

# QUEER-Y ROAD

a written dissection of the  
queer road movie genre  
from 1991-2024

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## Content Warnings

- Discussion surrounding depictions of homophobia and transphobia, including hate crimes, violence, and language.
- Discussion surrounding depictions of HIV and the AIDS epidemic.
- Brief mentions of depictions of sexual assault

## Spoiler Warnings

This zine covers plot points from the following movies:

- *Thelma and Louise (1991)*
- *My Own Private Idaho (1991)*
- *The Living End (1992)*
- *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (1994)*
- *The Doom Generation (1995)*
- *Boys on the Side (1995)*
- *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar (1995)*
- *Y tu mamá también (2001)*
- *Transamerica (2005)*
- *Little Miss Sunshine (2006)*
- *Unpregnant (2020)*
- *Drive Away Dolls (2024)*

**Front cover source: *My Own Private Idaho (1991)***

**Back cover source: *Unpregnant (2020)***

[Verse 1]

Time

Measured in dotted yellow lines has passed you by  
And I

Never said an honest thing to you in all my life  
Hard times go slowly and the good times never come  
The world is a motor inn in an Iowa highway slum

[Chorus]

When the open road is closing in  
And you can't say where it ends and you begin  
When every truckstop dive's another five years off your life  
When the open road is closing in  
And the dotted yellow lines begin to spin  
When the sky begins to fall on everything you like at all  
You won't be coming home again

[Verse 2]

Ciao

You keep on drowning in the roads between the towns  
Now

I have been closing all the shutters in the house  
Well, I know you'll be back when every tree is turning brown  
You'll find the house is empty and the swingset's fallen down

[Chorus]

When the open road is closing in  
And you can't say where it ends and you begin  
When every truckstop dive's another five years off your life  
When the open road is closing in  
And the dotted yellow lines begin to spin  
When the sky begins to fall on everything you like at all  
You won't be coming home again

When the Open Road is Closing In  
The Magnetic Fields

# INTRODUCTION

*“There’s not another road anywhere that looks like this road. I mean, exactly like this road. It’s one kind of place, one of a kind. Like someone’s face. Like a fucked-up face.”*

*-My Own Private Idaho (1991)*

Sometime after 2018, I developed something of a fascination with the open road. I traveled fairly regularly between Tallahassee and Orlando via the Greyhound during this time, six-hour bus rides of asphalt lined with trees, Jesus billboards, and highway patrol officers clutching LIDAR guns looking to meet quota. The trips themselves were of the usual Greyhound affair: reliable, for the most part, and painfully unglamorous. Regardless, I always looked forward to them. There was a charm I couldn’t explain in its exhausted transiency, in the hard seats and recycled air and holes to piss in, or the \$2 Slim Jim breakfasts in gas station parking lots at the crest of dawn. It enchanted me how no matter how many times I’d been on those roads and passed the same landmarks, they never felt entirely familiar or tangible. I imagined I adopted some of those qualities whenever traveling myself, granting the unique relief that comes from being a passerby and stranger, however brief.

When I think of the comfort I took during those long rides, I can’t help but think of my transition, a majority of which took place during the years I was making these trips. In Orlando and Tallahassee, I was weighed down by the responsibility of gender performance for my peers and family, one that I was still experimenting with and learning the moves to. Daughter or son, niece or nephew, ma’am or sir, these labels were stuck and re-stuck to me as people struggled to adjust to (or purposefully reject) my attempts at masculinity. Those uncaring stretches of road were some of the only places outside my home that I truly felt free of the pressure to perform, and being in-between cities

became a private moment of refuge and reflection for me, rare moments of alignment of gender and geography.

During the month of March in 2024, I watched 12 road films that feature LGBT characters and storylines, spanning from *Thelma & Louise (1991)* to *Drive-Away Dolls (2024)*. This zine is a collection of patterns I’ve noticed and observations on how these stories incorporate road movie tropes and elements to reflect queer experiences. A majority of the movies I will be discussing originate from the United States, the exceptions being the films *Y tu mamá también (2001)* and *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (1994)*, which hail from Mexico and Australia, respectively.

