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Route 666: A Guided Tour of American Road Trip Horror

Grace Fiser

1/20/23

This is an abridged version of my capstone project. I hope to publish it in entirety so I am only publishing the introduction and Chapter 4. I believe that these two sections adequately communicate what I am doing with this project and have a good deal of analysis in them.

Introduction: What Lurks In the American Borderlands

You're staring out the window on a stretch of road somewhere between Idaho and Montana. You can feel the heel of your hand pressing into your cheek. There will be a mark there when it comes away, sticky with sweat, but that's a problem for later. The novel you brought with you lies open but unread in your lap, your finger placed carelessly on the page you read over half an hour ago. You squint to blur your vision and the land rushes by in a chaotic flurry of beige, dust, scrub, and fenceposts, countless fenceposts, ticking by like a film reel turned up to double speed. You blink and your vision clears and the road is back, just like it always was. The hills roll out into the distance clear as crystal.

A dilapidated house moves into your line of sight and you find yourself fascinated by its sagging roof and sun-bleached walls. It's the only sign of humanity you've seen for miles. There's something disturbing about the way it crouches there by the roadside. As if it had crawled there as if the house's wooden frame were merely the shell of some great desert hermit crab scuttling over the hills and retreating beneath the shack whenever it heard the motor of a car coming down the tarmac. You crane your neck towards the corner of the window where you can see the dark shape retreating into the distance and almost imagine there are two curious eyestalks peeking out from under its roof checking to make sure the threat has passed. There's a large billboard advertising the services of some local chiropractors coming up on your left. A cartoon cricket crawls along the back of a smiling man whose skin is covered with needles. You

wrinkle your nose at the sight, you've never been a fan of needles or bugs for that matter.

There's a bright gas station with a statue of a man on horseback standing between it and the road. A man stands next to the statue with his thumb out. His brown coat is much too big for him and reaches almost to his ankles, his head is slumped into his neck almost like the roof of that old house. Your parents drive by without a second glance.

You look finally look back down at the book in your lap and find that you've completely forgotten what is going on and restart the chapter. When you look up again sometime later it feels as if you haven't moved at all. The scrubland still rolls steadily past without interruption and you sigh wondering just how long you've been driving, and how much longer it would be till you got to the motel. Before your cheek settles back into its groove underneath your cheekbone and your eyes droop closed, however, you are startled awake by something approaching outside the window. you start at something coming up in your window view. An old tumbledown house, the old tumbledown house. It's the same one you saw earlier you're not sure why but you'd bet your life on it. Down to the angle of the tilting wall, it is exactly the same. Weird. You shake it off. There's all sorts of old places like that in these hills, they all start to look the same after so long.

When the billboard with the grinning cricket passes by on the left again you start to get nervous. But hey, it's probably just a really big business out here making enough off of backaches and pulled muscles to plaster itself up and down the road. You get scared when you see the gas station coming up in the distance, the statue, the man with his thumb stuck out at the same angle as before there's no mistaking it. You blink once, hard, but when you open your eyes again he's still rushing up at you in the window standing completely still, not even his jacket moves in the Summer breeze. You pinch your arm and though you cringe with pain and your skin goes white and then red where you pinched it you do not wake up. You look towards the front seat and open your mouth to say something but the words dry up in your throat. The backs of your parent's heads are focused resolutely on the pavement in front of them. There's no sign that they've noticed anything strange at all.

You sit back in your seat as the gas station passes you by and try once more to distract yourself with your book, but the figure with his thumb stuck out swims in your vision. You look at your watch, only 2 minutes have passed since you saw that house for the first time. You look out the window and the empty window frames of that ruined house stare back at you like the empty eye sockets of a skull. The billboard is next. There's nothing remotely enticing about it now. There is terror in the man's frozen eyes and you can almost hear the scream coming from his smiling mouth as the sadistic insect scuttles across his back jabbing needles just where it will hurt the most. And finally, there he is, standing at sloppy attention next to the bronze cowboy. In the heat haze, it almost looks like there are more than two legs peeking out from under his brown duster. Your parents' heads still haven't moved and something in you knows that if you were to open your mouth to tell them the strange house, or the billboard or the hitchhiker they would continue to stare forward as the hills roll by over and over again.

Anyone whose driven on the American interstate highway system knows the trancelike state you can get into after a few hours of stationary movement. When you look at the same stretch of land for hours your mind starts to wander and warp it until it takes on an almost preternatural otherness. Road trips like that induce a kind of temporary insanity that begins when you fasten your seatbelt and ends when you step onto the carpeted floor of your motel room. When I was a child my father made it a goal to take a couple of days out of every Summer to visit one of America's national parks. Those days spent staring out the window at California and Oregon and as far as South Dakota one Summer¹ are some of the core memories of my childhood. It's difficult to describe the exact feeling of Road Trip Syndrome as I call it. It's somewhere between complete lethargy and profound restlessness that slows time to a crawl even as you fly over the road at 70 miles per hour. The world rushing by outside becomes unreal, separate from the bubble of reality inside your car. I wondered what magical

¹ After she'd finished reading us the *Little House on the Prairie* books, my mother wanted to visit every site that Laura Ingalls Wilder had lived at over the course of the series

dealings went on behind the doors of tumbledown farmhouses or what creatures prowled the hills just out of sight. Anything could be happening out there and I made games out of scaring myself silly over what horrors were hiding between the big cities. Admittedly I had quite the overactive imagination as a child,² but all the same, I am not the only person for which this Road Trip dimension holds some fascination.

Countless cultures going back to the birth of stories themselves have been telling tales of the great quests their heroes undertook through perilous and magical landscapes. The ancient Sumerians had *The Epic of Gilgamesh* the Greeks told of the travels of Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*. These days our questing myths look a little bit different. Our heroes travel on pavement. We worship such iconic journeys as Marion's drive in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* and the titular exploits of Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise*. This is the origin of what Joseph Campbell calls 'the hero's journey' one of the most common narrative structures to this day. The hero's journey follows its titular hero out of their comfort zone, into a series of trials, and into a conclusion that will usually result in some form of self-actualization and transformation of the hero.³ arguably the most well-known and common narrative structure is "the hero's journey" following its protagonist into a quest out of their comfort zone and into adventure and self-actualization. This structure fictionalizes the very real journey between adolescence and adulthood, often what we are really looking for is ourselves.⁴ However the world outside of ourselves, the one in between here and there can be a terrifying place. We understand here and we understand there, but the path in between rarely runs straight, it defies labels and understanding which sends us spiraling into confusion and speculation. It is no surprise, therefore, that the ultimate transitive system, the miles upon miles of roads stretching over the

² Quite frankly I still do

³ *Star Wars* and its hero Luke Skywalker is one of the most commonly brought up modern examples of this structure in practice, the story moves clearly from Luke's call to action to his rising action, climax, falling action and resolution

⁴ The power was inside you all along and all that

USA has become something of a mythological road into Mordor for those who read monsters into the mundane.

Uncertainty makes us vulnerable, makes us afraid. When we do not know what is around the next corner we cannot control it therefore we can be hurt. This is the origin of fear, the origin of horror, the terrible not knowing, or else the terrible certainty of powerlessness. The highway is made of corners we cannot see around, it is larger than we can imagine and we are intimately aware of the insignificance of our bodies in our cars driving along a vast eldritch landscape. We are claustrophobic in our metal boxes and agoraphobic under the bigness of the sky all at once. This vague sort of terror has taken many shapes in many minds over the years. Horror shifts its shape to fit the fears of its cultural moment and the horrors of the open road are no different. Road trip horror, as I have decided to call it holds a fascinating power over the American mind from the construction of the highways to today. For the sake of brevity and focus I will be defining the sub-genre as horror stories set on or in the corollaries of the American highway system. This is, of course, not a purely American phenomenon. Australia in particular has some fantastically chilling tales set in its vast outback. Borderlands are international as is the folklore surrounding them. However, there is a certain Americana nostalgic spirit attached to the phrase 'road trip' in American culture. It evokes a sense of manifest destiny and family vacations, the American dream, which makes the horror set in this cultural space so very very interesting in what they subvert.

The road-trip horror sub-genre has countless siblings within the horror family. One of its closest elder siblings is folk horror. This subgenre could be read as the original form of horror, built out of folk tales and legends leaking their way into our modern 'rational' minds.' The term, 'folk horror' was introduced in the early 1970s into British scholarship and was, for a while associated only with British folk horror although it is an international subgenre. Every culture has its boogymen and their ancient gods and monsters that threaten the sanctity of modernity and morality. Adam Scovell boils the large and unwieldy subgenre into a few key elements that he

calls the “folk horror chain.” The first link in this chain is landscape. The setting of folk horror is vital, it must be a monster in itself, a generator of stories and bad memories.⁵ The second link is isolation. The folk horror protagonist is often abandoned and alone in a vast space that is disconnected or fundamentally different from the world that character is used to.⁶ Then there is skewed belief systems or morality. The rules of morality will shift out in the wilderness, they are often anachronistic and brutal, an ‘old world’ violence rearing its head.⁷ Finally there is “the happening” or “summoning.” This is the inciting incident or goal of the plot that the protagonist is dropped into (Scovell, 15-19).⁸ Obviously the chain does not describe every piece of folk horror perfectly, however, it serves as an effective set of guidelines for identifying it. In modern America, our uncanny landscape is shot through with highways, and we spend hours driving that embodied countryside isolated in our vehicles. While there we return at least in thought to a time before skyscrapers and laptops and we imagine that the rules change the further away you get from the city. Folk horror is the clash of past and present and the reemergence of folklore into the rational present. The highway has become that anachronistic space for us and our modern legends of murderous hitchhikers, violent rural folks, and old gods of the earth.

Another of its close siblings is the American Gothic. Gothic and folk horror are close in themselves as they are both reliant on settings and the return of the repressed in some form or another. Gothic horror however is much more focused on the political and psychological repressions of the human mind. We are all familiar with the tropes and aesthetics of European gothic literature. Crumbling castles, mad monks, vampires in long black capes, and tortured souls wandering the moors. It is marked by motifs of imprisonment, insanity, and secrecy.

⁵ Think of the woods in *The Blair Witch Project* or even the tenements of Chicago in *Candyman* these places and their people make myths

⁶ Think of the Mother and Step-daughter living alone in a field or reeds in *Onibaba* or a group of hikers setting out into the Swedish countryside in *The Ritual*

⁷ The willingness to sacrifice their fellow humans to hungry gods in cult films like *The Wicker Man* or *Midsommar* are excellent examples

⁸ The uncovering of the titular claw in the furrows of the farmland in *The Blood on Satan's Claw* or the disappearance of an infant in *The VVitch*

Gothic fiction presents a “distorted”, but not “disengaged version of reality.” (Goddu, 3) The Gothic fear is the fear of the terror we know, the one we recognize within ourselves and our society but have tried and failed to forget. The crimes of the upper class and those in authority, systematic oppression, and sexual deviancy.⁹ All painted over with a veneer of propriety and virtue, so closely associated with Victorian England in particular. Though the Gothic is also an international genre its birthplace, like folk horror, is thought to be here.¹⁰ The desires and truths we repress make monsters out of us. Gothic literature is based on its historical context. American literature by contrast is often viewed as “ahistorical” and much too young to carry the centuries of repression and pain that the Gothic demands (Goddu, 9). This is, of course, absurd. Every culture has skeletons in its closet and there is no time limit on collective trauma.

The American landscape is rife with paved-over crimes and the atrocities our modern society was built on. In her the introduction to her book, *Gothic America*, Theresa Goddu argues that “American gothic literature criticizes America’s national myth of new-world innocence by voicing cultural contradictions” and “historical horrors” that have been repressed to maintain “the dream world of national myth.” (Goddu, 10) We may not have many crumbling castles or ancient graveyards. But we do have a history of colonial genocide, the residue of slavery and bigotry waiting under a national myth of progressivism and liberty. The highway itself is a monument to the manifest destiny of our ancestors and what was done to dominate the land and destroy its original occupants. The crimes of the USA are pushed to the borderlands rather than stuffing it into attics. We have the square mileage. However, they do not go away, they cannot. They lie in wait for us out on the road.

Road-trip horror combines the agoraphobic external fears of folk horror with the claustrophobic internal terror of the Gothic. Providing us with a folk setting that doubles as a

⁹ Think of the sexual crimes of the titular antihero of Mathew Gregory Lewis’ *The Monk* whose passions burst forth from years of religious repression or the mad woman in the attic of *Jany Eyre* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* imprisoned by walls of stone and patriarchal thought

¹⁰ Wow almost like literary academia is dominated by Western stories and schools of thought

repository for national guilt. Again we are minuscule in the vast American borderlands yet cramped and imprisoned in our little metal vehicles. The mythology of Road-trip horror however is often seated firmly in the modern myths of public memory more than antiquarian folklore, but it is no less born of community story-telling than the older stories (Scovell, 7). It just so happens that America's rural folklore machines are shot through with veins of living tarmac flowing with a bloodstream of anonymous travelers. The terror has taken on a paved mask but the source of the fear has not changed. In her essay on the abject, Julia Kristeva defines the writer as "a phobic who succeeds in metaphorizing in order to keep from being frightened to death; instead, he comes to life again in signs." (Kristeva, 38) When we tell scary stories we transform our unaddressed fears and traumas into hyperbolic signs and symbols built from the stories and environments we grew up in. The act of writing horror itself is an act of resurrection.

