THE GREAT AMERICAN ROAD TRIP:
EXPLORING IDENTITY IN THE OPEN LANDSCAPE

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A THESIS

Presented to the School of Journalism and Communication
And the Honors College of the University of Oregon
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

June 2013

An Abstract of the Thesis of

Lily Grace Bussel for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

In the School of Journalism and Communication to be taken May 29, 2013

Title: THE GREAT AMERICAN ROAD TRIP:
EXPLORING IDENTITY IN THE OPEN LANDSCAPE

Approved: [redacted]
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My thesis aims to understand how humans create a sense of identity by drawing on their physical surroundings. It looks at the hidden stories I find in various photographers' work and celebrates the 'average'—the truck driving families, painters, hotel receptionists, soccer playing twins. . . Those whose story will not make front cover news or prime time TV, but who make up the essence of the American landscape. Using different authors' writing, I discuss the role that our physical environment plays in people's external relationships and internal dialogue. I also explore the literal and metaphorical contrast between cities and small towns, cornfields, and canyons. My thesis's visual and written elements examine how places influence individual identity in the larger context of the open landscape.

Dedicated to my family who instilled in me a love of travel.

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We stopped in Buffalo, Wyoming for Duct tape. We probably would have stopped anyway had it not been for the faulty window. My mother, the trip navigator, set a goal before we left that the car should stop at every forgotten town, forlorn marketplace, and crumbling antique shop from Philadelphia to Eugene. For the first thousand miles we accomplished most of these goals. We drove along gravel roads into towns with population signs that read "47" where teenagers' Friday nights consisted of sitting on the steps outside the only convenience store, sipping Slushies and smoking cigarettes. We parked on side streets next to 1950s JCPenney department stores with displays of clothing styles to match.

Now, we were in Buffalo, a town with one main street. Adorning its side sits a historic inn and several thrift stores featuring Western apparel—the kind that look like a group of cowboys donated their too tight chaps before moving on to the next town. Next-door is an office supply shop. The cashier chatted with a customer.

Buffalo is a small town—where you run into your teacher, who is also your best friend's dad, at the office supply shop. I perused the aisles, looking for the Duct tape that the store did not carry. The 2001 Toyota Avalon that so faithfully carried us from Pennsylvania to Wyoming, with just a missing passenger door handle as its scar, was beginning to show more signs of its wear. Dried mango bits stuck to the car's floor and muffin crumbs, remnants from my numerous trips to the only Whole Foods store in Memphis due to all restaurants' menus being fried in the thickest of greases, wedged into the backseat's creases. Somewhere between Nashville's sluggish heat and St. Louis's boiling temperatures the driver's window decided to halt, refusing to budge up or down, stuck halfway between the two. We voyaged on, patching the gap with a

visitor's guide from Mount Rushmore until the Scotch tape began to peel off.

I noticed the cashier watching me. A young woman, 16 or 17, with a sweatshirt emblazoned with what was probably the local high school's football team. She finished chatting with the customer, a middle-aged woman who knew the cashier and, for that matter, most likely her mother and father, too. The cashier looked at me as I watched her interaction. It was a look we received many times on our trip—sometimes just a long stare and other times a spoken question. What are you doing here?

'Here' was the small towns. Custer, Sheridan, Butte, Billings, Halsey, Aurora. . . What were we, was I, doing here? I often asked this question, silently. Driving through Nebraska, Missouri and Tennessee—spending nine or ten hours on the road looking out the window at empty plains. Arriving, temporarily, in towns of 40 people. Walking down unnamed streets poking our heads into closed buildings and empty trailers, finding the remains of once bustling neighborhoods, reduced to ghost towns.

Driving cross-country had been on my mental bucket list since high school. Between Willa Cather's imagery of the Nebraskan plains and Jack Kerouac's wanderlust, the iconic "Great American Road Trip" served as a symbol of self-actualization, a means of using the open road as a healing of sorts, a channel for self-identity, a trip to contextualize my life on a geographic scale. I read these books when I was younger, relishing the descriptions of the road trip, whether the physical trek or the landscape upon reaching a destination, these stories drew me to their shared sense of freedom embodied by Middle America. The nostalgia to embark on this road trip stemmed from my early childhood where I reenacted Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House on the Prairie series. My favorite game was "pioneer" where I subjected my

younger sister to pulling homemade Conestoga wagons and pitching camp while I, the leading expeditionary, blazed a trail West.

I was fascinated by the original pioneers and the dangerous challenge posed by the 'open road.' Those who initially migrated West moved out of necessity, with hopes of owning land, a farm and raising a family. Unlike the generations that followed, the cross-country move was not a trip with stops at the drive through 'Tasty-Freeze' for milkshakes, but several consecutive weeks of hauling an entire family's belongings, enduring miserable weather conditions, and fighting disease as they pushed West. While the initial 'road trip' began with Westward expansion tainted with Manifest Destiny, the trek eventually morphed into a sort of soul-searching expedition, an excuse for restless wanderers to blaze their own trail West.

As a journalist I am taught to search for the untold and the unknown–to search and find and tell the stories of those whose voices are seldom heard, of those whom media and society overlook. I am taught to celebrate, hunt for, and document the 'ordinary.' I rarely look at the relationship between people and their surroundings and the spaces they interact with. I read stories about forest firefighters and their connection with the woods, but I don't often look at the relationship between people and the literal or metaphorical relationship they share with differing spaces. In a society where we shuttle from building to building in our little protectors-on-wheels we don't interact with space in the traditional sense. We don't cultivate a relationship with the land through tilling the soil or harvesting a fall crop. We don't drive for the sake of driving; we drive somewhere, always with a destination.

In order to explore these relationships I chart the progression and transformation

of the road trip from its beginnings with the pioneers in the 1800s to present day where drivers find directions through the Siri app on their smart phones and 'challenges' involve locating the nearest Starbucks between Boise and Tulsa. Using the memoirs from fellow travelers and expeditionaries I examine how my predecessors interact with the open road and the spaces they inhabit, however temporarily. Their work serves as a guide as I search for my own relationship with space and as a foundation as I explore individual stories about the potential that space holds. I look at the work of photographers who embarked on similar journeys, documenting the ordinary, the everyday, using their medium to create poignant pieces of the intimate moments in strangers' lives. With this history and work as my context, I use my own collection of photos and analysis of those before me to demonstrate how the road trip is a search without a foreseeable conclusion. I argue that the road trip serves as a means of searching for identity and that the spaces we interact with, whether consciously or not, act as partners in a relationship to heal, inspire action, provoke emotion or provide inner solace.

