FLOATING ON A MULE: ENCOUNTERS OF AMERICA

AN INTERACTIVE TRAVELOGUE

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Introduction

My senior thesis is a new edition to the literature and art of the great American roadtrip. My travelogue, which can be found at “floatingonamule.org,” takes the form of an interactive online map of my travels around the United States in the summer and fall of 2015. The map displays my route, marked by clickable waypoints that direct the viewer to different nonfiction stories. The stories themselves are told in a number of forms. The travelogue utilizes audio content, photographs, graphic nonfiction, and plain text. The end result is a collection of stories that function as a collage of encounters rather than a singular, cohesive, chronological narrative, though the user of the website, floatingonamule.org [FoaM], has the option to proceed chronologically if they desire to do so.

The travelogue is based on my travels around the US beginning May 24, 2015 and ending November 20, 2015. My dad drove me and my bicycle from Ohio to Bar Harbour, Maine. From Bar Harbour, I biked up and down the Whites, Greens, Adirondacks, through farmland, plains, fracking country, up and down the Rockies and the Sierra Cascades. After two months on the road, I was in Seattle. From Seattle, I headed down the Pacific coast, turning eastward again at Morro Bay, CA. From the coast I biked through the parched southwest to Vegas. From Vegas I travelled to Santa Barbara by vehicle. From Santa Barbara, I took a greyhound back to Vegas, where I picked the bicycle back up and rode through Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. I arrived in Austin on October 30th. From Austin, I made my way to North Port, Florida,
travelling through the bayou and then hugging the coast, biking most of the way and hitchhiking some of the way. In total, I biked about 9,500 miles and rode in a car about 1,000 miles.

My creative project focuses on encounter. These encounters are encounters of individuals, of nature, of man-made places, and of myself, who at times became unrecognizable from the person who began the trip. My goal in depicting these encounters is capturing individuals’ narratives in a faithful and accurate manner, creating a rich and tangible sense of place, and relating the reality of what it felt like--physically, mentally, and emotionally--to move sixty miles everyday for six months in a row. My project’s scope is as wide and as limited as all the people I met while travelling, all the places I saw, and all the experiences I had. My critical introduction has three parts. First, I highlight some key moments in the history of the American travelogue and position my own project within the existing body of literature. Then, I investigate how bicycle travel frames the particular ideological and thematic questions that concern me as a travelling artist. Last, I explain my creative process and justify the multimedia forms I incorporated into FoaM.

“Goin’ places that I’ve never been”: A Critical Look at the American Road Trip

To get a foothold, let’s look at some key moments in the history of the American road trip. Beginning with the diaries and letters of settlers, the travelogue has evolved as America has. The journals of Lewis and Clark provided an unprecedented wealth of factual information, while pioneers’ writings from the 19th century--such as those collected in “Paper Trail,” an online database of pioneer writings--detail the hardships of migration (Lewis, Clark and Moulton, 2003). These writings offer their readers a distinct sense of what America was like for the writer, but
they are still diaries and journals. They are full of scientific information or they are literal accounts of what occurred rather than literary recollections meant for an audience. These chronicles set the standard for a sequential, gradually unfolding experience of travel.

In 1856 Walt Whitman focused travel writing on encounter and persona, rather than literal recollection, when he penned the poem “Song of the Open Road.” The poem is a touchstone of writing that publicly articulates the longing for the freedom and opportunity of the road (Whitman). Whitman’s work marks an aesthetic shift in the style of the travelogue, no longer a simple chronicle of everyday occurrences. In Whitman’s poem inanimate objects acquire a spiritual significance to the traveler, and the road itself functions as a democratic space, where all are welcome and at home, where the traveler is not troubled by whoever denies him and blesses all that bless him. To what extent the road functioned as a democratic space in 1856, I am not sure, but it is worth pointing out that my travel narrative pushes back against these idealistic sentiments about the road. Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road” participates in a tradition of romanticizing the road as a space of freedom and individualism. If the individual is strong enough, Whitman’s poem suggests, he will find beauty and renewing energy while travelling.

Here [on the road] the profound lesson of reception, nor preference nor denial,
The black with his woolly head, the felon, the diseas’d, the illiterate person, are not denied;
The birth, the hasting after the physician, the beggard’s tramp..
They pass, I also pass, any thing passes…
These lines strike me as hollow in today’s America. It would have been too dangerous for me to embark on my travels if I were a person of color and/or a woman, especially if I were a black person, seeing as I experienced outright hatred on certain country roads just because of the fact that I was on a bicycle. Had I been black or brown, I would have had legitimate reason to fear for my life, and I would not have felt safe travelling and living as I did. If I were a woman my travel experience would have been significantly different as well. Racism and sexism pose a significant enough threat that I probably would not have felt safe travelling if I weren’t a white guy. Today, the road is far from a democratic space, contrary to what Whitman’s poem suggests.

