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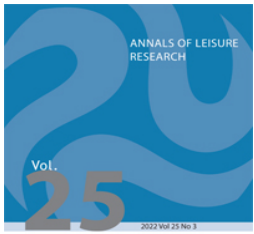
# The Great Raced and Gendered Outdoors: White Male Spatiality in Alexander Payne's Nebraska and David Lynch's The Straight Story

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# The great raced and gendered outdoors: white male spatiality in Alexander Payne's *Nebraska* and David Lynch's *The Straight Story*

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## ABSTRACT

This study uses two U.S. films – *Nebraska* (2013) and *The Straight Story* (1999) – to examine the centrality and framing power of hegemonic white masculinity for common conceptions in the United States of the outdoors. While both white male filmmakers portray white men rendered vulnerable to outdoor extremes by advanced age, they also depict common white American male perspectives on geographical space, and on one's own supposedly appropriate role as a central actor in it, a phenomenon labelled 'white male spatiality'. While *Nebraska*'s central character remains ensnared in a damaging conception of land, himself and his relation to others, *The Straight Story*'s protagonist demonstrates an approach to the outdoors that breaks free of self-serving appropriation, thereby promoting apprehension of others, land and the universe on something more like their own terms, as well as outdoor leisure practices that are more inclusive and reparative.

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## Introduction

In two films made in the United States, Alexander Payne's *Nebraska* (2013) and David Lynch's *The Straight Story* (1999), a retired white man takes a slow outdoors journey, one on foot and the other on a riding mower. In these revisions of the classic, youth-oriented and white-masculine 'road movie' genre, these elderly central characters exist in the leisurely time-space of 'retirement', but unsettled desires make them restive, driving them to pursue prizes that have eluded them all their lives. *Nebraska*'s Woody Grant (played by Bruce Dern) seeks financial status, and in *The Straight Story*, Alvin Straight (Richard Farnsworth) longs for lost fraternal love with his estranged brother. Contrary to most road movies, in which the protagonists zip through unpeopled landscapes in motorized transportation, and contrary as well to stereotypical notions of leisure travel enjoyed by financially able senior-citizens (RVs, cruises, package tours, etc.), these two films highlight the slow pace of their protagonists, and thus as well their exposure to the onslaughts and delights of natural settings. This is an 'outdoors' condition that would seem to encourage, in both the protagonists and viewers, a fuller apprehension of their surroundings and of their own places within them. While *The Straight Story* does explore this seemingly

universal theme, what both films depict via instrumentalised usages of outdoors scenery is particular raced and gendered influences on the movement, both physical and emotional, of their central characters. While the focus of these films, and thus of this study, is white male spatiality within the context of the United States, I would argue that interpreting these films in this light helps to reveal something that often goes unseen in other settler colonial contexts: the hegemonic white masculinity that shapes collective conceptions of natural, seemingly empty geographical space. The central characters of these two films serve as embodied focalizers of a historically sanctioned white male gaze, as indeed the films themselves do, through which such conceptions of the outdoors are commonly filtered.

This perspective is more than just white and masculine in its defining outlook on geographical space; implicitly coexistent is the presence of white men *in* such space, posited as the most appropriate and agential beings to be moving through it. As demonstrated by work in cultural geography (Dwyer and Jones 2000; Farough 2004; Kenway and Hickey-Moody 2009; Massey 1994), ethnoracial history (Herbert 2018; Kolodny 1975; Pierce 2016; Pratt 1992), mobility studies (Cresswell and Uteng 2016; Hague 2010; Pesses 2017) and leisure studies (Evers 2016; Long and Hylton 2002; Mowatt 2009; Spracklen 2013), and often informed by other multidisciplinary concepts and findings from critical whiteness and masculinity studies, an agential sense of mobility in relation to outdoor spaces in the United States has been specifically imagined as most appropriately white or male – and often as both. While white male identities in the U.S. have of course been forged in urban spaces as well, what lingers in the country's collective imagination from its history of raced and gendered conquest, a conquest encapsulated perhaps most aptly in the phrase 'Manifest Destiny', is a sense of white men being especially white and male in 'all-American' terms when moving freely through a relatively empty landscape. The result for white male individuals is an entitled sense of mobility that is also nostalgia laden (and thus illusory), not only about the outdoors but also about one's own place within it, as the empowered bearer of a particularly embodied mind and perspective, which supposedly went unquestioned and unchallenged in the past. The white male protagonists of *The Straight Story* and *Nebraska* exhibit an entitled, appropriative relation to open outdoor space, and the films themselves encourage viewers to accede to this normalized perspective on rural spaces and 'nature', and to a sociohistorically informed positing of white men as the most appropriate users of outdoor spaces as a self-serving backdrop. As the films themselves project this perspective on the outdoors, other perspectives, such as those of indigenous, black or Latin American people, or of various kinds of women – perspectives from which landscapes in the United States and those who sparsely populate them would be perceived very differently – are erased or ignored. Nevertheless, a crucial difference in perspective does emerge: while Payne's Woody Grant remains mired in and driven by consumerist, white masculine imperatives that he stubbornly refuses to relinquish even at his advanced age, Lynch's Alvin Straight eventually demonstrates that along with the excess leisure time available during retirement, white masculinity itself can foster refusal – of both consumerist demands and of a hegemonic conception of oneself and one's environment. A potential result for viewers can be a more appreciative, capacious apprehension of outdoor settings, and a deeper understanding of who does and does not feel welcome in them. Such a perspective also counters common, blithely

self-serving conceptions of the outdoors often held by white American men, and by many who produce and promulgate mainstream entertainment.

