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# Off the Road: Exploring Postcolonial Themes in the American Road Movie

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## **OFF THE ROAD**

### *Exploring Postcolonial Themes in the American Road Movie*

“Road movies are too cool to address serious socio-political issues. Instead, they express the fury and suffering at the extremities of a civilized life, and give their restless protagonists the false hope of a one-way ticket to nowhere.”

–*Michael Atkinson, quoted in “The Road Movie Book” (1).*

“This is gonna be exactly like *Eurotrip*, except it’s not gonna suck.”

–*Kumar Patel, “Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay”*

## **Off the Road: *Exploring Postcolonial Themes in the American Road Movie***

**Abstract:** *This essay explores the colonial nature of the American road movie, specifically through the lens of how road movies treat the South according to Stuart Hall's concepts of identity and Edward Said's on Othering and the colonial gaze. To accomplish this, the essay analyzes the classic 1969 road movie, "Easy Rider", and the more contemporary parody from 2008, "Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay." The thrust of this paper becomes: if a progressive parody of road movies cannot escape the trappings of colonialism "Easy Rider" displays, perhaps the road movie itself is flawed.*

**Key Words:** *Road Movie, Frontierism, Gaze of the Other, Postcolonialism, Edward Said, Easy Rider, Harold and Kumar*

What is an American road movie? No one can seem to agree on the exact definition, but there are a few similarities that seem to appear in every film that critics, academics, and the American public have interred in the canon. First, the film must follow roughly two to four Americans travelling either through America or abroad with the intent of reaching a destination, usually within a certain timeframe; for instance, New Orleans by Mardi Gras in *Easy Rider*. Second, the movie must be more about the journey than the destinations on either end. Third, our travellers must be simultaneously alienated from and fanatically despised by culture as a whole, though not by the audience. Essentially, this mean they must engage in coiunculture. These elements are often bent and rarely broken when it comes to the road movie, but there is one phenomenon left unaccounted for.

In almost every single road movie, our travellers either confront violently or in rare cases are accepted by the people who live in the strange lands they travel

through. This essay constitutes an investigation into these particular interactions, as well as the world of Othering that occurs inherently in the nature of the road movie.

Boiled down to its simplest elements, this essay aims to prove that the road movie is a flawed failure of an imperialistic and archaic institution that “demonizes” specifically those outside of the city as violent and simple people even as it claims to create freedom (Klinger, 192). To accomplish this goal, I will analyze two classic road films: *Easy Rider* and *Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay*.

On the surface, there could not be two more different road movies. *Easy Rider* (1969), considered by many to be the first countercultural road movie, tracks the progress of two motorcyclists, Wyatt (Peter Fonda) and Billy (Dennis Hopper), on their way from Los Angeles to Florida by way of Mardi Gras. Along the way, they encounter delightful slices of Americana, varying from a commune full of failed hippies to a small-town parade to a rural diner. Often hailed as a classic<sup>1</sup> by critics and audiences alike, *Easy Rider* is undoubtedly part of the mainstream American canon (RottenTomatoes.com). In order to have a more contemporary opinion on the road movie from the fringes, I will transition to *Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay*,<sup>2</sup> an absurdist stoner comedy from 2008 tracking an Asian man, Harold (John Cho) and an Indian man, Kumar (Kal Penn) as they travel from Guantanamo Bay to disrupt a wedding in central Texas. Though some would claim that *Escape* is nothing more than a pastiche of the road movie, I will make the claim that it is not only one of the most progressive road movies ever made but also aims to rewrite the troubled history of the genre. However, because *Harold and Kumar* is

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<sup>1</sup> The film is “88% Fresh” on Rotten Tomatoes, if that means anything (RottenTomatoes.com).

<sup>2</sup> For brevity, I’ll be using just *Escape* in lieu of the full title from here on out.

unable to overcome certain colonial structures nearly 40 years later, I will argue that the road movie is imperialistic not because of its content, but because of its inherent structure.

### **How the West Was Won: A History, In Theory**

To continue my trend of simplification and generalization, a road movie's heroes are most commonly two hip white men from the city, a characterization pioneered<sup>3</sup> by the two hippie bikers bound for Florida in Dennis Hopper's 1969 *Easy Rider*. Underrepresented demographics (i.e. women, minorities, and the LGBTQ+ community) wishing to enter the genre began to "recycle certain tropes [of the road movie] in order to highlight the difference between a new type of protagonists and [their] predecessors" in the 1990s (Mills, 6). These tropes include a cross-country road trip, drug-induced shenanigans, and a popular compiled score. Katie Mills contends that these alternative films successfully "debunk" the "patriarchal baggage" of the road movie by having differently cultured individuals go through the same mechanisms of travel (Mills, 11). However, though the faces on the cars, bikes and busses<sup>4</sup> have changed, the effects have not.

Every character on the road ostensibly has total free reign over their physical travel, or at least until they run out of gasoline. Mills calls it the "the raw exuberance of automobility" (Mills, 15), while Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark contend that Jean Baudrillard's association of "American culture with 'space, speed, cinema,

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<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, Kerouac's *On the Road* and Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*, among other countercultural works of the period, influenced Hopper's themes. And the origins of the buddy road narrative go all the way back to Gilgamesh.

<sup>4</sup> This being an obtuse reference to Spike Lee's *Get on the Bus* (1996).

technology' ... could just as well be describing the characteristic features of a road movie" (Cohan & Hark, 1). Put more simply, the road movie *is* the American Dream. Because they are freed from homes, road movie characters are generally portrayed as more progressive than most of society, often entering into counterculture.