I do, however, think Whitman’s poem pertains to my own travel because of the pace of travel in 1856 versus, for example, 1950. At the turn of the 20th century, the increasing availability of the automobile changed the American road trip forever. In 1903, Dr. Horatio Nelson Jackson set out to drive from San Francisco to New York, embarking on what was the first publicly recognized cross-country road trip. In 1916, Emily Post published By Motor to the Golden Gate which demonstrated that it was possible to drive in comfort from New York City to San Francisco (Post, 1916). Unlike Whitman, Post does not view the road as a place of intense trial. Rather than a psychological test, Post’s trip was a test of the extent to which America’s infrastructure was prepared to accommodate high-class automobile tourism. From this point forward, the American travelogue, for the most part, has focused on automobile travel. With the increase in speed of travel, the way Americans interacted with other Americans and even with the landscape changed. Whitman’s writings in 1856 reflect a road trip based on a more deliberate, slower form of travel--either by buggy or by foot--which is more akin to my
experience than automobile travel. A slow pace allows for more organic interpersonal encounters and a more deeply internalized sense of landscape. Furthermore, a slow pace on bicycle or on foot takes a physical and mental toll which can be seen in Whitman’s writing, but does not exist in quite the same form during automobile travel.

Regardless of the time period, the travelogue serves as a snapshot of America at a certain point in history. The most famous motorized road narratives--Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley in Search of America*, Kerouac’s *On the Road*, Least Heat-Moon’s *Blue Highways*, and Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*--occupy an important space in the American literary canon, offering readers a distinctly American experience of the promise and trial of the open road. These manuscripts bring our vast and diverse country into focus in the eyes of the writer. The American road narrative, in these books, captures some distinctly American individualism, some urge to uproot oneself and to become placeless as one wanders through new places. The energy and rebellion of the Beat 50s live in the pages of *On the Road*, which began to question Whitman’s problematic notion of romantic democracy while at the same time manifesting new—and also—problematic ideas, such as sensationalized drug use, destructive interpersonal relationships, and casually sexist and racist attitudes. A couple years later, Steinbeck’s often-humorous, sometimes somber *Travels with Charley* offered a more reserved narrative, one that also identified trepidation in a rapidly changing America. Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* prioritized philosophical questions and the interiority of the traveler. Then, in the 80s, William Least Heat-Moon’s *Blue Highways*, a road trip born of the traveller’s individual crisis, re-focused the travelogue on the individuals met while travelling. Since then, the American travelogue has gone off-road, so to speak, with hiking narratives such as Bill
Bryson’s *A Walk in the Woods* and Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild*, which offer a spiritual hike through the wilderness that is at times reminiscent of self-help. I have not, however, encountered a popular travelogue written by a bicycle rider, and I have not encountered one online.

**The Hot Seat: Bicycle Travel as a Method of Interrogation**

It is necessary for each generation to rediscover America, to face the road with the issues and questions of today. How does bicycle riding position a traveller to address these issues and questions?

My generation has digital lives as well as material lives; we have unprecedented access to information via the internet, and the government has unprecedented access to our information via the internet; we, in the midst of eco-crisis, are estranged from our beloved Earth; we recognize that racism is deeply ingrained into our government and our collective consciousness, and we have seen too many examples; we are examining and changing traditional ideas about gender and sexuality; we are at perpetual war in the Middle East; we are tired of an oligarchy that poses as a democracy; we are Americans but we may not be patriots.

Travelling on a bicycle, one earns an organic and intimate knowledge of the Earth we are slowly destroying while simultaneously engaging in eco-friendly travel. Spending days biking through the plains of North Dakota and Montana, for instance, all the while breathing in air thick with wildfire smoke, one feels the stench of human indifference to nature pestering one’s lungs. Biking through Texas oil country, passing signs that say “Danger, toxic fumes, hydrogen sulfide,” feeling a noxious light-headedness at the end of the day, one gains a surreal sense of the human impact on the planet through one’s own physical discomfort. Riding a bicycle through
Southern California allowed me to experience drought sucking the life out of my skin. As I rode by vineyards marked with signs that read “Irrigated by propane,” passed fields of avocados, almonds, and strawberries, all ripe in 105 degree dry heat, and then in town reading a sign that said “Jack and Jill had no water,” I became disturbed and disheartened by the way we own and distribute resources. I had an embodied experience of climate change because I was breathing hotter air and biking through more violent storms.

Another aspect of America that I experienced differently because of being on a bicycle was the segregation of systemic racism. On a geographical level, I experienced the stark juxtaposition between two neighborhoods in the same city literally separated by a railroad or a highway. Not only did this occur in big cities like Chicago or Cleveland but it also occurred in tiny towns in the middle of Texas, where there were three large estates on the edge of town, separated from a largely Hispanic population living either in mobile homes or in humble houses with tin roofs and DIY siding. Furthermore, a similar phenomenon occurred as I rode through reservation land to get to national parks. On Navajo and Apache land in Arizona and New Mexico, I was in a food desert as well as a literal desert, where I could only buy food at grocery stores such as family dollar. When I rode through Death Valley in early September I passed by the village of the Timbisha Shoshone people, a mere trailer park in the middle of the National Park “Death Valley,” a mile down the road from a green golf course and a fancy lodge. Likewise on my way into Glacier National Park, a place revered for its beauty, a place set aside to represent the ideal of nature as a secular cathedral, a place both awe-inspiring and stolen, I passed through Browning, a town on the nation of the Blackfoot Sioux. There I saw abject poverty from the seat of my bicycle, the kind of poverty that would have been shameful to
photograph. I could offer more examples to prove the point I am trying to make—that a road narrative from the seat of the bicycle is a crucial revitalization of the often too-romanticized American road narrative. Because there was nothing separating me from my surroundings, I could not ignore them.