### The great white male outdoors

Considering these films in light of the historical and geographic contingency of white masculinity can advance our understanding of an ideologically laden and socially dominant conception of outdoor spaces, a conception that amounts to what I will label *white male spatiality*. In terms of race, as Spracklen (2013, 10) points out, ‘outdoor leisure practices such as walking are connected to the imagined, nationalist nature of instrumental whiteness in the west’. In *Nebraska* and *The Straight Story*, a racialized situatedness is specific to their national setting, which imbues both films with conventional Hollywood narrative elements, which themselves have shaped national memory about the seemingly empty ‘great outdoors’ and ‘nature’. In reality, such spaces became relatively empty ‘natural’ or ‘rural’ settings in the 1800s via the white supremacist dispossession, slaughter and removal of indigenous peoples, while those parts that became more ‘developed’ often did so with the erased help of other ethnoracial groups (Glasrud and Searles 2016; Pierce 2016; Roediger 2005). Conceiving of oneself as a particularly apt and liberated participant in outdoor leisure activities remains an especially masculine entitlement as well. This is not to say that women, or non-white people or non-binary people, cannot feel liberated through participation in outdoor leisure activities. My point here is that in the context of U.S. settler colonialism, white men are more encouraged to feel so. As noted in studies of gendered influences on leisure practices, many women who subscribe to conventional gender roles, for example, do conceive of leisure as a time–space for self-actualization, because it allows for activities outside of the more caretaking ones expected of them in their regular lives, yet they nevertheless continue with family-oriented practices while spending time outdoors (Izenstark et al. 2016; Kay 2003). On the other hand, among men who subscribe to conventional gender roles, many tend to use outdoor get-aways as a chance to pursue *their own* interests. Fathers in Kay’s study (2003, 11) viewed ‘family holidays as “personal” holidays, while mothers prioritized the satisfaction of family members’. Generally, men on holiday tend to ‘display a much stronger sense of entitlement than women to pursue personal activities’. In these terms, while the movies’ two elderly protagonists ultimately pursue interests that are not the sole province of white men – financial status for one and familial connection for the other – what also propels them outdoors, along with their racial whiteness, from a more contented sense of having achieved a leisurely ‘retirement’ is their self-conceptions as men, and thus as agential beings who have yet to relinquish a sense of most fully being their proper selves when engaged in individualized and purposeful movement.

In both *Nebraska* and *The Straight Story*, plot tension is generated by the vulnerability these white men expose themselves to while walking or riding a lawnmower outdoors by being elderly. In part because both characters are relatively impoverished working-class men, and also because neither is travelling for touristic purposes, both films downplay stereotypical modes of elderly travel, which rely on motorized conveyance of elderly bodies (Hong, Kim, and Lee 1999; Moore and Henderson 2018; Onyx and Leonard 2005). Nevertheless, viewers learn, vehicular movement was central to both retired characters’ working lives – Straight was a truck driver, while Grant repaired vehicles in a garage

that he co-owned. As each film plays out, a contrast emerges related to the elderly stage of a white American man's life, a stage of life during which many find time to engage in self-assessment (Bauer, Wrosch, and Jobin 2008; Farquhar et al. 2013; Tassone, Reed, and Carstensen 2019; Torges, Stewart, and Nolen-Hoeksema 2008). While Woody Grant seems during moments of self-reflection reluctant to relinquish a more youth-oriented sense of himself as perhaps most *fully* himself while driving a nice vehicle, Alvin Straight rejects the typical white male fetishization of high-powered vehicular movement – a mode of being commonly posited in the United States as an especially younger man's prerogative (Best 2006; Cross 2018) – and instead allows his enforced slowness to lull him into embracing a more meditative apprehension of his connections to others, and to the outdoors.

As *Nebraska* commences, Grant has set out from his home in Billings, Montana for a walk to Lincoln, Nebraska (a distance of 850 miles) because he has received the same advertisement also sent to millions of others, a letter promising that he could win a million dollars if he merely returns a filled-in form. The real-world analogue here is the Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes, a surface-mail promotion which has long used the lure of a million-dollar prize as an incentive to encourage people to order at least one annual magazine subscription. Grant tries to walk to the mail-order company's headquarters because he has yet to receive what he falsely believes are his winnings. *The Straight Story* – the most straightforward, conventional movie Lynch has ever made, complete with the opening imprimatur of the Walt Disney Company – is based on the true story of Alvin Straight, a man who at the age of seventy-three really did embark on a 240-mile journey on his riding mower in order to visit his estranged brother (Longden, n.d.). Family members and friends try to stop both of these elderly men from plodding onward, worried about dangers posed by exposure to the outdoors, including vehicular traffic. If only they were to travel in a car or recreational vehicle (RV), or at least a public bus, others would feel relieved because their movement itself would instead be perceived as normal and safe. In thematic terms, a crucial difference between these two characters is their apparent motivations – Straight seeks further connection with family, while also maintaining a close, loving connection with the live-in adult daughter he has left behind (Rose Straight, played by Sissy Spacek). On the other hand, family is the very thing from which Grant seeks escape, primarily because his family members bring to mind how little financial status he has managed to attain.

A relatively empty outdoors backdrop in an 'American' context is emphasized throughout both films – great plains and occasional mountains in *Nebraska*, rolling hills and autumnal farm lands in *The Straight Story*, usually bisected by a two-lane highway – not only as a familiar setting for the characters' adventurous journeys, but also as a constitutive component of their embodied sense of themselves as they travel. In these ways, directors Lynch and Payne depict their protagonists (however purposefully or incidentally) within the historical lineage of a geographically situated and mythical white American male identity. As the United States expanded from its colonial east-coast origins, and as cities began to swell in the 1800s with provisionally white, non-'Anglo-Saxon' immigrants (Frye Jacobson 1998; Horsman 1981; Roediger 2005), a phrase commonly attributed to newspaper publisher Horace Greeley encapsulated a distinctly gendered component of the common conception of the acquisitive movement labelled 'Manifest Destiny': 'Go west, young man!' (Fuller 2004). As Horsman explains (1981, 189), westward expansion was

commonly touted in openly racist terms, as not just a supposedly organic national movement, but also as an explicitly 'white Anglo-Saxon' one. By the late 1800s, a popular conception had emerged of the 'American' West as a place that was relatively empty, yet also populated by an alternately demonized and romanticized, but always inferior indigenous other (Goldstein 2014; Vogel 2004). As 'settlers' and other white appropriators moved westward, this geographical space became an idealized staging ground for white-male enactment of a mythic, agential and mobile American self (Moos 2005; Pierce 2016; Rico 2013). Later, early cinema in the United States, especially cowboy-and-Indian 'westerns', further helped fuel the national imaginings of such outdoor settings.