This filmic freedom is similar to the character of the Exile in diasporic cinema, as both are wandering far from where they call home. In his essay, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall argues that "the inner expropriation of cultural identity cripples and deforms", thus creating "individuals without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless, rootless—a race of angels" (Hall, 395) who "can't literally go home again" (399). Though Hall's subject (1990s Afro-Caribbean third cinema) is vastly different from American road movies, I contend that *the promises they make are the same*: both genres seek to create an enlightened, exilic traveller who transfixes the audience with the "perverse palimpsest<sup>5</sup>" that comes with an explorer's lifestyle (Hall, 400). For example, when *Easy Rider's* Wyatt "went looking for America and couldn't find it anywhere"<sup>6</sup>, he is positioned as someone searching fruitlessly and similarly unable to "go home again" (Hall, 399). And yet, while exilic road movies often focus on exploring what oppresses the travellers, the American road movie has tunnel vision on how their characters are incompatible with the people whose lands they move through.

Before the 1960s, "the majority of road movies... more successfully imagined an ultimate reintegration of road travelers into the dominant culture" (Cohan & Hark, 5). Following the success of *Easy Rider's* loose narrative and looser

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<sup>5</sup> I'm using this word to mean "rewriting of a familiar personality type."

<sup>6</sup> The film's tagline.

protagonists, the road movie became fraught with anarchic routes, with an emphasis on self-discovery. As can be expected of countercultural movements, the dominant culture responds negatively in the films. Usually, this is through brutish violence or hateful words performed on the protagonists, either by police forces (*Thelma and Louise*, *Badlands*, etc.) or by private citizens (*Easy Rider*, *Deliverance*, etc.) Portrayals of “rebels, outlaws, and by extension, the counterculture as a whole, as victims... extinguished by the straight world” grew to be the norm, transforming kids on the road into anti-heroic martyrs (Biskind, 74). For the first time since *Rebel Without a Cause*, it was hip to be young, misunderstood, and dead.

However, a close reading of road movies reveals a truth that is both terrible and unsurprising: people from outside the privileged bosom of the city perform every single act of violence. How can it be that driving barely outside the citadel’s gates opens relatively harmless hippies up to random hate, and is it possible that the only actions certain poor citizens have is violence? I would argue that the inherent structure of the road movie has created an essentialized image of small towns as the primary source of xenophobic violence.

Elayne Rapping finds a similar trend in one-sided portrayals of the urban poor in the reality show *Cops*. Because the show’s “villains” are shown only when they are being arrested or otherwise interrogated by the heroic peacekeepers, “they are incorrigibly ‘other’ and ‘alien,’ incapable of internalizing or abiding by the norms and values [of society]” (Rapping, 217). Furthermore, Rapping suggests that such images do not present “a context that might explain their deplorable state of life or suggest ways to remedy it... these people [are presented] as alien, depraved, and

inferior” (229). Road movies create a similar phenomenon by unilaterally portraying small towns as what Edward Said would call “Other”, though the trend is not unique.

In his *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said asserts that America was founded on “a commitment... which, on the one hand, allowed decent men and women to accept the notion that distant territories and their native peoples *should* be subjugated, and, on the other, replenished metropolitan energies so that these decent people could think of the *imperium* as a protracted, almost metaphysical obligation to rule subordinate, inferior or less advanced peoples” (Said, 10). If we remove the intercontinental distance in “distant”, Said’s assertion becomes eerily similar to the philosophy of Manifest Destiny. Almost every traveler in a road movie comes from the city, so travellers that accept the notion of “imperium” and apply subjugation to the “native peoples” in the areas they travel through become active participants in a form of domestic colonialism.

And so we have the perfect storm: travellers from the city are not only exiles seeking to free themselves, but also missionaries waiting to be gunned down by ignorant villagers. By various portrayals and stylistic choices, road movies create what I will call “Landscapes of Brutality.” These Landscapes are positioned between the beginning of the journey and the desired final destination, and are demarcated as unimportant because they are neither here nor there, and are thus undesirable to stay in. In these Landscapes, violence and ignorance are not only the norm, but *the accepted law of the land*. And nothing proves their existence better than *Easy Rider’s* South.

**“This Used to Be a Helluva Good Country”**

When Wyatt abandons his wristwatch<sup>7</sup> near the beginning of *Easy Rider*, he is symbolically<sup>8</sup> leaving behind the norms of measured society as a whole. As the camera tracks into a static extreme wide shot of the California landscape, we see the bikers ride away into the dusty smoggy sun setting over the mountains like cowboys at the end of the film. Many elements, from the character names<sup>9</sup> to the desert atmosphere, align the film with common images of the Western. An apt comparison, considering the particular Cold War climate of counterculture in the Western:

“The articulation of these various elements—cultural consensus, government, youth, and gender—reveals in [Cold War Westerns] a growing discomfort with American cultural norms, ambiguity about moral action, and increasing doubt that moral action is possible within the American community” (O’Connor and Rollins, 177).