We will begin our trip down the road with a brief look at how the highway came to exist in the form it has taken today. Next, we will head offroad into the sordid world of American hicksploitation, a subgenre whose monsters are mined from an imagined backward and violent underclass, their isolation, and the threat they pose to American pride. How the price of capitalism and classism is abjected to the borderlands and a new hierarchy is shunted into place followed by a bloody and inevitable vengeance. Then we will take a life-changing road trip through the highway as a setting for a darker coming-of-age story. Growing up is scary and the highway provides a literal and figurative space for the journey between adolescence and adulthood. Our protagonists will set out on their own for the first time and encounter their first taste of darkness on the roads. A darkness that they might just recognize within themselves. Whatever happens, they will not come back to the same person that left, they are transformed for better or worse. Finally, we will shift our focus to the landscape itself and the way that it is used as a vessel for oppressive systems of power through magical realism and ritual. When the highway becomes a literal separate dimension from our own or characters wander into pockets of nightmare where the normal rules of life do not apply. Hope you've got your seatbelt buckled,

the radio turned on, and a good stash of gas station snacks in the backseat. It's going to be a bumpy ride.

Chapter 4

American Limbo: The Highway System as Parallel Dimension and National Shame Made Flesh

“The danger can be from those who work the soil, or those who want to kill for the soil, from things excavated from under the soil, from objects that sit confidently but uncannily upon the soil, or indeed from the very soil itself... An unmappable shadow-landscape, fluctuating to the point where only a searching alchemical topographer would dare attempt a plotting of its many ley lines.” - Adam Scovell, *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange*, 2017

“In the hidden places on the highways, in the bathrooms at gas stations, behind the painted scenery of roadside attractions, in vans parked far out in the grassland. There are oracles on these roads.”- Joseph Fink, *Alice Isn't Dead*, 2018

The road is an old setting, we have been traveling it with our feet and our imaginations since we derived a difference between here and there. It is so often framed as the method of getting from one place to another that its travelers rarely consider it as a space within itself, however as we enlightened readers know it is the journey that matters not the destination and the things not spoken or scene that wear the true face of a nation and a people. The American questing ground, the interstate highway, has thus been twisted by the imaginations of our storytellers into an extradimensional space capable of regurgitating the parts of ourselves and our world that we have banished to the backs of our minds. This may be a literal new plane of reality or a pocket of the fantastic hiding out beyond the rules of modern society. Either way, whether they know it or not, our protagonists enter a world where the rules they thought they knew flip upside down out on the borderlands.

Most mythological systems have a spirit world of one sort or another. The Greeks told stories about Mount Olympus, the faraway home of the Gods. For Christians, there is Heaven and Hell an afterlife of paradise or torment depending on how well you followed the teachings of the almighty Father. The Celts and Germans however believed the spirit world was “more or less superimposed on our own,” moving parallel to our reality as Alice K. Turner writes in her book *The History of Hell* (Turner, 108). According to their folklore, this world could be accessed through the thin places where time and space became unstable, where barriers became weak, thin places. A doorway might open up at twilight or dawn, at a crossroads, or near a spiritual monument. Because children and adolescents were teetering on the borders between infancy and adulthood themselves, they had an easier time accessing these doorways. They were liminal spaces, meaning that they straddled the boundary between one space, time, or state and another (Mcloughlin and Schifini). The void of meaning in these types of spaces inevitably attracts a wealth of interpretation and the excitement of a blank canvas.

Liminality, emptiness, and uncertainty make us uncomfortable. We build our lives from certain perceived binaries and truths that we can rely upon. Liminality as its own space doesn't fit with that, doesn't play by the rules, and cannot, therefore, be controlled. The American interstate is more than a thin place, it is a thin landscape, a place where the bounds of time break down and the past and present become confused, where dark and uncomfortable nuances can no longer be explained away. In the secular 21st century it is that space, between jobs and vacations and homes that has become our questing site and our fairyland. However, the magic and whimsy of fairyland is never empty, never truly arbitrary. Especially when fairyland is populated by more demons than angels. When we push our fear to the borderlands of fantasy where it is allowed to fester and grow until it becomes too big to shove back into the shadows and takes on a familiar face.

When it comes to horror and gothic horror in particular, there is no such thing as a meaningless scare. “Instead of fleeing reality, the gothic register's its culture's contradictions,

presenting a distorted, not a disengaged version of reality.” (Goddu, 3) In this chapter, we will discuss how the highway has taken on the significance of that gothic reality and the mythical horror of the transitional space. Where the setting itself becomes supernatural or hyperreal in a way that destabilizes America’s national myths. The way that the monsters that lurk on the roadside wear the mask of Americana reveals the often disturbing truth behind the ideology around which this country styles itself. The ways that guilt, bigotry, conspiracy, and capitalism manifest as modern folklore.

One of the most prominent spaces of fear in America’s majority Christian pantheon of cultural fears is Hell. That place where we are all terrified that we will be sent when we die, where all the shame we cannot speak of will be punished and we will face the torment we fear that we deserve. *Southbound* is an anthology film from 2015 composed of five scary stories set on a nameless road. The number on the road sign that marks the entrance is scratched out leaving nothing but its direction, South, downwards (Radio Silence, 0:02:46). Each story follows its protagonist’s descent towards something like divine punishment. The disembodied voice of the radio urges the characters forwards and leads the audience from one tale to another. As the film takes its audience on a journey down this road it becomes increasingly clear that we have wandered into another world entirely, somewhere hungry for the guilt of sinners and eager to dole out its merciless justice. The first clue, of course, is the road sign, leading you downwards where Hell is thought to reside below the world of the living, in the bowels of the earth or in this case, the southern bowels of America’s very own wasteland. This hell however resembles nothing more than another cracked highway dotted with motels and diners like any other. However, there is something gruesome and malevolent beneath the banal exterior that lurks in the corner of your eye unnoticed until it is too late to make a U-turn.¹¹ Each of our characters

¹¹ All of the TV screens in the film are playing scenes from Herk Harvey’s *Carnival of Souls* from 1962 a truly terrifying film about a survivor of a car crash who is haunted by the mysterious ghosts of an abandoned carnival on the roadside that watch her with dark staring eyes. By the end of the film we discover that she did not in fact survive the crash that began the film and these figures have come to

carries some unspoken crime or internalized guilt with them and finds the punishment they seek to escape on the highway.

The first segment, *Way Out* directed by Radio Silence opens with two men, Jack and Mitch, driving into the dawn covered in drying blood. Following their truck are floating skeletal figures trailing ragged black ribbons from where their spines cut off before the hipbone. Something happened, something bad. We don't know what, but whatever it is, these things have come for retribution. They take refuge at Roy's Cafe, a nondescript gas station standing alone in a sepia-toned landscape. Once they leave, however, having washed the evidence of their night from their skin, they find that they are unable to leave this part of the road. Over and over again they drive past Roy's Cafe without once changing direction or turning around. Their spectral watchers grow closer with every circuit. Mitch seems to understand and accept that these creatures have "come to collect" upon his and Jack's crime. After Jack is brutally killed by one of the floating skeletons, Mitch escapes into a nearby motel. However, upon entering the motel room he begins to hear a child's voice calling for help and sees flashes of a little girl whose picture we saw him clutching at the beginning of the story. As he runs through endless uniform bedrooms and hallways after the child we realize that he has entered yet another purgatorial loop. A faceless cleaning lady walks by and hangs a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the doorknob of Mitch's eternal punishment (Radio Silence, 0:02:06-0:12:56).

Mitch's fate and the inexplicable loop in space evoke the inescapable monotony of catholic purgatory. Purgatory exists between heaven and hell, neither paradise nor nightmare just plain existence. Technically painless but psychologically horrifying if you consider the implications of an eternity of nothing. In this tale, the uncanny repetition of that banal stretch of road is much scarier than any supernatural monster the desert could dish out. Sigmund Freud¹²

return her to her rightful place in the land of the dead. A cheeky little clue that lets you know exactly what kind of world you've stepped into.

¹² Personally I do not believe that Freud's outdated theories should be given the validation they continue to get from the academic community of 2023. His work did spart the discipline of psychoanalysis, but the

describes the uncanny or unheimlich as “nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression... something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light.” (Freud, 833) The source of terror in *Southbound* is based on the twisting of the places we believed we could trust. A banal motel room or a stretch of the road becomes horrifying when they break the rules of reality when their monotony becomes literally inescapable triggering the panic of an animal trapped in a comfortable cage. When the things and rules that we take for granted as part of reality break down into nonsensical threats we are hit with a very specific type of fear. The uncanny terror of the truth beneath the soil of normality.

The second segment, *Siren* directed by Roxanne Benjamin follows Sadie and the rest of her jazz band as they drive towards their next gig when their van breaks down leaving them stranded in the middle of nowhere. A kindly couple drives by and offers them a place for the night. However, their quaint little farmhouse proves to be the center of a local death cult into which Sadie's bandmates are indoctrinated and from which Sadie barely escapes with her life. The band and Sadie in particular are haunted by the death of their fourth member who died on Sadie's watch for which she feels immense guilt. Sadie projects that guilt onto those around her seeing accusation everywhere she looks. After escaping the cultists she makes it to the road but is ironically run down by the driver she hoped would be her salvation (Benjamin, 0:13:15-0:33:40). Sadie is not directly responsible for the crime she is punished for. Her punishment comes instead in the form of her own feelings of responsibility that this world seems to sniff out like a bloodhound.

The third segment, *The Accident*, picks up right where the second left off with Lucas, the driver who ran Sadie over. This disturbing tale seems to serve as an atonement for the crime of

study has moved past him and disproved many of his frankly sexist and absurd theories leading everything back to sexual organs and parental issues. Parts of his essay on the uncanny however are an exception to this trend wherein he actually makes some interesting points on the nature of fear, that is until he begins comparing blindness to castration.

texting while driving which caused Lucas to miss the girl standing in the road until it was too late. Lucas decides to take responsibility for his actions and calls 911. The voices on the line guide Lucas into a nearby and a hospital where he must treat Sadie's mortal wounds. As the story rushes forward Lucas begins to notice that there is something not right with the voice on the other end of the line. It calls him by his name before he shares it, and the town and hospital it leads him to are completely abandoned. However, he is too focused on saving Sadie's life to worry about that. Once Lucas enters the empty hospital he is told that he will need to manually compress Sadie's lung so that she will be able to breathe. The camera leaves nothing to the imagination. The viewer is treated to an intimate close-up shot as Lucas makes an incision beneath Sadie's ribcage. Blood flows steadily from the wound as he reaches into her stomach to feel for her lung. When he finds and squeezes the lung, Lucas gets a face full of blood. Despite the horrors Sadie dies on the operating table. Lucas is left alone wrist-deep in a corpse as the voices on the line break into hysterical laughter.¹³

Lucas says that he "[doesn't] deserve this" and the voices ask him to "elaborate." He says that "she was out in the middle of the road, in the middle of the fucking night, in the middle of nowhere...it's an extraordinary circumstance." The voices validate him gently, repeating his words back to him verbatim and assuring him that "it doesn't need to be your fault." The cruel laughter is gone as if it never was making the return of their familiar sympathetic tone doubly unsettling. They direct Lucas to a locker room where he finds a set of clothes identical to his own waiting for him. He washes the blood from his hands, changes into the fresh clothes, and drives off presumably back to his life as the camera pans back to a phone booth where a woman stands holding the phone and saying good night to Lucas in a voice we have become all too familiar with. She is most definitely not a police officer (Bruckner, 0:33:26-0:53:04).

¹³ That laughter is the scariest thing in a film filled with supernatural monsters its scary in a truly cruel and sickening way. Mather Zickel does an impeccable job as Lucas of selling that dawning horror and betrayal as he realizes that he has done all of this for nothing.

This is the first story in which our sinner makes it out alive. According to Alice K. Turner, the concept of purgatory dates back to the mid-13th century when the Catechism of the Council of Trent established the existence of a “purgatorial fire.” It was believed that the souls of the pious could be purified through “temporary punishment so that an entrance may be opened for them into which nothing stained can enter.” (Turner, 127) Lucas’ crime, texting and driving, is firmly rooted in the 21st century, however, the rituals of the old world continue to function in the distribution of justice. Because Lucas decides to call the authorities and try to fix his mistake, he is given a chance at redemption, though it will not be an easy penance. He is absolved and purified of his guilt, forgiven by the disembodied voices on his phone and the stains of his crimes literally washed away. Free of that guilt he is allowed to leave the southbound road.

