way of reconnecting with America. Rabbit has entered instead a darker, more self-aware generation of road adventure, one which links back to Film Noir, interwar crime fiction, and their dominant mood of social paranoia.

In *On the Road*, gas station attendants are barely ever spoken to. Cigarette cartons and gas are purchased—or stolen—from seemingly self-operated stations on the side of the American highway. In Southern California, they are places where Mexican youths try to sell car accessories to the next car that pulls up, and can easily be persuaded to sell the narrator and his companions a “girl” for the night (256). Dean even recounts to the narrator how, in 1944, having gotten in trouble with the police, he had stolen a gas attendant uniform from a station in Flagstaff and managed to get hired at the next gas station in LA under a pseudonym (210-11). Perhaps it is Rabbit's history of playing by the rules and to little lasting effect, illustrated in his faded high-school basketball star status, that explains his utter failure as a con man of the American road. The isolation he consciously feels from America suggests a desire to belong, which the characters in Kerouac's novel already satisfy by belonging to their own clan. Over the rest of his journey, Rabbit will resist the impulse of hugging another gas station attendant, a “young but tall colored boy,” whose “limber lazy body slumping inside his baggy Amoco coveralls” somehow moves the traveler (29-30).

Reckoning with the Roadside

It should be noted that, although gasoline stations and roadside services described in *Lolita* are almost always devoid of staff, they are no less threatening to the would-be hero's individualistic quest. Much against the shimmering mirage of free agency projected on the road at the beginning of Humbert's trip, highway signage and services stationed at the roadside present an implicit continuation of the societal relationships through commerce and the enforcement of basic rules of social living. If the motel's relative lack of managerial authority is at first exhilarating to the narrator of *Lolita*, the language of their signage and notices gradually becomes apparent as Humbert starts to measure that society has not been erased by life on the road. Thus, the following managerial notice in a motel room appears as not only awkward but ominous:

We wish you to feel at home while here. All equipment was carefully checked upon your arrival. Your license number is on record here. Use hot water sparingly. We reserve the right to eject without notice any objectionable person. Do not throw waste material of *any* kind in the toilet bowl. Thank you. Call again. The Management. P.S. We consider our guests the Finest People in the World. (210)

The omnipresence of the sign on Humbert's itinerary becomes a threat that society might be closing in on him, a threat which eventually materializes as the mystery driver by whom Humbert thinks he and Lolita are being followed. As in *Rabbit, Run*, the outcome of the road trip episode in Nabokov's novel is a failure with regards to the ideal of shameless moral self-reliance initially pursued. In *Lolita*, the second road trip episode also allows the title character to make her escape from her abuser, leaving Humbert alone to ponder on his extended breaching of the social contract, and eventually seek incarceration. In this context, as with Rabbit's drive, the moment of pausing at the roadside forces the driver to reassess his place in the country and in the world. Through this process of reckoning with the social order that could not be shed by mobility, signs but also mere objects are increasingly seen as testimonies of a national community previously negated. In the following gasoline station passage, shortly before Lolita's escape, the narrative is brought to an uncomfortable reality-check while a roadside attendant is "hidden from sight" behind the car engine boot.

Not for the first time, and not for the last, had I stared in such dull discomfort of mind at those stationary trivialities that look almost surprised, like staring rustics, to find themselves in the stranded traveler's field of vision: that green garbage can, those very black, very whitewalled tires for sale, those bright cans of motor oil, that red icebox with assorted drinks, the four, five, seven discarded bottles within the incompleting crossword puzzle of their wooden cells, that bug patiently walking up the inside of the window of the office. (211-12).

If traveler and roadside station attendants operate almost without contact, the criminal's anthropomorphic vision of the roadside's furniture, which lends it a reproaching gaze, confirms that the roadside is not a scattered network of isolated services but a system which is integrated to society, and through which Lolita will eventually be re-assimilated. A few stops later on the same journey, Humbert catches sight of an encounter between his young captive and a stranger with whom she seems to engage in an oddly familiar manner.