Because the watch abandonment is juxtaposed directly against a lengthy montage emphasizing Wyatt’s American flag-covered bike and body, Dennis Hopper makes a bold claim that lasts the rest of the film: to be American is to be free from society, which is to ride into the Frontier. Returning to postcolonial theory, we can see that Hopper’s thought process is not entirely unique. “The *production* of identity [is] not grounded in the archaeology, but in the *re-telling* of the past” writes Hall (Hall, 393), while Said chips in that “appeals to the past are the commonest of

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<sup>7</sup> Were I a bolder writer, I might claim some obvious ties between the conclusion of *For a Few Dollars More* (1965) and this beginning: the watch symbolizing domesticity, a young gunfighter coming into his fortune, and the choice between the two. If Peter Fonda and Clint Eastwood are on the same character continuum, he’s even more a cowboy than I thought.

<sup>8</sup> Some of the symbolism in the film is obvious to the point of insult. Patience, dear reader.

<sup>9</sup> “Wyatt” is based on Tombstone’s famous lawman, while “Billy” is short for “Billy the Kid”, according to the 1999 documentary *Easy Rider: Shaking the Cage* (Kiselyak).

strategies in interpretations of the present” (Said, 3). Hopper’s methodologies for reinforcing his claim are ingeniously simple, and can be broken down into three different types of scene: travel montages, encounters, and campfire stories.

*Play Me Some Steppenwolf*

*Easy Rider* is instantly appealing on the merit of Lázlo Kovács’ cinematography alone, especially in the wide panoramas of natural spaces full of life. In the opening credits, we see Wyatt and Billy riding east out of California and the hulking metropolis that is Los Angeles, directly illustrated by the last remnant of a desert town disappearing behind our riders in one shot. As the bikers travel farther inland, their surroundings grow more lush and full of water, an unmistakable<sup>10</sup> sign of the natural life and vitality missing in Los Angeles. The musical accompaniment, Steppenwolf’s *Born to Be Wild*, is perhaps the most identifiable piece in the film, and underlines that our bikers are “like a true nature’s child” (Bonfire). *Easy Rider*’s soundtrack is one of the first compiled<sup>11</sup> scores to appear in mainstream media, featuring the iconic countercultural sounds of The Seeds, The Electric Prunes, and Jefferson Airplane, among others. According to David Shunway, these music choices do not create a sense of nostalgia, as is typical with comparable scores<sup>12</sup> of the time, but rather a “strong sense of generational identity” (Shunway, 38).

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<sup>10</sup> We are even given a shot of the “Colorado River” signpost to pound the point home. Rivers have traditionally been “the root of all life” in literature and storytelling according to scholar T.S. McMillin (McMillin, xii).

<sup>11</sup> “Compiled” used here as it is in Anahid Kassabian’s *Hearing Music* to mean music the audience already knows as a cultural work (Kassabian, 49).

<sup>12</sup> Primarily, Mike Nichols’s *The Graduate*.

Though the majority of these montages take place while the bikers are on their metal steeds, there is one notable sequence that does not involve the bikes at all. Shortly after arriving at the commune, Wyatt, Billy, and two hippie women go skinny-dipping in a nearby river. A bike ride is heavily implied, but the suture itself is simply a hard cut from the commune's patriarch performing martial arts<sup>13</sup> broodingly outside the walls to the happy pair of couples loping along the riverside as The Byrds's *Wasn't Born to Follow* plays. The four travellers swim together in an isolated alcove, alternating between innocent splashing and casual foreplay indicative of the love generation's sexual openness. Compared to this independence, the structure of the commune seems positively puritanical. These two destinations are relatively close geographically, but the commune is demarcated as a place to "make a stand" and grow crops while the river is a place to be free for those who were not "born to follow" (Hopper). Though their hippie hearts are in the right place, the commune dwellers have still decided to settle down and thus have abandoned the Frontier spirit Wyatt and Billy treasure so much. Ill at ease, Wyatt's final line upon his return to the commune takes on an urgency atypical to his character: "I just gotta go" (Hopper).

Anything that creates a sense of identification must, by nature, render the opposite side "Other." While the hippies at the commune are relatively spared from judgment, other rural citizens who are less hip do not receive anything near the benefit of the doubt. Shortly after small-town alcoholic and ACLU lawyer George Hansen (Jack Nicholson) joins the trip to Mardi Gras, the caravan heads into a more

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<sup>13</sup> Because members of the commune quote from the I-Ching at length, it's not unreasonable to assume that this may be Tai Chi.

populated area for a pit stop. This particular day's travels are accompanied by two incredibly polarizing counterculture songs: *Don't Bogart That Joint* by Fraternity of Man and *If 6 Was 9* by Jimi Hendrix. But while *Don't Bogart's* playful, lilting melody takes us through farmland primarily devoid of people, Jimi Hendrix's experimentally driving anthem cuts in with anxiety-provoking images of modernization, like steel bridges and power lines. While the song continues, the film reenters a point of view structure passing Black families on the porches of their broken-down shanties. The lyrics split off here again to create a subtle tension between the hippies and the world of the rural Black families, as represented by Jimi Hendrix<sup>14</sup>: "If all the hippies cut off all their hair/ I don't care, I don't care/ Dig, 'cos I got my own world to live through" (Hendrix). In this moment, we are complicit not only in the counterculture of the traveller, but also implicitly in an imperialistic and condescending gaze originating on the bikes.