The fourth segment, *Jailbreak* directed by Patrick Horvath begins as the camera follows the woman in the phone booth into a nearby bar. The bar is soon invaded by this segment’s protagonist, Danny a man looking for his missing sister Jessy. He finds his sister in a back room tattooing strange symbols that resemble eyes onto the monstrous occupants of this highway otherworld. She has not aged a day in the 13 years she has been missing, but as one of her new friends explains, the “damned do not grow old.” He expects his sister to be grateful and eager to escape this hellish landscape, but as he forces her into his car and drives away she explains that “this place was made for people like [her]”, that it “found [her] and [she loves] it here.” The car reaches the end of the road where the concrete abruptly breaks off into empty scrubland. Jessy warns him that crossing the boundary is forbidden, but he drives forward into the darkness. Out in the empty void, she confesses that she’d killed their parents when they were children and tells Danny that he should not have come. Danny is ripped from the car by naked figures with chalky white skin who begin to strip the clothes from his body, Jessy blithely drives the car back the way it came ignoring the screams of her brother (Horvath, 0:53:27-1:06:23).

Given the pattern we have seen so far we could infer that Jessy is here atoning for the deaths of her parents. Yet unlike the other characters in this film, she seems to feel no guilt over her crime. In fact, she seems to take pride in her kinship with the monsters of this world. She said that this place found her, perhaps it calls to its own kind as well as those it wishes to punish. Perhaps the half-human demons that populate this world were all once people who were monsters by the standards of earthly morality. If Danny had only listened to her if he had only left and not violated the rules of this place¹⁴ he might have survived. If he had only listened to her warnings he might have gotten out with his life. This segment complicates the nature of this place which becomes a hell for some and a haven for others incorporating as well as punishing the worst of humanity either way it is built to house the abject.

The final chapter of *Southbound*, directed once more by Radio Silence, is tied directly to its first chapter by the title, *The Way In*. Though at first, a story about a family heading out on a final road trip before their teenage daughter has nothing to do with two men running from ghosts, we learn by the end that the stories are one and the same. The motel the family is staying in is attacked by three masked men who kill the parents as revenge for a terrible crime that the father committed long ago. The men give the daughter a chance to escape but when she comes back to try to save her parents they kill her too. When they remove their masks we recognize two of them as Mitch and Jack from the first segment. While they watch, the corpses of the mother and daughter begin to jerk and one of those familiar floating skeletons forces its way out of each of their bodies. Their companion is killed and Mitch and Jack manage to escape into the night. The next morning we watch them walk through the doors of Ray's Cafe once more and the credits roll (Radio Silence, 1:07:02-1:25:45).

Each of these stories flows seamlessly and apparently chronologically into the next making the placement of the prequel to the first segment of the anthology at the end incredibly

¹⁴ Magical realms always have rules, its how you keep things interesting, but woe to those who break them

disorienting. The timeline of the film is circular mirroring once more that purgatorial landscape where time and punishment repeat themselves until the end of time trapping its victims in the consequences of their actions. It makes you wonder just how many times these characters have played out their bloody ends and how many more times they will do so, and if they will one day make a different choice and manage to escape as Lucas does. According to Turner, early Christians believed that hell was a place where “the unredeemed must go through a process of purification in successive lives before eventually being admitted to the light.” (Turner, 50) As long as they continue to run from their guilt their punishment will come for them, after all, “if we are free to choose how we live our lives it would follow that we should continue to be free to choose after death as well.” (Turner, 77) Lucas made it out of his personal hell because he made the choice to take responsibility for his actions and forgave himself. However, those who carry their guilt with them, who do not obey the rules of the realm, will remain trapped there for as long as it takes for them to become purified of their transgression. The punishment is extreme, “but God’s justice is not human justice. Human moral standards do not apply.” (Turner, 81-82) All follows according to annihilation theory, the good survive while the sinners submit to eternal punishment whether they know it or not, and the landscape feasts upon unspoken sin (Turner, 52).

In the early 1920s, the framing of hell as wasteland entered Christian scholarly circles (Turner, 242). Hell was a place incapable of producing life with no source of relief for those who wandered it parched with thirst and hunger. It became for humanity the physical embodiment of lack and slow death. It makes sense that in the 21st century, American culture would set their hellish wasteland in the deserts of the interstate. The volcano’s fields of death and horned demons have been replaced by scrubland, mediocre motels and diner food, and sadistic creatures who wear human faces. Emanuel Swedenborg believed that the world was pockmarked with entrances to hell and each would look different based on the culture on whose nightmares they were based. “Behind the northwestern hells are ‘dark forests in which

malignant spirits prowl about like wild beasts,” and behind the southwestern are deserts where dwell those who ‘were most cunning in plotting artifices and deceits.’ The hells are classified in rigorous order to the infinite varieties of evil.” (Turner, 211) America’s largest wasteland and the arteries that feed its economy is also its idea of biblical hell. It can reflect both the monotony of purgatory or the fires of hell.

Like every hell, it is a vessel for the guilt of its people, the crimes that go unpunished in life and whose punishment waits out on the highway. So many run to the road avoid their crimes, attempting to bury themselves in miles of scrubland and disappear into the endless blue sky, the American dream, a new start. However, the one thing we cannot run from is ourselves. Retribution catches up and takes all the more from us for our attempts to escape it. To escape the punishment we need only admit to our guilt, to repent, but we would much rather keep running and cycling through our own pain before doing a thing like that. The southbound road is not a strict afterlife, for all intents and purposes Lucas seems to go back to his normal life in the world of the living and there is nothing resembling God or Satan in the parts of this world that we see. It does however fulfill the folkloric and figurative purpose of hell. It waits to test and judge those who enter it, forcing them to face what they have suppressed and to welcome those like Jessy who claim their deviancy without shame. The highway itself can be read as a microcosm in itself of America’s unspoken crimes. It stretches over a land that was stolen from its original occupants whose blood soaked the soil and was paved over and planted with crops to make enrich its new overlords. We make our own hell by our sins which come back to us in time one way or the other.

Most of the victims of the southbound road stumbled onto the literal highway to hell by mistake, making a wrong turn into its hungry mouth. However, there will always be those who

seek out those places in search of the powers contained therein. *Archive 81*¹⁵ is an audio drama created by Marc Sollinger and Dan Powell that dropped its first episode in 2016 and released its most recent series a 3-episode special titled *Left of the Dial* in 2019.¹⁶ Each season follows a new group of characters through a world where old gods reach apotheosis through rotting apartment buildings, all-knowing phone booths trade secrets for severed fingers and listening to the wrong VCR tape might just drive you insane. In the most recent season, Nicholas Waters and his half-sister Christine Anderson attempt to perform a ritual of power passed on to them by their late father. The ritual is revealed to have been a ploy by their warlock father to return from the dead and take over his son's body. At the end of the seasons the siblings manage to defeat their father and Chris leaves the human realm to join a crew of marauding space pirates from another dimension.¹⁷ *Left of the Dial* is set sometime after the events of season 3 in which Nicholas has followed in his father's footsteps and become a powerful magician.¹⁸ In the 3-episode special he and his vassal, an entity composed of radio static and teeth known only as Static Man,¹⁹ set out to perform yet another ritual left behind by Nicholas' father that will purportedly restore Static Man to a physical body.

In order to perform the ritual they must venture onto the Blacktop, one of the many twisted dimensions in this eldritch multiverse. To fulfill the requirements of the ritual they must be "in a four-door car that was made in Detroit between the years of 1971 and 1975." The fuel tank must "contain a mixture that is 12 parts gasoline and one part blood." There must bring a "vintage Skelly Oil highway map with all the town names crossed out in black marker" and the glove department must be filled with "discarded wrappers from no less than four fast food

¹⁵ I want to be very clear that we are discussing the original podcast and not the Netflix show. For the love of all that is holy do not watch it, it's a bad show and a worse adaptation. I will never forgive them for straightwashing Melody

¹⁶ There hasn't been any word about any upcoming content but I hope for my sake that they're not finished with this world yet

¹⁷ Yes this show is fucking awesome, go listen to it

¹⁸ Just without the whole evil wizard seeking eternal life thing

¹⁹ Yes you heard me, he also loves cartoons and popeyes fried chicken

establishments.” The car radio must be “anointed with the viscera of roadkill” and must be turned on for the duration of the trip, though this last detail is more for Static Man’s benefit than anything else as he cannot physically exist without the presence of some form of audible static (Sollinger and Powell, Episode 11, 1-2).

Essentially the ritual is an American road trip with a few grisly additions from the old-world magic of *Archive 81*. The magic system of *Archive 81* is notable in that it utilizes modern technology and objects as components of rituals that feel more in line with the pagan folk practices of the distant past. This magical realism seems to indicate that as technology has modernized, folk practice has followed suit, replacing sage, mortars and pestles, wings of bats, and eyes of newts with the cultural symbols and household objects of the 21st century. Like in *Southbound*, this anachronism creates an eerie and uncanny effect on its listeners. We do not expect the trappings of our modern life to break the rules of their mundanity. Sigmund Freud wrote that the uncanny evokes the magical “modes of thought” we thought we had “surmounted” and awakens the old beliefs that “still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation.” (Freud, 838) We think ourselves very clever in our rational, secular modern world. When the mundane becomes magical when sacrificial blood is spread on a car radio, that world becomes destabilized and we must learn to operate on new rules that breach the boundary between the natural and the supernatural. Even so, the ritual itself performs the same purpose it always has incorporating objects of cultural significance into a rite that boils reality down to its symbolic components. The American road trip ritual is performed here as an actual classical ritual that will allow Nick and Static Man to ascend to the spiritual plane of American modernity.

On its surface, the Blacktop seems like any other highway, but there is something distinctly off in the way that the familiar road trip tropes are performed in this dimension. Instead of music, the radio DJ plays classics like “thirty-nine minutes of radiator sounds from the Cleveland St. Mercy hospital in 1984,” which he advertises just like any other top-40 hit (Sollinger and Powell, Episode 11, 4). An ad for dental health promises to “make your mouth so

full of sharp, cutting teeth that you will look at this plane of existence like a wolf looks at its sluggish prey” (Sollinger and Powell, Episode 11, 10) Instead of the usual fire and brimstone ravings, a radio evangelist preaches the spiritual benefits of peeling off your own skin (Sollinger and Powell, Episode 12, 10-11). The morals, religion, art, and even commercial culture of the Blacktop reflect our own back at us through a funhouse mirror streaked with gore.

According to Victor Shklovsky, this kind of twisting of familiar symbols allows the listener to gain a better understanding of how the original symbol actually functions in real life. In his essay on *Art as Technique*, Shklovsky describes the initial transfiguration of objects into symbols as “algebrization” or “habituation.” This is the process in which an object becomes so strongly associated with certain settings and norms that they fade into the background becoming signifiers more than objects in their own right. When we depict these algebrized objects from a different angle in art we remove “objects from the automatism of perception.” (Shklovsky, 2-3) Art allows us to perceive the processes that we have been trained to take for granted. Radio chatter on a long road trip is literally background noise, drowned out as another unremarkable part of American culture, however when its artistic form is infused with horrific imagery we prick up our ears and take notice. The messages we are fed on the radio, in between our favorite tv shows, and even over the loudspeaker in the grocery store tell us what is popular, what is normal, and what we need to do or buy to be considered successful by our society. When the weight loss commercials and hellfire preachers are replaced by body horror and radiator noises we are able to reconsider the power that these messages have and what they reflect about the priorities of our society. We too pressure one another to modify our bodies and sacrifice ourselves to be beautiful, to be saved. We fill our ears with empty noise to distract ourselves from the world we live in. The Blacktop itself uses the defamiliarized trappings of the American road trip to critique the way that American capitalism manipulates and controls the nation it settles in and the people who live underneath it.

The Blacktop has everything you'd expect to find along a highway built for the comfort and convenience of its motorists. However, everything from gas station diners to motels to car repair shops is owned by a single corporate entity. Everywhere that Nick and Static man stop they are greeted with the same schmaltzy slogan "Welcome to Moody's Family Friendly [fill in the blank here], where we promise to treat you like the family we never had," recited dully by the same unfortunate employee who seems to run all of these places by herself (Sollinger and Powell, Season 3, Episode, 11, 17). The snack shelves of the gas stations are filled with mass-produced snack food including "Meat-Yumms," with "eat them and let the sugar, fat, and calories make you feel better about your hellish existence in a late-stage capitalist economy, special working at an unpaid internship because there's no possible way to advance in your 'creative' field edition," written on the plastic packaging (Sollinger and Powell, Season 3 Episode 12, 15).