## THE PUSH

*“I can’t just sit around here crying all the time. Jesus. My mascara keeps running. I look like a raccoon.”*

*-The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (1994)*

Similar to what is known as an inciting incident, a Push is what I call an event that gets the characters in a vehicle and on the move toward a specific destination. This usually occurs near the beginning of the film after establishing the characters’ personalities, relationships, and day-to-day lives. The main goal of The Push is to disrupt their routine and influence them to travel by 1.) creating an undesirable situation or state of being to escape from and/or 2.) coaxing them with a solution or temptation in the form of a destination or the act of traveling itself.

In *Boys on the Side (1995)*, Jane decides to accept a cross-country gig when her band is fired from their bar and subsequently breaks up; Bernadette from *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* agrees to Tick’s offer to perform drag in Alice Springs after the unexpected death of her husband; Jamie of *Drive-Away Dolls (2024)* is spurred to travel after a messy break-up, transforming Marian’s

mundane trip into a lesbian bar-hopping cruising adventure. In these examples, the characters choose to travel after a major disruption in their life leaves them vulnerable and unhappy. While Jamie and Bernadette seek a temporary distraction and Jane a long-term solution, all turn to the road as a means of solving their respective ails. Conversely, there are instances where characters travel due to necessity rather than choice. *Transamerica* (2005) and *Unpregnant* (2020) both feature medical procedures as a motive for travel (bottom surgery and abortion, respectively). The most common forced push is crime and running from the law (more on that soon).

Dissatisfaction with routine also plays a crucial role in inciting characters to travel. An element of this exists in all road films but is most noticeable in ones where there's seemingly no singular on-screen moment of disruption for the characters. *Thelma & Louise* (1991) features the titular women planning an innocuous fishing trip while in *Drive-Away Dolls*, Marian is visiting her aunt in Tallahassee to go birding. Rather than utilizing a single major event, the films instead take the time to sow seeds of dissatisfaction in these characters' daily lives — Thelma lives with her abusive husband while Louise and Marian work dreary day jobs and live lonely lives. The sober grind of their routine makes the open road that much more enticing, bringing with it the promise of adventure and reprieve.

Regardless of reason, Pushes always start with an ultimate goal in mind. This usually takes the form of a specific city or location, though not always. For instance, in *Y tu mamá también*, Julio and Tenoch agree to drive Luisa to a fictional beach they drunkenly conjured with the ultimate intent of having sex with her during their trip. A film can have multiple pushes if a different event happens that changes the ultimate goal of its characters. Of course, whether the characters achieve their goals is not the main appeal of a road movie. Rather, it is the transformation they experience during their time on the road, the lessons they internalize about their relationships to each other and society.

## Violence and Crime as a Motive for Travel

*“Oh, great. And just to think, 48 hours ago I was just another bummed out HIV-positive homo minding my own business. Now I’m a fugitive driving to God-fuck knows where in the middle of the night facing an accessory to a murder rap.”*

*-The Living End (1992)*

Acts of crime and violence are common in queer road movies. Out of the 12 movies I watched, five features the protagonists committing one or more violent crimes as a major story beat. Of these, three act as motives for travel or changing destinations:

1. In *Thelma & Louise*, the titular characters abandon their initial fishing trip for Mexico after Louise kills the man who attempted to rape Thelma.
2. In *The Living End* (1992), Jon and Luke initially travel to San Francisco to get Luke to safety after he murders a police officer.
3. In *The Doom Generation* (1995), punk teenagers Jordan, Amy, and X hit the streets of Los Angeles after accidentally killing a convenience store owner.

