

William Least Heat-Moon's American Travels: Representing Spaces through the American Road Narrative

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Abstract: William Least Heat-Moon embarked on a road trip across the United States in 1978, after having lost his job as a professor and after divorcing. With his van, called *Ghost Dancing*, after Native American ceremonies, Heat-Moon hits the open road for three months, travelling only through the backroads of America, with the intention to find pristine places. These experiences on the road are recounted in his well-known road book *Blue Highways: A Journey into America* (1982). The aim of this article is to discuss the representation of space—natural and manmade—within Heat-Moon's *Blue Highways*, using ecocritical and geocritical studies as a methodological mapping for the analysis. Applying the ecocritical and geocritical approaches will contribute to provide a more comprehensive study on the topic of space, leading also to a reconsideration of the genre of the American road narrative, and consequently, providing new insights on mobilities and space studies.

Introduction: Revising the American Road and Its Narrative

The American road narrative has been flourishing as a distinctive American genre particularly since the publication of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), which is generally considered the novel that has marked not only a generation—the Beats—but also a whole genre. However, as road scholar Ronald Primeau claims, “The American road narrative ... reaches back over hundreds of years of storytelling about a culture on the move” (18), this implicitly emphasizing that mobility is something rooted in the American character and that the road genre has become its modern literary and cultural product. The American fascination with mobility is rooted in America's history, being a feature that has marked the nation since its early beginnings, before any existence of roads or road tropes. As, in fact, Ann Brigham has stressed, “... the American, or perhaps more accurately, the Euro-American,

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national imaginary has been profoundly shaped by the promise of mobility: the freedom to go anywhere and become anyone” (*American Road Narratives* 3).

Mobility has almost always denoted a social achievement or progress, as well as territorial expansion. America was founded through journeys and through the successive conquest of frontiers/spaces. Thus, mobility allowed new opportunities and (self)reinvention as well as the extension of the American territory. Mobility occurred in space and space was discovered through mobility, this suggesting how they complement each other. Mobility held the promise of escape and of reinvention, and it opened new territories from which to start over again.

The road genre, in its literary, but also its filmic and other artistic forms, has gained popularity, particularly since Jack Kerouac’s publication of *On the Road*, as previously stated. However, academic works seems to have been increasing fairly recently, this showing how the road genre is a fertile ground for research. In “Critical Meeting Places: Major Approaches to the American Road Narrative,” Ann Brigham acknowledges the popularity of the road narrative genre, while also recognizing a kind of vacuum within the academic debate: “The road may be long and well traveled, but scholarly analysis of the road narrative is a newer and much less populated landscape. Even though road narratives date back to the early twentieth century ... the first study book to define the genre did not appear until 1996” (15). Furthermore, Brigham stresses the importance of rethinking the transgressive character of road stories, suggesting one should avoid the general idea of transgression as intrinsically good (*American Road Narratives* 9). Overall, American road narratives have been interpreted through metaphorical lenses, in the sense that the American road has almost always meant the possibility of something else, neglecting, for instance, that that very same road not only crosses the American space, but it is also a space itself as well as a generator of other spaces, “Because the road is a geographical construct, the insights of geographers seem particularly important to help literary critics develop an approach to it that goes beyond viewing it as a metaphorical and physical space outside of social reality and structures” (Brigham, “Critical Meeting Places” 30). Thus, Brigham provides new paths for reflection, while also encouraging the relevance of interdisciplinarity, contributing to viewing matters from different angles, and, therefore, allowing us to debunk traditional readings and interpretations.

This article intends to provide a different outlook on this specific American literary genre by shifting the focus on how spaces—natural and manmade—are represented in William Least Heat-Moon’s nonfictional road book *Blue Highways: A Journey into America* (1982), while also reflecting on mobility. Thus, instead of merely engaging with the author’s feelings and with the overall idea of the road as a transformer of life, the article engages with ecocritical and geocritical theories in order

to place at the center of analysis (no longer the human but rather) the environment along the American road.