The Moody monopoly of this dimension exaggerates and therefore makes visible the extent to which modern industry has been corporatized and homogenized by "industries whose products are consumed, not only at home but in every quarter of the globe." (Marx and Engels, 223)²⁰ Marx was absolutely correct in his prediction that capitalism would spawn corporate marketing at an international scale. How many Macdonalds' signs do you see driving through one state alone? How many of the gas stations are run by Chevron, Shell, or 76? When is the last time you saw an independently owned motel? Given the advances of corporations like Amazon and Disney today the idea that a singular company could dominate the entire highway industry doesn't seem too far off. The label on the unappetizing sounding 'meat-yums' lampshades the fact that we consume this homogeny and convenience blindly in order to distract ourselves from the power it has over our lives. We are so used to seeing kit kat bars and Coca-Cola bottles on the shelves of every gas station in the country that the sheer terrifying

²⁰ Oh you thought I was done bringing communism into this did you? Well strap in buckaroo we got a long ride ahead of us

reach of these companies no longer registers in our minds. It is algebrized into the background. Gas station becomes 'Chevron,' soda becomes 'Coke' the signified becomes the signifier, and originality is lost.

Furthermore, the constant repetition of the word 'family' and the phrase 'family friendly' in Moody's marketing speaks to another sneaky element of American capitalism. One of the more unscrupulous strategies used by corporate marketing campaigns is the framing of the workplace as a family. Your boss describes you and your co-workers as 'one big happy family' with them at the head, your local Panera Bread sells you a 'home-cooked' meal that is being served across the country. Would you ask your uncle for overtime pay for all those extra hours you worked? Of course not, it was for the family. And we all want to support those independent mom-and-pop restaurants that are trying so hard to give you the best mass-produced salad you've ever eaten. It's the American way after all. 'Family Friendly,' what a loaded phrase. Ostensibly it means that whatever it describes is safe for kids to enjoy as well as adults, in support of the good 'family values' we all hold near and dear to our hearts. However, what it actually means is that this product or space, or story has been watered down to fit within the strict and often puritanical standards of what Americans believe to be good lessons for our pint-sized American citizens in training. Without admitting it right out these places model the 'correct' way that you should live your life in America. You settle down, start a heteronormative family, get a job working for the capitalist machine, and pay your due without questions or complaints. There is little room in 'family friendly' spaces for deviation, or for that matter, innovation.

American marketing is uniquely obsessed with the myth of the family-owned business. Modesty is woven into the advertising campaigns of so many of our biggest wealthiest corporations who are apparently just hard-working folks who pulled themselves up by their bootstraps²¹ and their mother's cookbook that probably own several Summer homes in the most

²¹ Too pull oneself up by one's bootstraps is actually a criminally misinterpreted idiom. Its original meaning was to describe something that is impossible to do, have you ever actually tried pulling yourself

expensive parts of California. It's been centuries since the last log cabin was built, since the last flapjack was cooked over a wood stove in any American diner. Yet these images are plastered all over the advertisements for today's products which were produced in a big sad warehouse by machines and underpaid workers. We pay for the illusion of modesty, for the good old days that were over before we were born and probably never existed at all. The beautiful irony of it all is that all of those 'independently sourced' products come with the same branding slapped over the packaging. Again we are selling the illusion of American history with all of its darkness and hardship sapped away. Horror and folk horror in particular lures its audience in with the promise of these nostalgic aesthetics and reintroduces them to that darkness in our collective memory (Scovell, 125). Once more, the habituated becomes visible.

It is important to note that the Blacktop did not come to reflect our capitalist aesthetics on its own. It was not always a nightmarish "50s Americana wet dream," as the mysterious trucker who follows our heroes over the roads calls it. He reveals that it was Nick's father who "warped" the landscape and "didn't even realize he was doing it. That's how powerful he was. Things just bent to his will." (Sollinger and Powell, Season 3, Episode 13, 35) Even in a magical realm like this one, the conditions of capitalism do not just spring up on their own. Marx wrote that the bourgeois "compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image." (Marx, 224) In this case, it was the narcissistic ambition of one man. Micheal Waters, Nick's father, left no room for other people or perspectives in his devious plans. He prioritized his own needs and goals over the consequences for other people assuming that he knew best. Similarly, capitalism tends to

up by the straps on your boots? The irony is that it's largely used now to describe something that any hardworking person can do, though of course, it remains practically impossible to actually build an economic empire from nothing under modern capitalism, the whole thing is a layered delicious tiramisu of irony

subsume all other economic and philosophical modes of thought instigating the illusion of a zero-sum game over every economic and even many interpersonal transactions.

By transforming the world into its own image it retroactively establishes itself as the peak of civilization, the only way to be "civilized." Micheal Waters entered the Blacktop with the intention to use it as a mere component in his ritual. Without any thought to the autonomy of the land, he shaped it into the tool he needed. This supernatural overhaul is not unlike the crimes committed by the United States in the name of the Truman doctrine. In the aftermath of the second world war, the American military abandoned its isolationist philosophy when it came to foreign policy and deployed to eliminate communist regimes all over the world. They cared little about the long-term harm that their interference caused or who took power after that regime was dismantled as long it swore fealty to the cause of American capitalism (Foreign Service Institute). The Truman Doctrine was galvanized by the fear of communism and the neo-colonial civilizing drive to make everyone else conform to the standards of 'Western civilization.' Micheal Waters could be read as a microcosm of this historical and political phenomenon in how capitalism reproduced itself across the globe. He believes that his survival, the perpetuation of his power and ego, is more important than the existing political structures and people of this dimension. The highway itself has mapped and transformed the very shape of the landscape bringing the commercial spirit of American capitalism as the oil needed to power cars is pulled from beneath the earth, the tourism industry follows the highway seeding the land with conveniences and tailoring it to the aesthetic whims of its clientele. We live on land that has been warped and transformed by the values of our institutions, the Blacktop is no different. Micheal Waters treats his fellow human beings, including his own family with a similar lack of sentimentality. They too are forged into components of his rituals, something that becomes all the more obvious when Nick and Static Man make it to the end of the ritual Micheal Waters left behind.

The ritual culminates at yet another roadside diner where the warlock and his vassal sit down at a booth across from a woman who looks exactly like Nick's late mother. She cradles an infant out of nightmares that she refers to as her "beautiful, handsome boy."²² She explains that Nick's father molded her body from the soil and energy of the Blacktop so that she could "give birth to a hollow child, that he could fill with himself when he needed to." Much to Micheal's chagrin, he wasn't hollow, he was filled with his "mother's love," and therefore "Corrupt and broken," in the eyes of his father (Sollinger and Powell, Season 3, Episode 13, 39). As we know this was not the last time Micheal Waters has attempted to use one of his children as a second chance at life. Nevertheless, this revelation feels particularly shocking in its heartlessness. Micheal Waters created two living, thinking beings and then discarded them like trash when they were proved to be people with wants and an independent desire to survive rather than the lifeless clay he believed them to be. Capitalism at a philosophical level makes people into machines. Under capitalism, the worker sacrifices their personhood to the system in which they work. Marx wrote that "in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal." (Marx, 655) Commodification is the process in which "personal worth" is reduced to "exchange value." When we lose the belief in the inherent value of human life outside of their exchange value or ability to work we lose the ability to love people for themselves rather than what they can do for us.

In this way the very familial love that American corporations glorify and advertise is stripped of "its sentimental veil" and "family relation" is reduced to "mere money relation." (Marx, 222) In the monetary conditions that capitalism creates in interpersonal relationships, unconditional love is radical. Though we do not get a physical description of the infant, based on our characters' reactions to him, he probably won't be on any diaper commercials any time soon. He is not physically attractive and unfit to be used as a vessel for Nick's father, and

²² The infant is never described directly, but I have always imagined it to look something like the *Eraserhead* baby

therefore his exchange value is low. He is grotesque and hungry and unmarketable, and yet he is loved unconditionally by his mother. This love is not based on any hope for personal gain on her part. It is enough that he exists, that he is her son and because she loves him he is beautiful to her and because he is beautiful to her he is beautiful. To love a monster, or to love a person who is disabled or incompatible with the value system of capitalism²³ is an act of rebellion. Her decision to love and assert her own will is what stops Micheal from using her son as an object.

She too was created to be a vessel, flesh to be used and discarded once its purpose was fulfilled. Instead, she became something more. She became a mother, a mother willing to kill to keep her beautiful boy safe. In the end, Nick and Static Man leave the blacktop without the body they came there for. Nick, determined to be better than his father and do what he can to fix what his father broke, leaves the child and his mother in peace. In spite of the transformation that the Blacktop underwent under Micheal Waters' hand, he has not been able to fully eliminate that radical love. A love strong enough to survive the wrath of one of the greatest sorcerers ever to walk the multiverse.

It is only through that simple human capacity for love and solidarity that we are able to assert power over the vast systems of power woven into the fabric of our society. The sheer size of the highway system makes it a perfect metaphorical space to explore the vast influence that these systems of power have over our lives, as well as the part we play in pushing the evidence of those systems to the margins. Joseph Fink's horror podcast, *Alice Isn't Dead*, presents us with a dual world running parallel to one another on our very own plane of reality. There is the world of the city, an orderly place where things work smoothly and people go about their lives trusting that their government has their best interests at heart. Then there is the highway, the place wherein the price of that first world's peace is exacted, the hunting ground

²³ By this, I do not mean to say that disabled people are inherently monstrous in any way, only that they have been framed in this way by a long history of abelist stories and that the experience of monsters in film can sometimes reflect some of the ostracisation that those with disabilities face in the real world

for the monsters created by that dependable institution. Keisha Taylor was quite content to live in that first world where everything in her life made sense. That is until her wife, Alice, disappeared and was presumed dead before Keisha began seeing her late spouse standing in the background of news footage across America. Determined to track Alice down, Keisha takes a job as a long-haul trucker and enters that sacrificial second world, and finds much more than she had bargained for.

Keisha is more than aware of the risk she is taking when she first steps into that cab. She is a queer woman of color working in an industry dominated by straight white men who do not have a reputation or allyship. She is uniquely vulnerable to the marginal dangers of the road. We are all familiar with the myth of the open road. It is often framed as a place of pure freedom where you can chart your own path and be your own person. That freedom though is “dependent explicitly on being a white, middle-class male.” The nostalgia we hold for these kinds of folk spaces and ‘simpler times’ betrays the unawareness of this double standard and the way that different people experience the same physical space (Scovell, 142). If Keisha does not fit the stereotype of the American trucker, then “what does a truck driver look like?” (Fink, 12)²⁴ It’s a fair question. Are they the good honest men who work the American roads, a threatening figure at an empty gas station, or just someone willing to get behind the wheel of a semi? It really depends on who you ask. However, microaggressions from her coworkers are the least of Keisha’s problems. As she drives her routes keeping an eye out for her wife, she is menaced by the monsters who treat the roads as their own personal hunting ground, creatures who look a lot more like a stereotypical truck driver than she does.

²⁴ I will largely be citing from the novelization of the podcast, however if you are interested in checking out the story I would really recommend listening to the original audiodrama first. The novel is good, however it suffers from the pacing issues that come inevitably from fitting three seasons of podcast into a 300 page book and there is a great deal of worldbuilding and atmosphere that didn’t make it into the novelization that you really don’t want to miss out on

Keisha's first encounter with the 'thistlemen'²⁵ takes place at a roadside diner. At first, the man looks like any other drifter she'd see at these diners. Just a guy eating an omelet. However, underneath the t-shirt and baseball cap, his skin hangs off of him in loose flaps, his teeth are yellow and sharp and he smells like soil and rot. He moves with jerks and lurching steps as if he was unsure how to operate a human body. Keisha follows as he leads one of her fellow truckers out of the diner and watches as he bites hungrily into the man's neck, consuming him "with the same mechanical movement he had made with the omelet." (Fink, 4-6) After this Keisha begins to see these not-men everywhere. The worst part is that she seems to be the only one. No one else seems to be able to see these horrible crimes carried out in the light of day or they did "and then decided they didn't want to." (Fink, 11) As Keisha delves further into this mystery she discovers stories of countless people found mutilated by the roadside, their unsolved cases buried under layers of abstraction, negligence and sheer volume. There is even a catchy tabloid name for this prolific and elusive killer. "The Hungry man," whose victims are distinguished by "a human bite on the neck or shoulder or armpit. Not elegant pinpricks, the romance of a vampire, but ragged and clumsy." (Fink, 27)

The true crime industry has succeeded in turning the American serial killer into something of a macabre celebrity, commercially viable in their abjectivity.²⁶ Their stories are so largely circulated that their crimes lose their sting.²⁷ He²⁸ is an abstract likeness of the external extreme threat that is pointed to as the source of all American violence. He is a microcosm of random male violence in particular and the subsequent danger for lone women in wide open spaces. The thistlemen in particular reflect the fear of impersonal violence for the sake of

²⁵ Named for the thistle logo printed on their clothes

²⁶ Don't look it up, but there are markets for cutesy fan merch plastered with the faces of men like Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer

²⁷ It's easy to forget that the victims of these people were real whole human beings when you're focused on the instrumental sting that introduces the next twist in the tale on your true crime podcast.