For further context, Louise's murder is the first major act of violence in the film and catalyzes a drastic shift in tone from the film's cheery beginning. In the openings to Gregg Araki's *Living End* and *Doom Generation*, violence is set up as a much more prominent element of the films' universes. Luke is held at gun-point by lesbian lovers, shoots a trio of skinhead assailants, and beats a homophobic Neonazi with a boombox all within the first 25 minutes of the movie. In *Doom Generation*, X is introduced fighting a gang of homophobic punks, stabbing a member in the eye before escaping with the help of Amy and Jordan.

Despite the differences in their depictions of violence, the framing of the films' Pushes share a common thoroughline. The characters live

in social environments that are actively hostile toward them for their respective identities as women, gay men, and teenagers. When Thelma pleads that they go to the police after the attempted rape and murder, Louise snaps that nobody would believe them and that they “don’t live in that kind of a world.” In *T&L* and the Araki films, the acts of crime committed by the protagonists are direct results of the discriminatory societies they live in, done out of necessity and frustration. Their motives for travel become more than just evading the law— it’s to escape the systems that historically fail to support and protect the disenfranchised groups they belong to.

Simplified, crimes are actions that violate and disrupt the image of an upstanding, moral society. In Western civilization, queerness is seen to do exactly that, evident by the number of legislation that criminalizes queer bodies and relations, many of which are still being drafted and passed today. For non-queer individuals, queers performing acts of violent crime reinforces their perceptions of social and moral deviance being aligned with sexual deviance. Many of these non-queer individuals are ignorant to— or in direct support of— the systems that necessitates them to perform these acts in the first place. In queer film and fiction, crime and violence can act as a sort of catharsis against these notions, serving as an acknowledgement and criticism of the institutions that criminalizes queer existence, and a vicarious lashing out against the cisheteronormative status quo and its enforcers.

## HIV as a Motive for Travel

*dedicated to craig lee (1954-1991) and the hundreds of thousands who've died and the hundreds of thousands more who will die because of a big white house full of republican fuckheads.*

*- dedication in the end credits of The Living End (1992)*

Of the films I watched, two feature characters diagnosed with HIV: Jon and Luke from *The Living End*, and Robin from *Boys on the Side*. The health statuses of all three becomes their respective motivations to start or continue traveling.

In *Living End*, Jon and Luke drive aimlessly after Luke’s contact in San Francisco rejects him. They enjoy each other’s company until Luke threatens to shoot a police officer from their vehicle. They argue, and when Jon wails about missing his old life, Luke responds with:

*“You really wanna go back to your “I’m HIV positive and everything’s normal hunky dory” life? Well, go fucking right ahead. Just don’t forget to have sex in a plastic bag, and don’t plan anything too far in the future. (A beat.) Don’t you get it? We’re not like them. We don’t have as much time. So we gotta grab life by the balls and go for it. You can piss it all away in that stupid job of yours until you wither away and they feed you to the worms. I say fuck that shit, man.”*

At this point of the film, Jon and Luke have no ultimate destination, no plans to see specific parts of the world or settle in another city. To them, the act of constantly traveling— a perpetual existence outside of civilization— is their goal. Their hedonistic road trip of sex and violence becomes more than just a way of living life. It’s a blatant refusal to participate in the society and institutions facilitating the deaths of hundreds of thousands individuals to HIV and AIDS, ones that accuse gay men of spreading the disease, intentionally neglect to provide adequate care and support, then continues to disrespect them even in death.



*The Living End (1992)*

In *Boys on the Side*, Robin travels as an attempt to outrun her AIDS prognosis. When confronted by Jane in the hospital, she says, “I thought if I could just go somewhere else, I could make it not happen.” To Robin, the trip from NY to LA is not only an attempt at geographically distancing herself from her diagnosis, but also an emotional one. There’s even a sense of temporal withdrawal as throughout the initial journey with Jane, Robin reminisces about the trips she used to take with her family as a child.

