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Two Roads Diverge: Route 66, “Route 66,” and the Mediation of American Ruin

Andrew F. Wood

I explore Route 66 as both a material environment and constellation of media texts, highlighting how contemporary exigencies having inspired the creation of simulations and simulacra of the road. Simulations include reproductions of historical sites and experiences, such as refurbished gas stations and nostalgic performances; simulacra include the construction of conflated geographies that obscure the meaning of “the real” altogether, as seen in the Route 66 Casino Hotel and the movie Cars. Ultimately the question of “real” assumes a central focus in this piece, as it frequently does in research inspired by an omnitemporal framework, as today’s Route 66 entrepreneurs create, sell, and enact images of the “Mother Road” to tourists, travelers, and even academics who sometimes prefer inauthenticity to any number of supposedly real histories of the highway.

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Tourists gather together on a sidewalk on a warm spring morning. Windows appear to reflect the sight of a girl in a flatbed Ford who looks approvingly at a guy standing alone in the gathering light, a guitar resting against his leg. He’s caught the girl’s eye, but the hitchhiker won’t enter the red pickup. In fact, he isn’t going anywhere. While the Eagles song “Take it Easy” drifts amid the sunbeams, folks in their forties and fifties fiddle with their cameras and study the clever *trompe l’oeil* girl and bronze

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guitar player. Agreements are made and smiles are exchanged: I'll shoot you if you shoot me. They've come, some from a long way, to stand on a corner—"the corner," according to a sign propped for the purpose—in Winslow, Arizona. Preparing for this moment, some of the wealthier visitors stayed the previous night at a refurbished Harvey House, La Posada, right along the train tracks; they ate an expensive dinner in the Turquoise Room, surrounded by ads for the Santa Fe railroad. Others found more modest lodgings, perhaps at Earl's Motor Court on East Third Street, the mom-and-pop with the giant letters blinking the word "motel" in green neon on the roof, the one boasting a plastic backlit sign that advertises, "Sleeping on the corner in Winslow, Arizona" (Figure 1). For these people, this convergence of place and media forms an important locale of memory and meaning. This is Route 66, a decommissioned road reinvented as tourist attraction.

When high-speed interstates bypassed the old two-lane road that brought traffic downtown, Winslow seemed poised to disappear. But local entrepreneurs capitalized upon Winslow's connections to the famed Eagles song, along with its Route 66 roots, helping bring the northern Arizona railroad town back to life. Many visitors stop by for a momentary snapshot, maybe grabbing coffee at a nearby cafe, but some stay longer and spend more money, either here or further down the road. For a growing number of tourists, towns fashioning some of their identities along and around Route 66 form a sprawling repository of Americana as a constellation of media texts. I am one of these tourists, outlining in this essay a thumbnail history of that road and sketching out a method of its analysis before concentrating my attention on ways in which Route 66 offers ever more simulations and simulacra of itself. I conclude with some consideration for implications of an America whose dream of freedom seems increasingly distanced from the realities of civic life.



Figure 1. Standin' on "the" Corner in Winslow, Arizona.

Hitting the Highway

The nearly 2,500-mile diagonal thread connecting Chicago and Los Angeles always existed both as road and “road.” Route 66 began in 1926 as a promise of an American ideal, a “good road,” the path that John Steinbeck would label “the Mother Road,” the place that Bobby Troup would call “the highway that’s the best.” It is more than a way to get somewhere; it has long been viewed as a place worth going. Throughout its existence, Route 66 has reflected a convergence of practical necessity and outlandish hucksterism, representing a conveyance to the mythical Frontier, the exotic Other, even the Promised Land. Yet since being decommissioned in 1985, and more so in recent years, a phantasmagoria called “Route 66” has layered itself upon older strata of all-weather highway, road of migration, soldier’s trail, and postwar tourist highway.

In March 2008, I returned to Route 66 to explore how the road presents idealized versions of itself as a meaningful place.¹ My journey traversed from snow and rain in the north through howling winds on the plains and scorching deserts in the southwest to congested surface roads by the Pacific. Based on months of preliminary research into a voluminous amount of print and online travel guides, but also following eye-blink hunches and the advice offered by locals along the way, I drove Route 66 in search of a thickening surface of mediated imagery that stretches across a material palimpsest of trace, macadam, concrete, and blacktop. The method of my research, starting, let’s be honest, with a delightful roadtrip, may best be termed a close reading of those artifacts through which Route 66 becomes mediated by its own iconography.

I visit the road as a lover of its people and places, and my first impulse is to celebrate the ways in which far-sighted and resilient folks hold fast to an idea of America. Here I recognize something nostalgic though safely amorphous, a hazy not-quite memory that calls up an index of memories of movement and freedom, of community too: a caravan of fellow-travelers, each in their own individual cars. I see my own drive for proximate-distance, the chance to frame a vast space from the protected screen of a car window, as a means to get close to others but never so close that I cannot return to the open road alone. And I know that something about this ambiguity troubles me, compelling me to consider the thing that must be lost when Route 66 is perpetually founded and re-founded. I must unpack the implications of a structure based on mediated texts that often obscure the places they represent.