As Brigham has argued, the American road has mostly been considered “as a mythic space of possibility” (*American Road Narratives* 4), “as an unanchored space” (*American Road Narratives* 6), almost as something that transcends reality. Similarly to mobility, space has been dealt with in a stable way, almost as unchangeable. The influential works of Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault and, in general, the spatial turn in the social sciences and humanities have fostered a more comprehensive reconsideration of space and place. The interlaced conversation between literature and geography and the emergence of literary approaches, such as ecocriticism and geocriticism contributed to give voice to spaces. Ecocriticism “seek[s] to offer a truly transformative discourse, enabling us to analyse and criticise the world in which we live, attention is increasingly given to the broad range of cultural processes and products in which, and through which, the complex negotiations of nature and culture take place” (Garrard 4), while geocriticism “embraces space in its mobile heterogeneity” (Westphal 73), thus providing a wide-ranging approach on space, comprising also ideological and social relations. As Tally T. Jr. and Battista argue, “While distinctive in meaningful ways, both ecocriticism and geocriticism share a concern for the manner in which spaces and places are perceived, represented, and ultimately used” (2), thus proving to be complementary tools for a better perception and awareness of spaces in literary texts. Furthermore, Peter Merriman argues that we should “rethink movement and mobility as not simply occurring *in* or *across* space and time, but as actively shaping or producing multiple, dynamic spaces and times” (1), therefore showing the correlation between mobility and space, and how, in the end, they mold each other.

A selection of spaces will be proposed and analyzed, such as natural spaces, manmade ones, and spaces that were built because of the American love affair with (auto)mobility. Thus, I pay attention to how Heat-Moon represents those spaces and ask whether he does it in a superficial manner or not, namely if there is a thorough reflection on them and if a certain degree of environmental awareness is present. By also relying on more specific texts about the discussed environments and not only on Heat-Moon’s representations of them, thus, following what Bertrand Westphal has called “the interface between world and text” (112), this article further contributes to the field of environmental and space studies, and of the American road narrative, proposing new paths of interpretation.

The Spaces across the Road and on the Roadside: Representations of Natural and Built Environments in *Blue Highways*

In 1978, departing from Columbia, Missouri, William Least Heat-Moon embarked on a road trip with his van named *Ghost Dancing*, after Native American ceremonies. Heat-Moon decided to leave after he got divorced and lost his job as an English teacher. The road became the place to look for a purpose,

A man who couldn't make things go right could at least go. He could quit trying to get out of the way of life. Chuck routine. Live the real jeopardy of circumstance ... The result: ... to set out on a long (equivalent to half the circumference of the earth), circular trip over the back roads of the United States. Following a circle would give a purpose—to come around again—where taking a straight line would not. (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 3)

Thus, for Heat-Moon, the American road represents an escape from ordinary life, a safe territory where adventures can be experienced and where meaning can be recovered, especially by tracing a circle. This idea of the circle comes from Native American beliefs, and, particularly, from what John Niehardt, in *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), calls “The Power of the World,” an overall idea of connection and knowledge among things, following the natural cycle.

Heat-Moon looks for connection while travelling through his alien land, likely implying that, until that moment, he was feeling detached from his country. Thus, there is an urge to reestablish a certain kind of acquaintance with America, and to see whether some sort of connection is still possible. Thus, he claims, “With a nearly desperate sense of isolation and a growing suspicion that I lived in an alien land, I took to the open road in search of places where change did not mean ruin and where time and men and deeds connected” (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 5). The lure of the open road is clearly felt, it being the place where a man can lose himself, alluding hinting at a journey of self-(re)discovery and of regeneration: “Maybe the road could provide a therapy through observation of the ordinary and obvious, a means whereby the outer eye opens up an inner one. STOP, LOOK, LISTEN, the old railroad crossing signs warned. Whitman calls it ‘the profound lesson of reception.’ New ways of seeing can disclose new things: ... Do new things make for new ways of seeing?” (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 17). The road is the medium of observation, where the exterior, what surrounds him, might give room to introspection and self-examination, and, by mentioning Walt Whitman and its “profound lesson of reception,” the idea of knowledge across the road is, once more, emphasized.

But does Heat-Moon offer a deep reflection on American spaces? How are they considered and represented?