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Looking at these authors, characters, narrators, photographers and my subjects, I analyze how each uses the landscape differently. It is only this, though. Analyzing. Speculation. I look at each of these individual's lives through my own lens: one that has visited many of these places as an observer, sometimes spending an extended period of time, but never enough to fully understand the core of a city or town, as is often the nature of the road trip. My perspective as a photographer is one that is observational– looking for details that I can capture that represent a place in my eyes. But, beyond the

frame of a shot lies more of my world–one that I inevitably leave out by choosing to include one object or angle over another. As a journalist I search for the story. What defines a person, what are their greatest hopes, fears, and ambitions. I look to document individuals and then use their personal narratives to shape my sense of place. I may make generalizations, assumptions, or form theories in order to better answer my question. Finally, as a researcher, I piece together narratives, collected stories, and photographs in order to collage a rough understanding of each person's identity. These speculations and hypotheticals are the only means I have for creating a better understanding, though, and with it as my backdrop I can begin to understand different characters' and people's stories to answer my initial questions.

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To our credit, it was not until Nebraska that my younger sister and I started to ask, "Are we there yet?" Reflecting on this particular stretch of the trip I now recognize the irony I missed at the time. In 2013, where families outfit their supersized Suburban with surround sound and DVD players, the road trip acts a means of getting from point A to point B. Sometimes the road trip is a luxury, spending the weekend driving to a lake house or to visit relatives, but initially the road trip was a necessity. In the early 1800s Manifest Destiny prompted many American families to head West to claim their plot of land. "Are we there yet?" would have been an impossible question as this ubiquitous 'there' was beyond the scope of the towns and cities families had always known. "Are we there yet?" applies to a destination when many families headed West in search of land and opportunity. 'There' did not yet exist.

Thomas Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase in 1803 doubled the land of the United States. For Jefferson, this acquisition symbolized virtue and independence with landowning at its center.[1] When Abraham Lincoln signed the Homestead Act in 1862, he guaranteed free land for any citizen (African-Americans were excluded until 1868) and incited a generation of homesteaders who set off across the country in search of their stake in the American Dream. Westward expansion epitomized the nationalist sentiment politicians hoped to nurture among American citizens. For the first families who set off on these Western expeditions, their rickety wagons packed with provisions for several weeks of journeying, the 'road trip' was a necessity. The prospects of land, opportunity, wealth, jobs, and, on a national level, political might served as the impetus for the initial trip West. In many cases, cue the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath*, families had little to no opportunity in their current towns. Though John Steinbeck's book is set in the early 1900s, the sense of exploration and determination to find a better life for them and their children prompted many families to embark on these treacherous journeys during the mid 1800s.

Though the modern day road trip still shows traces of the nostalgic voyages from its decade old predecessors, it does not carry quite the same amount of isolation and fierce battles with the land that the pioneers faced. Perhaps the Rick Steves of these early treks was Randolph B. Marcy, a captain in the U.S. army who wrote *The Prairie Traveler: A Handbook for Overland Expeditions*. In this handbook Marcy details the routes to California and Oregon, how to repair wagons, what to pack, where to camp, how to cross rivers, and cure snakebites. In his camping section he writes, "The prairie

[1] "Westward Expansion." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, n.d. Web. 15 April 2013.

Indians make their camps upon the summits of the hills, whence they can see in all directions, and thus avoid a surprise. The line of tents should be pitched on that side of the camp most exposed to attack, and sentinels so posted that they may give alarm in time for the main body to rally and prepare for defense."[2] When comparing Marcy's writing with modern day travel books—advice about camping near Indian tribes versus which Holiday Inn features the best indoor sauna—as well as the 'perils' that the current generation faces like the Wi-Fi in the RV not working, it seems almost insulting to call the former 'road trips,' as their modern day connotation conjures feelings of fast food interspersed with frequent roadside rest stops. These initial trips that Marcy's guidebook addresses were successful if most of the members in a wagon train survived the trip.

While families in the mid-1800s embarked on these journeys out of necessity and politicians encouraged expansion to gain land and its accompanying power, later generations looked at the trip as a novelty, a conquerable challenge. In 1903 two men, Dr. Horatio Nelson Jackson and Sewall K. Crocker, attempted to drive cross-country in the hopes of becoming the first to traverse America in an automobile. Jackson took the trip on a fifty-dollar bet. Beginning in San Francisco, Jackson, Crocker, and their dog, Bud, drove into New York City 63 days later. The car had no windshield and its maximum speed was 30 MPH. The first road trip was a feat, a test of man's ability to surmount the challenges wrought by the initial attempts at intercontinental travel, etching the early roads into America's landscape. In Jackson and Crocker's trip we see

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[2] Marcy, Randolph B. *The Prairie Traveler: A Hand-book for Overland Expeditions*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1859. Web.

the road trip morphing from necessity to novelty, man's desire to tackle what was once untamed land. As the trip further shifted form and purpose in later generations, we see individuals' tries at reversion, searching for the untouched, wild land that their predecessors aimed to control.[3]

In 1956 then-President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act, establishing America's interstate highway system.[4] The construction of the interstate connected towns, cities, and states, creating a series of roads that linked the coasts. The 1950s also brought an era of mass consumption. The war was over, Americans were stocking their Frigidaires, buying automobiles and taking their families on vacation. Chevrolet's 1952 commercial with the petite, blonde Dinah Shore singing "See the USA in your Chevrolet" is the perfect representation of 1950s Americana sentiment. Shots of Chevys cruising along mountain roads, between desert valleys and driving over bridges epitomized the sense of freedom and desire Americans felt to take advantage of this new era. Americans were willing to spend money, take vacations, and use these automobiles that were becoming more popular and prevalent. The road trip was a luxury, a vacation. It found a new form in the fifties where it was no longer a necessity and a means of moving from point A to B, but was part of the consumerism rampant in the 1950s. Though the first automobile road trips were valiant efforts of man's ability to tame the open road, the mid-1900s trips still retained this initial sense of excitement. Behind shots of Chevys zooming along majestic roads Shore chants in

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[3] "Horatio's Drive: America's First Road Trip." *PBS*. PBS, 2003. Web. 1 Apr. 2013.

[4] Weingroff, Richard F. "Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956: Creating the Interstate System." *Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956: Creating the Interstate System*. U.S. Department of Transportation, 1996. Web. 2 Apr. 2013.

the commercial, "America's the greatest land of all: on a highway or a road along a levy, performance is sweeter, nothing can beat her. Life is completer in a Chevy. . . ."[5] The American made car brand capitalized on this new sense of adventure and exploration, illustrating how driving across America allowed you, too, to bathe in the country's rich and bountiful landscape. This sense of wealth and carefreeness propelled this generation's road trips West.