Today, as cinema in the United States often still demonstrates, the legacy of this dominant raced and gendered orientation toward outdoor 'American' spaces remains, shape-shifting into modes that suit current settings. In terms of race, as with gender, 'The attachments and deployments of white privilege reanimate preceding tropes and repertoires of racialization in ways specific to a particular moment' (Goldstein 2014, 1078). One manifestation of this hegemonic orientation toward the outdoors, evinced in both *Nebraska* and *The Straight Story*, is the privilege white men enjoy of relatively unfettered movement through idealized, seemingly unpopulated spaces, along with an enabling conception of themselves as a particularly apt traverser of such a setting. This is the embodied geographical orientation that I label white male spatiality. I build here on related work in several fields. Geographers Dwyer and Jones (2000) have spelled out a similar phenomenon in terms of race, a 'white socio-spatial epistemology', which they delineate as an illusory self-orientation to the world that fosters a false sense of individualism in white people when they fail to acknowledge erased racial and ethnic others. They often do so in the ways they imagine outdoors landscapes and act in them, and in how they conceive of themselves, in ways that are falsely individualistic in that they do not register the relationally constituted foundations of their own raced identities.<sup>1</sup> This white racial spatiality also conceives of outdoor spaces as vast, open and empty, when in reality geography has been segmented, via the paradoxical enactment of this same racialized perspective, into orderly, effectively segregated sectors. These cordoned spaces range from indigenous 'reservations' to

gated communities to redlined districts, from nature 'preserves' (including, for example, all-white golf courses) to office towers (white by day, brown and black by night). Further, by providing a framework for maintaining social order across space, this epistemology is the precondition for smooth mobility across zones, from the daily commute to leisure travel. (Dwyer and Jones 2000, 212)

What Dwyer and Jones mostly neglect to acknowledge is that this mobility is most readily enacted by male members of the white race, a conjunction that more accurately recognizes this socio-spatial epistemology as a *white and male* sense of space – a white male spatiality. While others continue to hold differing conceptions of geographical space, white American men have effectively taken dominion over – and established a dominant narrative regarding – nature, the outdoors, and rural spaces. Enactment of this perspective onto managed environments results in even outdoor spaces conceived of as 'nature' being parcelled into named, controlled sectors – parks, forests, preserves, reserves, parkways – traditionally managed, surveilled and policed by white men.

In addition, and ironically counter to the common white-male fetishizing of individualism, white male spatiality as an embodied perspective and epistemology is geographically

relational. As white men ‘tamed’ both Native Americans and the spaces in which they lived, white male American identity itself was greatly formed and shaped in relation to outdoor spaces, which have thus continued to serve as a self-defining site and backdrop for sanctioned white male action. The outdoors has thereby become a space in which white-male participation is the presumed, traditional norm, however much others also partake in outdoor activities (Dwyer and Jones 2000; Martin 2004; Virden and Walker 1999). At the same time, while white male participation and mobility in outdoor spaces is not normally conceived of consciously as this norm in raced and gendered terms, white men are the people who can most readily feel as if they are comfortably and aptly positioned as traversers of and agential actors within such settings. Useful here is philosopher Shannon Sullivan’s (2006, 10) notion of common ‘unconscious habits’ among white people, particularly that of ‘ontological expansiveness’: ‘One of the predominant unconscious habits of white privilege is ontological expansiveness. As ontologically expansive, white people tend to act and think as if all spaces – whether geographical, psychical, linguistic, economic, spiritual, bodily, or otherwise – are or should be available for them to move in and out of as they wish’. Any recognition, for example, of the land as stolen from slaughtered others, a legacy that has bestowed the largest benefits on members of one’s own race and gender, typically does little to impede the enjoyment of today’s white male outdoors enthusiasts. Even land set aside for indigenous peoples is commonly seen by white American men as geographical space in which they should feel welcome to practice their favoured activities (Crane-Murdoch 2013; Huhndorf 2001; Ladino 2004; Lipsitz 2008; Seraphin 2017).

In terms of cinematic depictions of white men in outdoor spaces, such landscapes have become not just a site deemed particularly suited to white male activity, but also a site for sight – for a normalized ocular white male perspective that sees, and thus conceptualizes, defines and labels, geographical spaces. Taking cues from such seminal work as Kolodny’s *The Lay of the Land* and Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes*, many have noted that outdoor space itself has long been gendered in the United States by white-male conquerors and other traversers as female (Kolodny 1975; Milstein and Dickinson 2012; Pratt 1992). Such work has often neglected delineation of both the white masculinity that informs the perspective from which landscape has been defined, and the implicit suitability of white men as individualized figures moving agentially and purposefully through it. Cinema is of course primarily a way of seeing, that is, of imagining that we are seeing whatever a filmmaker presents as a setting, usually one in which human characters interact with each other. In Hollywood movies that portray white men in largely unpopulated spaces, lone figures often interact instead *with the landscape itself*. Not only does such a character survey it, while we also survey it implicitly through his perspective, but his doing so helps to both form and reinforce for viewers a familiar conception of such a person: as the type of person who is supposedly most suited for purposeful action within such a setting.

Similarly, in terms of character interactions, Mulvey (1975) famously identified the classic Hollywood camera’s gaze as a ‘male gaze’, epitomized by the camera’s treatment of a woman as she enters a scene and pauses, by its travelling up and down her body. Instead, men have been typically seen by the camera as agential beings *moving through* a scene, often while also being depicted as point-of-view bearers of the same sanctioned, appraising gaze that the camera casts on female characters. In an especially helpful analysis of ‘lines of sight’ in Hollywood ‘western’ films, Hearne (2018) expands Mulvey’s central insight, by delineating a genealogy of conventional cinematic depictions



of outdoor space as a setting for character interaction. This is a set of conventional images and stagings that stretches back to United States roots in European imperialistic depictions in paintings of the masculine bearers of a colonizing, 'Master of all I survey' gaze. In Hollywood westerns, where the central characters and thematic concerns are nearly always white male (Schwarz 2014), the camera's gaze is again both raced and gendered, and the outdoor landscape plays a crucial role as the backdrop against which centre-staged white men provide for viewers a focalizing gaze – once again, we see as they see. In terms of character interactions, the once hugely popular genre of westerns often dramatized that which is merely subsumed in the visual conventions deployed in outdoors films set in later times: the violence with which the land was wrested from largely nameless, monolithically depicted indigenous antagonists. In terms of sight, 'mechanistic extensions of human vision – occasionally survey transits or binoculars but most often the gunsights of a rifle – remake that human vision into a form of domination, empowered with settler colonial force' (Hearne 2018, 98). As the audience sees via point of view shots that which the white male character is surveying or aiming at, a perspective that often includes rifle sights, the camera functions like an aimed gun. This is a cinematic cliché Hearne labels 'the gun/camera trope'. In a metonymic sense, the gun and camera fuse in classic westerns into an oracular extension of centre-staged white male identity and action. In rare instances in which a woman or an 'Indian' aims a gun, the camera typically does not rove over the landscape from their aiming point of view. We instead continue to watch them from an implicitly white male perspective.