While not within the scope of this zine, it would be remiss of me to neglect mentioning the significance of depicting a woman with AIDS in 1995, a demographic that’d been historically neglected in the narrative surrounding the epidemic. I highly recommend checking out Paul Sendziuk & Eva Squire’s “Reassessing the Critical Legacy of Early ‘AIDS Movies’”: *Longtime Companion*, *Philadelphia* and *Boys on the Side*” to learn more about the implications of this depiction, especially in relation to the rest of the cast of characters.

## THE ROAD

*SHERYL*

*Honey, Grandpa's soul is in Heaven now. He's with God. Okay?  
Olive nods. She turns and looks out the window.*

*OUT THE WINDOW*

*The passing landscape of the road leading back to the Interstate. It seems a long way from God.*

*-From the Screenplay of Little Miss Sunshine (2006) by Michael Arndt*

Ah, the open road. This is where you get iconic shots used for movie trailers: sweeping overheads of blacktop bisecting nature, and bad sing-alongs to ABBA and Kelly Clarkson through tinny car speakers. Despite being the name of the genre, the time actually spent on the road varies greatly from film to film. Some spend the bulk of their runtime driving while others focus almost exclusively on **Stops** the characters have made. Regardless, this asphalt expanse is the heart and soul of any road movie, sweeping the characters away from civilization into an isolated wasteland paved with possibilities and self-discovery.

Road travel is unglamorous and repetitive. You lay your foot on the gas and keep it there, stopping only to piss or grab food before repeating again. In film, the passage of time while driving is conveyed through sweeping gestures and broad brushstrokes, montages of passing landscapes and bite-sized vignettes of character interaction. This lends the journey a greater sense of scale and movement without bogging it down with the repetition of mundanities. Additionally, the combination of the landscape and the close proximity of the characters create ripe opportunities to develop key narrative elements and character, brewing them until they can come to a boil at the next **Stop**.

## The Landscape

*“I think sometimes this city is sucking away my soul. Like yesterday, I was stuck in this humongous traffic jam on the 405 freeway, and I just couldn't wait to get to the dead bodies lying there on the asphalt. All I cared about was getting out and moving again...”*