The counter culture of the 1950s embodied this carefree nature to an extreme. The Beat generation defied the more traditional standards of mainstream culture, experimenting with drugs and exploring their sexuality. The anthropologist Margaret Mead described the Beatniks as a group who was interested in the arts, travelled around in automobiles a great deal and the men usually had beards.[6] Jack Kerouac was a prominent Beat generation writer. From Kerouac's most well known work, *On the Road*, emerges a rebellion against mainstream society and its values among his characters. In a conversation between the main characters Dean and Sal, Dean says to Sal, "'Sal, we gotta go and never stop going 'till we get there.' 'Where we going, man?' 'I don't know but we gotta go.'"[7] The urge to travel, see, and explore without restraints or adherence to societal norms defined much of this generation. The restlessness of Kerouac's characters seems almost like a reaction to the materialism spawned by the 1950s. For this counterculture movement, driving wasn't a means of getting from one

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[5] *See the USA in Your Chevrolet*. Perf. Dinah Shore. *YouTube*. YouTube, 1952. Web. 6 Apr. 2013.
[6] *Allen Ginsberg on the Beat Generation*. History.com, n.d. *History.com*. History.com. Web. 15 May 2013.
[7] Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. New York: Penguin, 1976. Print. 242.

place to another, but a form of self-expression, rebellion, and youth. The lack of destination, in some cases, served to motivate these trips. Inherent in the road trip and even more accentuated by the group that took them was an itch for freedom to go anywhere and do anything.

For Kerouac's main character, Sal, the road trip serves as a self-searching medium. He sets off across the country to meet up with friends in the West and through his bouts with various characters and his escapades with drugs, sex, and the open road he begins to question his identity and individual purpose.

> I was far away from home, haunted and tired with travel, in a cheap hotel room I'd never seen. . .and I looked at the cracked high ceiling and really didn't know who I was for about fifteen strange seconds. I wasn't scared, I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost. . . I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future.[8]

Sal began his journey in New York City. A city filled with millions of people pushing past each other to get on the subway before the doors close, where honking in the streets and chatter along the sidewalks form a cacophonous melody. NYC is constant stimulation: nighttime fails to extinguish the bright lights and noise. The city acts as both a conductor and depressor of the identity formation that Sal experiences in his hotel room. For me, in New York, the constant swarm of bodies and excitement bars me from intent introspective thinking. I am swept up in the commotion of the busy streets and awed by the overstimulation of senses in the city. Only when I reach territory

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[8] Ibid. 15.

unmarred by this stimulation from outside channels can I reflect. For Sal, this precipice between his youth and his future is made more evident by his loneliness. Far from home, the changed landscape forces him to take refuge in his own thoughts. In places with huge populations, feeling like just one of many is easy–how do we distinguish ourselves from the multitudes that surround us? Inherently we are individuals, but with the enormity that is the 'city,' are we not just one individual in a sea of them? As illustrated by Kerouac as well as the work of several authors I will discuss, the empty landscape, and often more desolate one, provides a platform for introspection, uninhibited by any outside distraction. Though not as explicit as other authors I examine who use the cross country trip with the intention of exploring their identity, Kerouac too looks to the road trip as an excuse to bring Sal far from his comfort zone, positioning him in a variety of settings that work to define and reveal elements of Sal's character.

The landscape's ability to shape human relationships is best conveyed in a set of two quotes, one from Kerouac and one from the film *Crash*. In *On the Road* Kerouac writes, "LA is the loneliest and most brutal of American cities; NY gets god-awful cold in the winter but there's a feeling of wacky comradeship somewhere in some streets. LA is a jungle."[9] To explain the nature of LA, the narrator in *Crash* begins with: "It's the sense of touch. In any real city, you walk, you know? You brush past people, people bump into you. In LA, nobody touches you. We're always behind this metal and glass. I think we miss that touch so much that we crash into each other, just so we can feel something."[10]

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[9] Ibid. 86.

[10] *Crash*. Dir. Paul Haggis. Perf. Don Cheadle and Sandra Bullock. Lionsgate, 2005. DVD.

Sometimes cities are lumped together, often by those living in the suburbs. Chicago, Detroit, LA, NY, Philadelphia. . . They exist as 'the city' which is, simply, not the suburbs. In Kerouac's quote he humanizes NY, showing the voices of those who come together in the streets. NY enables this camaraderie in several ways but, and this is what the *Crash* quote emphasizes, in NY you have the human touch that LA lacks. The NY subway system is one of the only places where all socioeconomic classes come together for one purpose: moving from one place to another. Standing squished between strangers in a crowded subway car with the smells, sounds, and touch of unknown persons' shoulders and elbows poking into you breaks the physical barrier humans otherwise create. Despite the frequent staring into space look of those on the subway in their daily commute to and from work, the proximity of other bodies, the touch of other human beings, permeates what could be an otherwise isolating bubble. We see ourselves in the context of fellow human beings' lives: what their physical space in relation to ours is and how we react to each other. The latter quote about LA paints an entirely different city, one that lacks the human connection unavoidable in NY. People shuttling from home to work to school without coming into contact with others live a more isolated experience. In these silent commutes interrupted only by the radio or the ringing of a cell phone, self-reflection is done in the most personal of ways; we begin to carve and shape our sense of self in the company of our own thoughts. This independent identity formation enabled by solo traveling in LA differs from that of NY. Additionally, while each commute to work may not result in self-realization epiphanies, the time spent alone separated from the touch of the outside human world contributes to

this identity building though perhaps in a less obvious manner. When compared to New York's landscape where squeezing between bodies on the subway platform is daily routine in order to catch the J at Grand Central, we cannot physically separate ourselves. All comfort levels of space are breached, we are face-to-face, shoulder-to-shoulder with complete strangers. Everybody walks and, though eye contact on these city streets is rare, we see other human beings and come together in a shared place. The uniting factor of the subway is a unique one for we shed our cloaks of race, class, and ethnicity, coming together if just for the twenty-minute ride.