²⁸ Serial killers are as diverse as any human subgroup, however much of our news and sensational coverage is focused on a certain archetypal killer. He is white, male and largely targets women.

violence. This cannibalistic mutilation is devoid of sexual drive or capitalist consumption. It, like much of the apparently random violence carried out by real-world serial killers, sexual violence in particular, is a pure demonstration of power and freedom. They do it simply because they can, because it is easy, and because we allow them to do it because we choose not to see.

America prides itself on being a nation built on perfect freedom, at least for some. Keisha compares this way that people talk about freedom to how they talk about art as if “it is a statement of quality rather than a description. Art doesn’t mean good or bad. Art only means art. It can be terrible and still be art. Freedom can be good or bad too. There can be terrible freedom.” (Fink, 13) Freedom in America is conditional, conditional on the color of your skin, your gender, your sexuality. Those that have enough money or privilege to experience true freedom in America can be incredibly dangerous. Those who do not have to look over their shoulder when walking home alone at night or fear the consequences of their crimes are in possession of a terrible terrible freedom.

The Thistlemen pass invisibly through over the roads because they resemble the default possessors of this freedom. It is a freedom born of the absence of fear and in many ways the absence of empathy for people who experience that fear on a daily basis. It is also a freedom born out of a long history of inaction from a society that turns the other way when crimes are committed that do not immediately affect them. Because these crimes are often carried out by those we trust against those who are already made vulnerable by marginalization we take it as the simple way of the world, as set dressing to our lives. It’s like Keisha says, “the sky is pretty big but people still go whole days without noticing it.” (Fink, 157) The highway is big too, so all-encompassing and so very easy to disappear into, where that terrible, terrible freedom can be utilized in broad daylight without anyone batting an eye. Working as a professional driver, Keisha becomes intimately familiar with the preternaturally pacifying effect of a long drive. While the ability to “become cargo... is often seen as an exercise in freedom, but the effect it has on a person is a placating stillness.” (Fink, 257) Losing your identity out on the borderlands, in the

seat of your car allows you to forego your responsibilities as a person that is part of a larger community of people with the ability or calling to help one another. It's the kind of malaise that lets you watch someone being eaten alive and do nothing, it's the kind of malaise we live with every day as we watch the next atrocity on the news or a cry for help in a bustling city. It is horrifyingly familiar and mundane.

One of the most terrifying things about Joseph Fink's Thistlemen is that they are not alien monsters from the pits of hell or invaders encroaching on our peaceful world. They are us. They are our history and more importantly, they are human. During the 1970s and 80s, the golden age of the American serial killer according to the true crime community, it was nearly impossible to track someone down when they went out onto the highway. The interstate is littered with the remains of unfinished or abandoned roads from its long history of slapdash spontaneous construction before the inception of the defense highway system in the 1950s. The perfect places to lay low or hide a body. The trucking industry provided the perfect cover for the types of people who could benefit from a job that constantly moved them from place to place, particularly before the tracking software that is used today. Robert Ben Rhoades was one such man. Before he was caught in 1990, he spent 15 years torturing and murdering young female hitchhikers. He was only ever convicted of 3 murders, however, there were as many as 50 unsolved murder cases along his truck route during his active years. He left the corpse of his youngest victim, 14-year-old Regina K Walters in an abandoned barn off of a road in Illinois. By the time the barn's owner came by to prepare it for demolition, her body was already well into the process of decay (Vaselka). We've all driven by those little worn-down barns and houses and gas station diners and never given them a second thought,²⁹ oblivious to the corpses that line the roads, literally and figuratively. Rhoades was a very real monster who was aware of exactly what he could get away with and who he could get away with doing it to. More

²⁹ After reading this story I don't think I'll be able to see them the same way ever again

importantly, he was human, “most monsters are,” as one of the all-knowing roadside oracles reminds Keisha when she goes hunting for answers (Fink, 262).

The answers she finds are worse than anything she could have imagined. Just like any Thistleman, Hank Thompson was human once, he went to school, fell in love, and held within his soul the makings of a monster. Consumed by fear and then hatred for those who were different from himself he joined the Klu Klux Klan just before he turned 18 and sunk himself into a bubble of defensive conservatism. Over the years this blistering hatred alienates him from his own body, as his skin begins to hang off of his face in yellowing folds and his voice devolves into primal grunts, whoops, and whistles. One day Hank stumbles out onto the road, and finds nourishment in the flesh of his fellow humans, in the pain and fear that he can cause with this new, terrible freedom (Fink, 269-273). The metaphor is far from subtle, but it is more than apt. Bigotry dehumanizes its hosts as much as it dehumanizes its targets. It is faceless and barbaric at its core beneath the family values and the buzzwords it is nothing but paranoia and an excuse for cruelty. It is important to remember though that its source is buried firmly in the human soul.

Reading this, one might be tempted to take the bad apple interpretation. To insist that there are good people and bad people, and as long as we are able to beat back the bad ones, the monsters on the roads, we will be alright. However, in both, the world of *Alice Isn't Dead* and our own it is not so simple. These individual monsters are born out of a larger system that perpetuates these patterns of violence in order to maintain itself above all else. When Alice started working for Bay and Creek Shipping, the company that her wife would later sign a contract with to find her, she thought that it was an organized force for good working against the evil of the Thistlemen. A classic paradigm, the good guys and the bad guys. This comforting illusion is shattered however when it is revealed that Bay and Creek and Thistle are one and the same. According to Alice's supervisor, Thistle exists “because Americans needed them to exist so that Bay and Creek could work for a greater good.” (Fink, 229) Later on, when Keisha meets

the entity working behind all of this, the eldritch embodiment of human conflict,³⁰ the creature in the shape of a woman explains that “war is so useful... Lots you can hide in a war. Money diverted. Force and weapons justified. Unhelpful people killed and what are you going to do? There’s a war on after all.” (Fink, 202-203) The land itself was paved for war when a government terrified of losing its power poured its resources into preparation for the possibility of a conflict, for the elusive and hypothetical greater good. Institutionalized power, however good its intentions at the start, will do a lot to keep that power. After a while, everyday ethics become secondary to prolonging the rule of ‘the good guys,’ even if it means making up some bad guys to fight. This kind of good guy, bad guy binary suspends the nation in limbo, neither side winning because there are no sides at all. There is only power, those who have it and those that do not. The only thing that can interrupt this status quo is the direct action of the mass of normal people caught in the tide of politics.

After they are reunited, Alice and Keisha publish everything they have discovered about the conspiracy, but even then there is no change. It’s just another nutty conspiracy theory lost in the news cycle. Disheartened, but not beaten, they take their message directly to the people who will listen. They put out the word to everyone who witnessed an atrocity on the highway and thought they were alone and exchange stories in dingy rented rooms across America. Eventually, word spreads and the movement becomes Praxis, a word that has followed Keisha and Alice throughout their long road trip. Praxis means “practice distinguished from theory.” (Dictionary.com) It is the act of doing instead of talking about doing, the true drive behind every grassroots movement that made a difference in spite of the difference in power between them and their opponents. One person against the system is impossible, get enough people together though and things start to become possible. Keisha and Alice’s army beat back the forces of both Bay and Creek and Thistle in a climactic battle worthy of Tolkien fought out in the middle of

³⁰ Who for the record takes the shape of a police officer

nowhere. Praxis is built not on the pursuit of some amorphous greater good, but on the safety and value of every discrete human life in its number. Praxis focuses on the now, on the immediate safety of normal people, not states, not systems, not demographics or regimes, people.

Eldritch all-encompassing forces of cosmic evil make excellent metaphors for the oppressive systems of power that seem to have a preternatural hold over our lives. For the majority of American history, however, the metaphorical monstrous danger hyperbolized in *Alice Isn't Dead* was all too real for those deemed undesirable by the powers that be. In 1954, two years before President Eisenhower would begin construction on the interstate highway system, and a year before Rosa Parks would refuse to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery Alabama, there were certain parts of America where a person of color could be killed just for stepping over the borders of "Lovecraft country." (NAACP) *Lovecraft Country* is a collection of connected short stories written by Matt Ruff and published in 2016, following the trials and tribulations of the Turner family, an African American clan from Chicago. The novel is set in the 1950s, not the safest of times to be a person of color in America. This is soberingly exemplified by the necessity of "*The Safe Negro Travel Guide*," a publication run by George Turner the uncle of Atticus Turner protagonist of the first chapter of the book. *The Guide* is a regularly updated map survival handbook for folks traveling through the United States at a time when stopping at the wrong town could get you shot if you weren't the right color. It contains maps and directories of the businesses and towns that are safe to stop in and ethical to do business with.

George's book is based on a real publication that ran from 1936 to 1966. Victor Green and his wife Alma mapped out the businesses across America that were safe to visit from hotels to hair salons. They encouraged their readers to "buy where you can work," and to avoid giving business to those who contributed to their oppression. *The Green Book* was one of several guides that were largely distributed by mail order within black communities during this period of

American history (National Park Service). The fact that something like *The Green Book* was even necessary shows the sobering difference in the lives of white Americans and their non-white counterparts. It was a double standard that was universally understood but ignored by domestic policy. America was not a free country, there was a very real chance that you could be met with a monster out on the backroads as deadly and as inescapable as any of Lovecraft's ghoulish creations.

Ruff's title alludes to that infamous master of monsters. During his life, the works of Howard Phillips Lovecraft went largely unappreciated, published for a pittance in magazines from 1916 to his death in 1937. Since then his works have been reexamined and elevated to the status of horror canon and inspiration for what is commonly called Lovecraftian horror³¹ (Mondschein, vii-ix). Another name that has been adopted in lieu of Lovecraft is cosmic horror, as though Lovecraft's legacy is undeniable, the politics of his work are abominable. Lovecraft grew up in the insular community of Providence, Rhode Island, and remained in his childhood home into adulthood. Since childhood, Lovecraft was afflicted with severe mental illness that manifested in intense depression and paranoia.³² His prolific career in horror stemmed from that terror. His novellas, short stories, and essays are littered with unrepentant and truly reprehensible racism and xenophobia.³³ Lovecraft's bigotry cannot be excused as a product of his time. He was an unforgivable racist even by the standards of the 1920s, which is really saying something. His contributions to the horror genre are impossible to untangle from that

³¹ Though Lovecraft was credited with popularizing the genre he was hardly the first to engage in the 'weird' fiction of the early 20th century. Some of his greatest influences included Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood and Robert Chambers who were genius' of the craft in their own right.

³² This is what I am referring to when I say that Lovecraft was a complex literary figure. In a time before the mental health services of today his mental afflictions went undiagnosed and untreated. Thus that internalized fear was directed outwards and inwards causing him to isolate himself from the rest of the world. His self-loathing is so profoundly felt in several of his short stories that I cannot help but feel something for that kid holed up in a drafty house all alone. This said, I am a white reader and therefore I speak from a privilege that that many do not and reading his work cannot have quite the effect that it has on his nonwhite readers. For this reason many choose to leave his work strictly in the past which is incredibly understandable considering the virulence of his bigotry

³³ Do *not* google what he named his cat

violent racial conservatism as they are based entirely on his acute fear of change and difference³⁴ (Mondschein, xi-xii).

Ruff's novel is placed intimately within the cultural context established by Lovecraft and many other pioneers of science fiction, horror, and fantasy that were popular at the time and so often inundated with the less savory prejudices normalized in polite society. Nevertheless, these tales of magic and monsters are beloved by George Turner and his nephew Atticus, while Atticus' father Montrose bristles at his son's veneration of men whose writing contributes to the oppressive systems of power that dominate the life and the life of his child. After Atticus comes to understand the hostility behind these apparently innocent stories, he reads them with a new wariness that he must carry with him in every aspect of his life as a man of color in America. As his Uncle George explains, "stories are like people, Atticus. Loving them doesn't make them perfect... Sometimes they stab me in the heart." (Ruff, 13)³⁵ Though Lovecraft's fears took the shape of racial and ethnic others, scientific advancement the feeling of constant terror was rather ironically more relatable to the readers who most resembled those demographics that Lovecraft cast as his most abject monsters. Lovecraft's most iconic works described eldritch worlds so ancient and vast that the human mind was incapable of perceiving them. Unknowable beings so huge that in comparison the entirety of the human race was nothing more than an anthill to be crushed beneath one gargantuan claw. What he failed to understand was that this fear was felt by countless people in America alone when faced with an unimaginable history of systematic bigotry big enough to destroy their lives without even knowing that they exist. And

³⁴ Was it worth it? Probably not. Has Lovecraft written some of the most effective scary stories to come out of the 20th century because of it? In my opinion yes, though it will forever give me a squirming feeling in my 21st century stomach not dissimilar from the squamous things that slithered around the legs of so many of Lovecraft's self-insert protagonists. As a reader and writer of horror fiction I have made it a personal goal to create critical and creative work that would make the old reptile spin in his grave like a whirligig in a Bellingham windstorm

³⁵ I cannot directly empathize with the experience of reading racist literature as a person of color, however I know the feeling of betrayal as a queer person who has read countless examples of casual homophobia and stereotyping in the work of even my most trusted authors that I continue to read in spite of this history, the ethical consumption of stories is always more complicated than we want it to be. On a completely unrelated note, we need to have a talk you and I Stephen King.

that the, incredibly knowable, perpetrators of this eldritch system look a lot more like he did than any of the people he feared.