In these terms, a legacy of classic Hollywood cinema in later road movies is an implied bearer of the gaze on outdoors landscapes, with the landscape-roving camera again functioning as – because it alternates with – the perspective of a character who embodies a focalizing white-male perspective. As in westerns, road movies conventionally situate this bearer of the gaze as the appropriately embodied, visually roving and physically acting centre of the narrative plot. As Roberts (1997, 62, 66) astutely notes, conventional road movies portray male characters using the road 'to flee femininity'. However, in those featuring female protagonists, the 'women cannot similarly flee the masculine because of the gendered assumptions of the genre ... [Patriarchy] is omnipresent'. I would add that one confining patriarchal phenomenon for female characters in conventional road movies is the implicit cinematic gaze, which often lingers on or roves over their physical features from a conventional male perspective. On the other hand, movies with women as central characters tend to handle visual depictions of outdoor landscapes differently, apparently because the protagonists are women instead of men.<sup>2</sup> In such films as *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1975), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), *Leaving Normal* (1992), *Boys on the Side* (1995), *Wendy and Lucy* (2008), and *Lovesong* (2016), the camera tends to spend more time on medium and close-up shots, with interactions between characters the focus, and with little or none of the relational interaction between protagonist and landscape that is so central to road narratives with white male protagonists. An iconic scene from *Thelma and Louise* serves as an instructive example: as an entirely male array of local and federal forces close in on the pair of women racing off the highway and across a natural landscape, long shots of the car are filmed as point of view shots from the perspective of a man sitting in a helicopter. In this closing scene, the camera only shifts to point of view shots for either woman when viewing the men in pursuit, instead of to survey from their perspective the landscape itself.

## Mobilized white male spatiality: *Nebraska*

As the still-popular genre of road movies suggests, the type of person commonly conceived of as the most appropriate surveyor of, and active participant in, outdoor United States settings remains a white man. Indeed, along with myriad other forms of popular culture that depict outdoor landscapes, such films help to further this raced and gendered conception. In both *Nebraska* and *The Straight Story*, Grant and Straight travel in ways deemed inappropriately dangerous because they are elderly, and thus vulnerable, and not because of who they are as white men. Were a woman or a non-white man depicted travelling along highways in such exposed ways, their gender and/or race would likely be foregrounded factors, including at times the use of point of view shots that suggest how they see the landscape differently. As in classic westerns, because these two films include white male protagonists, the camera surveys the land, often from the protagonist's perspective via reaction shots, from an empowered, and thus relatively safe, position. As the editing frequently alternates from shots of the protagonists surveying outdoor landscapes to shots of their impressions of what they are seeing, nothing in this relation of person to landscape registers discordantly. Aside from the occasional suggestion of bodily or mental infirmity due to their advanced age, their vantage point remains an empowered, comfortably embodied one. This embodied ocular dimension also has an aural accompaniment. In both films, soothing acoustic, vaguely 'country'-style music swells during moments in which Grant and Straight survey the landscape visually, adding to the sense that their view of the outdoors, which the films themselves deploy, is a comfortably ensconced white male one, if not a proprietary one, since working-class white men like Grant and Straight are most commonly conceived of as typical country music fans. The more specifically rural form of working-class Americana that both films depict is further enhanced by the name of *Nebraska's* protagonist, Woody Grant, which evokes that of Grant Wood, painter in 1930 of the renowned portrait of grim, enduring white rural subjectivity, *American Gothic*.

A general conception of the outdoors in the United States context has gradually morphed from an initial site of lurking dangers (including predatory animals, hostile Indians and treacherous weather), to one of an appropriate setting for white male action and reinvigoration (once animals and Indians became readily dispensable antagonists), and then to a bucolic setting for tourism and leisure. Threatening animals and weather are now easily escapable via tents, cabins, recreational vehicles and so on, and all are welcome to explore, play, relax and revive themselves. Nevertheless (as noted above), recent research in tourism and leisure studies has demonstrated that the primacy of white masculine action to outdoor settings remains. Perhaps as a result, *Nebraska* depicts Woody Grant as a man willing to risk exposure to bad winter weather through bleak landscapes (a bleakness enhanced by the film's being shot in black and white) because 'home' strikes him as a deadening, emasculating trap. Grant wants the million dollars he thinks he has coming, and since no one is willing to give him a ride to the company's headquarters in Nebraska, he stubbornly walks along freezing, potentially slippery winter highways to get it (Figure 1).

What continually impedes Grant's progress is attachments to other people, especially family members. Grant's son David (Will Forte) repeatedly halts his westward walks by insisting he get into a car and submit to a ride back home. The film opens with Grant



**Figure 1.** Woody Grant tries to walk to Nebraska.

being similarly interrupted highway-side by a police officer. When the officer asks him where he is from and where he is going, Grant vaguely thrusts a thumb backwards, and then points a finger forward. The sense conveyed is that Grant is currently stuck between a past and a future, a condition further symbolized later when he rides beside his son down another empty highway, and we watch him squint meaningfully at an odd sight: two attached locomotives moving alongside the Grants' car, one facing forward and one backward. As in *The Straight Story*, this elderly man is facing the undeniable end of life, and something from his past is impeding satisfactory progress toward that end. Both films suggest that the post-work stage of life can be a time to reconsider where one has been, and thus where one is going. A crucial difference I will explain more fully later is that in these establishing scenes and throughout its length, *Nebraska's* perspective remains fully ensconced in that of traditional white male spatiality, by emphasizing elements of outdoor settings as they resonate for and tell us about Woody Grant. In *The Straight Story*, white male spatiality is instead gradually downplayed, an attempt to portray the outdoors on something more like its own terms. For white men and others, whether young or older, this reorientation can be simply, yet profoundly, a reconsideration of *where one is* while being outdoors.