We crave this touch. It helps us acknowledge our sense of belonging and that despite our seemingly constant disconnect from those surrounding us we can access this group, our fellow human beings, whenever we feel alone. Loneliness can be debilitating. It consumes and gnaws away at a person, whittling away at his self-confidence and grip on who he is. It lingers when we're trying to fall asleep at night, a heavy weight pressing into our chest as we think about the morning, waking up, alone, feeling like we're living an irreversible routine. It can also motivate. Our primal instinct to be a part of a group drives us to form relationships with others. It is often loneliness that serves as a catalyst for sharpening our sense of self, as we become more acutely aware of our flaws and idiosyncrasies when we are completely alone.

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Loneliness serves as one of the themes that the two following authors explore in their work. Gretel Ehrlich's *The Solace of Open Spaces* chronicles her life on the plains in Wyoming. She works as a cowgirl; her friends are sheepherders, ranchers, cowboys, members of different Indian tribes, and cooks. Her book explores relationships, pain

over losing loved ones, and the imminence of death using the Wyoming landscape as a backdrop for her internal dialogue. Wyoming's empty space and resulting feelings of isolation (which Ehrlich contrasts against her previous home in New York City) serve as a context for her commentary during the course of her book. Ehrlich writes, "I suspect that my original motive for coming here was to 'lose myself' in new and unpopulated territory."[11] Her motive for moving to Wyoming is similar to that of other authors' (like Kerouac) who take the cross-country road trip. Though sometimes finding solace in the city is possible (like *Crash* suggests), Ehrlich's writing acknowledges and celebrates this potential in the untouched landscape of the West. Identity is a ubiquitous term, and difficult to define. It is one's being, soul, culture, and sense of self. It is personal and yet relative to others at the same time. In Ehrlich's decision to 'lose herself' in the uncharted landscape, she approaches this process of cultivating a sense of identity from a different perspective than Kerouac. For Ehrlich, to truly reach this self-discovery she uses her surroundings to break free from the previously known identity that dictated her city life. By losing herself she becomes most vulnerable and enters the unknown. The metaphor between the infinite plains and the 'unknown' that Ehrlich writes about in Wyoming's landscape lends itself to the identity exploration at the root of her essays. The open space, uninterrupted by the compartmentalizing terms that we so often use, serves as an unmarred backdrop with which Ehrlich can play out her fears, dreams, and relationships in order to better grasp how she copes with different emotions. In doing so, she can begin to piece together what defines her as an individual, free from the distractions present in her city life.

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[11] Ehrlich, Gretel. *The Solace of Open Spaces*. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 1985. Print. 3.

In her book, Ehrlich explains how open space possesses a power that we, as Americans, sometimes struggle with:

> Space has a spiritual equivalent and can heal what is divided and burdensome in us. . . . We Americans are great on fillers, as if what we have, what we are, is not enough. We have a cultural tendency toward denial, but, being affluent, we strangle ourselves with what we can buy. We have only to look at the houses we build to see how we build against space, the way we drink against pain and loneliness. We fill up spaces as if it were a pie shell, with things whose opacity further obstructs our ability to see what is already there.[12]

Throughout Ehrlich's narrative she draws on her physical environment to illustrate the way humans interact in relationships, whether with each other or with our geographical surroundings. In this quote Ehrlich acknowledges the fear that consumes humans when we confront space. She alludes to the space in conversations where both parties sit silently waiting for the other to make his move, to quickly fill the silence so that the eye shifting and uncomfortable glances will quickly end. These moments make 15 seconds feel like an hour with each person quickly racing to think of something to fill the unanticipated lull in conversation. She explains that Americans desire to fill space, with chatter or material objects. Open space, the unknown, frightens us. Perhaps this stems from our history of conquering space. Our expansion West and, once we reached the edges of America, overseas with colonization. Ehrlich losing herself in the landscape is a terrifying prospect for so many. To willingly enter an environment where she

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[12] Ibid. 15.

relinquishes a conscious grip on her sense of self and how she views herself in the context of others is debilitatingly daunting for some. However, Ehrlich's act of forgetting who she was brought to the surface the essence of what truly defined her.

Space and emptiness can prove intimidating because they leave uncertainty and vulnerability —emotions that we frantically attempt to avoid. In Ehrlich's book she uses the open space of the Wyoming landscape to explain how relationships differ on the uninterrupted plains. In the isolated setting of cowboys and sheepherders' lives, Ehrlich describes their selectivity and Spartan like way of speaking: their conversations do not serve to fill space. Their sentences are not superfluous. From driving through Wyoming and reading about Ehrlich's minimalist conversations with individuals, I saw a unique calmness and peacefulness in the empty space and bare communication. Ehrlich writes about the pointed conversations between people, where only the most essential words are used. In the bustle and distraction of cities, garbled conversations filled with unnecessary phrases and words litter the streets. Reading her work and seeing the homes and towns of the West reveals the bare essentials attitude of many in this part of the United States. The lack of garish strip malls and luxurious department stores cluttering these tiny towns translates to the flow of conversation Ehrlich writes about. In the context of large cities with little space, the rhythm of dialogue morphs to match.

The Solace of Open Spaces examines interpersonal as well as intrapersonal space. Ehrlich writes, "closer to home we might also learn how to carry space inside ourselves in the effortless way we carry our skins. Space represents sanity, not a life purified, dull, or 'spaced out' but one that might accommodate intelligently any idea or

situation."[13] I think this is the type of solace that Ehrlich's book refers to. While the Wyoming landscape inherently lends itself to interpersonal space, it fosters an intrapersonal calmness. Ehrlich writes about her internal dialogue, as she is often alone with her thoughts. Separating herself from the inundation of media, chatter, and distraction of the city, she is able to nurture internal space. Being alone is not equivalent to loneliness, though. The former implies a peace with one's thoughts, a sort of comfortable state. The latter contains the sensitive pain of one longing for company and acceptance.

In Alice Koller's memoir *An Unknown Woman: A Journey to Self-discovery* the author spends a winter in Nantucket reflecting on her failed relationships, particularly the relationship with her mother. Nantucket is desolate in the winter. An island supported by summer tourism, the place empties during the off-season becoming an isolated body surrounded by the icy Atlantic Ocean. Koller purposely chooses to move to Nantucket with only a dog as company. She moves with the intention to write and clear her head from the sticky threads of previous boyfriends and unmet expectations that her life on the mainland held. Like Ehrlich, Koller surrounds herself with open space, though she is more of an observer, watching the rolling waves and vast coastline rather than working the land. She spends much of her time indoors, walking between the ocean and her rented house. Often her inner dialogue is angry and sad. But mostly it is wistful. The bleakness of her surroundings exacerbates these feelings. "Strange to see nothing at all on an expanse of water as broad as I'm looking at now. . . . No person on the entire line of the beach. . . . No one. Nothing. So utterly, totally, unbelievably quiet,

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[13] Ibid.

and I the only living being in sight."[14] Koller's lack of human interaction forces her to turn inwards. She begins to unravel her relationships struggling to understand what she wanted from the men she dated and what she could never have from her mother. Living in the context of the desolate island forces Koller to turn to her memory to further explore who she is. Both Koller and Ehrlich state that their respective surroundings made them feel like the only person around. For Ehrlich, this sensation is at times invigorating and empowering. She finds tranquility in her isolation while Koller falls into a murky depression.