I approach this topic as a decidedly interested participant-observer. Since 1996, I have focused much of my own recreation and a fair amount of my scholarly efforts onto Route 66, completing the entire route twice and exploring smaller alignments every couple of years, paying special attention to roadside architecture found in tourist traps and independently owned motels. My experiences of the road are informed as much by personal wanderlust and journalistic gaze as the theoretical apparatus of scholarly writing. Transcribed interviews, field notes, photographs, and a growing collection of material artifacts such as postcards, pamphlets, maps, business cards, ashtrays, key fobs, even discarded insulators that once topped road-adjacent telegraph and telephone posts, not to mention hours of chats with folks in cafes,

motels, and attractions, comprise some of the raw material that contribute to my understanding of the road.

As a guide to reading these texts, I initially find it useful to consider constructions of “authenticity” as my conceptual focus.² After all, this notion of seeking the “real” through travel, and the presumed inauthenticity of tourism, has long served as a point of departure for scholars of mobility, whether related to the American roadside or to broader processes of global tourism. We recall Daniel Boorstin’s (1992/1961) and Paul Fussell’s (1980) rejections of pseudo-events and pseudo-places built to accommodate tourists who would prefer to avoid the authentic hassles and risks of reality. To Boorstin, the experience of tourism “has become diluted, contrived, prefabricated” (p. 79). Dean MacCannell’s (1973) response that tourists are hardly superficial, that they “demand authenticity, just as Boorstin does” (p. 600), set forth a debate over the notion of authenticity that continues today.³ While I side closer to MacCannell’s perspective than with Boorstin’s and Fussell’s critiques of the tourist experience, arguing even that meaningful touristic pleasure comes from recognizing its inauthenticity, reveling in the ability to peer backstage, I continue to hold that increasingly mediated experiences, while pleasurable, are ultimately alienating (Wood, 2005a). In fact, one might suppose that this essay continues a conversation advanced by Hardt’s (1993) articulation of non-alienated and, presumably, non-alienating, environments that “increase the chances for the emergence of free individuals [based on] reclaiming language and the realization of a symbolic environment in which participation becomes a mode of existence and leads to democratic processes” (p. 63). That these environments reside within, alongside, and sometimes in opposition to the discourses that shape contemporary life makes them worthy of study. Along Route 66, many tourists seek that sense of meaning, of place, of community. But they find something else too: efforts to recreate the road by simulation and simulacra that call to question the very authenticity that Route 66 represents.⁴

In its place, one finds the affirmation of an American myth built upon the nostalgia for modes of transformation and places for consumption that merit critique as much as they inspire affection. The rebuilding of Route 66 in the image of America-the-mobile calls forth what Hal Rothman (1998) termed a “devil’s bargain,” the touristic impulse to transform (or import) locals and their locales into idealized, sanitized, and merchandized versions of themselves, resulting in the loss of something substantial, often the abandonment of the real or its accommodating alteration that results in its destruction. Rothman notes how “[t]ourist workers quickly learn that one of the most essential traits of their service is to mirror onto the guest what that visitor wants from them and from their place in a way that affirms the visitor’s self image” (p. 12). Paul Virilio (1995) offers an insightful parallel with this term, “*the delocalization of the local*” (p. 87, emphasis in original). Thus, people and places are edited and transformed into versions of themselves, ideally caricatured to be easily read by the high-speed motorist or easily related to media texts that for many interpreters seem to come first in their experience of the road. The co-creators of this myth, the investors and owners and managers and laborers of these businesses, are not dupes of consumer desire; they know their business all too well. To be fair, many

of these folks appreciate “the road” even more than any tourist. Theirs, they frequently say, is a labor of love. Still, one must consider the implications of a love for a place that seems increasingly built upon a surface of simulation.

Route 66 as Simulation

A growing number of boosters have begun to refurbish existing but rundown Route 66 sites, or even chosen to produce superior simulations of the originals. In both cases, strategies of self-referentiality become key to understanding how these sites craft the notion of Route 66 as “Route 66.” The Odell, Illinois Standard Oil gas station illustrates efforts to refurbish originals. Built in 1932 from a 1916 “house with canopy” design, the gas station had fallen into disuse once Interstate 55 bypassed Odell. Even so, locals saw value in transforming the station into a sort of museum piece that might draw motorists back into town. They even spruced up a long white bench that recalls an era when regional bus services connected tiny burgs throughout the country. And, for when the station is unattended, restorers added a recorded message to visitors, announcing in part:

The station represents another generation, a time when the pace was a little slower and travel was an adventure. Tens of thousands of people have passed this way before you. Some say that if you sit on the bench and close your eyes, you can sense, *even hear*, the sounds of folks from long ago. It is a magical moment. The excitement of travel, the apprehension of what lies ahead on the ribbon of road known as Route 66. We look back on these old Mom and Pop businesses with respect. Places like this represent *real America*. (emphasis added)

With this recording, the Odell Station marks the presence of reality through its absence. To sit at the bench, listening to the recorded narration, one attempts a form of time travel by willingly projecting the self into the past, away from the present. The place has proven to be meaningful enough already to serve as site for at least one wedding.