As a bicycle traveller, on the saddle for six-twelve hours a day, I had plenty of time to meditate on a number of questions. My travelogue interrogates, addresses, poses, and/or attempts to answer these questions: What is it that makes an individual American and what does it mean to be American? How does what it means to be American differ from person to person? What unity do we find as Americans? What tears us apart as Americans? What problems exist in American society? What constitutes individual identity and how does individual identity change as the individual travels through new, unfamiliar spaces? What constitutes minimally adequate social interaction? What differentiates needs from wants? Who has the right to own what? Can an individual or a group of people or a government own a plot of land, a stream, a river, a lake, a cactus, a rock, a hill, a mountain, the insides of a mountain? How do material items gain spiritual significance? How do we reconcile the reality of living with privilege given the reality of injustice? Does all physical matter have the attribute of consciousness? Does every atom and molecule have a unique experience that it is like to be that specific atom or molecule at that specific moment in time and place in space? How do we interact with individuals we disagree with? What does it mean to be a cultural outsider, and to what extent can/should an outsider comment on the activities of a different cultural group? How do our memories differ from our experiences? What is the difference between meaning and purpose, between meaning and happiness? Can one be unhappy and well simultaneously? Can one have purpose without having
meaning? Can one have happiness without having meaning? Do we have free will? Is social mobility a myth sold by the media to condone and justify an oppressive power structure? Does America rely on slave labor? Is pain redemptive? Is the goal of climbing a mountain the view at the top, the fun of the descent, the sense of accomplishment, or the effort expended? To what extent should an individual trust a stranger? What do we do about climate change? How do we protest injustice? Who is responsible for injustice? Who ever does have a feeling that tonight’s gonna be a good night while they’re sitting in a Tim Horton’s at noon on a Sunday listening to a pop song that samples Etta James? Is the American flag something we should be proud of? When we experience beautiful sights, sounds, emotions, what remains of the beauty after the experience is over? When is one justified to kill an insect? To kill a rabbit? A moose? A human? Is one ever justified to intentionally kill another human? When is one justified to extract a natural resource from the Earth? How has the internet changed society? How has the internet changed individual identity? Is it possible for individual consciousness to be replicated by computers? Is it possible that human consciousness will be synthesized with computers, creating a new species of humans? What will happen in the cities of the southwest as water gets even scarcer? Are there bad people out there? Are there bad people? Is there bad, or is there only unfulfilled/unrealized good? If we do not believe in evil, how do we explain evil behaviors? What constitutes sexual consent? Can sexual consent ever be implied? Can sexual consent exist between intoxicated individuals? How does an individual’s aesthetic beauty (as defined by traditional beauty standards) or lack thereof alter their experience? How does one live in the present moment? What is the most urgent problem we face as a human race? To what extent do we fear too much? How do we dismantle destructive, hegemonic, and/or fragile masculinity? Is there anything holy
or divine about the Earth? Does sagebrush have spiritual powers? Can material items be
haunted? Are ghosts, spirits, or angels real? How do we interact with the homeless in a way that
affirms humanity, in a way that is not condescending or patronizing, in a way that helps the
individual? Does increasing someone’s ability to make choices in any way limit their freedom?
How do we enact love as a practice rather than considering it as an ideal? What constitutes theft?
Can one steal trash? Do animals have a concept of morality, of decency, of justice? To what
extent is my generation fucked by our circumstances? What are the ramifications of tourism on
the community which hosts the tourists? Is tourism inherently exploitative? What does a barter
economy look like? What does a sharing economy look like? Is there a good way to die? What
does it mean to have a thought? Does thought have a material analogue or does it exist separate
from the body? Can thought or experience ever be reduced to shear data? To what extent does
wealth inform an individual’s aesthetic sensibilities? Why do we define individuals by their
mental illnesses, and does the solution to mental illness entail a fundamental shift in our
approach to what constitutes sanity? What constitutes sanity? Can someone be simultaneously
insane and also a functioning, contributing member of society? Can one learn from solitude
lessons they would not be able to learn otherwise? What are the drawbacks of solitude? How
does stress manifest in the human body? How does stress manifest in the human mind? Is
emotional detachment a strength or a deficiency? Can one be emotionally detached and still
empathize? Does changing one’s name fundamentally change the individual’s identity? What
makes something dirty? What makes a person’s body dirty? What makes a person’s mind dirty?
What makes a person’s morals dirty? Can sex exist without intimacy? Is cole slaw better than
cake? How do death and life overlap? Can a human being ever lose their humanity before they
die? How many homeless folks have the police killed? What does ‘radical’ mean? Could we live in a society without police and without destructive power relationships? Where is the center of our souls? Is all suffering inter-related? Can one understand one’s own suffering without understanding others’ suffering? What does it mean if everything’s alive? How come we can’t figure out the simultaneous velocity and location of a quark? Where’s karma’s karma? Is there an underlying unity? Is there a noumenal center to phenomenal speech?