We gradually learn via Grant's interactions with others, often filmed in stark outdoor settings, that he has not fulfilled the traditional role of a good family man. An unrepentant alcoholic, Grant has also 'cheated' on his wife and paid little affectionate attention to his two sons. During a visit to his ancestral 'homestead', as his sons label the now-abandoned farmhouse in which he was raised, Grant reveals that his own upbringing was also harsh and cold, a past that weighs on him as a likely influence on his own domestic negligence. Family, as symbolized repeatedly by exterior and interior shots of various homes, is a feminized, entrapping space for Grant, a reminder of his past failings from which he seeks escape by being outdoors. For viewers alert to a white supremacist socio-historical context that informs both rural settings and forms of popular entertainment set in them, the concept of a 'homestead' registers not merely as an ancestral family home and the land surrounding it (also commonly referred to as a family farm). It also calls to mind, as it does not for Grant and his immediate family, the theft of land from indigenous peoples and the establishment of an idealized, explicitly whitened 'American' landscape. In the mid to late 1800s, a series of federal 'Homestead Acts' gave millions of acres of

'empty' land primarily to white 'settlers', an effort to reformulate 'the ideal American citizen to be a white landowning American man' (Soliman 2018, 3). In these terms, a received set of conventional conceptions of rural land makes it easy for Payne to depict Grant as a white man for whom outdoor settings remain a binarized opposite to notions of 'home' that nevertheless feels in a way like a home, as a sociohistorically appropriate setting for a downtrodden or otherwise weary white man's revivifying, purposeful movement toward a reparative goal.

Eventually, having been driven to the Nebraska headquarters by David, Grant is forced to admit that his million-dollar dream is delusional. He instead receives a promotional hat, which reads 'PRIZE WINNER', a sardonically humorous marker of his failure to achieve the prizes in life that commonly mark working-class white male success. When confronted by David about just why he wanted the prize money so badly, Grant replies, 'I want a truck. ... It's for you boys. I wanted to leave you something'. Grant's interest in redeeming himself as a family man is fully revealed, an effort to reintegrate himself, or at least a better memory of himself, into the fold of his immediate family, if only and ultimately for his own sake. Significantly, though, the item he seizes upon as the literal vehicle by which to do so is a pickup truck, an iconic emblem of rural American masculinity, and the film's final scenes emphasize how much of a self-defining extension of himself he actually wants the truck to be. Motorized vehicles, especially cars and trucks, are of course longstanding extensions and evidence of white American masculinity, and much of *Nebraska*'s dialogue revolves around masculine, consumerist fetishizing of cars and trucks. As a younger man, Grant owned an auto repair garage (which he visits with his son David), and when the Grants spend time at one point in the home of extended relatives in (fictional) Hawthorne, Nebraska, two of his son's male cousins repeatedly badger David with emasculating questions about cars. Their outlandish claims about how quickly they usually travel serve as a humiliating contrast to David's admittance that he travels at normal speeds.

While vehicular transport is crucial to the agential white male movement so central to road narratives set in the United States (replacing as it has the horse that completed the iconic cowboy image, and even the mule that completed that of the gruff, crusty gold prospector), also crucial to this movement-oriented identity is an outdoors setting in which to move. In contrast, vehicular movement through urban settings is a differently racialized motif in conventional media discourse in the United States, with black Americans typically depicted as antagonistic elements for white central characters. 'Outdoor' settings for commercialized mobility are coded as wide open 'rural landscapes' or 'nature', and as innumerable commercials for pickup trucks and SUVs have long suggested in the United States, moving through such landscapes, and just being 'outdoors' in general, is signalled as a particularly white male endeavour (Dwyer and Jones 2000; Gentry and Harrison 2010; Stern and Mastro 2004). Perhaps ironically, white American men – having vanquished the indigenous peoples whom they once vilified for being 'inferior' because they considered such people part of nature, and thus uncivilized – have gone on to conceive of themselves as especially suitable occupants of and participants in outdoor settings.

While Grant hopes to reintegrate himself into home and family by buying a truck with his winnings, the item itself nevertheless routes back narcissistically to Grant himself, just as outdoor landscapes do. As the defeated Grant heads back home with his son from Nebraska (the name of which evokes for most in the United States a vast, seemingly empty outdoors setting), his son decides to cheer him up by stopping along the way to



**Figure 2.** Woody and David Grant trade places in life.

buy a pickup truck. David tells his father that he bought it for him and that the truck's title is in his name, and he then allows Grant to drive down the main street of Hawthorne. Grant's replenished narcissism as a still-agential, because still-moving, white man is further suggested when he insists that his son get down out of the sight of various pedestrians whom Grant knows (demonstrating in the process, again, that white masculinity itself is not a guarantee of preferential treatment in all circumstances). These small-town residents, all of whom we have met earlier, pause while walking within a flashback-like montage to smile and nod with approval or envy at Woody in his new truck. The film's closing scene further cements and valorises the historically resonant conception of white men as most fully themselves when moving, preferably down an empty highway into a seemingly empty landscape. We next see the Grants' truck pause in such a setting, and the two men get out, trade places, and then keep moving down the road (See [Figure 2](#)). The outdoors function here to enhance a conventional message, with the elderly father finally accepting his son's metaphorical taking over of the 'driving' in their unspoken, white patriarchal conception of manhood and family life. When considered in this light, conventional white American manhood has a certain emptiness at its core, with mobilized pursuit often conceived of as perhaps more important than whatever it is that a man happens to be pursuing. However, in *The Straight Story*, David Lynch suggests that white American men are not necessarily trapped in such an empty conception of themselves and the environment. Their white masculinity itself, along with the slower pace that old age can enforce, can foster release from such a perspective, helping to open one up to other ways of relating to outdoor settings and that which they contain.

### **The outdoors and beyond: *The Straight Story***

With such pervasive elements as panoramic shots of farmland and 'nature', vaguely country-style theme music, encounters with strangers who always register the white male protagonist as non-threatening, a virtually erased history of conquest waged in terms of racial and ethnic otherness, and the central image of a lone elderly character's slow movement through vast, seemingly empty spaces, *The Straight Story* also evinces

white male spatiality in relation to an imagined 'American' outdoors. However, as this white male protagonist moves through rural space, the film gradually conveys a radically different cinematic and thematic perspective on the outdoors. Based on the true story of 73-year-old Alvin Straight's epic trek on a 1966 John Deere lawnmower (Longden n.d.), Lynch's film is also a 'straight' story in that it departs significantly from the convoluted, surreal edginess that pervades his other films. In *Wild at Heart* (1990) and *Lost Highway* (1997), Lynch directly subverts the road movie genre, exposing, for one thing, the lazy reliance of many such narratives on the genre's clichés. In a discussion of white male desire as depicted in *Lost Highway*, Carrillo Rowe and Lindsey (2003, 181) write that it encourages viewers 'to imagine beyond the suffering individual white male to recognize the social, political, and cultural forces that constitute a broader white male sense of self'.<sup>3</sup> While the bucolic realism of *The Straight Story* ostensibly seems anything but subversive, it may well undercut conventional Hollywood depictions of the outdoors even more than Lynch's other two road movies do. In particular, it too exposes and rejects the conventional perspectives, especially that of white male spatiality, that *Nebraska* continually falls back into.