Koller's depression and restlessness preceded her move to Nantucket. She followed men's or others' advice, rarely asking herself what she wanted. "I was unhappy there (wherever it was) and I could only hope that at least I'd leave this unhappiness behind if I left there (wherever it was)."[15]

The restlessness of Kerouac's characters is evident in Koller's writing though with different motivations. For Kerouac, the itch to set off across the country stemmed from a desire to explore and experiment, to take part in the cultural revolution spawned by the Beat generation.

Koller's restlessness is of another vein; she is constantly searching for external support and acceptance. During her seclusion on the island she discovers the root of this endless search began because she never received the approval and love of her mother. This manifested itself in Koller's hopping between relationships, clinging to any potential supportive figure in her life.

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[14] Koller, Alice. *An Unknown Woman: A Journey to Self-Discovery*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981. Print. 195.
[15] Ibid. 35.

The two women are individuals with their own distinct positionalities. That being said, it is important to note the space that they reflect in and how it contributes to molding their respective identities. In Wyoming, the open plains that stretch on for miles possess a wildness. Staring across this landscape there is also a sense that this vast expanse is conquerable, not in a destroy and develop capitalist sort of way but in the simple fact that one could traverse it, find out what lies beyond the horizon line. The idea of hurtling across the open landscape is liberating. For those who work so closely with the land and the animals who survive off of it, (the cowboys and sheepherders in Ehrlich's writing) they create a sense of oneness with the land. They integrate the open space into their relationships. Ehrlich writes, "During the winter, while I was riding to find a new calf, my jeans froze to the saddle, and in the silence that such cold creates I felt like the first person on earth, or the last."[16] Whereas this same feeling for Koller would be terrifyingly depressing, Ehrlich's words reveal a calmness and internal peace that seems to pervade all of her relationships. Ehrlich finds self-empowerment in the sensation of feeling like the only person on earth. While at times, especially during the frigid winter months, the West appears lonely, Ehrlich finds an internal strength in her surroundings, despite her original vulnerability. Wyoming's untamed nature contributes to Ehrlich's independence and trust in herself–not only can she survive far removed from her comfort zone but, with meticulous care, she looks for and appreciates the open space of the West that contribute to her growth as an individual.

The ocean with its same endless view has the opposite effect for Koller. She feels insignificant, overwhelmed, and lost. She stares at the crashing waves questioning

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[16] Ehrlich, 2.

her purpose and why she even decided to move to the island. For Koller, her physical space unravels the shallow framework that precariously held her sense of self together. Living alone without speaking or seeing another human for days eats away at the reality she previously created. The deterioration of Koller's reality is a direct effect of what Ehrlich discussed: "We fill up spaces as if it were a pie shell, with things whose opacity further obstructs our ability to see what is already there." Koller had continuously filled the emotional void in her life with men and clung to them for love, terrified by examining the root of this void–the lack of attention from her mother. As a reader I can begin to piece my first hand observations of the land with the secondary sources of these various authors to form a somewhat coherent analysis of space's role in human relationships. The lens of a camera accentuates some elements of these individual stories while simultaneously masking others.

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To contextualize my work in the context of others who have embarked on similar journeys, I look at three photographers who precede me, what themes their work examines, and how my piece aims to explore something new. As a photojournalism major I am taught to observe. Journalism rarely allows posing or directing subjects, photo editing beyond adjusting contrast levels, and prohibits the staging of events, unless the composition is a portrait. Even then the standards are fairly restrictive. As an advertising double major I am taught that every creative execution is controlled and purposeful. Nothing is left to chance, but rather planned, timed and heavily edited. During my preliminary research I looked at the styles of several photographers and the different approaches to their work.

Robert Frank published *The Americans* in 1959. His black and white photos examined a grittier America and proved poignant in their depiction of segregation and the working class. Frank was a pioneer of cross-country photography but not from the 'taking a trip' angle. Rather, Frank focused on documenting the non-glamorized America, choosing to instead capture the untold stories. Photographer Joel Meyerowitz said "it was the vision that emanated from the book that led not only me, but my whole generation of photographers out into the American landscape in a sense—the lunatic sublime of America."[17] From assembly lines in Detroit to funerals in South Carolina, Frank's portraits give their viewer an intimate look at the relationship between subjects or between subject and environment. Frank had a hit and run approach, shooting people unaware and moving on, not speaking to his subjects.[17] His work reflects a journalistic piece in the truest sense of the word: entirely no interference or direction, a stealthy observer blending in with the scenery. His work often feels sad; most of his subjects are not looking at the camera but instead gaze off frame. Like Meyerowitz said, Frank led a movement into an America unknown to popular media. In the introduction to Frank's book Jack Kerouac writes, "As American a picture—the faces don't editorialize or criticize."[18] I found Kerouac's insight critical to the approach I take for my project. It prompted me to consider if my photos would critique their subjects: how will I portray people? Will my work serve as a commentary? An analysis? Or an expository piece?

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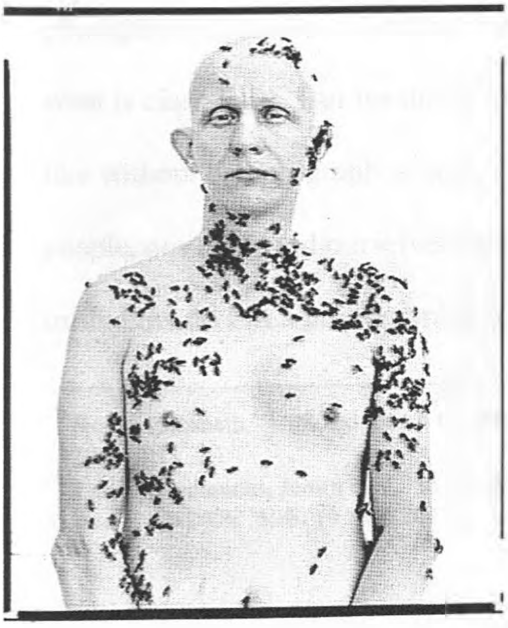
[17] Cole, Tom. "'Americans': The Book That Changed Photography." NPR. NPR, 14 Feb. 2009. Web. 18 Nov. 2012.