With such a list of questions, it is clear that I could not possibly answer even a third of them, yet these questions delineate a few important themes. All of the questions informed my journalling, my thinking, and my interests as I travelled through the country, and the justification for such a long list is that before asserting answers, I believe it is necessary to ask the right questions. For my purposes, the inquiry itself takes precedence. Some of the questions were more directly applicable to my experience, questions that occurred to my mind multiple times in a week, whereas others were secondary or tertiary, only coming to mind through associative thought or peculiar circumstances. The questions that most directly concern my work are questions about human impact on the climate, about economic and social inequality, about human connections and communities, and about the construction of individual identity.

From There to Here: Coding and Creating an Interactive Website

My thesis project is an important contribution to the existing body of American road narratives because of its utilization of multimedia as an effective way to tell unique stories. So how did I develop the content? How did the creative process develop from my experience as a
traveller to my experience as an artist/curator of experience, and how does multimedia allow me to engage the themes and questions I’ve already listed?

In order to relate the road trip as it actually occurred, in a way that is faithful to the individuals I met, I began with documentation in a number of forms. To begin with, I utilized the hand-written journal throughout my trip. Journalling at least once a day, I journalled a total of 94,500 words by hand. My entries did not follow any specific formula from day to day. I just wrote whatever felt like the thing to write and I attempted to enter a flow state when writing. My goal was, when I sat down with the pencil in my hand, to continue writing without processing, without stopping or pausing. I wrote character sketches, dialogue, scenery, impressions, anything that came quickly to my active mind. When I took days off, I typically spent at least half the day to “catch up,” to write about the things that I wanted to write about but didn’t have time to write about. My hand-written journals came in different sizes and forms. In chronological order, I went from “The Black Journal” to “The Loose Leaf Journal-Papers” to “The Purple Journal” to “The Blue Light Blue Mini Journal” to “The Blue Dark Blue Mini Journal” to “The Little Black Journal” to “The Big Light Blue Journal” to “The Little Green Journal.” After completing The Black Journal and the Loose Leaf Journal-Papers, I began writing in two journals at once, one being a larger journal and one being a pocket-size journal. This way, I had a small notebook in pocket when I was about the town, but I also had a larger journal for longer, more intentional journalling.

Throughout these journals, I focused on dialogue. Anytime I could remember what someone said to me, I wrote it down. Dialogue is key to character, and I see it as crucial that road writers represent the individuals they meet without fundamentally altering their speech, whether
on accident or to fit their own agendas. Of course, some inconsistency between actual experience and its rendering as art is inevitable. In the interest of preserving the fundamental unique humanity of the individuals I met, my goal is to minimize these inconsistencies and to capture idiosyncrasies of speech and manner. Having audio recordings of some of the individuals as reference, however, certainly helped me write accurate dialogue.

It is worth noting that when I re-read my journal entries, I can vividly recollect the experiences that I did journal about, but I cannot recall virtually anything that occurred otherwise. It is almost as if those things did not happen, and I know for a fact there are so many more meaningful things that happened to me than I was able to write down. I am aware of this selective bias and I realize that when I think of my trip, I am thinking almost exclusively about the things that I documented, thereby letting the rest of it slip out of mind. After I returned to Ohio, I typed all my journals into one google document.

In addition to hand-written journals, I utilized my iPhone to take notes, audio recordings (audio journals as well as field recordings of conversations), and photographs. I took notes on my iPhone when it was not opportune to pull out a notebook and start writing. I took voice recordings of myself while biking if I had a thought I wanted to remember. I took a few recordings of myself singing. I also took recordings of people talking. Sometimes I asked their permission. Other times I did not--I just began recording and then put my phone in my pocket and spent time with the person. The justification for surreptitious recordings is to accurately capture an individual’s idiosyncratic speech without bastardizing it with my imperfect memory. I found that when I asked to record a conversation, the conversation often became stilted and the individual spoke less naturally. Initially I thought that I would transcribe these surreptitious
recordings and then use them as dialogue lines, but once I listened to them again, I realized I would lose the immediacy of the voices if I transcribed them. Some of these individuals, Paul in North Dakota, for instance, I have contacted to ask if they would be comfortable with me using their voice in my work. Other individuals, some of whom I met on the street, I am not able to contact. There’s an ethical question about using their voices in my work. Despite the fact that I do not have some individual's’ explicit consent, I have chosen to include audio recordings of people such as Eliyah in Albuquerque and Jim and Eric in Seattle because I find their stories valuable for others to hear and because I am not, nor will I be, using the travelogue for material gain. Their voices are valuable to me as human voices, not as characters who populate a product I am selling. It is in the interest of sharing their human stories to others, not selling their stories for money, that I include them.