*“I know. I feel like a gerbil smothering in Richard Gere's asshole.”*

*-The Doom Generation (1995)*

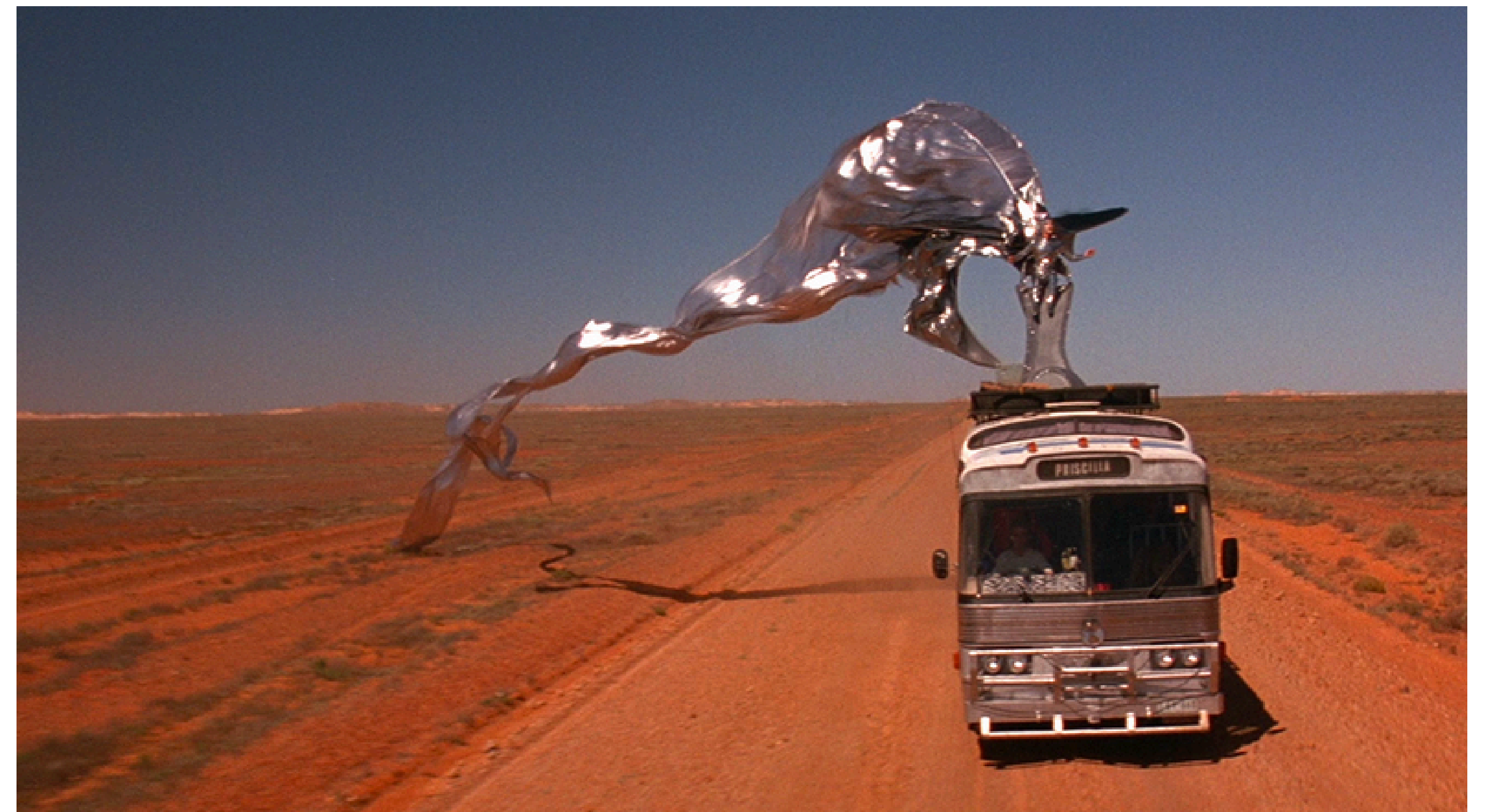
The open road is something of a symbolic chameleon, versatile enough to represent a range of contrasting ideas and themes. Similar to how it offers something different to different characters, filmmakers can accentuate various aspects of the landscape to further develop a unique atmosphere and story.

Traveling across the United States interstate system— on long stretches of samey, uneventful scenery and through copy-pasted sprints of Americana— creates a sense of temporal and spatial distortion. Even after hours of driving, one might feel like they've barely moved at all until they reach a key destination or the sun sets. In this regard, filmmakers can not only use landscapes to geographically orient the viewer, but also manipulate the narrative's sense of progression. For instance, a montage of vastly different landscapes and landmarks in succession conveys that a large amount of distance has been traveled with no notable events in between. Equally utilized are shots of massive expanses of scenery: seas of wild grass or farmland, long stretches of barren desert, winding systems of generic-looking ramps and roads, all indistinguishable from the next, utilized to create a feeling of isolation and scale.

A character's response to their surrounding landscape can also further contextualize the film's setting and characters. Some may reminisce about their own childhood passing familiar landmarks like Robin from *Boys on the Side*. Others are hostile, such as the teenagers from *The Doom Generation* toward their hometown of Los Angeles. Even if the

characters are seemingly ambivalent toward their specific surroundings, simply being away from society can spur a sense of freedom and vulnerability that drives their development or expression.

My favorite example of this comes from *Priscilla*. Off the road, in cities and towns, the drag queens are antagonized and alienated by the general public. They are harassed, threatened, and assaulted. In the desert, however, hundreds of miles away from civilization with only themselves as company, they are free from the judgment of a homophobic and transphobic society. Characters stand atop a moving bus in full drag against a giant silver stiletto, costume billowing out behind them as they speed through the auburn Australian desert. They sing ABBA loudly, cake themselves in make-up and don wigs despite the sweltering heat. The wasteland embraces the outcasts, and they embrace it back, transforming it into a stage, its isolation an opportunity for expression that's loud, colorful, and unabashedly queer.