Similar refurbishing efforts, such as the Soulsby Station in Mount Olive, Illinois; the Phillips 66 station in Baxter Springs, Kansas; and the U-Drop Inn in Shamrock, Texas convey visitors generally to the same place: a series of tourist exchanges where cold drinks, t-shirts, postcards, and other stackables are handed to visitors. Each of these offers assurances to the weary (and potentially wary) motorist that *this* truly is the place, particularly as evidenced by the ubiquitous Route 66 highway shield sold as tin collectables, affixed to shot glasses, and attached as car decals. It must be noted that these places still sometimes maintain functioning businesses beyond the selling of travel totems, or they plan to start them eventually. The gloriously art-deco U-Drop Inn, for example, hopes to transform itself from a Chamber of Commerce office and occasional community center back into an actual diner within the next few years. Roy’s Station in Amboy, California now sells gas and may even reopen a few cabins once it can get water service restored to the broiling desert ghost town. One can hardly doubt that these efforts represent a positive step in the commemoration and continued existence of American roadside history. Yet these places, and the kind

and helpful folks who run them, seem to represent continual reminders of the same place, each simulating a meditation upon the same ritualistic consumption of gas, food, and lodging. One no longer visits Odell or Mount Olive or Baxter Springs or Shamrock or Amboy by way of Route 66. Instead, one visits Route 66 by way of these places. Each one becomes a means to gather and distribute a common set of artifacts, mediating the collective memory of roadside Americana as a linear museum, varied in its displays but unified by one swell gift shop.

Beyond basic refurbishment, a number of sites have been entirely rebuilt atop the ruins of their former selves. Sometimes the reproductions are literal, but more frequently they vary greatly from their original designs and uses. By way of illustration, I recall my 2008 visit to Paris Springs, Missouri, when I came across a brightly painted Sinclair gas station labeled Gay Parita. With its “visible pumps,” advertisements for S&H Green Stamps, and prices for regular gas at 15 cents per gallon, I could be forgiven for imagining that I’d somehow escaped from present-day America. Only the large sign pitching Route 66 Root Beer pulled me back from the past. I wandered down the display and read the signs in silence until its owner, Gary Turner, bounded out from a nearby residence and invited me to see more of his re-envisioning of a station that burned to the ground in 1955.

Offering an inch-by-inch tour, Gary piled photographs, pamphlets, and business cards into my waiting hands, stopping occasionally to indicate where I could sign pre-printed signature-souvenirs: “Kix on ‘66’ Gary to . . .” His use of quote marks around the route number was likely intended to signify emphasis. But it means something more to me, a nascent awareness of the pleasurable artificiality of this simulation that creates a different mode of exchange than the norm. I spotted a button and asked the price, but Gary insisted that I keep it with no charge. He trades mostly in signatures, sharing his and awaiting those of guests, sometimes in the form of letters or photo-essays sent months after an initial visit. I then asked if I could take a photograph and found that Gary has long performed this ritual. He donned a cap, cocked his head, and lifted a phone to his ear, portraying a fifties-era gas station attendant. Knowing how many people have shared this moment in this manner, I imagine that hundreds, maybe thousands of similar photographs have begun to fill Route 66 scrapbooks around the world. During our chat, he told me that he’d made millions selling cars in California but decided that he prefers a simpler life in Missouri. Posing as an image of the ideal gas station attendant is Gary’s current line of work (see Figure 2).

Where there was once a ruin, now one finds a glorious simulation. The pleasure of Gay Parita is not in offering one more place to buy gasoline. One may say that the meaning of this place is in its near-impossibility. At the time of my visit, a period affected by severe price spikes, the price of gas was nearing the four-dollar mark. But one may forget all that, at least for a while, at Gay Parita. Gary does not seek to refurbish a station to current realities; he and most of his visitors prefer a knowing detachment from reality, where a “gas war” results in pennies on the price tag. Similarly, while media memories of gas station attendants conjure forth images of uniformed professionals handing out maps and good advice, most travelers know all too well the reality of filthy bathrooms and grimy fingernails. Visiting folks such as



Figure 2. Gary Turner's Gay Parita.