### *Cowboys and Indians*

What happens when the travellers and the "natives" encounter each other face to face? Perhaps the most famous example of country bumpkin ignorance comes in the infamous diner scene. Fresh off the road, our travellers walk into a diner with the sole desire of eating food and minding their own business. Before the weary wanderers can even take their seat, someone loudly calls them out as "troublemakers" (Hopper). Over the next several minutes, the locals rain down not-

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<sup>14</sup> Yes, I recognize Hendrix was a hippie in his own right. But since he was also a prominent Black man, I think the point is valid.

so-passive insults that are alternately racist, homophobic,<sup>15</sup> misogynistic, and otherwise offensive<sup>16</sup> especially to the love generation, the film's intended audience. Surely one remark would have been enough to suffice, but Hopper broods on this scene for nearly *four minutes* as the travellers are refused service and the ignorant villagers bombard them with hateful epithets. Even more troubling is the sheriff's deputy's presence as an instigator who claims that they "might have to bring [the bikers] up to the Hilton<sup>17</sup> before it's all over with" (Hopper). George dismisses the lines as ignorant "country witticisms", but having an officer of the peace who is not only complicit in hatred but actively acknowledging that they "won't make the parish<sup>18</sup> line" is a direct demonstration of a Landscape of Brutality gone too far. In this part of the country, even the police are against outsiders.

There are exceptions to these hyper-masculine encounters, but they troubling in their own right. Intercut with insults in the diner are whispers among a young group of women attracted to the bikers. To the bikers (and thus to us) they exist in the film as nothing more than "poontang", are characterized solely by their attraction to the bikers, and are to the locals nothing more than another form of possession. When these same men later kill George in cold blood, it seems to be more in retaliation for trying to steal their women than any other marginal offense. While it is easy to suggest the sequence occurs the way it does because *Easy Rider* is a misogynistic film, we need only to turn to the prostitutes later in the film to

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<sup>15</sup> Admittedly, the man who saw two male bikers "just kissing away" may be referencing the popular practice of Hell's Angels kissing, not a gay couple.

<sup>16</sup> A few choice lines: "I'd love to mate him up with one of those black wenches out there", "I think she's cute" referring to Hopper, "I thought most jails were built for humanity, and that won't quite qualify" and a veiled Civil War reference to "Yankee queers" (Hopper).

<sup>17</sup> i.e. Jail.

<sup>18</sup> This being in Louisiana, where the state is divided into parishes instead of counties.

disprove blatant ignorance. While the end goal<sup>19</sup> here is the same, the setting is entirely different because the prostitutes are from the big city of New Orleans. Hired for sexual services, the two instead play a key part in countercultural intellectual expansion through hallucinogens<sup>20</sup> in the most abstract portion of the film. The argument seems like a stretch until we consider that the only other fleshed-out women in the film are shown in the commune, which is full of self-proclaimed “city kids” (Hopper). Thus, the rural women are shown as dumb objects owned by the backwards hillbillies and capable only of desire towards the refined city folk.

*Easy Rider* also contains an unusual reference to agrarian society early in the film. A flat tire prompts the bikers to pull into a barn along the path, where they deal with the flat tire in abrasive juxtaposition with a farmer putting a new shoe on his horse. The symbolism is clear: they have entered a world of the past, but that does not mean the two worlds are much different thematically. The dinner that follows with the farmer’s family has a refreshingly wholesome tinge, down to Billy removing his ridiculous cowboy hat for grace. As the bikers discuss their Los Angeles origins, the farmer says that he was going<sup>21</sup> to make it to California once too, “but, well, you know how it is” (Hopper). Later in the conversation, Wyatt speaks perhaps the most condescending line of the film: “You’ve got a nice place. It’s not every man that can live off the land, you know. You do your own thing in your own time. You should be

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<sup>19</sup> Though neither instance seems particularly insistent on actual sex acts, both are heavily shrouded in the imagery of desire.

<sup>20</sup> a.k.a. They are the men’s acid trip buddies.

<sup>21</sup> Starting multiple times fruitlessly seems typical of rural people in *Easy Rider*. Even George never made it to Mardi Gras despite his numerous attempts. Everyone seems unable to escape the Landscapes they live in despite a constant desire to. Hopper’s bias seems to be that no one can live without wanting to pick up their rucksack and hit the road at one point. Apparently, though, only denizens of the city are able to Go.

proud” (Hopper). Admittedly, the words themselves are technically praiseful of the farmer, but the demeanor in which he says them is the same as a teacher giving a preschooler a gold star. Roger Ebert troubles this particular line in his revisit of the film in 2004: “The rancher, who might understandably have replied, ‘Who the hell asked you?’ nods gratefully” (Ebert). By having the humble farmer accept the underhanded praise with gratitude, Hopper is showing the only alternative to Brutality is obedience to the clearly superior forces of civilization.

### *Campfire Songs*

In their rare human moments, our riders stop every night to sleep by the campfire. As a respite from encounters, the campfire serves as a place for reflection and meaning making, for both our characters and the film’s audience. There are five of these scenes across the course of the film, and each one introduces a new element to the film. The one commonality between all of these scenes is that they are all intended as a form of education: at every campfire, the hippies teach someone something. I will be particularly analyzing the first, fourth, and final fires because they most clearly state the film’s theorem.