Having seen to the needs of my car, I walked into the office to get those glasses and pay for the gas. As I was in the act of signing a traveler's check and wondered about my exact whereabouts, I happened to glance through a side window, and saw a terrible thing. A broad-backed man, baldish, in an oatmeal coat and dark-brown trousers, was listening to Lo who was leaning out of the car and talking to him very rapidly, her hand with outspread fingers going up and down as it did when she was very serious and emphatic. What struck me with sickening force was—how shall I put it?—the voluble familiarity of her way, as if they had known each other—oh, for weeks and weeks. (218)

The modern American road, as is revealed from the sheer *ennui* of these two latter passages, is not pure abstraction: it is supported by roadside services which tend to the driver's immediate needs—fuel, sustenance, distractions, as well as an array of modern comforts—and by the same token negate the road as a space of pure promise. Because Paradise and his peers in *On the Road* steal from and subvert the commerce of the highway, they maintain the illusion of their independence from the system. Elsewhere, road narratives reveal that there is a certain class of citizen that lives on the movement of others, and that this relationship implicitly negates "independence." In *Lolita* and *Rabbit, Run*, this realization is a source of self-awareness and discomfort. In these novels, it is the mundane reality of the roadside which removes the motorized protagonist from the undisturbed solipsism of the drive and brings him on a level with the reality of a social order which is implicitly tied with a sense of national unity, in spite of the apparent distance between one stopping place and the next. Crucially, when Rabbit enters a roadside diner later on his hectic drive, he notices that locals look at him dismissively and consequently wonders "Is it just these people I'm outside or is it all America?" (31). America, in Rabbit's physical and mental journey, turns out to be a paradox: it is simultaneously the class of citizens living in towns who depend on the highway and the negation of this economic relationship.

The Road Narrative and Its Discontent

In his seminal book *Romance of the Road* (1996), cultural historian Ronald Primeau reflects on the evolution of the American road narrative across the twentieth century and argues that the postwar road trip, as it deploys the optimistic and, to an extent, reactionary political attitudes of self-reliance, fraternal bonding, and epicurean non-conformity which Kerouac's road novels channel, takes a sour and dystopian turn with the rising political awareness of the 1960s. In the wake of the genre's postwar glory days, this shift in attitudes is brought about in literature, according to Primeau, through either parody or a nihilistic assimilation of the road trip's established philosophy and conventions.

After two decades of social protest, self-discovery, and the search for a national identity, the road for some turned sour. As the energy of Dean Moriarty's "Wild Yea Saying" diminished, the journey became discouraging. For others, by the late 1960s the road offered no hopeful renewal, but the frenzy of pure escapism. [...] John Updike's Rabbit Angstrom is one of the earliest examples of an ambivalent hero who drives to escape, *Rabbit Run* (1960) expresses an American dream that doesn't seem to be working. (89)

Primeau's timeline is partly confusing, for it includes *Lolita* in a list of post-hopeful "quest parodies" in spite of the fact that the novel appeared in the mid-fifties, in the height of American motor culture's postwar optimism, and indeed two years before *On the Road*. Meanwhile, Primeau's assessment of these ambivalent expressions of the disillusioned road trip—self-reflexive parody or escapism—proposes to distinguish between the "dystopic nightmare" of Nabokov's novel on the one hand and the genuine moral and psychological exhaustion of Updike's characters (89).

Primeau's identification of a post-Kerouac road narrative overlooks, among other things, the elements of parody in Updike's *Rabbit, Run* which, as in "On the Sidewalk," captures Kerouac's idealism and turns it upon its head. The rendition of Rabbit's long night at the wheel of his car through a litany of ads, songs, and repetitive news reports heard on the radio, for example, reads like an actual inversion of *On the Road's* anti-capitalist ideal.

On the radio he hears "No Other Arms, No Other Lips," "Stagger Lee," a commercial for Rayco Clear Plastic Seat Covers, "I Didn't Care," by Connie Francis, a commercial for Radio-Controlled Garage Door Operators, "I Ran All the Way Home Just to Say I'm Sorry," [...] news (President Eisenhower and Prime Minister Harold Macmillan begin a series of talks in Gettysburg, Tibetans battle Chinese Communists in Lhasa, the whereabouts of the Dalai Lama, spiritual leader of this remote and backward land, are unknown, [...]), a commercial for New Formula Barbasol Presto-Lather, whose daily cleansing action tends to prevent skin blemishes and emulsifies something, "Pink Shoe Laces" by Dody Stevens, a

word about a little boy called Billy Tessman who was hit by a car and would appreciate cards or letters, “Petit Fleur,” “Fungo” (great), a commercial for Wool-Tex All-Wool Suits, [...] “Venis,” and the same news again. Where is the Dalai Lama? (28-29)