Mobility towards Loss of Localness and Destruction: The American Road and the Surrounding Environment

Heat-Moon is looking for a more rural place, not encroached by modernity, where small businesses are still operating, and, particularly, where the idea of community is still at work and connection is still appreciated and cherished. In the chapter “West by Southwest,” he depicts himself driving through Arizona, on highway 260, an Arizona state route, with the desire to arrive at the next town, Heber,

I began anticipating Heber, the next town. One of the best moments of any day on the road was, toward sunset, looking forward to the last stop. At Heber I hoped for an old hotel with a little bar off to the side where they would serve A-1 on draft under a stuffed moosehead; or maybe I'd find a grill dishing up steak and eggs on blue-rimmed platters. I hoped for people who had good stories, people who sometimes took you home to see their collection of carved peach pits. (*Blue Highways* 172)

Heber is thought to be a smalltown, still characterized by its own specific features, which render it a place. Geographer Tim Cresswell has drawn a distinction between space and place, explaining that space needs to be endowed with meaning to become a place, “Space, then, has been seen in distinction to place as a realm without meaning—as a ‘fact of life’ which, like time, produces the basic coordinates for human life. When humans invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way (naming is one of such way) it becomes a place” (10). Looking at places involves also looking at attachments, connections, and experiences (Cresswell 11), something that is missing in Heber. In Heat-Moon’s road trip, small-town Heber is represented first as an idealization, and, shortly after, as the real space, or at least, as perceived through Heat-Moon’s eyes, as he further comments,

That was the hope. But Heber was box houses and a dingy sawmill, a couple of motels and filling stations, a glass-and-Formica cafe. Heber had no center, no focus for the eye and soul: neither a courthouse, nor high church steeple, not hotel. Nothing has done more to take a sense of civic identity, a feeling of community, from small-town America than the loss of

old hotels to the motel business. The hotel was once where things coalesced, where you could meet both townspeople and travelers. Not so in a motel. No matter how you build it, the motel remains a haunt of the quick and dirty ... Motels can be big, but never grand. (*Blue Highways* 172-173)

According to Heat-Moon, one of the causes that led Heber to become a soulless place is the loss of hotels and its replacement with motels. He views hotels as places in which connection and sharing were possible. Motels, instead, are regarded as nefarious for localness, being mainly built environments that promote standardization.

The first motels appeared during the 1920s and they were distinguishable from hotels, which were located in city centers, whereas motels were usually smaller and situated outside towns. The motels' upsurge, and especially that of chain motels, is a consequence of American people's devotion to automobility, as argued by Jakle, Sculle, and Rogers, "The rise of the motel (and the reorientation of the traditional hotel to accommodate motorists) followed from the automobile's adoption as America's preferred mode of transportation. The increase in the number of motels followed closely to the increase in automobile registrations" (20). Furthermore, Jakle, Sculle, and Rogers underline that, "Motels, as places, are commodified. They are packaged as a commercial product" (22), something that Heat-Moon also acknowledges when confronting small-town Heber. Mobility, therefore, has led to the standardization of places.

In a chapter titled "South by Southwest" we are confronted with a natural environment. Heat-Moon is travelling through "the Texas some people see as barren waste when they cross it, the part they later describe at the motel bar as 'nothing'" (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 149), and he provides a description of the desert landscape. From afar, the land appears as a barren landscape, "so rocky and dry" (*Blue Highways* 149), but when Heat-Moon gets closer he observes a different reality. He enumerates the observed wildlife, providing a list of thirty different species of fauna and flora, which he ironically calls "a list of nothing" (*Blue Highways* 149). That portion of the Texan desert shows itself to be rich, thus contrasting with the general idea of the desert as a wasteland). From an anthropocentric perspective, the landscape is barren and desolate, but when Heat-Moon stops and observes it more attentively, looking for what is there, the land acquires different connotations. There is a whole ecosystem where human beings are almost imperceptible: "I was there too, but my presence I felt more than saw" (*Blue Highways* 150). This might imply that, in an environment like the desert, humans are not more than a plant or an animal, but they are equally part of the whole environment; thus, the immensity of the desert erases any feeling of superiority by human beings.

