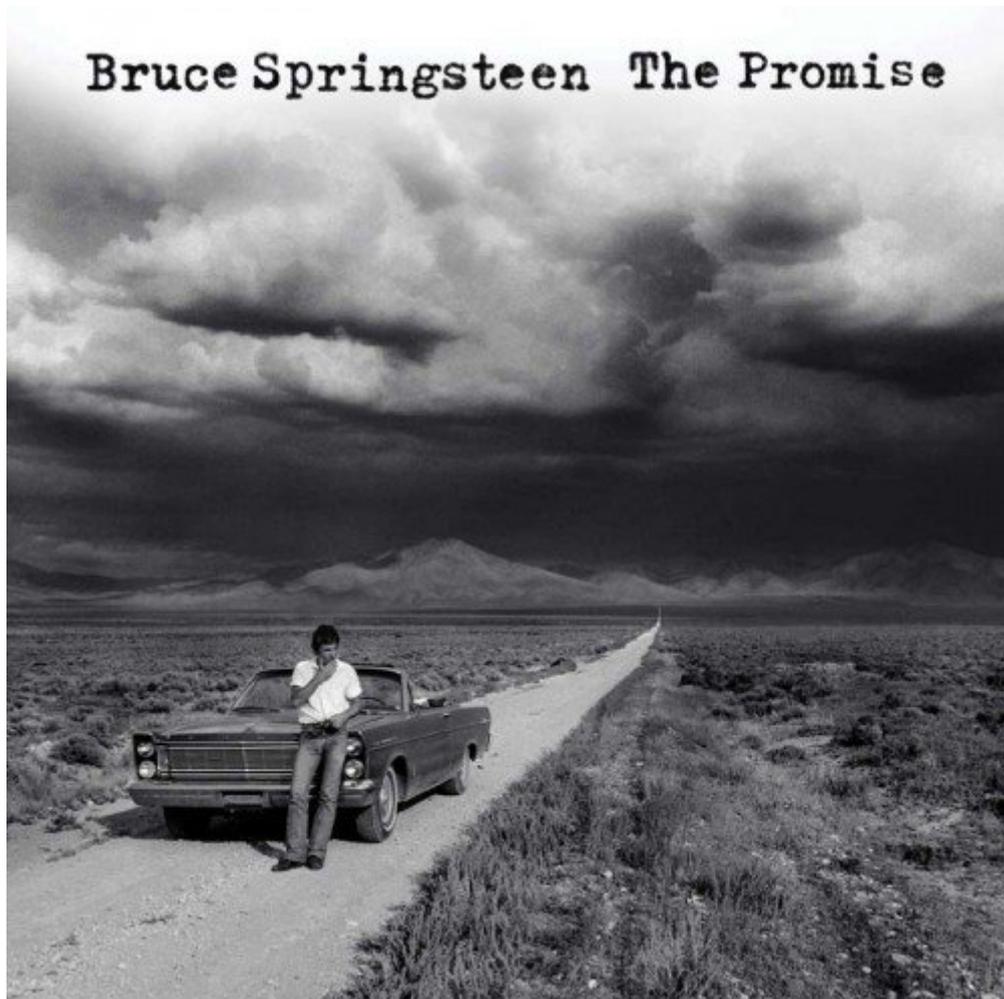


“It’s A Town Full of Losers, and I’m Pulling out of Here to Win”:  
The Significance of Mobility and Place in Bruce Springsteen’s Song-Stories



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## **Abstract**

Bruce Springsteen is known for writing songs about the experiences of the American working class. In this thesis, I analyze the significance of the themes mobility and place in Springsteen's lyrics, and how these themes contribute to Springsteen's perspective on American culture. There are a number of questions that I aim to answer: What is Springsteen's perspective on the Open Road and on the American Dream? What do the recurring metaphors of the car and the road signify in his lyrics? Does his perspective change over the years? How do Springsteen's lyrics fit in the genre of road narratives, among the likes of Walt Whitman, John Steinbeck, and Jack Kerouac?