Gary, we hardly hope for a reproduction. We prefer reification: transformation of abstract ideas into material reality with the physical site as foundation not function.⁵

Perhaps an ideal example of efforts to recreate idealized versions of Route 66 may be found in Lucille's Roadhouse in Weatherford, Oklahoma. Lucille's is named for Lucille Hamons who ran a tiny gas station in nearby Hydro (about five minutes east of Weatherford). For nearly 60 years, Lucille operated a much loved Route 66 landmark, dispensing fuel, souvenirs, and stories for Mother Road travelers. Following her death in 2000, Lucille's station began a gradual decline before Rick Koch purchased the station and began work on its renovation. But now there are two Lucille's: the original and his much larger replica located four miles away. Koch's new Lucille's sells an undeniably decent meal, while affirming its nostalgic identity with fifties music, chrome stools, turquoise booths, tile floors, and Conoco gas pumps (set at 35 cents a gallon). And, throughout, signs point to various histories: Route 66 shields, Texaco and Phillips marquees, and framed advertisements for late fifties Chevys, Mustangs, and Corvettes. With these aids, Lucille's Roadside reifies the idea of Route 66. The literal reality of Lucille cannot be called forth any longer, and even photographs promise fewer and fewer people the recollection of a real person who lived and died on the Mother Road, just a bit further down the road. Instead, the abstract referent "Lucille" becomes real enough with the aid of recessed neon and glass block, a place with a large parking lot located conveniently near a Holiday Inn. The simulation must precisely not be real, merely real enough to fix "Route 66" upon the decaying roadbed.

"Route 66" as Simulacra

Route 66 has long served fake versions of tourist fantasies, especially of the West. While the highway could be driven in either direction, westward from Chicago or eastbound from Los Angeles, its dominant orientation has led motorists toward

visions of cowboys and cacti rather than dreams of dipping toes in Lake Michigan. The hyperrealism of iconic images, often drawn from literary references or cinematic portrayals, led to the construction of simulacra: images referring to other images with no underlying reality. Referring to the transformation of Newberry Springs, California's Sidewinder Cafe into the Bagdad Cafe following the (relatively modest) success of a movie using the same name and shooting location, Langer (2002) writes, "Route 66 shakes up memories of scenes that never took place" (p. 135). Objects along Route 66 are often designed to remind tourists of fertile American myths, and motel owners learned to capitalize on the tourist expectation of Route 66 *as* the West, more than a mere link *to* the West, in their signage and even physical designs (Mahar, 2002; Wood, 2005b). Even today one may stay at the Desert Hills Motel in Tulsa, Oklahoma lit by the neon of the only cactus to be found in these parts. And cement tepee motel rooms promise lodging in so-called Wigwam Motels in Holbrook, Arizona and Rialto, California. The incorrect terminology for the native dwelling (they resemble tepees, not wigwams) only further accentuates the nature of Route 66 simulacra: reproductions of mediated texts reflecting tourist desire over physical and cultural reality.

We find efforts to lay fantasy atop roadside reality that lead back to the road's earliest days. Even as far back as 1928, two years after the road's commissioning, entrepreneurs sought to capitalize on the highway in the form of a transcontinental footrace that partially followed the new route. The nascent Highway 66 Association, not without some trepidation, affiliated itself with what would soon be mocked as the "Bunion Derby" in hopes that media attention might propel the new national road into the public consciousness.⁶ As such, Route 66 started as more than a highway; it began as a synecdoche for America. It was this place that animated songwriter Bobby Troup to fashion a lyrical map across the country with his 1946 song, "(Get Your Kicks On) Route 66" (Krim, 2005). For generations of motorists, the highway has become a series of stops chosen for their ability to rhyme with each other, even if they failed to follow the actual route of the road, as evidenced by the reminder, "Don't forget Winona," a town included because of its assonance with Arizona and not because of its relative position on 66 (or for its charms). From 1960 to 1964, the television show *Route 66* further complicated matters by placing its characters in locations all around the United States, but almost never on the actual highway. Once the Eisenhower interstates began threading themselves across the country, Route 66 had become a sign system pointing to an ideal rather than an actual place. Thus, today tourists may visit a site such as the Jackrabbit Trading Post in Joseph City, Arizona, recalling billboards featuring a black rabbit set against a yellow background, looking for "here," finding at last the iconic sign, "Here it is." Inside are tin shields and t-shirts depicting Route 66 and the store itself, good people running the place, too: honest, friendly, warm, and fair. Still, the Jackrabbit exists for many tourists as purely a textual universe of souvenirs celebrating "Route 66" and its own well-known iconography.⁷

Departing the "real" road, we now turn to places demonstrating the purest forms of roadside simulacra, places based solely upon the idea of Route 66 without even

possessing their own history. These pure simulacra typically construct media-rich environments designed to conflate vast vistas of geography and culture into a singular place. POPS reflects that phenomenon. Opening in 2007 in Arcadia, Oklahoma, POPS is a gas station, convenience store, and diner that is remarkable mostly for claiming to sell between 400 and 500 different types of soft drink. An entire world of sugar water can be found at POPS, including Desnoes & Geddes Kola Champagne, Sprecher Ravin' Red Cranberry Cherry, Jackson Hole High Mountain Huckleberry Soda, and something called "Dr. Whatever." The glass façade is lined with about 12,000 pop bottles that glow when lit by the sun. But they are not for consumption, as white placards remind: "Bottles in windows are for display only. Please check coolers for available pop selections." Throughout the store, flat-screen monitors portray trinket-buying opportunities, and crowds of tourists line up to buy Route 66 gear and sometimes to buy POPS swag ranging from t-shirts to rub-on tattoos.