However, unlike Lovecraft's fictional old gods, the threat a person of color faced in America during the early 20th century was very very real.³⁶ George Turner's *The Safe Negro Travel Guide* defines the "Jim Crow mile" as "a unit of measurement, peculiar to colored motorists, comprising both physical distance and random helpings of fear, paranoia, frustration, and outrage. Its amorphous nature makes exact travel times impossible to calculate, and its violence puts the traveler's good health and sanity constantly at hazard." (Ruff, 1) The eldritch power of racism warps the very rules of reality by which people of color lived and continue to live their lives today, even down to the laws of time and space. This is Lovecraft Country, named by the targets of its namesake's bigotry, not for the monsters he dreamt up but the flesh and blood monsters he represented.

Following in his father's footsteps, George's 12-year-old son Horace, an aspiring illustrator of science fiction comics creates what Atticus calls "a visual translation of *The Safe Negro Travel Guide*" by illustrating his father's atlas. Safe areas for people of color are marked with "shining fortresses," "towers or oases" and smaller safe spots with "peasant huts, tree houses or hobbit holes." Danger zones are likewise delineated with "ogres and trolls, vampires and werewolves, wild beasts, ghosts, evil sorcerers, and hooded white knights... a great white dragon coiled around Tulsa, breathing fire onto the neighborhood where Atticus's father and Uncle George had been born."³⁷ (Ruff, 20) Horace's art is a deliberate reclamation and reversal

³⁶ Victor LaValle has also done a great deal of work to deconstruct and reclaim the cosmic horror subgenre, particularly in his novella, *The Ballad of Black Tom* which is a direct retelling of one of Lovecraft's most heinously bigoted short stories, *The Horror at Red Hood*, from the perspective of the immigrants and social outcasts it framed as devious occult conspirators, transforming the story into one of liberation and reclamation of power. Furthermore, it is important to note that LaValle is an author of color while Matt Ruff is not, a fact that affects his writing and has been critiqued by more qualified writers than myself

³⁷ This last is an obvious allusion to the Tulsa massacre, a devastating attack on the neighborhood in Tulsa, Oklahoma that was known at the time as 'Black Wall Street,' that is until it was burned to the ground by its white neighbors in 1921 (Tulsa History Society).

of the function of monsters in the literary history he pulls from. Classical monsters in fantasy fiction, particularly that which was popular at the time were often thinly veiled stand-ins for racial, ethnic, or social Others who would ultimately be beaten back by the white-protestant coded defenders of all that is good and honorable. By using these very monsters to represent the oppressive order run by those 'white knights'³⁸ Horace identifies the real threat to peace in America and speaks to the very real fight for survival he and his family must engage in every day. The escapism offered by monsters and horror stories can provide a relatable yet simpler escape for the oppressed as well as a power fantasy for those who do the oppressing, depending on who is writing or reading the story.

In the first chapter of the book, George, Atticus, and his childhood friend Leticia Dandridge must venture into the territory of the monsters on Horace's map to rescue Montrose Turner who is being held prisoner in the heart of Lovecraft country. At first Atticus, rather appropriately, misreads the name of the town where they will purportedly find his father as Arkham, Massachusetts, the name of a fictional town where many of Lovecraft's stories were set. The similarity to *Ardham* Massachusetts where Montrose is actually being kept is no accident as there are more than lynch mobs waiting for the Turners on the road. George recalls a story he heard from his friend Victor who had taken a trip through Devon County of which Ardham is a part. Devon is what was colloquially referred to as a "sundown county" a modifier on the "sundown town" connoting a place that a person of color would not want to risk being found after dark. Victor finds himself stranded in Devon as the sun is going down and describes the sounds of a large unidentifiable creature crashing through the woods toward him when he stops to relieve himself. Atticus refers to the thing as a "shoggoth", one of Lovecraft's famous

³⁸ Another allusion to the KKK who explicitly modeled themselves off of these archetypal heroes of the establishment, yet for some reason refused to show their faces when carrying out these supposed acts of righteousness

monsters.³⁹ However, “the real monster was waiting for him” out on the road wearing a police uniform and aiming a shotgun at his chest. Victor manages to escape Devon county to tell his tale, but only barely (Ruff, 21-23). It is notable that this anecdote makes a distinction between the threat posed by an unnameable monstrous beast and a mere human being, the latter being the more terrifying of the two. This establishes the kind of environment the Turners are headed into, however, their first brush with near-deadly racism occurs far north of Massachusetts.

In her book on the American Gothic subgenre, Teresa Goddu points out that the South has “served as the nation’s safety valve: as the repository of everything the nation is not... The imaginary South functions as the nation’s ‘dark’ other,” therefore the strictly Southern Gothic “neutralizes the gothic’s threat to national identity.” (Goddu, 76) When we talk about racial politics in America we often frame it in the binary of the racist South and the abolitionist North from the Civil war to the Civil Rights movement today the North is framed as a comparative paradise for people of color in comparison with the South. However, while the North was certainly ahead of the South in abolishing slavery,⁴⁰ it wasn’t much easier to be a person of color in the North of the country than anywhere else. Pegging all of the blame for America’s racist history on the South allows us to pin down a history of systematic oppression built into the foundation of our government to a couple of bad apples south of Ohio. The national shame and the horror of slavery and its legacy can be dismissed as a regional problem, while as we can see here the fact is that the whole of the United States was Lovecraft country to some extent or another.

The trio stops for lunch at a diner in Simonsville Pennsylvania that has been marked safe in *The Guide*, but the moment they walk in the door Atticus knows that something is wrong. The diners and waitstaff stare shamelessly as they sit down and he notices that the brick walls

³⁹ Notably a slave race that rises against their old god masters in the novella, *In the Mountains of Madness*

⁴⁰ And let’s be real, the only reason they did was that it was no longer financially viable

of the building have recently been covered with a fresh coat of whitewash. Casually, as if sharing a fun fact, Atticus reminds his uncle why the Whitehouse. After it was set on fire during the War of 1812 the Whitehouse whitewashed to cover the burn marks. They manage to sneak out the back door and get back on the highway but not before George's Packard takes some buckshot to its rear bumper (Ruff, 36-39). The unspoken implication is that this diner had been a safe place to stop the last time George's scout came through Simmonsville, that is until the local flavor took issue with one of their own inviting undesirables into their township and set fire to the place, then literally whitewashing the evidence and carrying on as if nothing had happened. For people of color in America, the open road becomes a Lovecraftian dimension in itself, a world not built for them, and not welcoming to their kind.

The image of those dark burn marks, the evidence of virulent hatred against even the possibility of people of color entering a white Northern community, being painted over in pure white paint is incredibly evocative. It is indicative of what we might call 'liberal racism' today in which those who call themselves anti-racists participate or benefit from the systems of racism and simply erase all traces of that injustice and often the existence of people of color from their 'color blind' progressive world. Clearly, this particular community took more direct actions than microaggressions, but still, it is notable that they cover up the evidence of their crimes unwilling to admit to sinking to the level of their Southern counterparts who often pride themselves on their white supremacist leanings. At the center of every Gothic horror story is the intention of "speaking the unspeakable," giving voice to the darkness beneath the very 'best' of society and the violence that goes into maintaining that image of respectability (Goddu, 154). In the realm of the Gothic, that terror is blown up to monstrous and often magical proportions to reflect the interior emotional experience of living within the statutes of respectability when the truth is so horrific.

Cosmic horror is often framed in opposition to the Gothic. The source of cosmic terror is exterior, it is scary because it is outside of human understanding invading normality and sanity

while Gothic terror comes from interior truths that are horrifying because they are already known and understood. *Lovecraft Country* complicates this dichotomy in that his cosmic Lovecraftian monsters become tools of the dominant class in the highly racialized American Gothic. The power of what the Turners discover to be a longstanding white supremacist cult is outsourced from the alternate dimensions frequented by Lovecraft and other writers who delve into the weird eldritch extents of human understanding. However the threat to the Turner family is not these alien forces, it is this society that has stood as a symbol of power over the mystical forces of the world and over their fellow humans for generations. The monster may be scratching at the door but the call is coming from inside the house. The cult's goal in kidnapping Montrose was to lure Atticus to Ardham so that he can be used in a ritual of power. Atticus' mother was descended from a woman that was owned by this family and sexually assaulted by one of its patriarchs, therefore they seem to believe that this gives them some claim over Atticus. He is of their blood, but they will not allow him true entry into their legacy outside of a component in a ritual because of the color of his skin. The dehumanization and exploitation of black bodies is intergenerational, based on a long history guilt with fine houses and whitewash. It is the clash of the old world aristocracy and prejudice, new world ideas of freedom and equality, and of course, that third dimension of inexplicable terror that blankets the darker corners of the human psyche as they move further and further away from what is familiar and understood. However, these are not the only ancient gods that continue to roam the roads long past their time and not the only cult that would rise to the call of that old world darkness.

Stephen King's short story, *Children of the Corn*, was published first in the March 1977 issue of *Penthouse*. Later it would be included in Stephen King's first collection of short fiction, *Night Shift* in 1978. Ever since the short story and its iconic film adaptation from 1984 have become a staple of American folk horror. It begins as most of these tales do with a suburban couple, Vicky and Burt, making a wrong turn and getting lost in the middle of nowhere. In this case, 'nowhere' happens to be Gatlin, Nebraska a picturesque little farming town from right out

of a postcard, that is until its children found religion. Three years before Vicky and Burt drove into Gatlin, a pint-sized prophet named Isaac lead his cult of children in a holy crusade in the name of the deity who presides over Gatlin's cornfield. Every adult in town is slaughtered and offered up in sacrifice to "he who walks between the rows." (King, 263) On their way into town, Vicky and Burt drive past a sign that reads "DRIVE CAREFULLY PROTECT OUR CHILDREN." (King, 256) The irony is that it was the children Gatlin would need protection from. Again the nuclear family structure is interrupted by the transformation of the innocent child into a source of terror. The symbol of youthful purity, the thing that must be protected from corruption and subversive thought that destroys the respectable community allying itself with the land. In the scene that depicts the day of the massacre in the 1984 film, we see a stark contrast once more between the nostalgic farm town image of American folk culture and the violence of the old world. Pre-cult Gatlin is the picture of a quaint 50s farm town with its white church steeple, and small diner with its patterned wallpaper and corn-shaped salt and pepper shakers⁴¹ that immediately become spattered with blood as the children take the blades of harvesting implements to the throats of their parents. Once again these iconic symbols of agriculture and respectable American life are twisted into tools of violence and defiled by holy blood (Hamilton and Horton, 0:01:17-0:05:18).⁴²

Similarly the scripture of this cult of ankle-biters is a fascinating conglomeration of Christian scripture and pagan imagery. While exploring the old Gatlin church, Burt finds a copy of the bible with most of the New Testament removed and a mostly intact Old Testament. Several of the more graphic verses from that section have been written on the walls of the church. Presiding over the tableau is a portrait of Christ with "a twining mass of early-summer

⁴¹ Oh yeah they went there

⁴² Also you've got Isaac looking in the window with that iconic black hat and devious little smile watching through the diner's window the whole time. John Franklin was 24 at the time of filming but was able to play the 12-year-old Isaac due to a condition that made him look younger than he was. He absolutely steals the show, chewing the scenery harder than a cow chews its cud every time he's on screen. He also portrayed Cousin It in the Addams Family films in 1991 and 1993 (IMDB)

corn” growing from his head and a sinner “drowning in a lake of fire” in each of his wide pupils (King, 265-267). The presence of scripture alongside bloody pagan imagery defamiliarizes and reframes these brutal passages from a book that has been framed as a source of love and redemption in modern Christianity when it in fact contains a great deal of truly horrific imagery alongside its promises of forgiveness and hope. The way that these verses fit so easily into the gruesome beliefs of this corn cult demonstrates once more the darkness beneath this pillar of American culture and the danger of religious fanaticism particularly in isolated communities.⁴³ Another principle Americans pride themselves on is freedom of religion as many of the first immigrants to the new world were Protestants fleeing Catholic persecution. They were often radical and extreme in their dedication to the text of the bible and frequently isolated themselves to the point of asceticism. However, the intensive religious beliefs of these sects often bordered on zealotry resulting in repressive, narrow-minded communities that repressed any deviation from a strict set of religious laws of performance in morality, sexuality, and gender that left many with undue shame and religious trauma that continues in many congregations today though things have grown much less restrictive for many 21st century Christians. Nevertheless, that history of repression and violence will always be a part of Christian history and the text of the bible itself. *Children of the Corn* depicts a hyperbolized version of what happens when believers focus on those parts of scripture while ignoring those that preach love and compassion towards all people. Notably, this film falls into the continued regional stereotyping of rural folks as religious fanatics.