The first campfire’s most interesting moment occurs before the flames are even lit, far away at a roadside motel. The “Vacancy “ sign lights up as Hopper screams, “Hey man, you got a room?” over the noise<sup>22</sup> of his bike. Once the

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<sup>22</sup> The noise of engines throughout *Easy Rider* signifies what ethnographer Dag Balkmar would call the connection between “horsepower... masculinity and [the] powerful car” (Balkmar, 190). She goes on to write that vehicles are “desirable by reference to their ‘manly sound’”, a claim Hopper would be inclined to agree with: Hopper and Fonda’s combined masculinity is simply too much for the poor villager (190).

proprietor comes out and lays eyes on the road-weary duo, he quickly returns inside to illuminate the “No” (Hopper). Though they do turn and call him an “asshole”, the two seem used to being left homeless for the night. Instead of showing the cold desert where they surely must be camping in the middle of February,<sup>23</sup> the film shows them sitting with shirts slit far down their chests around a sparse campfire next to a wrecked car discussing the “Mardi Gras queen” and “groovy dinner” waiting for them in the big city (Hopper). Pauline Kael’s original review of the film put this strange portrayal in perspective: “[*Easy Rider*’s] sentimental paranoia obviously rang true to a large, young audience’s vision. In the late ‘60s, it was cool to feel that you couldn’t win, that everything was rigged and hopeless” (Kael). By establishing our heroes as both rejected and impervious, the film’s first campfire is the hippies’ way of teaching the audience that rejection by backwater motels actually makes them cooler. Unfortunately, the motel in question becomes a site of active antagonism, and thus is itself less civilized.

*Easy Rider*’s fourth campground is home to two of the most famously quoted lines in the film, and is the scene that really cemented Jack Nicholson in the minds of the critics. Set this time in the swamp of Louisiana, the first line of dialogue comes as George stares into the fire: “this used to be a helluva good country. I can’t understand what’s gone wrong with it” (Hopper). Billy takes a drag off the joint and responds with what we have all been thinking: “Hey, we can't even get into like, uh, second-rate hotel, I mean, a second-rate motel. You dig? They think we're gonna cut their throat or something, man. They're scared, man” (Hopper). This small moment

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<sup>23</sup> We don’t know the exact date, but we do know it is right before Mardi Gras, which was on February 18<sup>th</sup> in 1969.

may not seem a lot, but it is the closest Billy gets to trying to understand the motives of the people whose lands he is travelling through on a humanistic level. When confronted with dirty, smelly strangers, a natural reaction is fear until later explanation. Yes, it is a closed-minded response, but a logical one nonetheless.

However, the filmmakers immediately dismiss this moment by proclaiming that the riders are, in fact, American freedom embodied. The reason the small-minded folks fear them is, according to George, because they are truly free:

“Talkin' about [freedom] and bein' it - that's two different things. I mean, it's real hard to be free when you are bought and sold in the marketplace. 'Course, don't ever tell anybody that they're not free 'cause then they're gonna get real busy killin' and maimin' to prove to you that they are. Oh yeah, they're gonna talk to you, and talk to you, and talk to you about individual freedom, but they see a free individual, it's gonna scare 'em” (Hopper).

The austere<sup>24</sup> lesson taught here could not be clearer: if you discuss what freedom means to you with people in the mainstream capitalist materialist society, they will annihilate you out of xenophobic hate. In his sardonic review for the New York Times, Vincent Canby noted this relates to “the threat that people like the nonconforming Wyatt and Billy represent to the ordinary, self-righteous, inhibited folk that are the Real America. Wyatt and Billy, says the lawyer, represent freedom; ergo, says the film, they must be destroyed” (Canby). Flawed though it is, Hopper drives the point home by having a gang of rednecks from the local town beat the bikers while they are sleeping, resulting in George’s death. These people in their Brutal outlands are to be regarded as demons just as much as Custer’s Indians were.

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<sup>24</sup> Vincent Canby called the monologue a “Statement (upper case)” (Canby).

The final campfire is one of the most contested scenes in the film's entire runtime, and it all stems from one line: "We blew it" (Hopper). Uttered by Wyatt immediately after Billy's verbal victory lap at having made it to the final night of their journey, the line becomes a ubiquitous generational statement, to the point that not even Wyatt can define it. Fonda and his overly serious gang of filmmakers meant it as the final moment in an odyssey across the South, a staunch<sup>25</sup> notation that by becoming obsessed with their money and paradise these hippies, emblematic of an entire generation, became doomed. Peace and love is simply not realistic in certain parts of the world. It would seem that this final scene is a warning to all the kids in the audience: stay away from Landscapes of Brutality, lest you be lost like these poor young fellows.

### *The Final Frontier*

Where exactly should we land on *Easy Rider*? On the one hand, the film is a fumbling masterpiece that defined a generation identifying through their lack of identity, and should thus be respected as a cultural artifact. However, one could say that films such as *The Birth of a Nation* or *The Jazz Singer* defined other generations. Perhaps scholar Barbara Klinger put it the best in her extensively researched essay on *Easy Rider* as a text and cultural phenomenon:

"[*Easy Rider*] generated substantial debate, [and] critics from the alternative and mainstream presses alike generally saw it as a spectacular document of its times that effectively represented the hippie ethos as well as the serious rifts between counter- and dominant cultures" (179).

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<sup>25</sup> In 2015, the line plays unfortunately like a bad joke. Ebert spares only one word: "Heavy." (Ebert).

So, no, we cannot write *Easy Rider* off as a bad movie in a vacuum, nor should we. Because of its popularity and acclaim, the film cemented the norms of what a road movie on the American frontier is: city boys versus the unwashed hordes.