The only frantic voice of Rabbit’s journey is conveyed by the uninterrupted flow of the radio, whose carefully transcribed titles and listing reminisce of Nabokov’s parodic list of motel names and road signs advertising an endless repetition of curio shops and ice-cold drinks. Framed as the background to news concerning the war in Lhasa and the whereabouts of the Buddhist spiritual leader, the passage is a cynical nod to the author of the *Dharma Bums*, told from the perspective of a faithless young man who is spiritually lost. Nevertheless, the pull of finding himself in “sweet low cottonland” (29) by morning testifies to Rabbit’s faith in something he cannot quite name but is written all over the pages of his aborted adventure: the vague knowledge of a cultural mood which is not enough to guide him to destination.

Meanwhile, against Primeau’s assertion that Kerouac’s *On the Road* is the postwar road trip’s “blue-print” (2), the self-reflexivity of the road quest in *Lolita* would suggest a reckoning of the pattern *avant la lettre*. As Humbert reflects on their year-long travels at the beginning of part two, he remembers for example how Lolita would plead to take the hitchhikers they would see along the highway. Humbert felt particularly threatened by this generic figure, which he describes as

[...] the clean-cut, glossy-haired, shifty-eyed, white-faced young beasts in loud shirts and coats, vigorously, almost priapically thrusting out tense thumbs to tempt lone women or sad sack salesmen with fancy cravings. “Let’s take him,” Lo would often plead, rubbing her knees together in a way she had, as [...] some man my age and shoulder breadth, with the *face à claques* of an unemployed actor, walked backwards, practically in the path of our car. (159)

It is very tempting to read an anticipatory portrait of Kerouac’s peers in this description of the typical hitchhiker as repeatedly seen on the side of the highway, who appears as a threat to Humbert’s easily-wounded masculinity. An old-fashioned European male, Humbert does not believe in male bonding as a way to escape social constraints. What *Rabbit, Run* and *Lolita* share, on either side of the publication of *On the Road*, is the lack of destination of their respective road quests on the one hand, and the solitude of their drivers on the other.

Conclusion

Beyond the considerations of stylistic and cultural cachet which most comparisons of Nabokov, Kerouac, and Updike's works have tended to focus on, the question of the primacy of the road motif in *Lolita*, *On the Road*, and *Rabbit, Run* points to an implicit—and so far understudied—cultural dialogue over the moral problem of “heroic” individualism supported by access to independent mobility

Within this discussion, Primeau's thematic assessment of these three works of fiction overlooks the socially hopeful outlook in Updike and Nabokov's respective treatments of the road trip adventure. In both these cases, if the nihilist quest fails while the communities of the roadside thrive, the outshoot of society presented by the network of highway services is presented as potentially live and hopeful in that it negates the quest for pure individualism as the key to an authentic American experience. In both these scenarios the road trip fails, and the true experience of the country is missed out on, because of the protagonists' arrogance over the American community beyond the white male middle-class perspective.

More recently, Ann Brigham's reevaluation of *American Road Narratives* in literature and film notes that the cultural ubiquity of American mobility in the twentieth century has produced a near-automatic conflation of movement with freedom and escape which should be reassessed and questioned. Brigham observes that early twenty-first century expressions of automobility, on the contrary, have been sought and promoted as means of reconnecting with national identity in a post-9/11 political landscape. She argues that, in this context,

mobility is not a method of freeing oneself from space, society, or identity but instead the opposite—a mode of engagement. Indeed, the genre's significance emerges in its demonstration of the ways mobility both thrives on and tries to manage points of cultural and social conflict. (4)

Responding to “a range of road scholars and audiences [who] have celebrated the road as an unanchored space” over the twentieth century (6), Brigham points out that recreational travel trends since 2001 have echoed the “See America First” campaign in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in exemplifying a use of road travel as assimilation to, not escape from, the country. Aligning myself with her book's introductory observations, I would go on to suggest the failed road trips of postwar American fiction go to support this theory, in so far as the desire, expressed in *Lolita*, *On the Road*, and *Rabbit, Run*, to achieve autonomous movement on the road might have been illusory from the beginning.

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