[17] Kerouac, Jack. Introduction. The Americans. By Robert Frank. Millerton, NY: Aperture, Inc., 1978. 5-9. Print.

Despite Frank's fly-on-the-wall style, he still retained the creative control of a photographer: he chose what to include in each frame, which angle to shoot his subjects at, as well as other aspects of composition. His photo titled 'Movie Premier - Hollywood (1954)' shows a glamorous woman caught with a cold expression in the foreground with a gaggle of fans behind her. The woman is in soft-focus while her admirers are in-focus. This image exemplifies the balance between creative control and journalism: while Frank does not pose the woman, he purposely chooses to focus on the group that is often ignored. Celebrities are forever at the center of photos with their fans as the white noise that follows them. Frank's deliberate decision to emphasize the admirers in this shot serves as a unique statement about the relationship between the rich and famous and the hierarchical structure between the two groups.



On the other end of the creative control versus journalist spectrum is American photographer Richard Avedon. He completed a series of portraits titled *In the American West*. The essay consists of photographs of individuals and couples taken across the Midwest and West. The massive black and white portraits show kids, men, and women covered in bees, working in mines, holding shotguns, or staring straight into the



Ronald Fischer, beekeeper,
Davis, California, May 9, 1981

camera. In this series Avedon captures each person's hardship, struggle, pain, suffering, laughter, and joy without divulging to the viewer the answers to the myriad of questions that arise from each photo. Avedon tightly controls each of his portraits in this series, staging his subjects against white backdrops–journalists rarely remove their subject from his natural environment. He also cast some of his subjects, like his infamous photo of the beekeeper, by placing an ad in magazines. For many, *In the American West* is a controversial series. Critics argue that the photos demean their subjects.[19] His work can also be seen as a sensationalist collection that portrays the West as he wanted America to see it. "'The image existed in my imagination long before it became a photo,' Avedon said. 'I had to find in the real world what began in my mind.'"[20]

Last summer *The New York Times* featured photographer Mustafah Abdulaziz and his photo project *Memory Loss*. Abdulaziz completed an American road trip photo essay, too; though his portraits focus less on the physical trip and instead look at the people that define the places he visits. I think some of his photos reflect a critique, not of their individual contents but of the country as a whole. Abdulaziz's pieces feel natural, not contrived, but reveal a truth that I face in my work: a difficult element in photographing America (and her people) is that we, as viewers, think we know so well what is close to us. But we don't. We don't know what our country and her people look like without a photograph to separate 'us' from us. These photos force us to look at our people, our land, and ourselves from an observer's perspective. Herein lies the difficult truth: how do I as a photographer, photograph with the least amount of bias and internal

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[19] Royte, Elizabeth. "Unfazed by All the Buzz." *Smithsonian Magazine*. Smithsonian.com, Nov. 2002. Web. 19 May 2013.

[20] Turner-Yamamoto, Judith Bell. "In Avedon's American West." *In Avedon's American West*. World and I Journal, June 2006. Web. 19 May 2013.

critique?

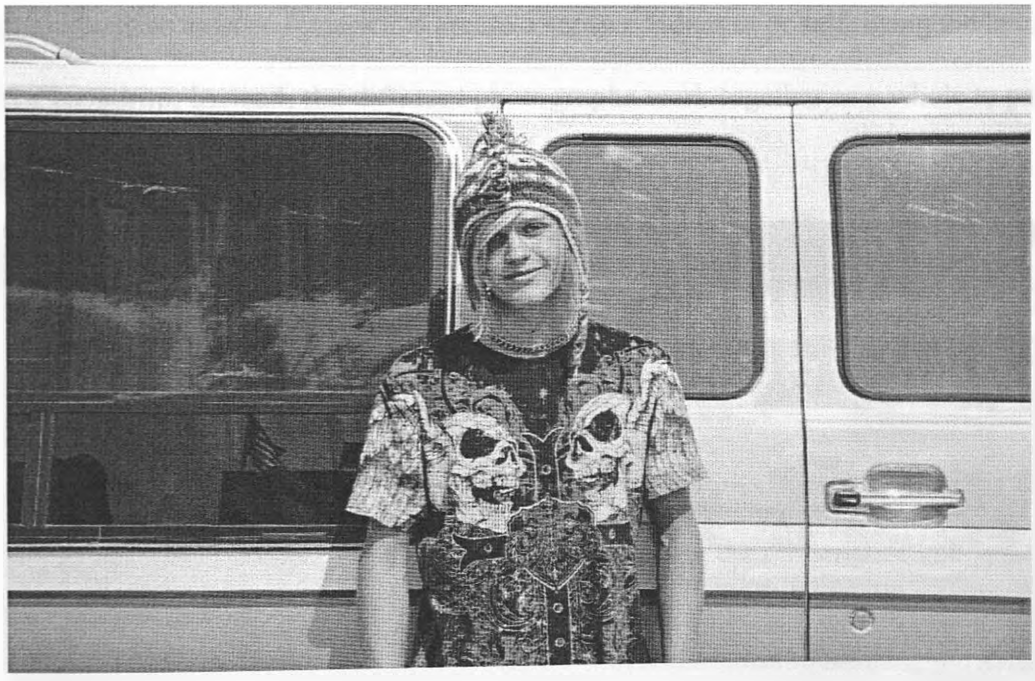
Despite the criticism *In the American West* received, it lives as a poignant portrayal of the 'ordinary' lives of those who are often overlooked and ignored. It helped pave a road for photographers and journalists to find and document the stories of the average American. From Avedon's work I recognized that I had an image of Americana that I wanted to portray in my photographs. Reading Kerouac and other cross-country travel books like Bill Bryson's *The Lost Continent*, aided me in forming an image of what I thought America should look like. Or, rather, the people and spaces I should look for when I began my own documentation. Like a scientist reflecting on the human error that skewed his results, this is something I take into account when evaluating and critiquing my own work. My personal vision and research I conducted prior to taking this trip influenced my 'results.' Why I chose to capture some scenes and ignore others, what objects I purposefully excluded, what expressions I evoked from my subjects. . . All of these factors contribute to my inevitably biased interpretation and critique of identity across America. I suppose even the most neutral and purest form of journalism finds this unavoidable, though. Why some subjects are chosen and others ignored is often subjective.