***The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (1994)***

## The Passengers

*“Look, Robin, right? You're a nice lady and I'm sure there's a lot of things about yourself that you just can't help, and I understand that. But I don't fucking think we mesh at all. And I'm sure there's somebody out there who wants to go cross-country with the whitest woman on the face of the earth, singing Carpenter songs and reliving childhood memories. But it ain't me.”*

*-Boys on the Side (1995)*

Perhaps the most important role of the road is to restrict the characters' company and the actions they can take. Shared with others, cars are cramped, intimate spaces with almost no privacy. This forced proximity between characters creates fertile ground to develop and explore the relationships between them.

Either through conflict or chemistry, the main purpose of traveling is to generate energy or tension. In *Y tu mamá también*, Luisa is gradually charmed by Tenoch and Julio's comradery and boyish posturing as they drive through Mexico. Conversely, early on in *Boys on the Side*, Jane shoots down Robin's attempts at small talk on the road and offends her by crassly mentioning her dead brother. On the road, interactions between characters are limited. Passengers can't act on developing sexual urges, animosity, or other budding feelings the same way they can outside of a moving vehicle. More significantly, the characters are unable to escape each other's presence even as these tensions grow to become unbearable. The car then becomes something of a pressure cooker, trapping the characters until they're able to properly act on their simmering emotions the next time they're off the road.

Of course, character relationships are dynamic. Interactions in the vehicle change as the story develops and passengers' perceptions of one another change. However, I found that many major turning points and revelations didn't happen in the moving vehicle itself. The road is

only one of the integral elements of a road movie, working in tandem with...

## STOPS AND ROAD BLOCKS

*“Okay. In 20 miles, we're gonna make our first stop.”*

*“Yes! Yes! Love stops. We should go check out the world's biggest fork.”*

*-Unpregnant (2020)*

Stops and road blocks are places or events that allow— or force— the characters to take a break from driving. Think of charming small town diners with frill-aproned waitresses, aging tourist traps, budget motels, and popped tires on the freeway, classic mundanities that road films depict with an air of nostalgia and amusement. The difference between stops and road blocks is that stops are intentionally made while road blocks are not. For instance, taking a detour to the gas station to grab fuel and snacks is a stop while running out of gas on the freeway is a road block.

### Characters and Plot

*Mike is hesitating. He is about to say something personal. He looks at Scott and back to the fire, a few times too many.*

*-From the screenplay of My Own Private Idaho (1991) by Gus Van Sant*

Stops/RBs do more than just break up the monotony of driving scenes. They give the characters opportunities to act on or test the relationships developed through the course of their journey. If traveling is what breaks down their defenses— wearing them down through physical exertion and proximity— then stops are where they're the most vulnerable. In the famous “campfire scene” of *My Own Private Idaho (1991)*, Mike confesses his feelings to Scott in a



desert wilderness while in *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), Sheryl and Richard have an explosive argument in a motel room away from the family, acting on tensions exacerbated by the reveal of Richard's failed book deal. Stops/RB's also present characters different opportunities to reveal sides of themselves that they can't in the limitations of a moving vehicle. In *Boys on the Side*, Robin shares her favorite soap opera with Jane in their motel, and the two bond despite their rocky beginning. In *Unpregnant*, Bailey makes her and Veronica their childhood drink in a gas station, revealing that she hasn't fully discarded their previous friendship.