However, the area travelled by Heat-Moon is part of the Permian Basin, a region well-known for the human intervention upon the environment. Heat-Moon passes close the Pecos River, a river that begins in New Mexico and then flows into Texas, subsequently merging with the Rio Grande. Little is said about the river's conditions, except that it is "now dammed to such docility" (*Blue Highways* 150) and that it was "a small, but once serious river" (*Blue Highways* 150). Actually, the Pecos River is not a small river, as Jensen claims, "The Pecos River flows 926 miles through Texas and New Mexico draining a 38,000-square mile watershed (Huser, 2000; Graves, 2002; Horgan, 1984). The river flows approximately 418 miles through Texas and is the United States' largest tributary to the Rio Grande" (1). Although Heat-Moon mentions that the river is dammed (rendering it docile), he neither delves into the actual conditions of the river, nor does he address its long history of exploitation, as Patrick Dearen shows, "A river born of nature, the Pecos has long been subject to man. He has trod its banks and used its waters, usually content to accept its sustenance without considering the consequences of the stream's future. But no water source is immune to impact, especially in the arid Southwest, and the ramifications of man's involvement with the Pecos have been far reaching" (22). Around the end of the 1800s, the river began to be exploited, since American settlers wanted the region to become profitable for agriculture, and, from then on, the intrusion of man into the region has never stopped.¹

Heat-Moon's disappointment does not come from the Pecos River, but from the reality of Fort Stockton, which represents another example of the standardization of places, as well as showing how mobility has indeed contributed to their alteration. From far away, Fort Stockton looks like "a mirage" (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 151) or like "a golden city of Cibola" (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 151). However, Fort Stockton's apparent splendor is overturned, when he realizes that those are the lights of "the plastic signs of Holiday Inn and Mobil Oil" (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 151), while Jakle et al. stress: "... Holiday Inn led the motel industry's transformation from an aggregate of independent, largely disorganized, and inconsistent local businesses to a set of standardized properties dominated by internationally oriented corporate networks over the past forty years ... In essence, Holiday Inn became the motel of America" (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 261). Motels and billboards, among other infrastructures, are part of the commercial strip, which define a specific landscape categorized by David E. Nye as "the third transportation landscape ... that of the automobile" (103), thus as a landscape that originated because of the existence and circulation of the automobile.

Early travelers by car regarded the American road, and, therefore, mobility, as a way to reconnect with nature and as a perpetuation of the frontier experience, which clearly involved a contact with "unspoiled" territories, and their subsequent domestication, resulting in the confrontation between man/technology and nature. The "natural sublime" which, as David E. Nye argues, extended

into the “automobility of 1900-1930” (104) was soon encroached by the commercial strip, providing services along the road, fostering consumption, and creating a modern version of the sublime. The commercial strip can be seen as the man’s domestication of the American environment, creating an “automotive space” (Nye 105), thus becoming the mobile experience of drivers on the American road.

Nye’s automotive spaces are emblemized in Heat-Moon’s considerations of Heber and Fort Stockton. Looking at Fort Stockton, Heat-Moon might have had the same feelings when confronting Heber’s reality: because of the motels—a manmade construction, consequence of the much-praised American mobility—America is becoming homogenized, since standardization is stripping away localness and the possibility for connection, something that Heat-Moon is strongly looking for through his road trip. Fort Stockton is a town not only dominated by Holiday Inns, but also by the Mobil Oil company. The town is the county seat of Pecos County, part of the Permian Basin, a region subdued to oil interests for a long time, as shown in a 1929 article from *El Paso Evening Post*,

... oil was demonstrative of humanity’s ability to conquer nature. Oil infrastructure was a fundamental improvement on the region’s primitive past, erasing the region’s lack of distinctive geographic features and natural beauty with rapidly expanding oil communities. Construction was a stepping-stone into the modern world and national freedom of movement, epitomized by the automobile, was fueled by Permian Basin hydrocarbons. (Stanford-McIntyre 164)

American mobility is highly dependent and connected with oil and, around it, America has centered its economy. As John Urry has highlighted, oil—“this ‘carbon capital’” (586)—has been involved in several business activities. Companies such as Toyota, road construction companies like Bechtel, and companies related to drivers’ facilities, such as Holiday Inn and McDonald’s, are all linked to the carbon capital, thus becoming central to American economy (586). The freedom of mobility is paradoxical and even illusive, since, in order to happen, it has to depend on oil’s extraction, thus on natural resources. The freedom of mobility occurs with the devastation and transformation of the environment, disclosing its deceptive nature. How, then, can mobility be seen as an act of freedom when that very same freedom is highly exploitative and intrusive?