Above the row of soda coolers hang a series of seven framed Route 66 posters: California's Wigwam Motel, Arizona's Jackrabbit Trading Post, New Mexico's Blue Swallow Motel, Texas's Cadillac Ranch, Kansas's Rainbow Arch Bridge, a Missouri Steak'n' Shake, and Illinois's Ariston Cafe. Roadies recognize each place as a genuine artifact of the highway, places burnished by age with the patina of authenticity. And yet we find one state missing, Oklahoma, which reflects the lesson of Route 66 simulacra that gather the entire road into one continuum: All-place is more important than any place. In this manifestation of the Mother Road, we find some culmination to an omnitarian sensibility that colonizes even the most seemingly local and authentic places (Wood, 2009).⁸ One does not visit POPS to see Arcadia or Oklahoma.⁹ One visits POPS to see "Route 66." "Here," one imagines a chain of similar sites one day connecting the length of the Mother Road, each one near enough to the interstate to facilitate easy-on, easy-off access, each near enough original roadbed to warrant the purchase of a pin that reads, "I've driven Route 66." To visit POPS is to experience a place constructed intentionally as an icon. From its googie-inspired cantilevered design, meant to suggest a 50s and 60s era space age business, to its 66-foot tall pop bottle sculpture that pulsates with LED lights at night, POPS was built primarily for the camera and the cash register.

Consider also the art deco Donley County Eastbound Safety Rest Area, completed in 2003 by the Texas Department of Transportation. This place is part of a program of themed environments designed to evoke aspects of Lone Star State culture while inviting motorists to break from the potentially monotonous length of interstate cutting across the panhandle. Outside, an asphalt-looking playground-path evokes images of the road; nearby, a plaque labeled "What Replaced Route 66" lists the Eisenhower-era interstates that roughly follow the older road. Inside, visitors find walls festooned with old advertisements for highway-related products that include Texaco gasoline and O'Neil's Velvet Motor Oil. A kiosk topped with a plastic Sinclair Dino gasoline logo assures patrons that they are both on the interstate and "along" the old Route: an instructive distinction, given that older alignments of 66 remain nearby:

You may be driving the modern Interstate, but you are also driving right through the heart of American history. You are traveling along the route of old Route 66, the narrow two-lane ribbon of concrete that reached from Chicago to Los Angeles, bringing millions westward in pursuit of the American Dream.

The dream chain of cities is gathered together in places like this and transformed into a sign-system of corporate referents and interstate numbers, as if one could seek to reproduce all of the Mother Road in some other way. These sorts of simulacra call to mind suburban streets named after the trees they've displaced, except that the copies reproduce only more copies.¹⁰

We find one culminating impulse of Route 66 simulacra, the ultimate Route 66 theme park, at Pueblo of Laguna's Route 66 Casino Hotel, west of Albuquerque. Pulling off the highway and parking on a vast lot, one enters a neon-lit world of shops, restaurants, and signs thematically linked to a conflated version of the Mother Road set within a giant climate-controlled enclosure. I first visited the casino in 2004, led from place to place by a patient but eagle-eyed public relations rep dispatched to ensure that my camera lens would not capture gaming devices. I returned in 2008 to find a hotel added to the casino, completing the possibility that one might live in "Route 66," while seeing only a necessary few miles of Route 66 from airport to check-in.

A tour through the casino calls forth an array of Route 66 images. An entrance mural presents the complex as a winding roadmap that depicts classic cars cruising a path complete with tourist traps and restaurants, interspersed with pictures of slot machines. The Hungry Cowboy Buffet boasts a tall "muffler man" sculpture similar to the kinds found along the original roadside, such as in Illinois. The marquee for the Kicks Cafe resembles a neon sign found at any motel or greasy spoon along the route, complete with blinking yellow bulbs and streamlined bands bisecting a diagonal metal tube. Nearby, a model of Shamrock's U-Drop Inn stands, its fluted columns soaring out of some Buck Rogers comic. Tucumcari's beloved Blue Swallow motel is reproduced in mural form, complete with a painting of itinerant Route 66 illustrator Bob Waldmire resting against the aging sign.¹¹ Even the Santa Monica Pier, often considered the western terminus of the road, symbolically at least, transports patrons to a bingo hall.¹² In the Route 66 Casino Hotel, we witness the completion of roadside simulacra: the whole world reproduced as a map placed atop the original, not tattered as Jorge Luis Borges (1998) imagined, but tempting as a replacement.¹³

With the 2006 movie *Cars*, we even find the map expanding across and beyond the original territory, illustrating how simulacra draw less from place than mediated memory. As Roadies have long known, Pixar animators traveled the highway with historian Michael Wallis, searching for inspirational settings and characters upon which to build the story of an impatient race car who learns to slow down and enjoy life. The film's creators thereafter modeled the Cozy Cone Motel after the highway's two Wigwam Motels, Ramone's House of Body Shop after Shamrock's U-Drop Inn, and even a distant mountain range after Amarillo's Cadillac Ranch. Route 66 personalities also were translated into cartoons. For example, Sally the Porsche, the out-of-towner who settled in Radiator Springs, was modeled after Dawn Welch who

decided to purchase and run the Rock Cafe in Stroud, Oklahoma after traveling much of the world while working on cruise ships.¹⁴ At least two Route 66 personalities offered some inspiration for the dim-witted but lovable Tow Mater. Michael Wallis went as far as to lend his voice to the character of the Sheriff, adding both a sense of authority and authenticity with his powerful baritone. With dozens of other homages, some only readable by a dedicated Route 66 roadie, the producers of *Cars* can reasonably claim to have sought some degree of verisimilitude.