I watched and read and listened to a lot of road trip horror for this project. One thing I noticed appearing again and again in almost everything I consumed was the figure of the

⁴³ This perspective on religion is indicative of King’s political beliefs regarding the danger of religious fanaticism and looking to religion as the sole cause or solution to the world’s problems, another notable example is Mrs. Carmady from his novella *The Mist* who responds to a local apocalypse by forming a small group of scared townsfolk willing to sacrifice a child to the monsters that have invaded their small town. This is another one where I would recommend the original source over the film adaptation, the ending is much better in the novella.

televangelist roaring fire and brimstone over the radio or through the TV.⁴⁴ Though there is some truth to the difference in religiosity and secularism in the urban vs rural areas of the United States,⁴⁵ the trope does fall into that aforementioned backward country folk archetype and the subsequent superiority complex of the often secular modern road trippers. As Vicky and Burt drive into Gatlin, they hear one such preacher raving over their radio about the evils of the world and the fires of hell. They quickly turn to another station and make fun of the preacher's intense sermon, calling it "drivel" (King, 255-256). This attitude towards rural religion both disrespects the faith held by these communities and dismisses the more harmful rhetoric within that faith as a joke not considering that it does real harm and should be treated seriously. It cheapens the normalization of violent and extreme religiosity as we can see in Gatlin. However, in the delightfully karmic fashion of horror, these two will be punished for their mockery and their condescension by the wrath of an ancient and thirsty god.

In the 1970s the resurgence of interest in these older pagan beliefs inspired a folk horror boom. The films largely reflected a certain fear of the return of 'irrational' and un-Christian folk beliefs among the countercultural youth.⁴⁶ Folk horror was particularly threatening in the 1970s and 80s, and probably more so today, to a society so set in the rational scientific thinking of modernity. When folktales and folk deities like "he who walks between the rows" are proven real the comforting laws of nature we have become used to are trampled beneath the inexplicable and unpredictable laws of the supernatural. Folk horror forces its often atheistic protagonists to accept that disbelief will not save them from the 'make-believe' spirits of whom their ancestors lived in terror (Scovell, 70). Not to mention the land that sustained them and now sustains us. A land that we no longer respect as we did in the times when we believed that there were

⁴⁴ We have already discussed the skinless preacher of the Blacktop

⁴⁵ They don't call the Midwest the 'Bible Belt' for nothing

⁴⁶ An excellent example of this is *The Blood on Satan's Claw* from 1971 in which a group of teenagers in a small English farming village start a cult around a severed claw that was tilled up in a field and attempt to grow a new body for this satanic figure through human sacrifice

monsters and spirits flitting over the fields. In the time of the telephone and the car and the highway, we city-dwellers have forgotten the true meaning of isolation within that vast landscape. Walking the empty streets of Gatlin Burt is reminded of what it feels like to be utterly alone. He wonders what must have happened to these people “all alone, cut off from the outside world by hundreds of square miles of the rustling, secret corn. Alone under seventy million acres of blue sky. Alone under the watchful eye of God, now a strange green God, a God of corn, grown old and strange and hungry.” (King, 268)

When we drive through those wide open spaces we are reminded of just how thin that ribbon of paved civilization is in the vastness of the natural world. In our cities and our neighborhoods we fill the space with noise and commerce and infrastructure and we feel big. Out there we become small again and oh so vulnerable to the land that we thought we had brought to heel. In *The Children of the Corn* the threat is born out of the very crops that have been sewn en masse to support our industrious civilization, mercilessly pulling the nutrients from the earth and shipping it far away in trucks that spit poison into the air and bleed it back into the soil. Looking at it that way, it is no surprise that the soil rises up and demands payment in blood.

King deliberately addresses the nostalgic Americana associated with farm culture and cornfields in particular and defamiliarizes the very sensory experience we associate with it. For Burt the smell of the countryside is one of “good associations. It meant winter was over for good... It was a smell tied irrevocably in his mind with other aromas that were perfume: timothy grass, clover, fresh earth, hollyhocks, dogwood.” In Gatlin however, “the smell was close but not the same. There was a sickish-sweet undertone. Almost a death smell.” (King, 263) The fear of folk horror relies on a subversion of our affection for the lands on which we live. We ooh and aah at the vista of a sunset over a green field and mountains rising over the horizon, but we do not like to get our hands dirty. We only worship the land as long as it looks pretty enough for a panoramic view to be used as a nice background for your computer. To some extent, it is tied to

the shift in the literary depiction of nature during the birth of the Romantic and Transcendental traditions. For the Romantics the land was godlike not only in its beauty but in its deadly power and vastness in comparison to humanity. This was known as the sublime (Scovell, 37). The Transcendentalists were part of a return to the land movement similar to that which went on in the 1960s and 70s focused on conservation and sometimes patriotism tied to the landscape. Like the movements that would follow them, they sought to re-personify the land in an age of industry which involved deifying it in the eyes of the American people.

After all as Julia Kristeva points out, “the abject is edged with the sublime.” (Kristeva, 11) For all the horror and the dirt and blood of Gatlin, Nebraska, its countryside is beautiful. That comforting smell remains alongside the metallic scent of blood. There is a god on this land and it is truly sublime in its power which infuses beauty with terror and terror with beauty. By the end of the short story both Vicky and Burt have been woven into this grotesquely folksy tableau. The pair hang in the cornfield like scarecrow parodies of the crucifixion of Christ alongside a similarly positioned skeletal figure still wearing its police uniform and the thing that walks the fields is “well pleased” and well fed (King, 276-278).⁴⁷ The triumphant vengeance of the land reflects the subconscious fear of an industrialized society that they do not have quite the hold on the forces of nature as they thought they did, knowing that they have exploited and abused it and it would have every right to seek retribution.

This return and repetition of nostalgic motifs from cornfield crucifixions is part of the longstanding tradition of hauntology in horror that relies on history and well-known symbols. Hauntology plays a large role in the effect of both Gothic and folk horror. It is the name given to the concept we have already touched on when discussing hicksploitation and other folk horrors such as *The Children of the Corn* and *Left of the Dial*'s 50s aesthetic. Namely the resurgence or

⁴⁷ The 1984 film adaptation ends with the burning of the cornfields and the destruction of he who walks between the rows in a spectacle of charmingly dated 80s special effects. Vicky and Burt drive off with the last two ‘good’ children in Gatlin at the perfect little family. Personally, I prefer the short story’s ending.

'haunting' of that which we believe we have left behind is thought to have been left behind. Hauntology is the continued influence of an inescapable past that refuses to be forgotten (Scovell, 122-123). Hauntological subjects can be as small as an ear of corn or as large as a field or rolling scrubby hills. The highway is dotted with these kitschy little pockets of American folk history. They lure us in with the promise of familiarity, a repeated image with a comforting history and we follow happily with our cameras raised. That is until the door slams shut behind us. There's a reason they call them tourist traps after all. From porcelain dinosaurs to giant balls of string to Mount Rushmore, Americans are obsessed with filling in the gaps between our cities with little shrines to our patriotic national myths.⁴⁸ These faces carved into our mountainsides and the good frontier heroes of our past haunt the American countryside standing alone in the wastes and beckoning weary travelers closer with promises of novelty magnets and family photos for this year's Christmas card. However, as we have learned these out-of-the-way attractions are rarely what they seem.

David Schmoeller's *Tourist Trap* hit theaters in 1979. Its premise should be familiar quite familiar by now. A car filled with vacationing college students breaks down by the side of the road in the middle of nowhere and the kids venture out into the wilderness to look for help. Lucky for them, they have broken down conveniently close to 'Slausen's Lost Oasis and Western Museum.' According to Mr. Slausen, it was quite a hotspot for tourism before they put in the new highway and left their little turnpike in the dust. Slausen's wax museum boasts such icons as Davy Crocket, General Custer, and a confederate soldier with a fully functional gun that fires as a gimmick to scare the "Yankee tourists." Slausen himself is the very salt of the earth, a smiling old man in overalls who is more than happy to help out a couple of stranded kids (Schmoeller, 0:18:53-0:21:12).

⁴⁸ My personal favorite is the corn palace over in South Dakota where you can see American history spread out in giant vegetable murals, so magnificently tacky

The hallways and backrooms of Slausen's labyrinthine house are lined with mannequins in various stages of construction which is creepy enough without the dark secret waiting behind those unseeing eyes. You see there is a reason that Slausen's wax figures are so very realistic. Each was once a tourist like our hapless heroes who were smothered alive by hot wax and added to sweet Mr. Slausen's army of the undead.⁴⁹ One by one the kids are coated in wax and made into museum exhibits until only one is left, Molly, to do battle with her waxwork friends alongside American icons.⁵⁰ Wax figures, dolls, and mannequins are some of the scariest monsters of the horror pantheon.⁵¹ It leads back to the Freudian concept of the uncanny. The closer something inanimate looks to a human being the more obvious it becomes that it is not making for a terrifying effect. We are inevitably reminded of a corpse. Similarly, Slausen's waxen patriotic symbols reflect the emptiness of these nationalistic myths and the danger they can cause when turned against their creators.

Both General Custer and the confederate soldier were involved in America's genocidal past, yet for many, their actions have been lauded as heroic. Though General Custer is remembered as a tragic hero of American military history, we rarely discuss the fact that his famous last stand was against the indigenous inhabitants of the Great Plains whom he was attempting to drive out of their land so that white settlers could move in. Though many, to this very day, argue that the American Civil war was fought over 'states' rights,' the actual goal of the confederacy was and always has been the perpetuation of slavery. Davy Crockett was the

⁴⁹ The exact nature of these dummies is left ambiguous. Is Slausen actually animating them with some terrible magic or has Molly, our final girl, lost her mind. Either way the effect of the mannequin's jaws dropping open and emitting human screams and the uncertainty of who is wax and who is flesh makes for a truly spine-chilling final act that I would recommend for a hot summer night with all the lights turned off

⁵⁰ She does make it, spoilers I guess, but the fact that the final shot of the film shows her driving down the road with all of her mannequined friends in her back seat it kinda tickles me. What is she going to do with them?

⁵¹ Another excellent tourist trapesque example is Stuart Gordon's *Dolls* from 1987 wherein a small family stops in at the house of an eccentric dollmaker after, of course, their car breaks down in the middle of nowhere, the dolls come to life to deliver karmic retribution against those who have not held onto their inner child in a truly magnificent feat of practical effects its a fairy tale fit for the Grimm brothers set out in the American backroads twisting once more the innocence we associate with children and their toys into terror

ultimate symbol of the frontier bootstraps spirit that defined early America which was framed as a virgin country, *terra nullius*, or empty land. However, we all know that that land was far from empty, that it was stolen and dominated not by heroes but by colonizers. By constructing these icons from the corpses of tourists and then turning them on their fellow Americans, *Tourist Trap* haunts its viewers with the consequences of smothering the dark truths of history in wax and nostalgia. The violence returns at the hands of those very heroes we venerate for the atrocities they committed. The figures that we molded and propped up for the entertainment of those touring the stolen land we are so proud of.

24 years later Rob Zombie would release his own take on the roadside funhouse of horrors with his directorial debut, *House of 1000 Corpses*. The film came out in 2003 but is set back in the 1970s when the films it takes inspiration from were released. Zombie takes the Americana tourist trap and twists it into a much more explicit postmodern commentary on America's fascination with its own gruesome history and morbid spectacle. This time though, the pitstops are the objective of the road trip rather than any particular destination and this new batch of arrogant kids is literally asking for trouble. Bill, Jerry, and their girlfriends are doing field research for a book they are writing on the "crazy shit you see when you drive across the country." Captain Spaulding's Museum of Monsters and Mad Men is exactly what they are looking for. Captain Spaulding the roadside clown has his own collection of animatronic American icons, however, there are no patriotic heroes in his gallery. Instead Spaulding's infamous "murder ride" is populated by real American serial killers like Albert Fish, Lizzie Borden, and Ed Gein alongside the fictional Dr. Satan, a surgeon who liked to cut his patients up more than he liked to sew them back together. As the tourists are pushed in a small wagon through the exhibit their host regales them with the true stories of murder and perversion as if he were presenting a classic freakshow or hall of wonders. As our protagonists move through the ride the campy macabre tableau are inter-spliced with black and white footage of the crimes these American folk monsters committed. All the while, Spaulding wears a bedazzled Uncle

Sam suit along with his signature clown make-up spangled with the stars and the stripes (Zombie, 0:10:32-0:16:53).