*Keywords: Bruce Springsteen, mobility, place, road narrative, the Open Road, the American Dream, American mythology*

## Preface

I have a lot to thank to my parents, and being a Bruce Springsteen fan is one of those things. Being a Bruce Springsteen fan is a lifestyle, my father once said to me. My mother hung pictures of him in our living room, in our kitchen, and even in our bathroom. Together my parents travelled all over Europe to see Springsteen and the E Street Band play live. In 1995, when I was only a few years old, I remember my parents went on one of their many Springsteen trips to Paris, and I was left to stay with my grandparents for the weekend. They were supposed to take a bus from the Netherlands, full with other Dutch Springsteen fans, all the way to Bercy, the concert venue in Paris. However, many Parisians were on strike and it completely disrupted traffic in and around Paris. The Dutch bus, with many disappointed Springsteen fans, including my parents, would not be able to make it to the concert on time. Along with a few other fans on the bus, my parents decided to take fate into their own hands as they got off the bus somewhere in the south of Belgium and tried to find an alternative way to Paris from there. Without a map, internet on their phones, or even without Belgian or French francs in their wallets, my parents walked and walked, in hopes of finding a way to get to Paris after all. Luckily they reached a train station eventually; they managed to buy train tickets, and they had to change trains a couple of times, but they would get to Paris. My parents arrived at the concert only a few songs into the concert. As soon as the concert had ended and my parents walked out of the venue, they saw the bus that they had left behind drive up the parking lot. The other fans were, of course, disappointed because they had missed the concert, but applauded my parents and the few other fans who had made it to the concert as they got back on the bus and started their journey back to the Netherlands.

When I was 11 years old, my parents took me to my first Bruce Springsteen concert. Many would follow. In the past 15 years, my dad and I have continued my parents' tradition of travelling all over Europe together, and we have made trips to Dublin, Paris, Madrid, and many other places to see Springsteen and his band play live. Each and every trip has been a magical experience.

When I was 17 years old, my father and I took a road trip along the East Coast of the United States, traveling around New Jersey and New York and visiting all of the places that Springsteen writes about in the song-stories of his younger years. It was my first time in the United States, and it was there and then that I knew I wanted to study American Studies.

As a family, we have spent many evenings discussing and listening to his music together. His music helped us get through hard times and it has helped us enjoy the good times. Bruce Springsteen came into our lives a long time ago, and I doubt that he will ever leave. Even though he has millions of fans all around the world, it feels as if Bruce Springsteen and his music are 'our thing'. That is why I would like to dedicate this Master's thesis to my mom, dad, and Lydia.

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## Introduction

Two young American working-class kids grow up in a small town in New Jersey and seem to have no other future career prospects than following in the footsteps of their working-class parents. For leisure, the couple likes to get in the car and drive out of town, “down to the river,” to enjoy some quality time together, dreaming about a better future than the one that seems to be set in stone for them. One day, however, their quality time leads to an unwanted pregnancy – and they are forced to get married at the age of 17, with “no flowers [and] no wedding dress”. The boy is forced to quit high school and take up a job at a construction company, but the couple struggles financially as “lately there ain’t been much work on account of the economy.” Looking back on the days when they could still carelessly drive down to the river, which was their beacon of hope, the main character wonders if a dream is a lie if it does not come true, “or is it something worse.”

This is the story of the song ‘The River’, by American rock musician Bruce Springsteen. The song chronicles a story of local culture, economic difficulties, hopes and dreams, and above all having to readjust these hopes and dreams when faced with the harshness of reality. The story, however, is not fictional, but a rather truthful depiction of a situation that hits close to home for Springsteen and his family. When Springsteen first played the song live in 1979, he explained that he wrote the song about his sister and brother in law. Springsteen’s sister, Ginny, later confirmed in an interview with biographer Peter Ames Carlin, author of *Bruce*, that the song is indeed an accurate description of her early life: “every bit of it was true” (qtd. in Carlin, 272).