Still, since the relative success of *Cars*, Route 66 businesses and personalities reversed the process by associating themselves with the movie. In shops and diners, posters, books, and other *Cars*-related memorabilia peek out among the older Route 66 collectables, inspiring a new generation of roadies. In fact, during my March visit I found myself trailing a father and daughter who were driving the Mother Road through Oklahoma together. As we exchanged smiles and a few words at various stops I presumed that the dad was sharing with his kid an adult version of a great road trip. Only while touring Arcadia's Red Barn together did I learn that it was the daughter who insisted on a Route 66 summer vacation after seeing the movie. No doubt, business owners who seek to attract tourists have learned much from *Cars*. Given the speed of the tourist gaze, the darting look from object to object, presumably authentic Route 66 places and people often find that building their affiliation with the movie yields greater hope of tourist recognition than merely existing on the road upon which the movie was based. As a result, one can find a growing number of beat up and rusting boom trucks gussied up with the addition of oversized "eyes" placed in their windshields. One might never even know that the version found in Galena, Kansas, resting on the parking lot of a snack and antique shop called Four Women on the Route, is the original one, the one that inspired *Cars*' creators to create Tow Mater (Figure 3). Adding those fake eyes, the original veers back and forth between the experience of authenticity and simulacra, much like many tourists' experiences of the highway itself.



Figure 3. Tow Mater in Galena, Kansas.

Conclusion

In studying Route 66 as a simulation and simulacrum of itself, this essay has offered no claim to the novelty of its conclusions. It's never been just a road; it's always been an idea of the road, a text subject to popular and critical analysis from its beginnings. Winding its way through more than 80 years of American history, transmitting ideas, objects, and people in discrete packets over its nearly 2500 miles, the highway has lived, died, and been reborn as a place, more than as a way to go elsewhere. To drive Route 66, the nostalgic among us say, is to seek the quirky, natural, and humane America that is otherwise lost amid a grid of homogenous, artificial, and alienating exchanges. That vision is what draws people like me to visit its tacky tourist traps, dusty diners, and elderly motels: The hope to encounter something meaningful in the creased maps and blue highways of guidebooks promising "real" America.

That fanciful vision also has inspired refurbishment projects by federal or state entities, along with those enacted by complex culture industries and regular folks dedicated to saving the Mother Road from the final bypass. We imagine, we hope, that this phenomenon helped save towns like Winslow. Writing in the *New York Times*, Susan Morgan (2007) finds an apt parallel between Winslow's renewal and the version found in *Cars*: "Cars' has a happy ending—Radiator Springs bounces back to life. And although Arizona is not Hollywood, Winslow, too, has reawakened" (p. F3). Just like the movie, a town lives again. These efforts to preserve Route 66 by repairing its crumbling foundations and repainting its weatherworn exteriors do much good. All too easily the road could decay and rust and rot away by the neglect of time.

For this reason the old road must become augmented by simulations of self-referentiality and reification that mediate its material reality according to texts that create a sense of authenticity. The meaning is too real to be limited to reality. Route 66 exists ever more by signs that say "Route 66." Moreover, the road increasingly presents tourists with simulacra that point less to any underlying reality than to media texts referring only to themselves. Within this collective fantasy that is produced, consumed, and co-created by small town boosters, gimlet-eyed entrepreneurs, culture-shaping media personalities, historically-minded preservationists, and even a few road-tripping academics, we experience a potent articulation of environments, businesses, and people who have become idealized versions of tourist desire. Upon this highway's new iteration, one must look hard to see the old road, what Scott and Kelly (1988) remember as "Bloody 66," the dangerous, traffic-strewn artery whose replacement by the interstate was labeled a sign of progress long before it was a sign of decline (Figure 4). Route 66 becomes a sanitized version of itself, its ruins transformed into photo opportunities.