Using Frank, Avedon, and Abdulaziz as a portion of my preliminary research, I took several insights that guided my personal approach. From Frank I recognized the importance of the observer, how refraining from interfering with a subject allows for the most raw portrayal of a scene. I also learned how to 'control' without posing: using varying focus and angles to reveal a specific critique. From Avedon I learned the importance of choosing a subject; what makes one person's eyes, expression or aura

intriguing? How do I convey this through a static medium? His work also made me consider how much direction I felt comfortable giving my subjects. What would distinguish my work between art and journalism? From Abdulaziz I tried to look at this trip from an outsider's perspective. I tried to forget the America painted by the authors and artists I had looked at and approach my subjects from a blank slate. This proved to be the most difficult task.

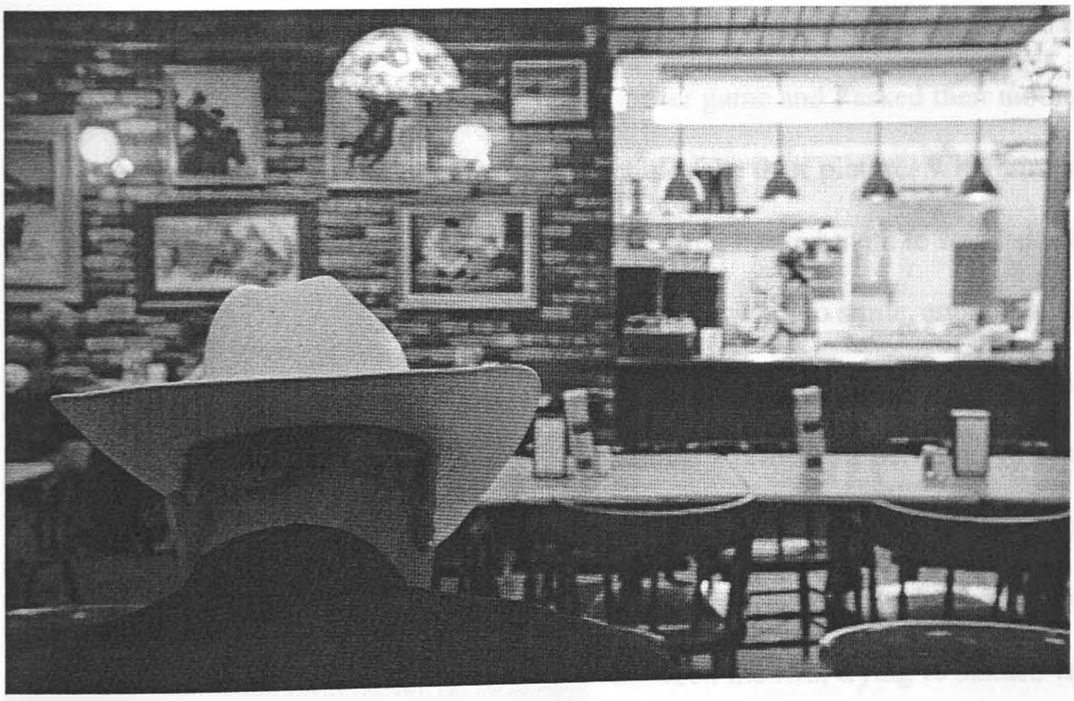
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To explain my process I chose to discuss four pieces from my collection of 30+ photos.



The first pictures a young man whom I found at Mount Rushmore. I had seen him walking into the entrance of the monument and was caught by the boyish expression beneath his hardened exterior of a chain hanging from his neck and his shirt that bore a screaming skull and cross.

His older father moved slowly beside him. The boy seemed almost disconnected from his punkish façade, instead acutely aware of his role as son. I approached him in the parking lot to ask for his photo. I explained the project I was doing. His response when I asked to take his picture came in the softest tone. I was thrown by his high voice, a tenderness masked by his tough looking exterior. I hoped to convey some of this sensitivity in this shot; he stands in front of the van that he and his dad traveled in. The American flag caught in the window's reflection is by chance. I like the sort of parallel between what it symbolizes and my aims to capture the diverse range of individuals across the States. Different from Avedon's work, my pieces speak less literally as individuals as to how Americans create a sense of identity or self, using the landscape as a backdrop. Instead, the different photographs work together as a whole to paint a portrait of identity exploration in the United States.

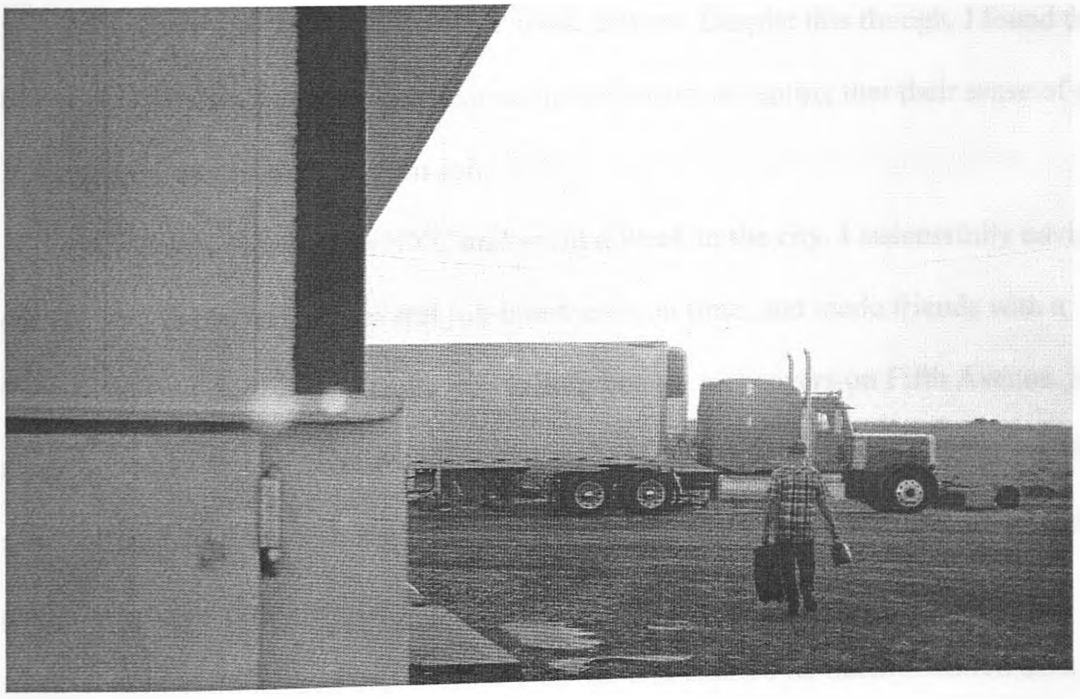


I shot the second piece in Wall, South Dakota. This piece is much more of a Frank approach as the subject did not know I was taking his picture. The restaurant I photographed this older gentleman in was part of Wall Drug–an iconic stopping spot for tourists in the Dakotas. I chose him as one of my subjects because he seemed like a regular at a place swarming with visitors. Him and his wife looked like they lived in or near the tiny town and his cowboy hat seemed like part of his attire rather than a cultural artifact purchased at the souvenir shop. I chose to photograph him from behind because I wanted to show his weathered skin, creased by the sun and dotted with freckles. His cropped hair shows signs of grey and his broad shoulders the beginnings of bowing from the weight of manual labor. He reminded me of one of the characters in Ehrlich's work with the sort of quiet calmness she describes that comes with working with the land in the West.