To begin at the end, my entire argument becomes predicated on one simple statement from Klinger when she analyzes the final scene. Seemingly out of nowhere, two rednecks pull up alongside the riders in a pick-up truck, intent on “[scaring] the hell out of them” with a brandished shotgun (Hopper). When Billy returns their greeting with his middle finger, the man with the gun pulls his trigger. After a sufficient reaction from Wyatt, we rejoin the rednecks in their cab. Seemingly unperturbed, the shooter says, “We’d better go back” so that we can believe for a second that they want to return and take moral responsibility for what was clearly an accident (Hopper). Instead, the men return to destroy, gunning down Wyatt and his bike as well. Amidst praise of *Easy Rider* and the context of the genre as a whole, Klinger manages to slip in one beguiling string of sentences: “[In *Easy Rider*,] not only is the West<sup>26</sup> idealized, but the South is demonized. *Easy Rider*’s South bears the burden for all of civilization’s maladies, including small-town racial prejudice, xenophobia, and the negative effects of modernization, urbanization, and industrial growth” (192). Though Klinger immediately moves on, I believe she has reached the crux of what is the road movie’s particular sin: not only does the structure situate alien, Othered Landscapes of Brutality and peoples as fundamentally against travellers from the city, but it also *geographically defines them on a map*. *Easy Rider* points a finger at small towns in the American South, and all of its ilk follow suit.

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<sup>26</sup> Note the capitalization; Klinger discusses the Frontier from the same classic perspective as mine.

### **Beyond White Castle**

Though the 1990s were checkered with progressive road movies (*Thelma and Louise*, *Get on the Bus*, *Natural Born Killers*, etc.), 2004 played host to the surprisingly well-received<sup>27</sup> *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*. Critics who were not easily offended recognized that “behind all the Farrelly-esque gross-out humour and Cheech & Chong-isms lies a sensitive little picture with a deftly handled anti-racism slant” (Adams). Like its sequel, the movie tracks Harold and Kumar, though this time as they travel to the fast food chain White Castle to take care of a serious case of the munchies. Because of the film’s great critical and financial success, a sequel was in order: *Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay*.

#### *Parody Matters*

Before we go any further, I must elucidate why I consider a silly stoner flick such an important film to the American road movie. Simply put, the *Harold and Kumar* series is a statement that Asian and Indian men too can have their own identities and adventures on the road. Were the movies just about them travelling on their own free of interference, it would still be considered a progressive road movie. However, both films in the series actively highlight our characters overcoming issues of racism, though admittedly the second film is more focused to this end. A quick look at the titles shows us the progression of ideology in the films. While the road trip to White Castle revels in its “exuberance of automobility”,

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<sup>27</sup> 74% Fresh on Rotten Tomatoes (RottenTomatoes.com).

sprinkling in racist cops and a gang of redneck reprobates along the way, the second film is framed entirely around an “escape” from absurdly evil agents of the Federal Government who confront them at every turn (Mills, 15). Katie Mills would note that their persecution is actually repurposed from *Easy Rider*’s obsession with being the outcast “in order to highlight the differences in identity between a new type of protagonists and [their] predecessors, or to exploit their similarities” (Mills, 6). Thus, a new dimension of social commentary is added.

And yet, media scholars would be skeptical to include a film featuring a graphically sexual fantasy between a couple and their human-sized bag of marijuana in the canon.<sup>28</sup> Dan Harries touches on this trend in his *Film Parody*, which claims that “many theorists of parody... seem reluctant to give any credence to the proposition that parody is itself a canonical process, thus reducing parody to a formless, random assault on established codes and conventions” (Harries, 7). The critical bias is no doubt based on the success of nonsensical films like *Austin Powers*, which I would deem is closer to pastiche, and less so on legitimate social commentaries such as those found in films like *Blazing Saddles*. The key difference between these two types of film is simple: “parody deconstructs, pastiche reconstructs” (Harries, 31). So while there are moments when a bag of marijuana has sex, there are also times that address the unspeakable acts happening in Guantanamo Bay, or a meeting of the KKK. Perhaps this sort of alternative road film is exactly what America needs to exorcise archaic fossils like *Easy Rider* with their colonial myths of the white frontier. For indeed, parody’s “reworkings affect not

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<sup>28</sup> Take a look at that sentence again. If you feel a need to take *Harold and Kumar* less seriously based on that scene, you’ve proven my point.

only the viewing of previous textual systems but also the construction and viewing of future related canonical films” (Harries, 7).

And yet, upon closer examination of Harold and Kumar’s journey, we can point out a few key points where it is no better than *Easy Rider* to the people met on the road. Particularly, I will be examining the Guantanamo Bay jailer “Big Bob” (Randal Reeder), the high-powered government agent Ron Fox<sup>29</sup> (Rob Corddry), and a fictionalization of President<sup>30</sup> George W. Bush (James Adomian).

### *Just Don’t Try the Cockmeat Sandwich*

If there is a central thesis to *Escape*, it is that America’s military went overboard with the War on Terror. When Kumar pulls out a bong in an airplane bathroom, an elderly woman with a significant racial prejudice<sup>31</sup> alerts air marshals who detain both travellers. In the subsequent interrogation session, Ron Fox announces that Harold and Kumar are going to a place where “they have never even heard of rights”: Guantanamo Bay (Hurwitz). Upon arrival, Harold and Kumar are confronted with their new captor, “Big Bob”, who begins to force the pair to fellate<sup>32</sup> him. Though the assault is never completed, we must pause for a moment and consider the situation. Why does the one guard with a significant speaking role have to look like he walked off of the set of *Duck Dynasty*, beard and all? Why must he use the words “ain’t nothing gay about getting your dick sucked” before calling the pair

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<sup>29</sup> Perhaps a jibe at Fox News, though who can be sure at this point.

<sup>30</sup> Bush was in the final days of his presidency at the time of the film’s April 2008 release.