The gimmicky way that Spaulding describes and depicts the very real gruesome events exaggerates and satirizes the way that true crime is commercialized today. It is significant that the only killer on Captain Spaulding's murder ride that is made up for the purposes of the film is the infamous Dr. Satan. All of the other exhibits are taken from actual history that would have been contemporary during the time that this film is set making the carnivalesque tone taken with these gruesome crimes all the more unsettling. This campy ride satirizes the way that true crime media distances these killers from the reality and consequences of their crimes turning them into celebrities and bogeymen not connected to the real world and their very real victims. The crime itself and the fetishization of violence and the taboo, notable in the way that Spaulding makes emphasizes the sexual perversion of these crimes. Through his patriotic costume, Captain Spaulding becomes the spirit of commercial America itself selling its own dark history back to its citizens for a couple of bucks. After the murder ride, Jerry asks Spaulding for directions to see the tree on which Dr. Satan was hung according to local legend. On the way to their morbid tourist stop they pick up a hitchhiker and what do you know their car breaks down.⁵² Their hitchhiker, a bubbly blonde in a bedazzled cowboy hat, offers to take them back to her family's place where her brother can take a look at their car and the fun begins.

Little do our heroes know that they have entered the titular house of 1000 corpses, home of the Fireflys, a family of maniacs that has been trapping and torturing tourists for heaven knows how long.⁵³ In some ways they are getting exactly what they were looking for, the 'weird' shit you see on the roads. They just didn't expect to become part of the spectacle. The premise of Bill and Jerry's book places themselves on a separate plane from the spaces and people they are documenting on the road. They feel almost akin to the colonizing British explorers in the way

⁵² Bet you never saw that one coming

⁵³ Long enough for them to have 1000 corpses I guess

that they head out looking for something strange to bring back to their friends at home, profiting off of the fascination and taboo surrounding people and places on the physical margins of society. Captain Spaulding even calls them out on their condescension directly, foreshadowing their ultimate punishment for treating his world like a sideshow. Bill⁵⁴ is the first casualty of the Fireflys. He is killed, stuffed, and grafted onto a long scaly tail like a Fiji mermaid⁵⁵ becoming the Fantastic Fish Boy (Zombie, 0:42:26-0:45:00). When Bill becomes a curiosity the dynamic of looking is reversed. That which was being observed and consumed as 'curiosity' by those in the lower class who live far away from urban centers, is now observing their would-be consumer as a curiosity himself.

House of 1000 Corpses makes its audience constantly aware that they themselves are observing and not participating in the events they see on screen. The film's plot is intercut with clips of commercials that make it feel as if you were watching the movie on television ad breaks and all. These breaks include ads for Dr. Wolfenstein's horror channel which alludes directly to the other late-night horror movie channels hosted by such icons as Elvira or Peter Cushing at the time. The camera work and sets are chaotic and minimalist sometimes the colors shift into pure psychedelic as if you were watching the film through infrared goggles. All of this makes the audience constantly aware that they are watching a movie, that they are watching a horror movie that exists within the context of other horror movies.

The Fireflys are really just a more glamorous version of the family from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The film even includes a dinner scene that parallels that infamous family dinner perfectly. The family celebrates Halloween like Christmas hilariously inverting the values of their normative suburban counterparts. The metatextual elements of *House of 1000 Corpses*

⁵⁴ Played by Rain Wilson before he was Dwight K. Schrute, yes if you want to watch your favorite character on the office go through sadistic torture this is the movie for you

⁵⁵ Famous hoax and staple of curiosity shops everywhere. Essentially it's a mummified monkey corpse with a fish tail sewn onto its torso that was passed off as a mermaid by P. T. Barnum in the 1840s, google image if you dare this is no Disney's little mermaid

further satirize the way that violence is made passe by oversaturated programming as well as creating a loving homage to Zombie's horror heroes. Ultimately the film ends with each of our road-trippers becoming part of the attraction, one more corpse to add to 1000, an eye-catching number in itself that resembles the catchy titles you see for the many tourist traps along the highway. Zombie's film presents a surreal wonderland version of the horrors we imagine to exist just beyond the limits of the cities and fulfills our twisted desires for the grotesque before making our audience surrogates part of the show. The Fireflies seem to be quite aware of the way that their country has shunted people like them to the side. Otis, the young artist of the family, is depicted wearing a T-shirt with the American flag on it that reads "Burn This Flag." They clearly take pleasure in flipping the power dynamic established by class and capitalism in the most colorful and disruptive way possible.

Of course, there are more than tourist traps lying in wait to snap up curious travelers along the Great American Roadside. More terrifying still are the motels that are "programmed to receive," where "you can check out any time you like, but you can never leave." (*Eagles*, 0:03:31-0:03:42)⁵⁶ Kurt Connor's *Motel Hell* was released a year after *Tourist Trap* in 1980 and has a similar tongue-in-cheek tone to Rob Zombie's film. In this hilariously horrifying epic, we observe the fall of the great Farmer Vincent's Famous Smoked Meats and Motel Hello. As I'm sure you can guess by now, the secret ingredient to Farmer Vincent's meats is far from kosher. He and his sister Ida save a great deal on grocery expenses by catching and cannibalizing the tourists who drive by their farm before selling them back to a stream of happy customers once they've been dried and nicely seasoned. However, this is not your typical cannibal diner grift, this meat is homegrown and farmed locally. You see, Vincent and Ida don't just make their prey into jerky straight off of the road like animals.

⁵⁶ I know that most folks read *Hotel California* as a song about drug addiction, however, I choose to take the more literal reading. Why can't it be a spooky inescapable haunted hotel purgatory populated by ghosts? Let me have my road trip horror rock ballad

Before their victims are ready to become 'Famous Meats,' they must be "planted" in the "secret garden" behind the motel where they are buried up to their necks so that only their heads poke up above the soil in neat rows like carrottops. There they are kept, fed, and quiet until they are ready to be harvested and processed into Farmer Vincent's guaranteed all-natural hickory smoked meats without a hint of those newfangled preservatives. Vincent and Ida speak of their work like any farmer would casually discuss a particularly good harvest of corn or a high-quality herd of beef cattle. "They're good animals," Vincent remarks as they watch their crops slurp their dinners from feeding tubes. With guileless conviction, Ida agrees, insisting that "someone has to take responsibility for the planet." (Connor, 0:38:02-0:39:11) This strange process by which Vincent processes his victims makes the human body into both an agricultural product as well as a meat animal. He parodies the commercial crops covering the majority of the American countryside by making the earth itself into a holding cell for his backstock prisoners.⁵⁷

This solution to our planet's problem is rather sensible in a horrifying and rather hilarious sort of way. It is no secret that tourism for all that it loves the beauty of nature does more harm to it than good. The exhaust of their cars poisons the fresh open air of the scenic mountain roads they love driving down and the way to America's most picturesque vistas is littered with discarded candy wrappers and fast food bags. We consume without question the produce sold in grocery stores that have been harvested from monocultural farms and the meat killed with cruelty in unfeeling slaughterhouses. And we call Farmer Vincent the monster. At least that's the way he and Ida see it. All they are doing is reducing the traffic on the road and repurposing the excess waste to meet the inevitable demand of more tourists. It's a solution worthy of Jonathan Swift, if there are too many mouths to feed if there are too many people polluting the world, why

⁵⁷ Talk about reduce, reuse, recycle gotta hand it to the guy its an ingenious way to save on building materials and pasturing space

not kill two birds with one stone and get rid of the excess while giving the poor earth a break from feeding us?

The great irony of Farmer Vincent's philosophy, of course, is that by repurposing and profiting off of the tourists he harvests, he lures more out to his farm becoming part of the machine of tourism and American exploitation, perhaps not of the earth, but of one another. Vincent advertises his business as a return to the good old days when food was home-cooked without a nasty cocktail of chemicals and we wasted nothing, not even each other. Of course, as we now know those wholesome good old days never really existed in the way that we think about them today, nostalgia goggles secured firmly over our eyes and this too proves to be yet another performance, even for poor Farmer Vincent himself. After his terrible sacred garden is discovered and a rather epic battle chainsaw battle, Farmer Vincent finds himself with a chainsaw embedded in his side bleeding out all over his trusty overalls and flannel. As he breathes his last he confesses that his "whole life has been a lie" for his meats were made with preservatives.⁵⁸ As the camera pans back out of the slaughterhouse we see the now familiar neon sign advertising "Motel Hello." The flickering 'o' in 'hello' finally bursts in a shower of sparks leaving the sign to read, "Motel, Hell." (Connor, 1:35:40-1:39:27) It is on the nose, ridiculous, and quite satisfying. Still, there is a warning in it about the products that are sold as 'planet-friendly,' 'all-natural' and plaster their packaging with big red barns, smiling grandmothers, and happy farmers in straw hats. The packaging is all we see when we drop it into our shopping carts. However, what is produced far away from those grocery shelves and what is done to make it seems friendly and safe is rarely anything like that happy picture on the plastic bread sleeve.

Alfred Hitchcock is not a director one would frequently discuss in the same sentence as movies like *Motel Hell*, *Tourist Trap*, and the bombastic work of Rob Zombie. However, it cannot

⁵⁸ I think I actually cackled out loud at this scene

be denied that arguably his most iconic film, *Psycho*, sits comfortably next to them in the road trip horror pantheon. The 1960 classic has been practically deified in the realm of film academia. Even those who haven't seen the film will likely recognize the sound of screaming violins accompanying a knife stabbing harshly up and down during the infamous 'shower scene' where Janet Lee met her sticky fate. The film is credited by many as the first American slasher, however, before that, it was a movie about a haunted motel. The film kicks into gear when Marion Crane, a secretary at a bank, steals \$40,000 in cash from a rich client and flees onto the road.

The first time glimpse we get of the Bates Motel is its now iconic neon sign rising out of the black void outside of Marion's car. She's been driving all day and into the night and it is raining heavily. The motel appears miraculously like an oasis and the answer to her prayers. The angel who comes to her aid is Norman Bates played to subtle and unassuming perfection by Anthony Perkins who lives all alone in that pitch darkness with his invalid mother. He explains that, because "they moved away the highway," the motel has "12 cabins, 12 vacancies," but "we just keep lighting the lights and following the formalities." (Hitchcock, 0:25:56-0:30:13) Yet another odd little corner of the borderlands forgotten by an arbitrary road. Of course, we all know by now that this sweet young man is far from heaven-sent. The isolation and pointless routine of maintaining a perpetually empty motel reflect the psychological malaise into which poor Norman has fallen. Yet another place abandoned and left to rot by a rather arbitrary placing of roads. After killing his mother in a jealous rage, Norman finds himself compelled to take on her persona killing anyone who threatens the monotony of his life that he has come to both resent and rely on.⁵⁹ Marion Crane is only Norman's latest victim. She broke

⁵⁹ This element of the film and the novel it was based on was, like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* inspired by Ed Gein a serial killer active in the 1950s who also had a very intense relationship with his mother that left him devastated and desperate to keep her alive after her death by becoming her

the rules of her society and stepped off of the beaten path forfeiting her right to its protection and whether she truly deserved it or not paid the price.

The killing of its protagonist played no less by such an iconic actress 45 minutes into the film shocked its audience and changed the rules of horror. Yet this was not the only metatextual shock the film had in store for its audience. For today's horror fans, Anthony Perkins will forever be remembered as Norman Bates the psychopath with mommy issues, however, prior to this film he had made a career as America's "young teenage heartthrob" playing wholesome boys next door all over Hollywood (Fuller, 0:45:05-0:58:14).⁶⁰ Who would ever expect that all-American boy of such terrible crimes? Thus the meta-casting of Anthony Perkins made the twist ending all the more shocking to his loving audience. Even over half a decade later it is so easy to feel as safe as Marion does under his watchful eye. That is of course before the knife comes out and the dark repressed insanity of that all-American face brutally destroys any possibility of change in its picture-perfect but empty status quo.

American history and its landscape is littered with these sad and grisly ghosts. Places that are forgotten, and abjected, will inevitably be filled with folklore into which we project the guilty fear we have of the consequences of our actions and those committed in our name. The highway system is unimaginably vast and runs through a land that has been colonized and poisoned and bled dry of everything we can take from it. The monsters that populate this folkloric landscape inevitably reflect the systems of power involved in constructing both the idealized myth of America as well as its darker underbelly. Where we celebrate American capitalism, its freedom and equality, religious purity, and the land-loving frontier spirit we bury the greed, the terrible freedom and discrimination, the violent zealotry, and the violation of the

⁶⁰ *Psycho* ultimately ended that career as Anthony Perkins was unable to escape the shadow of this role which he played to such uncanny perfection, because he, a queer man in 1950s hollywood had become so used to playing just that role in his actual life, the all-American boy with the secret burning just beneath the skin, a secret that he only needed to repress because of the arbitrary prejudice of his surroundings the casting was accidentally ideal

earth. Along the way we have found men dressed in stars and stripes and overalls with knives gripped behind their backs and hungry portals to worlds existing in sick parallel to our own waiting to swallow up unwary travelers with secrets to keep. Road trip horror utilizes this American folk landscape to do the gothic work of unearthing all of the hard truths buried beneath the vast deserts and endless crops of America. We can ignore these spaces all we like, push the evidence as far away as we please, it will still be out there waiting.

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