It is still possible that some of the individuals I met might feel misrepresented, or that some individuals will feel that I misrepresent entire communities. In the about page of the website, I’ve included the following paragraph:

I care about the people I met, the things they said to me, and the time we spent together. From the very beginning, my motivation for going on the trip was to encounter individuals I simply would not have met otherwise. I've done my best to preserve these folks' autonomy by capturing their speech and mannerisms as they occurred. If, however, you find yourself in this website and you don't like the way you're represented, or you'd prefer not to appear on the website at all, please contact me at floatingonamule@gmail.com.
In the event that an individual feels misrepresented, they could contact me to let me know they’d prefer not to be included.

In general, however, I believe that because of the intersection of race, class, gender, and other identity markers, the traveler-writer will inevitably experience some conflict with some individuals or communities that s/he encounters. To write about a rodeo hosted by mostly white folks on a Native reservation in Montana, for instance, I must be aware that I am an outsider not just to the indigenous peoples there, but also to rodeo culture. This awareness brings me back to dialogue and faithfulness to experience. It is important to me that, as an outsider, I relate my experience in a way that captures specific details, specific dialogue, specific characters, rather than makes moralizing generalizations or attempts to summarize my impressions of an entire cultural group, whether it be the white rodeo families or the Native Americans. In this way, I hope to particularize my experience. In the site that recounts a rodeo scene, the user encounters an intersectional conflict at the end of the story, where I wake up in my tent with an unfamiliar man staring directly at me, his arms crossed and his legs spread. The intersectional tension, latent in the rest of the piece, comes to focus in the particularity of my experience waking up, which is laid bare. Then, in the next site on the map, this tension is expanded upon and investigated (...org/Places/Wolfpoint.html and ...org/Places/Nashua.html).

Aside from audio, I used my phone to take about 3,000 photographs throughout the trip. As my phone space would fill up, I would upload the photographs and audio recordings to google drive and then delete them off my phone. Unfortunately, I lost about
200 photographs from Austin to Florida. I thought they made it onto Google Drive, but they did not. They’re gone. I took photographs from the saddle while biking, from the side of the road while off the bike, and as I walked around town. I have never had any formal education or training as a photographer, so my theory and goal was to take photographs that have an aesthetic correlation to my experience. I wanted them to come out as “true” to my eye’s and body’s perspective as possible. My photographs of desert landscapes, for instance, came out a bit fuzzy because of the condensed sweat that made its way between the lens of my camera and my phone case. One can see, even feel, hopefully, the heat in the texture of the photographs.

1 An example of a ‘from-saddle’ shot.
After I gathered together all the source content--journals, notes, photographs, and audio--how did that material transform into what the user finds on the website? From the start, as I’ve mentioned, my intention was to avoid creating a romantic road mythology even though I wasn’t sure exactly what the end result would look like. My peers have told me how jealous they are that I was able to have the experience of travel that I did. My peers have their own wanderlust, their own travel dreams that may or may not turn into plans and then into experiences. It is important to me to represent my trip as it actually occurred, not just as it lives in my memory, for the sake of these individuals. I am aware, now, that in retrospect, certain aspects of my trip feel in memory like they felt in dreams before I even went on the trip. Before I left, I had a notion of grandeur, of longing, of freedom that informed my wish to travel, and now that I’ve gone and returned, I think of the trip sometimes with the same notion of grandeur, longing, and freedom, yet these notions were contrary to the actual experience of travel. How would I capture my travels in a way that resembled my actual experience of travel?

I began developing the content for what would become “Floating on a Mule” in spring 2016 in tutorial with Professor Eric LeMay. Though I knew I wanted to create something interactive in the end, I began with plain text. I drafted a few pieces, which were somehow lacking in energy. Over spring break, I did an intensive reading of graphic nonfiction works, including Lynda Barry’s *Syllabus*, which justifies the utilization of graphic nonfiction for untrained artists. I began to let go of the good-art/bad-art binary and started experimenting with organic image-making throughout the rest of the semester. I found the results to be humorous and occasionally profound. These comics live in Barstow, NV, in Haverhill, NH, in Webberville, TX, in the Desert Somewhere, and in Beaumont, TX. In fact, the map found on the homepage of
FoaM is itself an example of a Barry-esque image. I drew the map with my left hand, partially with my eyes shut, and attempted to keep the pencil moving at all times. \(^2\)

\(^2\) A panel from a cartoon featured in Lincoln, NH
That semester, I also began to experiment with my work outside of plain text. Notably, I created a few booklets/zines/chapbooks. One of these, called “Inside Imagined House 18637,” I created with Adobe InDesign. This chapbook, set in Las Vegas, featured an entirely dialogue-based encounter with a homeless man named Michael and works through juxtaposition of text and image. The end result was too de-contextualized as an individual object, but through its creation I began to see the importance of dialogue to bring individuals to life on the page. The other booklet, set in Ione, WA, was made with a stapler, scissors, crayons, and a story-on-paper that I had already written. The process of creating this booklet led to some of the best writing on