As *The Straight Story* commences, it could seem that Lynch is reiterating a traditional masculine dichotomy between entrapping family life and the call of the open road. Initial establishing shots show the exterior of what we learn is Straight's home in the small town of Laurens, Iowa, and as the camera pans and stops at a window, we hear what sounds like a body falling to the floor. As the scene switches to a group of elderly men playing cards, but missing a player, and then into Straight's kitchen when one of the men has come to his house to check on him, we see Straight sprawled on the floor. A visit to a doctor reveals that Straight's health is failing quickly, and will continue to do so unless he halts some unhealthy habits. In the next shot, Straight lights up a cigar, suggesting that he will not be following his doctor's advice – this is an independent man, determined to continue living what little time he has left on his own terms. Confronted by his impending mortality, Straight announces to his live-in adult daughter Rose that he wants to see his brother. Since he can no longer drive, and Rose cannot drive him either, we next watch Straight build a small trailer, which he then attaches to his lawnmower. After visiting with some male friends in a hardware store, where he persuades the owner to sell another indicator of his elderly infirmity, a product 'grabber', Straight heads out of town, the epic scale of his journey sardonically registered by a quartet of barking dogs.

To say that this film depicts sparsely populated outdoor space – the rolling hills and geometrically patterned farms typical of the U.S. 'Midwest' – in a way that gradually rejects a conventional white male spatiality is not to say that Straight's white male status has no significance. While Lynch makes no apparent effort to highlight the empowered, privileged status of his travelling protagonist, it nevertheless does matter. For one thing, a person travelling this way who is not white and/or not a man would likely feel less welcome in this rural United States setting, and also act with more caution. Straight meets dozens of people as he travels, all of whom register as white, and all of whom do not of course perceive him as a racial outsider. As in *Nebraska*, racial whiteness permeates this film's landscapes, and as in real life in the United States, this normalized racial status is only registered as such for white people when someone or something racially different appears. In *Nebraska*, a sign of changing times (and thus of Grant's elderly



status) arises when he pauses to visit a car-repair garage that he once co-owned. Seemingly to his bewilderment, two men working on a car appear to be Latinos, a status confirmed when they speak Spanish to each other. The moment is played for laughs when Grant begins correcting how the men are working, only to be hustled away by his son David. A similar effort to inject comedy occurs when Grant's old friend (played by Stacy Keach) steps up to a karaoke stage in a crowded restaurant scene to sing a 1969 Elvis Presley hit, 'In the Ghetto', the lyrics of which express liberal sympathy for implicitly black victims of inner-city injustice. Humour is clearly meant to arise from the jarring incongruity between this song's topic and the homogeneously white setting. In *The Straight Story*, a similar flash of racial otherness appears after a woman's car has zoomed past Straight and killed a deer. As the animal lies dying, a white woman (identified as Deer Woman in the credits) wails about this being the thirteenth deer she's killed during her daily commute, which is especially hard for her because she 'love[s] deer'. She then adds that she's tried to warn the deer by blaring music by the black rap group Public Enemy as she drives. This scene may be the film's most Lynchian moment, conveying as it does a sense of macabre comic relief that is part of his signature style. In terms of race, though, Lynch falls back here on an age-old convention in white American entertainment – the brief use of ethnic or racial otherness against a glaringly white racial background for comic relief (Engles 2018; Morrison 1992; *TV Tropes*, n.d.). With racial others having been otherwise vanquished or discouraged from moving into such rural settings, and with being visibly non-white a continued marker of supposedly threatening outsider-ness in them, Straight can relax, knowing that he will be welcomed as an unthreatening person, and thus more able to absorb and appreciate his surroundings.

Nevertheless, much of *The Straight Story* radically departs from conventional cinematic depictions of white men moving through outdoor settings. As Straight travels at a pace that seems absurdly slow, given the distance he has to go and the fact that he's travelling along a highway with trucks blasting by, the camera begins to focus less on the landscape as Straight sees it than on Straight's observing face. This perspective on him, rather than on him as the one who sees and defines geographical space for the purpose of physical action, undercuts conventional cinematic white male spatiality. The film instead registers how Straight *experiences* things – not only landscapes, but also their interplay with the sky, the weather, birds and animals, and other people. Given his mode of transport and his elderly status, this is a perilous journey, but Straight seems open to and intrigued by what he encounters as he moves towards his goal, rather than obsessed to the exclusion of all else with that goal, as Grant often is.

As in *Nebraska*, this film pauses for long shots of farmland and the 'outdoors' as a white man moves through it (Figure 3). However, most such scenes are edited not as point of view shots from Straight's perspective as a white male traveller, but rather from a proverbial bird's eye view, or with tracking shots moving alongside him, sometimes from the point of view of people whom he's passing by. Straight is depicted as thoroughly contextualized by this space, thereby rejecting the usual self-serving perspective on landscape that is white male spatiality. Straight also evinces this non-appropriative perspective in his encounters with others. Unlike Grant's encounters, Straight's are less about what these people mean for him, and more about Straight's empathetic efforts to apprehend who they are and what they are going through. At one point, he gently persuades a wandering, pregnant teenager to consider returning home, and at another, he commiserates



**Figure 3.** Helicopter shot, *The Straight Story*.

in a bar with a fellow war veteran, helping the man express his pain by revealing his own wartime regrets. The slowness of Straight's pace comes to match or parallel the slowed-down nature of elderly existence, but in Straight's case, the enforced slowness and consequent carefulness of advanced age are not entirely hindrances. They instead encourage him to perceive both other people and outdoor environments more on their own terms.