Springsteen's song about his sister, “The River,” is just one of many examples of Springsteen’s chronicles of the hopes, dreams, and broken promises of Americans. June Skinner Sawyers, editor of the anthology *Racing in the Street: The Bruce Springsteen Reader*, mentions in her introduction that “Bruce Springsteen [is] many things to many people. Iconic rocker. Archetypal American. Working-class hero. All-American sex symbol. Introspective lyricist *and* goofy showman. Compassionate chronicler of misfits, losers, and loners – hard people living hard lives – but also a bastion of hope, faith, and glory” (26). As illustrated by “The River,” Springsteen’s own experiences as a member of a working class community, as well as those of his close friends and family, have been an inspiration for Springsteen’s songwriting.

Bruce Springsteen, who was born in 1949, grew up in a Catholic, working class family himself – throughout his life, Springsteen’s father had a variety of jobs, from factory worker to bus driver. Springsteen became interested in music at the very young age of 7, when he watched Elvis Presley play on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1956. In his autobiography, *Born to Run*, Springsteen recalls watching this performance on tv, and how his love for music and playing the guitar was born: “When it was over that night, those few minutes, when the man with the guitar vanished in a shroud of screams, I sat there transfixed in front of the television set, my mind on fire. I had the same two arms, two legs, two eyes; [...] so what was missing? THE GUITAR!!” (42). Soon thereafter, Springsteen convinced his mom to buy him a guitar, and the rock and roll artist who would later receive the nickname ‘The Boss’ was born. As Springsteen sings in "Thunder Road": “Well I got this guitar / And I learned how to make it talk”. By 1973, Springsteen had made two largely autobiographical albums, *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.*, and *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle*, containing a number of stories of young Americans growing up on the Jersey Shore. These first two albums, as Roxanne Harde and Irwin Streight argue in *Reading the Boss*, embody a spirit that “Springsteen has followed throughout his work, giving voice and social-psychological depth to the characters who speak from within his songs” (3). Springsteen’s narrative form of songwriting, with special attention to the characters, has often been compared to the styles of American songwriters such as Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan. It is therefore not surprising that the young Bruce Springsteen was praised as “the new Dylan” in the 1970s, writing “dizzily expressionistic lyrics verging on the Dylanesque” (Harde and Streight 3).

Not only has Springsteen been compared to contemporary songwriters, he has also been likened to American authors and poets - Springsteen’s first manager, Mike Appel, initially promoted Springsteen on various occasions by naming him together in a sentence with the likes of Wordsworth, Keats, and even Shakespeare (Harde and Streight 1). However, by academics, Springsteen is most often and most notably compared to Walt Whitman. In scholarly approaches to the works of Bruce Springsteen, various authors have called Springsteen’s “project to sing America evidently Whitmanesque” (Harde and Streight 2). Brian Garman’s study in *A Race of Singers* also traces Springsteen’s literary lineage back to Walt Whitman. Like Whitman, Garman argues in this book, Springsteen expresses a deep concern for the working class, and his song-stories respond to the voices of the working class in America. Springsteen listens to the voices of these Americans, turns these voices into stories, and then offers these stories to those who are willing to listen. As stated by academic David Gellman in the anthology *Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies, and the Runaway*