<sup>31</sup> Manifested through a hallucination of Kumar with a full-length beard and turban.

<sup>32</sup> Inarguably, *Harold and Kumar* is homophobic; making gay prison rape a humorous analogue for torture is one of the most tasteless moments I’ve seen in recent memory. I have the feeling that waterboarding scenes would not have tested well with audiences, but still.

“fags”, and why does he have no mercy on them whatsoever? At this point, the filmmakers knew there were federally sanctioned atrocities<sup>33</sup> occurring within Cuban walls, and Amnesty International had already called it “the Gulag of our times” (Kahn). But instead of directing the blame towards the government as a whole, the filmmakers create a Landscape of Brutality filled with uneducated and hateful “Big Bob” types; after all, not even Ron Fox knows what goes on in this land. The scene begins to “rhyme” more and more with that diner Wyatt, Billy and George escaped. Thus, the film’s target shifts from the government to the stereotypically uneducated private citizen, albeit one in a position of immediate physical authority.

*Phantasmagoric Mr. Fox*

While Harold and Kumar complete their escape and get back on the road,<sup>34</sup> their trail is continually marked by the incomprehensible figure of Ron Fox. Standing in for Secretary Whitmore during his “ice fishing trip to Glacier Bay”, Fox is as blatantly racist as one man can possibly be. At one point, Fox and his group of cronies interrogate a Black man in the heart of a Black neighborhood in Birmingham, Alabama. Previously, the film had subverted standard depictions of urban neighborhoods<sup>35</sup> by having Harold and Kumar run away from a group of Black men who turned out to have no ill<sup>36</sup> intentions. Showing the somewhat progressive travellers flee like racists allows us all a moment to learn, reflect, and

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<sup>33</sup> Though, admittedly, they may not have known about the infamous “Torture Memo”, whose controversy only came to the mainstream in 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Through a truly bizarre series of events involving Cuban refugees, an old college buddy in Miami, and a protracted display of genitalia. Really, go watch this film sometime.

<sup>35</sup> Read: Housing projects.

<sup>36</sup> In fact, they were offering to change the pair’s busted tire.

grow away from what we expected of rural Black men in a Hollywood movie; consider it the “deconstruction” parody necessitates. When Fox arrives, however, he plays into several more blatant, absurdist gestures. While the witness, a Black orthodontist, approaches, Fox pulls a gun on him. After they have established there is no threat, Fox proceeds to pour an entire grape soda on the asphalt in front of the community, yelling, “I’m not stopping until you crack!” (Hurwitz).

Fox’s perfect foil, then, is the NSA’s<sup>37</sup> good Dr. Beecher (Roger Bart), who stands as the voice of reason (Hurwitz). Though he does prevent the star witness from being shot in Birmingham, Beecher’s most important<sup>38</sup> contribution comes in another interrogation. Fox has apprehended Harold and Kumar’s respective parents, but his choice to have an incompetent Korean translator in the room and to call Kumar’s father both an Arab and “Chief”<sup>39</sup> shows again what he really is: a dumb, stupid racist. Beecher, on the other hand, simply speaks with the two thoroughly American couples about possible connections Harold and Kumar may have in Miami, and is rewarded with information that moves the investigation forward. Again, the power of an open mind and non-ignorance is shown to be superior to such closed-mindedness. What does it mean that only the educated man is intelligent enough to recognize immigrants as Americans too? There is no Landscape of Brutality here per se, but there is still the creation of Fox as a lone, rogue government agent who is evil simply because he is undereducated. And if that wasn’t enough...

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<sup>37</sup> This was before most of the public knew the NSA was abusing the Patriot Act, so forget the bias you have with that name.

<sup>38</sup> Aside from the final sequence, where Beecher sacrifices himself to save Harold and Kumar.

<sup>39</sup> After the man announces he is not Arab, but Indian. A subtle joke, blink and you’ll miss it.

*“A Village in Texas is Missing Its Idiot”*

Admittedly, being George W. Bush was not a popular<sup>40</sup> position in 2009, and portrayals of the man as an outright idiot were pervasive. So, when Harold and Kumar finally run across the then-president at the end of the film, audiences accepted that he was a beer-swilling simpleton evildoer. But when the trio retreat to Bush’s man cave to flee Dick Cheney and smoke marijuana, there is an entirely new transformation that takes place. The small room is decked out with things you might find in a frat house, up to and including a dartboard with Osama Bin Laden’s face in the bullseye. These surroundings, complimented by Bush’s use of phrases like “terrorizer” in place of “terrorist” and “Mitsubishi-wa” in place of “konnichiwa”,<sup>41</sup> become endearing because he is able to relax<sup>42</sup> and light up<sup>43</sup> with the travellers; he doesn’t mean what he says, but is just a kid along for the joke. In fact, George W. becomes a strange shade of *Easy Rider*’s George, an outsider desperate to get to the inside. When asked why he doesn’t just legalize marijuana, Bush responds, “do you know how pissed my dad would be?” (Hurwitz). Egged on by his new friends, Bush finally calls and confronts his father:

“I don’t need your friends to tell me what to do anymore. [Pause.] No, I’m not being disrespectful. I’m just saying I can handle my own shit, alright? I don’t need them to tell me how to do what I have to do... Yeah, you know what? Fuck you, Dad. Fuck you!” (Hurwitz).

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<sup>40</sup> Remember, Bush had a 22% approval rating when he left office in 2009(CBSNews).

<sup>41</sup> Upon learning that Harold is of Korean descent.