Stops/RBs also allow the plot to "catch up" to its characters. Sometimes, this can be very literal. In films that feature active pursuits such as *Thelma & Louise* and *Drive-Away Dolls*, every stop gives the opposing party an opportunity to close distance and gather evidence. In a more figurative sense, stops/RB's can also force the characters to confront their past or reveal plot-relevant information that drastically shifts the dynamics of the characters. In *Doom Generation*, Amy is mistaken for an ex-lover in nearly every bar or shop she goes to, each encounter ending in a bloody, violent mess. Frank encounters his gay ex-lover in a gas station in *Little Miss Sunshine*. In *Transamerica*, Toby accidentally discovers that Bree is transgender during an off-road bathroom break. Relegating plot important elements and reveals to stops/RBs gives these moments the unique space and weight they deserve, and can drastically change the dynamics of the characters the next time they hit the road, keeping the journey compelling.

And the sex! Many of the films I watched featured explicit scenes of same and/or opposite-sex couples, almost all of which occurred during a stop of some sort (almost all, as *The Living End* has a wonderful depiction of road head). In these movies, sexual tension builds as the characters travel together, interactions becoming more heated the closer they get. To build off a previous example, if the car is where Luisa is charmed by Julio and Tenoch—bantering and learning about each other's sexual habits—then stops are where she acts on it, first

having sex with Tenoch in a hotel room, then with Julio in the parked car the next day. Araki's *Living End* and *Doom Generation* feature their protagonists making joyful and passionate love in overnight lodgings as they wander the state(s). In *Drive-Away Dolls*, Jamie and Marian cruise at lesbian bars before eventually having sex with one another. While intimate in their own right, each sexual encounter is informed by the characters' shared time on the road and the stops they've made previously along the way. And in this age of rampant corporate censorship and sanitization of queerness, I think on-screen displays of gay passion and love and sex is pretty dang cool.

## Cops

*"These weirdos coming in here, these boys in dresses, corrupting you with their way of life, changing the way things have always been. I really don't think that's what you want!"*

*To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar (1995)*

One of the most notable road blocks I came across during my marathon was the presence and pursuit of cops. If the road offers an escape from the grind and oppression of normal society, than cops are an active threat against that, patrolling the streets and chasing down deviant behavior in flashing squad cars and SWAT mobiles. While common in the genre of road movies as a whole, their role as traveling enforcers of societal norms (i.e. rich white cisheteronormality) play an integral part in illustrating narratives that are specifically queer.

Regardless of its content, every interaction between a queer character and a police officer is informed by a long and violent history of policing in queer communities that continues on to this day. How this is handled varies from movie to movie. *Thelma and Louise* spend a majority of the film evading law enforcement, going so far as to commit suicide rather than turn themselves in. In *To Wong Foo*, a small town stands together to drive away the homophobic Sheriff that

attempts to arrest a group of drag queens. Queer resistance against law enforcement is a core pillar of modern queer liberation and civil rights. Its depiction is, in my opinion, more important and relevant than ever before. This makes recent movies like *Drive-Away Dolls*, which features Beanie Feldstein as a “good” lesbian cop that saves the day, all the more disappointing to me, a reminder that just because a movie is queer doesn’t make it inherently subversive in every area.



*To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar (1995)*

## CONCLUSION

*After all those trains and all those breakdown lanes  
The roads don't love you and they still won't pretend to  
After all those days on God-forsaken highways  
The roads don't love you and they still won't pretend to  
Long Vermont Roads by The Magnetic Fields*

A road movie isn’t over just because the characters have reached their destination. In this genre, where a character ends internally is more important than where they end up geographically; just because they’ve reached their goal, doesn’t mean they’re emotionally or spiritually

fulfilled. Likewise, as I type up the concluding paragraph of this zine, I can’t say that my appetite for this niche genre of film is entirely sated. In fact, my passion for it has only grown as I saw how diverse and colorful each film was, so much so that I probably could have written a similar length (and probably more coherent) zine on each individual film alone. For now, I can only hope for more queer road movies to bless my screen in my lifespan, each more brazen, raunchy, and radical than the last.

Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go rewatch my DVD copy of *The Living End*.