Instead of demonstrating a purposefully and narcissistically active sense of self that would see the loss of vehicular-driving skills as emasculating, Straight relishes his slowed pace. As McHugh puts it, his 'body language and facial expressions, especially, speak place in the moment, in the here and now' (2009, 213). In contrast to people zipping by with faster vehicles, including a herd of cyclists, Straight continually observes and drinks in, often sensually, the outdoors world. Viewers are prepared for this element in Straight's personality before he hits the road, when he and Rose sit at home and contentedly enjoy a thunderstorm. This is a distinctly immobile form of pleasure and wonder that Straight later repeats after finding shelter in an abandoned barn (Figure 4). During night scenes, while sitting beside a makeshift fire, Straight gazes repeatedly at a star-filled sky, his features again registering pleasure and wonder. In an insightful interpretation of this film, DeFalco (2016) considers it in light of the ongoing history of the denigration of 'idleness' in western cultures. DeFalco convincingly reads *The Straight Story* as 'an inspiring rebuttal to the morally inflected condemnation of idleness', with a protagonist 'whose thoughtful watching is an implicit ethical challenge to the self-absorbed tendencies of activated bodies' – that is, bodies like that of *Nebraska's* Woody Grant (DeFalco 2016, 85). In interviews, David Lynch has long championed transcendental meditation and an accompanying deeper attention to the simple being-ness of one's existence and surroundings (Barney 2008; Douridas 1997), and as DeFalco demonstrates, *The Straight Story* may be his most direct artistic statement of such values. By depicting Straight as an observer and experienter of landscape, instead of a definer and selfishly driven traverser of it, Lynch breaks from cinematic conventions that depict the outdoors via the embodied perspective of self-defining white male spatiality, even if it is white male privilege itself that especially enables more carefree outdoor activity. While the film thereby encourages a non-appropriative approach to landscape and resources, by





**Figure 4.** Alvin Straight enjoys another storm (and another cigar).

continually depicting the outdoors from something closer to an objective point of view, a road movie like *Smoke Signals* (1998), written, directed by and starring Native Americans, shows that being an indigenous traveller in the 'American' outdoors regularly marks one, ironically enough, as an outsider. In *Smoke Signals*, the two protagonists repeatedly ponder their own indigeneity, while the white Americans they encounter almost invariably point it out as well, sometimes with threatening hostility. Nevertheless, while the outdoors in *The Straight Story* is a familiar imagined U.S. landscape in that it has a lone white man travelling through it, as the movie progresses scenery becomes just one element appreciated by Straight in his observant openness, along with the dignified being-ness of various people he encounters.

As the film closes, and Straight joins his brother Lyle (Harry Dean Stanton, star of another subversion of the road film genre, Wim Wenders' 1984 film *Paris, Texas*) on the porch of his broken-down house, conventional notions of home and family are affirmed. Once again, though, the outdoors itself is not depicted here as a conventional setting for white male action. Instead, the camera drifts upward as Straight and Lyle also look upward, as in earlier scenes in which Straight drinks in a summer storm or a starlit sky. This final camera movement, as if into a great beyond, suggests impending mortality for these reunited elderly brothers, but given the many scenes in which Straight observes and experiences the outdoors, instead of narrowly perceiving it as an appropriate setting for his own purposeful, self-defining action, it also reminds viewers that space itself ultimately exists on its own terms. In terms of outdoor leisure practices, 'home' is usually thought of in binary terms, as the place one leaves in order to engage in such practices. This film's conclusion, signalling again a capacious, wonder-filled appreciation of the outdoors, and indeed of the entire universe, as well as a humble acceptance of one's relatively insignificant position within it, perhaps suggests that we should consider the notion of 'home' in far wider terms.

## Discussion

Given the elderly state of both central characters, these two films ostensibly depict the outdoors as at times threatening, a reminder of the heightened vulnerability experienced

by older people to the ravages of time and the elements. However, a deeper look reveals that in their particular national context, these two protagonists share, along with the films' two auteur-like directors, a dominant raced and gendered perspective on the outdoors, a perspective that is shaped and empowered by a lengthy historical legacy of white supremacist, patriarchal mythmaking. This is an embodied white male spatiality that continues to make the 'American' outdoors a presumptively white male space, albeit a more threatening space for the elderly, especially when walking or riding a lawnmower alongside highways. The legacy that perceives the outdoors as an especially apt setting for white male activity also continues to exacerbate its use by others. As Asian American journalist and outdoors enthusiast Glenn Nelson points out, being recognizably 'other' in racial terms means, for example, 'we get questioned for hiking in groups, something white people apparently find intimidating, though many of us do it to feel safer around them. It means having trouble getting a permit for a big-enough camping spot because our outdoors party, especially if we're Latino, might comprise all of our *familia*, including our *abuelos* and other extended members. It means getting shushed for socializing on the trail, something I've never heard anyone do to, say, a chatty group of white female hikers' (Nelson 2016). As white male filmmakers, Payne and Lynch also manifest spatialized white masculinity in their other films, often in ways that have come to constitute a conventional yet categorically embodied cinematic perspective on the 'American' outdoors.<sup>4</sup> When considered together, these two films illustrate how for white male individuals, this domineering raced and gendered mindset can be confining, a state which *Nebraska's* Woody Grant chafes against and from which he ultimately fails to emerge. However, the privileges such a state affords can also foster the kind of emergence that *The Straight Story's* Alvin Straight manages to attain, in part because 'retirement' affords him more time and mental space, and because his white male status helps to free him from some of the limitations commonly imposed by that same status. The result is a less self-serving and more capacious, welcoming appreciation, both of other people who differ from himself and of the outdoors, as part of a wider universe that moves and operates on its own mysterious terms.

In an analysis of perceptions of freedom in relation to leisure practices, Carr notes (2017, 139), 'What all those who have theorized about the socially constructed nature of the individual have identified is that instead of the individual being the master of his/her own behaviour and motivations they are driven instead by the will of the society in which they are situated'. The advanced years of one's life, often termed 'retirement', are commonly conceived of as a time-space of leisured freedom, a time of life in which one is no longer driven by the demands of one's society. And yet, as Breheny and Stephens (2017) demonstrate in their analysis of 'the discursive construction of leisure in later life', western cultures tend to binarize conceptions of elderly time-spending into 'productive time' and 'personal time'. The former is favoured by society at large, as older people are pushed to continue contributing to society. Conversely, older people who pursue their own interests and pleasures by spending a lot of 'personal time' on pursuits of their own are commonly deemed selfish or otherwise unhealthy. *Nebraska's* Woody Grant, with his desire for motorized movement through the great outdoors and for leaving a commodified vehicle behind for his sons, seems all too driven by the will of the capitalist society in which he is situated, doing what he can to spend his time in a seemingly productive pursuit, and feeling bereft because advanced age and a lack of financial

resources have made doing so very difficult. As suggested by Grant's desire to buy a new truck as recompense for his neglectful parenting, he remains driven by a consumerist mentality that posits work, and the 'productive time' during which one does it, as the best way to use one's time. This is of course a state of existence that younger people at least find more do-able, and in these terms, the social approbation cast on older people who instead pursue more 'personal time', however misdirected, appears to be another form of ageism in late-capitalist society. Such social pressure also discourages older white men from using retirement to slow down naturally, and to embrace forms of reorientation to the world that a slower pace can allow and even encourage. In *The Straight Story*, Alvin Straight rejects such conventional, youth-oriented motivations and instead uses the relatively free time of retirement to absorb the world and its wonders. Straight also demonstrates no interest in impressing family members, nor in leaving them something both materialistic and conventionally emblematic of white American male mobility. He would rather simply connect with them, and cherish that connection, while also appreciating the wonders of the world and universe in which they all exist.