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3 The hand-drawn map. After drawing it, I uploaded this image to Adobe Illustrator, traced the lines, and then added my route.
FoaM—though I’ve revised the piece a few times since I wrote it. I discovered that my focus on coincidence, dialogue, light, and color would best be captured in the simple present tense. I also began to re-work a manuscript I’d written as an audio piece, which one can find in Flagstaff, AZ under the subheading “Sheldon.” Creating this audio piece forced me to consider the literal voices of the people I include in the travelogue. How did the people talk, and if I were to speak their lines, how would I say them? Again, creation moved me to the simple present, a tense that demands immediacy. At the end of the semester, I even choreographed and videotaped a few movement ideas involving dancers that occurred to me as I was thinking about the linear balance, rhythm, and fluidity of bicycling. Unfortunately, I haven’t been able to work this moving content into the website itself.

In the summer of 2016 I focused my energy on plain text. Working on my own in the summer, I produced several longer drafts set in cities. The attempt was to capture the here-and-there nature of my wanderings throughout cities and the rapid-fire succession of encounters with strangers. These city drafts were set in and around Flagstaff, Albuquerque, Wolf Point, and Chicago. During the summer, I also produced a prose-poem called “New in Kindling Dark,” which is set in the Kaibab Plateau and Mukuntuweap. The impetus for this poem was an image, which compliments the poem (.org/Places/KaibabPlateau.html). When it came time to program the website itself, this piece, as well as the piece in Chicago, posed a challenge because the setting jumped from one place to another. To resolve this issue, I had to cut and paste parts of the stories and then make sure the edges were still smooth. I was also able to strengthen the city pieces with supporting photos and audio.
In fall 2016, in tutorial with Professor LeMay, I produced a few more plain text pieces and began working with source audio content. After sharing and workshopping the city pieces and the prose poem I had written during the summer, I switched my attention to the audio files I had stored in google drive--hours of raw footage. I used Adobe PremierePro to edit down audio content of individuals speaking. A beginner with audio software and audio engineering, I did virtually nothing other than cut and paste with the intent of isolating and conglomerating those audio bites that best represented an individual’s character. Using this style, I created 15 character bites--Paul in Bottineau, ND, Jim and Eric in Seattle, Michael and Leela on the Oregon coast, Groggs in Lincoln, NH, and others. I believe these audio clips, as opposed to photos or text, might provide the strongest sense of immediacy for the user. During the fall, I also produced some more plain text pieces--the ones set in Effigy Burial Mounds, in College Station, and along the coast of California. At this time, I also shared some unedited journal content from places that I knew I needed to include but wasn’t sure how to include: from Pure Bliss Ranch to Bottineau and from Las Vegas to Santa Barbara and back. I couldn’t get an idea of how to “re-tell” the stories of these places. The structure of the stories from these places did not take form until I actually began building the website, when I was able to pair images, text, and audio. At the end of the semester, I used Adobe InDesign to create an interactive booklet with a map as a table of contents. I found InDesign’s interactivity functions to be incredibly constraining, but I had created something that modeled what I wanted to do, it just wasn’t live on the web.

This spring 2017, then, I enacted the idea of creating an interactive website with a map and clickable waypoints as a homepage. The online map began as a skeleton code of a homepage with an image-map with clickable buttons. In tutorials I learned how to troubleshoot the code,
how to put files onto the internet, how to write in html, and how to style with css. Using Photoshop and Dreamweaver, I began adding dots on the map that correlated to subsites, and then filled these subsites in with content that I’d created. As I began to build the site, the subsites assumed a number of different lengths—some utilized audio, text, and photos, others just text, and others just photos. As I plugged content in, however, I came up against some stumbling blocks. I found that all the writing I’d done over the past year needed to be revised again, and the audio could still benefit from some trimming. Everything had rough edges, so as I programmed content I also revised the content. Near the end of March, I had finished creating all the subsites. At that point I went back through every subsite and line-edited/revised the pieces one more time.

At the end of March, I had the opportunity to beta-test the website with a group of undergraduates in Professor Dinty W. Moore’s creative nonfiction workshop. Some of the students and Professor Moore himself were confused about the chronology of the site because they didn’t find the “about” section, so they were clicking around the map without any direction. To fix this problem, I added the words “Click Bike” to the map, so that everyone who enters the site would start with the about page, which gives them a contextual understanding for how to experience the site. I also expanded this “about” section to include more information. Some of the undergraduates brought up specific individuals they remembered from the website, which made me happy, since I wanted characters to be well-rendered and memorable. Though none of the other students agreed, Professor Moore wrote me, “If I were your editor, I would urge you in the strongest way possible to somehow re-envision and re-arrange this project so that there are fewer dots on the map, and instead of being tied to place, the dots would correspond with individual characters” (Moore). For the sake of this project, it’s too late to do that sort of
over-haul, and—though I was pleased that Professor Moore found my writing of characters so compelling—I believe the dots still do need to correspond with place, so that the characters within those places are encountered almost by coincidence.