I took the portrait of the twins in Memphis, Tennessee. They were headed to a soccer game and I asked their mother if I could take their picture. With minimal directing I asked them to stand side-by-side, to try not to smile, and to put their hands behind their back. I posed them against a brick wall because I wanted to minimize any distraction from their faces. I want the viewer to look back and forth between the two, trying to discern what makes each unique, both extrinsically and



intrinsically. It is interesting to consider how we shape our own identity when we know we are different from those surrounding us. Identical twins always fascinate me because I wonder how they differentiate themselves: is it more difficult when you are forever associated with your 'other half?' For the two girls, I think this formation of separate identities is evident in their expressions. The one on the left looks a bit uncomfortable, her mouth set somewhere between pursed and grimaced. Her eyes seem distrustful, but also sort of lost. Her sister's eyes seem sad, wistful. Almost like they belong to someone older than her. Her expression is soft, calm. Like the space that Ehrlich describes within human relationships, I think that these two young girls' sense of identity is inextricably attached to each other. Society, friends, and family will forever group them with each other and so defining their respective unique identities is done in the context (and acknowledged in the space) of the other.



The fourth photo shows an older gentleman in the foreground, with the sunset and his truck in the background. I took this shot at a rest stop in the Midwest. In one hand he holds a suitcase, the other a small bag. This is my favorite piece of the photo essay. To me it symbolizes the aloneness that I read about in Ehrlich's work. I saw many truck drivers on my trip; I spoke with a truck driving couple in a town of 47 people on the border of Montana. They lead a life where most of their time is spent alone with only the radio and their thoughts as company. The sun's setting rays streaming through his truck's windows shows the end of another day of hundreds of miles of travel. Truck drivers are the Americans who truly see the landscape. The ones who see the changing seasons, the rising and setting sun, the rolling hills of Middle America, and the towering steel skyscrapers of the cities. I captured this man as I peeked out from behind the gas station's side; I felt that his slow trudge back to his rig showed a weariness that I saw in other truck drivers. Despite this though, I found that this population has a certain determination and focus, accepting that their sense of place is sometimes as transient as their job.

I recently returned to NYC and spent a week in the city. I successfully navigated the subway, got myself to several job interviews on time, and made friends with a French girl in a pastry shop and a guy selling beauty makeovers on Fifth Avenue. As I made my way through swarms of tourists and seas of businesspeople rushing into their shiny office buildings, I thought about my goals for this project and how my research and photographs influenced me. My historical research aimed to contextualize my work. It explored the road trip's initial purpose and charted its transformation from necessity to luxury to soul-searching expedition. Examining the roots of the initial road

trip helped me consider why it was so iconic to America and what people saw they could find by taking it. Examining the works of Kerouac, Ehrlich, and Koller contributed to my knowledge of the different shapes identity exploration took in various landscapes. By reading the inner dialogue of these three authors, I was able to craft a better understanding of how the road trip and changing scenery influenced each author's relationship with his or her sense of self and with others. Through the photo essays of Frank, Avedon, and Abdulaziz I was able to form a narrative of those who embarked on similar journeys before me. I looked at their approach in order to develop my own. I studied their subjects, composition, and intent to create a framework for how my essay would depict this topic differently.

In executing this body of work I initially hoped to contribute a monumental American identity-defining piece with poignant portraits that epitomized each geographic region of the United States. Needless to say, my vision changed during this project. It came from speaking with locals in bagel shops in St. Louis, painters in the scorching heat outside of antique stores in Nebraska, and identical twin waitresses in hotels in Memphis. I learned that the 'identity' I tried so hard to encapsulate in a single photograph was impossible to make so black and white. Identity is nebulous by nature. Its fluidity knows no region or landscape but, rather, it is something we individually craft, taking bits and pieces from the different environments we live in. The relationships we form, and the space associate with those spaces, are part of the tools we use to carve our sense of purpose in the world. For me, this collection celebrates the diversity in the American landscape as a dynamic partner in the relationships we build with it, with each other and with ourselves.

List of Photographs on CD

1. Open Road, outside Lincoln, NE
2. Baseball Game, Cape Cod, MA
3. County Fair, Cape Cod, MA
4. Game Booth, Cape Cod, MA
5. Ice Cream, Cape Cod, MA
6. Women's NRA Event, Cape Cod, MA
7. Look-a-like Contest, Cape Cod, MA
8. Bagel Store, St. Louis, MO
9. Trucking Couple, Saltese, MT
10. Golf, Eugene, OR
11. Tweens, Martha's Vineyard, MA
12. Schoolbus, Cape Cod, MA
13. Corky's BBQ, Memphis, TN
14. Laundry, Memphis, TN
15. Book Store, Memphis, TN
16. Frosties, Valentine, NE
17. Restaurant, Portland, OR
18. Diner, Wall, SD
19. Cowboy, Wall, SD
20. Painter, Broken Bow, NE
21. Abandoned town, Treloar, MO
22. Clothesline, Martha's Vineyard, MA
23. Twins, Memphis, TN
24. Mannequins, Wall, SD
25. Wedding, NE
26. Sisters, Memphis, TN
27. Viking, Memphis, TN
28. Punk, Mt. Rushmore, SD
29. Cowgirl, Mt. Rushmore, SD
30. Badlands, ND
31. Fay, St. Louis, MO
32. Boat, Cape Cod, MA
33. Trailer, ND
34. Gas station Valentine, NE
35. Sunset, Cape Cod, MA
36. Field, Route 2 between Grand Island and Thedford, NE
37. Plains, NE
38. American Flag, Valentine, NE
39. Going Home, Valentine, NE

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