In “South by Southeast,” and especially in two instances, it is possible to reflect upon the relationship between the American road and its surrounding environment, and notice if the trap of idealization is still present. Heat-Moon enters the state of Mississippi, on highway 16, “a road of trees and farmhouses” (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 103), a brief description, which conveys the idea of a harmonious balance between the road and nature. However, when Heat-Moon gets nearer the

landscape, he notices that the farmhouses are not as he thought they were, but more similar to suburban houses, which suggests that the place has likely been modified. All in all, highway 16 is described as a road that passes “through green fields, blue ponds, clumps of pine; it crossed the earthy Yokahockana River” (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 104), thus infusing a feeling of stability among the road and nature, although he acknowledges some instability, when he mentions the way white settlers dispossessed Native Americans of their lands, specifically those owned by the Choctaw (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 104).

Afterwards, in Ofahoma, still in Mississippi, Heat-Moon enters the Natchez Trace Parkway, part of the America’s Byways, a designation regarding scenic roads, created by the U.S. Secretary of Transportation. The Trace runs from Natchez, Mississippi to Nashville, Tennessee, “For miles no powerlines or billboards. Just tree, rock, water, bush, and road. The new Trace, like a river, followed natural contours and gave focus to the land; it so brought out the beauty that every road commissioner in the nation should drive the Trace to see that highway does not have to outrage landscape” (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 104). Heat-Moon sees this road not only as a way to reconnect with nature, but also as an integral part of nature itself, and even compares it to a river.

His comment on landscape overlooks the history of parkways in America. Parkway, such as the Natchez Trace or the Blue Ridge Parkway, were built with a specific intention: merging the scenic view of nature and the act of driving, giving the impression that, through mobility, one could fuse with American nature. According to Thomas Zeller, those “roads were understood to mean a technology in synch with nature ... The goal of these roads was more than simply carrying tourists to previously faraway and inaccessible places; according to the rhetoric of the designers, such roads would be able to reconcile the tensions between nature and technology through carefully designed landscapes” (Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways* 126). Natural spaces were, thus, readjusted to serve Man’s purposes, and, therefore, revealing the illusive character of parkways, and, in general, of the American road as a regenerative path towards and into nature.

Conclusion

This article has shown how certain spaces are represented in Heat-Moon’s road narrative, while also considering the road itself. Heber or Fort Stockton are examples of spaces where localness is replaced by the winds of modernity, mainly caused by the American appetite for mobility, even if Heat-Moon does not deeply recognize the extent to which mobility is indeed responsible for his much-praised localness. In the end, he is still trapped in the idealization of the American road. When confronting nature, it is possible to notice an ambivalent position: the desert is not considered through

an anthropocentric perspective, but his description of the Pecos River denotes superficiality and a lack of environmental awareness. The Pecos River and the surrounding area are spaces of environmental damage, something that Heat-Moon is not able to address. Similarly, when discussing the Natchez Trace Parkway, Heat-Moon dismisses “the tension between technology and the environment” (Zeller 135), regarding the Natchez Trace Parkway as an element harmoniously part of nature.