Thus, we may at first be inclined to conclude with pithy remarks about the inauthenticity of even the most well-intended preservation efforts. However, our journey cannot end there. Beyond questions concerning the authenticity of Route 66, we must also encounter this thread of sites and texts as a reflection of a broader transformation of civic life into a series of consumer exchanges whose interpersonal connections increasingly center upon mediated versions of America. In this instance, nostalgia for an American age of mobility, with its totems of drive-in, fast food,

motor hotel, and similar signifiers of automated movement, reveals a popular identification of national identity as ideally (or at least necessarily) marked by motion, distance, the fetishization of the motor. Mike Davis (2002) points to Los Angeles and Las Vegas as exemplars of this “car-defined urbanism,” a strip-mentality that conflates an ever-colonizing disciplinary apparatus and consumer identity into an increasingly narrow band of public life. Jeremy Packer (2008, p. 271) adds that this media-fueled fantasy of perpetual motion enacts a “car = freedom = equality” equation that neatly eludes analysis of the carceral nature of all of those individuated containers. Where then do we find democracy?

For most Americans, traffic is a democracy of individual slights, a prison built of our own free will to move. It becomes a synecdoche for civic life. We must jostle one with another, competing for space and time, our electronic connectivity tying us together with invisible bands. The open road, particularly the freeway that leads west, serves as the mythical counterpoint to civic life. We imagine the potential for near limitless speed, punctuated by momentary exchanges, brief conversations, an edible landscape composed solely of our choices to stop and go. Freed from social constraints, our mental horizons stretch outward to embrace sightlines no longer marred by urban canyons. Red buttes and setting suns, the memories of *Road Runner* cartoons, cast deep shadows where we might hide from human interactions. We may stay a night or two at one of those thirties-era motor courts, the ones with attached garages. We might savor a bowl of chili at a roadside diner whose neon sign makes a transfixing photographic opportunity at twilight. And as night falls we can look down the road to miles and miles of empty space. For us, Route 66 fills that emptiness with simplified simulation at first, then with simulacra that transcend any pretence at authenticity. Ultimately Route 66 serves spiffed-up images of itself, with near ubiquitous tin shields and related iconography that contain no more meaning than this: This is the Place.

To be sure, one may still find the real road alongside the superslab and increasingly distant from the dream-road. One may step over barbed wire to photograph an abandoned building in the ghost town of Glenrio, Texas. One may yet search for the remains of John’s Modern Cabins near Rolla, Missouri, which during my last visit featured freshly painted Burma-Shave signs that warned, “Photograph these while you’re here. The wrecking ball is looming near” (Wood, 2009). One may still chat with folks who remember the road as a conveyer for cars before it became a backdrop for *Cars*. One may, in short, walk along a portion of the old route that may be termed original. But doing so becomes ever more difficult with the passing of time and the values of artifice over authenticity, as Route 66 becomes “Route 66” to survive. Thus, we leave the conundrum of Route 66 studies. Even one’s scholarly critique invariably conjures up one’s own love of this place, one’s personal needs to be “here,” which cannot be abandoned by the side of the road.

I write this from a personally constrained position, literally in the front seat of my car in a parking lot where I seek some solitude and inspiration. A laptop computer is crunched against the steering wheel and a Starbucks coffee shop fills the windshield as I conjure up my memories. Even in this paradoxical place, I profess and perform an unabashed love of highway travel and culture. The lure of the road is no mere

academic inquiry to me; it is part of my identity, a means of conveyance away from the occasionally confounding realities of my everyday life. My office is practically a temple to the highway, filled with highway shields, postcards, and memorabilia mostly of Route 66. In particular, I keep a framed print of Andreas Feininger's 1947 photograph "Texaco Station on Route 66" as a mental vacation, one available through the power of prolonged gaze. Billowing white clouds crown a tableau of the West, which is cut by a dusty road piercing into the horizon, all that space made accessible by gas station, by hotel, and by diner. There is nothing else, other than a hitchhiker who awaits a ride. In that era, decades ago, one might imagine that the hitcher would be picked up eventually. Even now we have no illusions even for that limited form of interaction among strangers. The highway and its horizons has become America, an expanse of freedom that freed us finally from each other.¹⁵

What an irony then that Route 66 has come to represent an earlier, simpler time where people helped each other, chatted with each other, and saw America with each other. This fantasy, this "Route 66," exists as a series of set pieces, of names, histories, and destinations, and of those people who choose to perform these narratives out of passion or duty or the desire for profit. We reinvent the road just as we reinvent ourselves. Looking back upon the pliable past, we need not stare too closely at our weathered foundations when plenty of cleaner, safer, and more accessible histories wait, usefully fitting themselves to our needs. This place—Steinbeck's Mother Road, but also his "road of flight"—is a perfect lens upon our contemporary lament, that we are most authentic in our search for community when we recognize the solitary nature of that journey, that we are most honest about our ideals when we recognize briefly, fleetingly, the performances they entail. It is a strange transformation indeed that we find ourselves looking backward with misty eyes to the technologies and structures, to the road, that got us here in the first place.



Figure 4. Kansas Route 66 shield.