Fictional stories about elderly people often depict how being free from work in the existential time-space of 'retirement' enables reflection on personal burdens from the past, and if one is financially and physically able, on reparative action as well, usually in terms of improved relations with others. This is a narrative framework and thematic concern for both of these films: Grant initially feels encumbered by a lack of material 'success', a sense that his life as a husband and father has not added up to much, and Straight suffers from the severing of a connection with his cherished brother. Grant is more immersed in and/or driven by this embodied conception of himself, and thus is less the 'master' of his own 'behaviour and motivations' (Carr 2017, 139). Grant's search for a form of freedom is an effort to relieve his conscience from a sense of his life as a failed one; that is, as a failure to achieve his social order's conception of white-male success, the attainment of financial wealth. However, *Nebraska's* final scenes suggest that while Grant has achieved some freedom from the burden of financial failure, and thus some apparent happiness, he remains firmly fixed in his embodied, spatialized white-male perspective. This is an illusory, consumerist sense of achieved individualism that he asserts most crassly when he pushes his son down and out of sight while he cruises along in 'his' new pickup truck, seeing a validating conception of himself in the faces of others. What he sees about himself in their approving or impressed gazes while projecting a sense of confident movement via vehicular possession is a sense of revived, yet stereotypical white American masculinity, as well as a false sense that he has recaptured something of his faster-paced youth. One could say then that in this sense, Grant maintains here a broader hegemonic white male gaze as projected upon himself, until perhaps the end, when he finally accedes some control to his son. On the other hand, to the extent that Alvin Straight accepts his diminished position in life and his impending mortality, and turns his concerned gaze toward others and the universe more on their own terms, he relinquishes such a perspective.

The self-serving aspects of white male spatiality are significantly downplayed in *The Straight Story*, despite its depiction of an elderly white man travelling along quiet highways through seemingly empty outdoor spaces. Although Straight travels as a relatively privileged, welcome white American man, *The Straight Story* suggests that we should reject a conventional white male gaze on the outdoors and attempt to apprehend it more on

its own terms, and as space that can be and has been imagined in different, less abusive ways. While this perspective is enabled by the reception of Straight as white and male, it also rejects white male spatiality's conception of the outdoors in relation to oneself. As Harding writes (2014, 4), in the cultural imagination of the United States, 'enjoying the full status of an American [that is, of an American white man] does not signify just inhabiting a city or belonging to a region; it means enjoying mobility and transience, being able to travel and migrate across the American continent ... cherishing the dream of unattached, unfettered existence'. In *The Straight Story*, instead of longing for the days when motorized transport helped Straight assert an aggressively agential sense of himself, and instead of perceiving landscape as an empty canvas that he could use for that purpose by driving quickly and purposefully through it, Straight and the film itself convey acceptance of the slower pace of older age, in part because it enables a fuller understanding and appreciation of both the world and one's connections to others. Such a perspective ultimately undercuts the power and abuses long inflicted on others by self-serving hegemonic white American masculinity.

## Conclusion

As theorists and researchers have often noted, in a cultural order so thoroughly saturated with movies and other media-generated versions of reality, mass media have profoundly shaped our collective conceptions of reality, serving as co-constituents with a patriarchal white supremacist social order of dominant narratives and perspectives, including those involving the outdoors. Results include such phenomena as 'film-induced tourism' (Bolan, Boy, and Bell 2011; Cardoso et al. 2017), which can provoke disappointment when particular destinations or landscapes fail to match media-influenced preconceptions of them. Within the context of a settler colonialist social order, filmed and televisual depictions of outdoors landscapes and people within them have so often been presented in terms of white male spatiality – along with the accompanying implication that purposeful, preferably lone white men are the most suitable occupants of it – that they have become a sight-oriented substrate within the collective United States, and perhaps global, consciousness. One result may be a more widespread and destructive emphasis on outdoors leisure *activity*, rather than on appreciation of the outdoors that includes efforts to apprehend and care for such settings more on their own terms, let alone to better apprehend the losses incurred by those from whom they were stolen.

In terms of age, elderly white men like Payne's Woody Grant can find it difficult to resist or relinquish socially instilled imperatives to feel productive and purposefully driven, preferably while driving an impressive vehicle. Nevertheless, as Lynch's Alvin Straight demonstrates, being both 'retired' and white male can make it easier to escape from consumerist imperatives, and to instead adopt and even appreciate a slower pace, which in turn can stimulate development of a more sympathetic and appreciative apprehension of the world and all it contains. More generally, heightened awareness of the pervasiveness and power of white male spatiality pushes us to reconsider that which has become naturalized about outdoor spaces, both in entertaining narratives and reality. However much *The Straight Story* subverts such a hegemonic perspective, both films depict the dominance of white male power in a colonized land, and the films themselves contribute to the continued shaping of such a reality – one in which white-male protagonists continue

to predominate in Hollywood movies, which depict them with a level of humanity and complexity so rarely granted to women and people of colour. By shifting away from white male spatiality, such a geo-psychological reorientation can also help us see that the leisure available in outdoor United States spaces, like the leisurely enjoyment of most mass media products, caters more to white male participants, to the harmful exclusion of others.

## Notes

1. As is widely recognized in many realms of identity theory, a heightened and illusory sense of individualism is a common effect or manifestation of dominant group membership. This illusory sense of individualism arises because hegemonic, naturalized, and normalized social categorical membership discourages awareness of said membership, as opposed to membership in subordinated categories, whereby subordination and the problems it tends to cause conversely encourage awareness of group membership, often necessarily.
2. In terms of race, road movies with characters who are not white – such as *Smoke Signals* (1998), *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004) or *Green Book* (2018) – are perhaps even less common, ‘the road’ and its pit stops and byways having been unwelcoming places for people of colour.
3. For a negative critique of gendered depictions in Lynch’s *Wild at Heart*, see Willis (1991).
4. For a critique of another Payne film, *The Descendants* (2011), in light of subjective conceptions of geography held both by Payne and his characters, see Sánchez Palencia (2015).

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