Through the process of creation and through sharing my project with peers and mentors, I’ve come to realize that the fundamental thing that distinguishes my travelogue from its predecessors is its form. When someone reads a long-form narrative, a book, they are locked into the narrative frame that the author has created the story within. The author, more often than not, crafts the story as something with a beginning, middle, and end. At least, this is how *Travels with Charley*, *On the Road*, *Blue Highways*, and *Wild* work. As such, the reader follows the author through the story on the author’s terms. If one started *Wild* on page eighty, say, read till the end and then read the first eighty pages, that person would have an odd, confusing, and ultimately unsatisfying experience. In these travelogue books, the meta-narrative—the overarching story the author creates within which each chapter has context—means almost as much as the individual anecdotes do. In the travelogue I’ve created, however, users may choose to override the chronology, though they should be aware of it. They are not tied to my over-arching story. If a user is from Portland, she may simply click on the dot for Portland, look at the pictures and read the anecdotes, experience the encounters there, and then leave. As creator, I cannot say how the reader’s experience will be effected by going chronologically from the beginning or by starting in Las Vegas for an “in the middle of things” trip. I can’t say that one of these is the ‘best’ or ‘intended’ way to experience the website. The ‘best’ or ‘intended’ way to experience the website is to find people important and to listen to what they’re saying.
To be clear, I do believe that my website has a meta-narrative. The meta-narrative is itself the website’s focus on encounter in place. The user may proceed chronologically, or they may start in the middle of things, or they may simply click around wherever they please. In the about, I’ve offered the user a few suggested ways to navigate the site. If one were to proceed through the entire website having started in Las Vegas, as per my suggestion for ‘in the middle of things,’ they would probably experience layers of meaning that might not be evident to someone clicking around randomly. Both of these users, however, might have a similar encounter with Paul in North Dakota. Because both users are able to click an audio link that features Paul’s speech, they both experience his character with a sense of immediacy and presence that has little dependence on the meta-narrative or overarching chronology of the site. Chronology and my own development over time become important insofar as they inform the way I encounter different individuals in different places. I myself become a character encountered in different places.

Throughout the creation process, as an artist and an individual, I’ve come up against some ethical questions and dilemmas. After returning from this trip, I found myself confused by people and almost emotionally stunted. I’d become so used to moving on every day or week that I’d forgotten what it meant to work on developing a relationship with an individual over time. I’d become so used to ignoring my feelings of discomfort that I’d forgotten how to take care of myself. I’d become so used to being alone, I’d forgotten how to have friends. I believe now that humans aren’t meant to travel alone and that anyone who tells you they feel okay on their own for over a month is probably lying. My solitude was useful, but it was also damaging and unnatural.
As an artist, my moral dilemmas centered around reconciling the reality of privilege with the reality of injustice. If the Great American Road Trip is only available to a certain privileged subset of the population, then is it worth going on? I recall biking in the drought heat and looking to my left and right, where migrant workers--de-facto slaves--picked grapes all day. There’s something perverse and shameful about that image. I can’t shirk it. Shouldn’t something that’s good and fulfilling be good and fulfilling in equal measure and in equal opportunity? How can I justify spending almost two and a half years working on something that a person of color probably would not have been safe doing? If I don’t believe in the Great American Road Trip on principle--for its exclusivity, its vanity, and its romance--then what are the merits of my own travels and what about those travels is worth communicating to others? I found that, even if I do not believe in the road trip at all, that it is still worth it to share encounters. It feels important.
While Lynda Barry’s book of graphic nonfiction is not itself a travelogue, it does provide a theoretical justification for the utilization of the graphic nonfiction form for untrained artists. In *Syllabus*, Lynda Barry documents her experiences teaching a course that attempts to unlock the creative process of creating images. Doing away with the good/bad-at-art binary, Lynda Barry asks her students to create organic images, often with humorous and profound results. In my own work, I utilize her techniques and her theory.


A classic in American road narratives, this film explores the tensions of the American sixties. Wyatt and Billy ride their motorbike across the American south, partaking in hippy subculture while being shunned by mainstream culture, and ultimately assaulted by two conservative ‘rednecks’ in Florida. This film depicts the tension within a country that promises freedom to its citizens, yet whose citizens treat those who practice that freedom as less-than-human. Indeed, the ending of this film seems to push back against the idea of a democratic America, or at least it serves as a warning that practicing freedom is quite dangerous, even for white guys.

A road narrative born in loneliness and pain, *Blue Highways* chronicles the journey of a man who had nothing else to do but hit the road. Fresh out of a relationship, fresh out of a job, equipped with a van and a copy of *Leaves of Grass*, Heat Moon explores small-town America, staying clear of big roads and big cities. This book positions the American road narrative within the realm of faithful non-fiction, without any sensationalising or needless mythologizing. The book frames the road as a shelter for the otherwise hopeless man, a sort of refuge where one may find company and solace, and a place to re-discover one’s identity.