Notes

- [1] While this essay concentrates on processes of *how* Route 66 communicates a set of values, I share Nodelman's (2007) inquiry into *why*: "Why has 66 turned out to be more interesting to so many as a downgraded, abandoned, or disappeared highway than it was as a functioning strip of pavement?" (p. 172).
- [2] Route 66ers struggle mightily with notions of authenticity. Who is a real Mother Road advocate and who is merely a collector of souvenirs? At least some of this distinction may be traced to the construction of Route 66 found in Michael Wallis's (1992) *Route 66: The Mother Road*, the most significant work on the subject published in a generation: To Eyerman and Löfgren (1995), Michael Wallis "develops a classical polarization between the tourist and the real traveller, a rhetorical pastiche on superficial and genuine experience of past and present" (p. 59).
- [3] Scholars that have followed MacCannell's more tolerant analyses of modern tourism include Redfoot's (1984) rebuke to the "cultured despisers" who "denigrate the reality experiences of the tourist" (p. 304), Wang's (1999) proposal that authenticity ought not be defined by outside "experts" but according to the perspectives of tourists themselves, and Cole's (2007) claim that rebukes of tourist commodification by privileged outsiders reflect little of the advantages perceived by locals. See Caton and Santos (2007) for an application of this perspective to the Route 66 tourist.
- [4] Responding to Jorge Luis Borges's fable depicting the laying of a map upon an empire, Jean Baudrillard (2006/1994) states, "It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer of the Empire, but ours. *The desert of the real itself*" (p. 1, emphasis in original).
- [5] Ned and Michelle Leuchtner have accomplished a similar goal, rebuilding Cool Springs Camp in Arizona's Sitgreaves Pass atop the ruins of the original, which burned in 1966.
- [6] Not to a desired affect. Williams (2007) recalls that footrace organizer C. C. Pyle failed to properly advertise Route 66 in his promotional materials and even appeared to denigrate the highway as a safe pathway for his runners. Even worse, "Pyle besmirched the good name of Highway 66 by inviting a barrage of negative publicity associated with the race, such as being egged and operating games of chance" (p. 217).
- [7] Childers and Bradbury (1996) recall: "During the latter years of Route 66, some souvenir shops and roadside stands hawked Southwestern kitsch such as cheap turquoise and silver jewelry and rubber hatchets, but in the beginning many of the operations were as indigenous to the countryside as the hills over which the highway passed" (p. 24).
- [8] This is, I should add, one omnitarian sensibility among several. Other articulations of omnitopia include Dung Kai Cheung's *The Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City* (English excerpt in Cheung, 1998) and Robert Redeker's (2003) *Inhuman: Internet, School, and Humanity*.
- [9] POPS does sell at least one entirely local product, Round Barn Root Beer, in tribute to the famed Round Barn also located in Arcadia.
- [10] Shapiro (2007) notes, "The popularity of reproductions and simulacra demonstrates the cultural and architectural significance of various recent past styles and structures. However, while copies thrive, 'originals' often sit vacant or are slated for demolition to make way for the construction of an imitation of something else" (p. 11).
- [11] As this essay was nearing its final draft, Bob Waldmire was nearing the end of his own journey, living in a converted school bus and dying of cancer. On November 22, well-wishers gathered at Springfield, Illinois's Cozy Dog Drive-In to celebrate Bob's life and purchase samples of his artwork. Like many students of Route 66, I feel fortunate to have met the man once, back in 1996 when he was running the International Bioregional Old Route 66 Visitor Center in Hackberry, Arizona. Our visit forged an indelible memory for me. Of course, it is the nature of the road that Waldmire will exist for most people as a reproduced signature on

his myriad and stunningly detailed postcard images of Route 66's places and people, an ephemeral souvenir sold at nearly every stop along the highway. That said, he chose not live on as the namesake for the bus in the Disney/Pixar movie *Cars*. The producers were forced to select "Fillmore" to signify their aging hippy character instead of "Waldmire" because Waldmire, a vegetarian, didn't want to help sell hamburgers through the movie's tie-ins with fast food restaurants (Schmadeke, 2009).

- [12] Steinhauer (2009) notes that Route 66 never actually terminated at the Santa Monica Pier; its final stop was the less photogenic intersection of Olympic and Lincoln Boulevards. No matter, local boosters added an "End of the trail" Route 66 shield to the pier when celebrating the road's 83rd anniversary in 2009. What about those purists who reject the creation of a fake endpoint as a means merely to give tourists something to photograph when they reach the Pacific coast? Steinhauer quotes Route 66 Preservation Foundation chair James M. Conkle: "It's a myth . . . but it is a myth added to all the other myths of Route 66."
- [13] While an extraordinary example of the theme, I should note that other Route 66 sites like the town of Lexington's Memory Lane and the Towanda Walking Trail attempt similar modes of conflation, gathering parts of the whole into a singular locale subject to the pedestrian viewer's gaze.
- [14] On May 20, 2008, fire gutted the Rock Cafe, which opened in 1939. The destruction of a small diner merited regional news coverage, but the Rock's near-destruction remains unknown to most folks living more than a hundred miles from Stroud, Oklahoma. Even so, Route 66 roadies worldwide poured out their concerns and support to owner Dawn Welch, encouraging her to rebuild. The Rock Cafe reopened a year later.
- [15] Fotsch (2001) reminds us how General Motors knew this particularly well.

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