<sup>42</sup> Music plays a key role in this as well. The filmmakers juxtapose cuts from the wedding’s classical music to the man cave’s soundtrack: Jimi Hendrix’s *Hey Joe*.

<sup>43</sup> As if this has not been clear, marijuana is the great equalizer in the countercultural road movie. *Easy Rider*’s George is only truly accepted after his introduction to the herb, and Bush is already shown to possess a certain stoner mindset. Other examples include the farmer earlier in *Escape*.

To me, this moment is as powerful an exorcism of a harmful culture, specifically the corporate strings of the Republican Party, as Wyatt dropping his watch, or Thelma and Louise taking to the outlaw's road.

And yet, do Harold and Kumar sympathize with their president or take advantage of him? Clearly, Bush is in a particularly vulnerable position if he feels the need to run away from his own houseguests, and regularly smokes joints "laced with a little blow" (Hurwitz). The answer is, Bush is simple in the same way that *Easy Rider's* humble farmer is. Though he is a good guy deep down, he is also a frightened child just learning to free himself, with a plaque on the wall from the American Public that reads, "Awe and Disbelief at Disservices Rendered" (Hurwitz). The reason he is this way is his other defining element: a thick, Texan drawl. As the only Texan we meet in the film, Bush's stupidity is mapped again to his geography.

### *Home On the Range*

One particular portrayal that I cannot quite decide on is a pivotal meeting made in the woods. Having just ditched their car in the middle of Alabama, Harold and Kumar run across a hunter who announces himself by slaughtering a deer all over Harold's face. When the pair is invited back to his cabin, a familiar pattern begins to emerge. A violent, psychotic, and stupid redneck with a decrepit shack house giving shelter to two city boys is about as common a story as it gets on the road, and Kumar acts his part as well. After complimenting the hunter's house, he quickly turns to Harold and whispers, "This place is gonna suck" (Hurwitz). From outside the dumpy longhouse, the audience is inclined to agree with Kumar, but

upon entering, all expectations are subverted. The hunter and his wife live in a spacious house decorated with an art-deco flair, smoke weed regularly, and generally exist just as one would in the city. Kumar immediately acknowledges the subversion of expectations, saying that he “always assumed... people from the South were kinda,” to which his host cuts him off with, “a bunch of dumb rednecks?” (Hurwitz). The characters play it off as a joke, but the moment of tension makes us aware that even progressive people like us can also use damaging stereotypes. With this in mind, the film’s message of universal tolerance and defied stereotypes becomes clearer.

Until, that is, the husband and wife reveal themselves as brother and sister, complete with a mutated inbred son who lives in the basement. The filmmakers try to explain it away with a simple line: “Raylene here and I are siblings, and we get it on. But that don’t mean we ought to be judged” (Hurwitz). There is a sense of pride in owning the identity of the redneck, and subversion transitioning to ownership is certainly a way of defying the negativity of certain stereotypes. That does not mean that we do not judge these simple farmers just as much as we will the KKK members just a few scenes later, but it appears to be a start. And we can hardly blame them for trying to even out such a fun little movie.

### **This is the End, My Greatest Friend<sup>44</sup>**

There is an old joke that simplifies the laws of thermodynamics into three easy parts: you can’t win, you can’t break even without changing the rules, and you

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<sup>44</sup> It truly pains me not to reference *Apocalypse Now* more in this paper.

can't change the rules. In my opinion, the American road movie is the same: you can't be completely actively progressive as a travel narrative, you can't even escape the lens of colonialism unless you cease to show occupied lands being travelled through, and if you do not go anywhere with people than you sure aren't a road movie. If this is all true, maybe it'd be better to just give up on the road movie, particularly considering its disproportionate effect on low-income people living off the road and especially those in the American South.

And yet, breaking down the road movie has given me the insight to know that making a road movie free of the same imperialistic colonial gaze is possible. *Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* is about as close to perfect as we have gotten so far<sup>45</sup> from Hollywood, especially considering how far we have come from *Easy Rider's* ignorant redneck murderers. But let me now challenge the three defining norms we began with.

First, the ideal road movie could still follow roughly two to four people travelling across the land, and could even delve into the beauty Lázlo Kovács brings to *Easy Rider*; colonialism is not inherent in the travel itself until people are encountered. Second, this movie could still be about the journey primarily, for that lens is internal; great road movies are loved because we are looking at how our heroes change along the course of the journey. Problems begin to arise with the third aspect of road movies. The first half of my claim that heroes "must be simultaneously alienated from and fanatically despised by culture as a whole" is

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<sup>45</sup> While I recognize that video artists on the fringes have been working on the same issues I have, I also haven't heard of any of their videos.

pretty problem free, for alienation is again a personal move. Being despised by culture and/or active in is also somewhat less troubling, for there are people who choose that as a form of identification. However, to also give representations of people in the mainstream that hate is to play into a Landscape of Brutality. And of course, needless to say, violent confrontation with these masses is the most troubling aspect of the genre.

It appears, then, that the “perfect” road movie would be one where non-denominational entities travel through lands, but more importantly where encounters<sup>46</sup> with the natives are filled with love or at least mutual respect, not hate, condescension, ignorance, and violence. I do not make the claim that this film would be an interesting movie, for it would contain much less conflict and less intrigue for us scholars to mull over. But from a postcolonial perspective, the “perfect” road movie is still waiting to be made.

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<sup>46</sup> And again let me stress that encounters are necessary; to show a place without portraying its people is hardly what I aim for.

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