Kerouac’s *On the Road* still sits on the dash of many aimless vehicles and in the packs of many wandering hitchhikers. The narrative, in all its speed-infused rush, all its ‘it’, captures the sense of urgency and desire for something more than the traditional American Dream. Fueled not only by gasoline, but by sex, drugs, and adrenaline, this road narrative reframes the road as a space of rebellion and social protest, its characters interested in crossing all sorts of social, cultural, and political norms all the while theoretically searching for some spiritual resolution on the other side. Critics have rightly identified casually sexist and racist tendencies within Kerouac’s thinly-veiled autobiographical novel. The narrative had a profound cultural impact, encouraging countless youth to go on their own adventures, to rebel, to listen to jazz music, and to experiment with drugs.

One of the founding documents of the American west but also of the American travel narrative, these journals function mainly as documentation and information-gathering. At the request of Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Clark departed with the mission of finding the most direct and practical route through the west, to further commerce and to expand the American empire. The journals contain numerous contribution to science, but also chronicle the dramas of the travelling party, including interpersonal conflict and romance.

Moore, Dinty W. “Floating on a Mule.” Received by Michael Mayberry, 31 March 2017.


Post’s *By Motor to the Golden Gate* poses the question of whether or not, at the time, it was possible to drive in comfort from New York City to San Francisco. Though this travelogue features an adventure conducted by women, the journey remains an upper-middle class exercise of leisure. Unlike Whitman and Kerouac, Post does not view the road as a place of hardship or intense trial. In fact, she would have ended her trip if the trials became too intense, and she and her company, her son and her cousin, stayed in the finest hotels and ate the finest food available. This trip was a test of the extent to which America’s infrastructure in 1915 was prepared to accommodate high-class automobile tourists on a cross-country trip.


Though not a travelogue in the same sense as the others in this bibliography, *The Grapes of Wrath* shows what cross-country travel looks like when it is not a choice. The novel also informs Steinbeck’s own travelogue *Travels with Charley*. *The Grapes of Wrath*
follows the Joad’s on the road to California, on the search for work and home. The narrative at times pushes against the idea of the road as a democratic space and at times conforms to it. On the one hand, the Joad’s are well aware of the differences between their shoddy Jalopy and the shiny new cars on the highway. Likewise, they are also turned away at diners and face other discrimination based on class. On the other hand, within the community of migrants, the Joads find companionship as they join their vehicle in a caravan with another family.


A dying man, Steinbeck said his purpose in *Travels with Charley* was to see what Americans are like nowadays. Throughout his travels, Steinbeck expresses concern with the state of modern America, with its weapons, its mass production, and its consumer culture. Writing in a wisdom voice, which gains legitimacy through the use of humor, Steinbeck’s aim and scope are grand. He pinpoints the problems in American society as he perceives them, often with a disillusioned or bitter voice. Though Steinbeck the novelist may or may not have embellished some of his encounters, the encounters themselves are more or less mundane, as Steinbeck’s interest lies in the everyday American.


A New York Times No. 1 bestseller, and now a major motion picture, *Wild* tells a story of initial distress followed by spiritual realization on Strayed’s solo hike from the Mojave to Washington. The travelogue stands out for its synthesis of past and present, for its determination and honesty, and for its inspirational but realistic attitude to hiking. As a
solo woman traveller, Strayed proves that it is possible to travel as a solo white woman, and indeed her story has inspired a myriad of women and men alike to hike the PCT. Recovering from a heroin addiction Strayed began her hike without any hiking experience whatsoever, over-packing and quickly encountering physical hardship. Despite these setbacks, which pale in comparison to the pain of the loss of her 45-year old mother and her resulting addiction to heroin, Strayed learns the lessons of the trail.


Another road movie that ends in disaster, _Thelma and Louise_ is widely regarded as a feminist classic. In this movie the road, where Thelma and Louise encounter and kill the rapist Harlon as well as the robber J.D., is a dangerous, masculine space. Not only does the movie cast two women as the leads in a road narrative, but it exposes the role of harmful, hegemonic stereotypes commonly held by men about women. The sensational narrative pushes back against the ‘road as a democratic space’ narrative, instead portraying the road as a hegemonic space.


Another frantically written Roman a Clef, _Fear and Loathing_ explores the barrenness of the American dream, which seems to live on as an empty promise despite the counterculture movements of the 60s, which have failed despite all their enthusiasm and unique transgressions. Unlike Kerouac, who justified his drug use as a way to cross cultural and spiritual lines, Thompson’s drug use, fictionalized in the character Raoul
Duke, is acknowledged as a way to make a mess of oneself. Drug use in this context renders the individual a reflection of American society, and thus becomes itself a form of critique and protest. However depraved and repulsive the drug use may be, the novel asks the reader to consider that America is no less depraved or repulsive.


Published in Leaves of Grass, Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road captures the archetypal spirit of the American Road. The road is heralded as a democratic, perhaps even utopian space, where the traveller, though he finds himself challenged and weary, is ultimately rejuvenated by the road. Whitman ascribes a certain spiritual value to travelling. The traveller is sure to be in good company, and when he passes through new spaces, he comes into contact with all of the collective experiences held in those places through the years.