The adopted approach relied on what critic Derek Gladwin has quoted as ““Geocentric logic”” (40), that is to avoid focusing only on a singular perspective on a given space. Considering Heat-Moon’s descriptions and including other texts has allowed us to gain a more comprehensive outlook on environmental and spatial issues. Renée Bryzik considered Heat-Moon’s travel on the road as an example of ecocentric travel, regarding his style as “ecosensitive” and his book as an example of bioregional literature. If one considers Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, to which *Blue Highways* has been often compared, one cannot deny that spaces within Heat-Moon’s road book are debated in a more critical way than in Kerouac’s novel. However, his attitude is still egosensitive, as Jesse Gipko argues,

Least Heat-Moon uses his journey—and, by extension, nature—to understand himself and other people, but he does so because he thinks he should change along the journey. Nature also serves to bolster his tenuous optimism, especially when he faces the negative in America. He finds that, though natural beauty still exists in the America of 1978, that beauty will disappear unless rampant greed and commercialization are checked. (234-235)

Heat-Moon is looking for connection, and spaces, as Gipko has suggested, are just a medium to fulfill his personal desire. At the very beginning of the book, Heat-Moon claims, “When memory is too much, turn to the eye” (*Blue Highways* 5), which might be interpreted as the author’s determination in leaving behind the burden of his old life, and “turning to the eye,” meaning seeking new ways of seeing, new perspectives that might allow him a new beginning. Thus, the American open road continues to be a locus of opportunity and regeneration.

Furthermore, in the “Afterword” of *Blue Highways* 2013 edition, Heat-Moon does not make any specific comment about the environment. Considering Bryzik’s statement about the ecosensitivity of Heat-Moon’s road trip, it would have been expected to find at least one reflection on the American environment. Instead, what Heat-Moon advocates for is the American legacy of mobility, something that he is not able to question, “Perhaps it’s in our blood, maybe it’s just in our history, but surely it’s in the American vein to head out for some other place when home becomes

intolerable, or merely even when the distant side of the beyond seems a lure we can't resist. After all, every American has come or is a descendant of people who came from another part of the globe" (*Blue Highways* 417). Heat-Moon is reaffirming and advocating for the myth of the open road and the promise of mobility as distinctive features for the American national identity, overlooking the fact that that very same promise of mobility has contributed to inevitably transform the American environment. Even if Heat-Moon states that he "took to the open road in search of places where change did not mean ruin" (*Blue Highways* 5), he is, in the end, looking for connection. He hits the open road seeking for a new self, not for deeply acknowledging environmental damages or spatial transformations.

Furthermore, in 2014, thirty-two years after *Blue Highways*, Heat-Moon published *Writing Blue Highways: The Story of How a Book Happened*, where he explains and explores the writing process of his acclaimed road book. The journey on the road proved to be twofold in its objective: on the one hand, it provided him with a new life, and, on the other hand, it furnished material to then be used for the writing of his book. After thirty-two years, Heat-Moon reiterates, once more, the importance of mobility for the American experience,

After all, I lived in the most unfixed nation the earth has ever seen, a country conceived and populated by wanderers, wayfarers, migrants, immigrants, voyagers, vagabonds, most of them believing in the far side of the rainbow, in the possibilities of elsewhere, optimists for whom a road is an enticement beyond resistance and almost any there is preferable to a here. Movement is in our bloodstream in actuality and in metaphor. Is there an American who has never muttered, "What if I just quit? Just said fuggum and took off?" (*Writing Blue Highways* 9).

This reinforces the idea that, if one just leaves, a realm of new opportunities might be found, and that the appeal of the road will never cease, since mobility has always been part of the American foundations. Movement is intrinsic in the American character, and American roads—the arteries of the nation—allow for a perpetuation of the idea of America as nation on the move. Heat-Moon still clings to idealized notions of American mobility, and, consequently, he is not able to be fully aware of the nefarious consequences of that very same idealization.

To conclude, this article has, therefore, contributed to further the research in the field of the American road narrative, avoiding an exclusive focus on mobility as an inner quest. Following Ann Brigham's approach, the American road narrative "is not a method of freeing oneself from space ...

but instead the opposite—a mode of engagement” (4), thus considering it as a genre that can disclose the reality of the exterior space, rather than merely representing a metaphor of inner quests.

¹ The river’s water was leveraged, as well as the surrounding territory, and Dearen explains that, since the early 1880s, the Pecos region was exploited in terms of water, timber, and grazing (45). Other resources, such as zinc, copper, gold and silver were discovered and, around 1882, the Pecos River Mining Company began to operate in the region, specifically in the Pecos-Willow Creek area, inevitably leading to ecological damages (Dearen 46).

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