*American Dream*: “Springsteen [offers] a wide array of characters whose lives are lived in the shadow of [the American] dream [...] of fame, fortune, and independence” (8). In writing his song-stories, Springsteen pays a lot of attention to the development of his characters and settings. In doing so, Springsteen draws inspiration from his favorite authors. In the book *Songs*, which contains the lyrics to a number of Springsteen songs along with his own commentary on the lyrics, Springsteen remarks: “I wanted to ... create a world of characters, which is what the writers I admired did” (qtd. in Irwin and Streight 8). One of these authors is Flannery O’Connor, who was recommended to Springsteen by his current manager, Jon Landau. Springsteen’s biographer Dave Marsh reports that Springsteen was greatly impressed by the precision of Flannery O’Connor’s writing and “the way [she] could enliven a character by sketching in just a few details” (qtd. in Irwin and Streight 57). Furthermore, Springsteen remarks that beyond creating the music of his songs, the most important aspects to his song-stories are actually “the precision of the storytelling, the use of correct details, and discovering an authentic emotional center for the song” (*Songs* 274). These comments by Springsteen reveal the kind of attentiveness to his use of language and chosen form of narrative that are generally associated with authors and poets instead of songwriters. Taking this into account, Springsteen’s lyrics become much more than just that; they become carefully crafted stories, and it makes sense to treat Springsteen as an author and a poet, or as Robert Coles calls him in *Bruce Springsteen’s America: The People Listening, the Poet Singing*, “a consciously literary and culturally literate songwriter” rather than as a musician or songwriter only (45). The lyrics of Springsteen’s song-stories can be considered literary works in themselves, and Springsteen’s concern for the form and language of his lyrics, apart from, but not necessarily excluded from the music, justify taking a literary, critical approach to close readings and analyses of Springsteen’s song-stories; one that is commonly more reserved for novels or poems.

That is not to say, however, that music and performance are insignificant to a song: these are also important components of Springsteen’s songs and the ways in which these are interpreted. For example, one of his most famous songs “Born in the U.S.A.” is an example of how the musical experience could influence the reading of the song. In the song “Born in the U.S.A.”, the loud, pounding, rock and roll sounds of the song overwhelmed its deeper semantic meaning, causing misinterpretations of the song as a pro-American anthem rather than a song criticizing the Vietnam war and the treatment of American veterans. Additionally, without a close reading of the rest of the lyrics, the repetitive lines in the anthem-like chorus (“Born in the U.S.A. / We were born in the U.S.A.”) along with the sound of the exploding

drums, could indeed imply a sense of pride and patriotism rather than serious criticism. An acoustic version of "Born in the U.S.A.", which came out as a B-side track on Springsteen's *Tracks*, without the pounding drums and loud cries, emphasizes the critical and ironic character of the song. However, even though a specific performance may either emphasize the song's words or even cause a misinterpretation, the words themselves – along with the story Springsteen is telling - do not change. A textual analysis of what Simon Frith calls "speech acts" is therefore "no different from established textual approaches to studying the plays of Shakespeare, sonnets, elegies, dramatic monologues, [or] free verse from Ezra Pound to the Beats: [they] are words on the page that gain their force and nuances of meaning likewise through an act of performed speech, whether read aloud or interiorly" (qtd. in Harde and Streight 10). Here, Roxanne Harde and Irwin Streight argue that the song's words do not necessarily have to be sung by the artist in order for their semantic meaning to be properly understood. In order to comprehend the song's words as sound structures, to get a sense of the author's rhythmic use of language, and to understand the words' expression of emotion, the words can also be read aloud from the paper by the reader, or interiorly.

Following this reasoning, it has therefore also become more accepted in academia to treat songwriters as literary authors and poets, and to consider lyrics a form of literature and poetry. It was, for example, only very recently (2016) that Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize for literature, for "having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition" (Nobelprize.org). Additionally, the lyrics of Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, and Bruce Springsteen have started to appear in anthologies of literature alongside classic pieces of American literature and poetry in the past decade (Harde and Streight 10). Reading Springsteen's thoughtfully crafted lyrics as a form of literature provides a new perspective on studying Bruce Springsteen and his place in American culture.

Even though Bruce Springsteen has been the subject of a great amount of writing since he became popular in the 1970s, articles on Springsteen and his music have been largely biographical or journalistic in their approach; it is only in recent decades that a number of scholarly approaches to Springsteen and his lyrics have started to appear. For example, Robert Coles' *Bruce Springsteen's America: The People Listening, a Poet Singing* from 2003 offers a perspective on Springsteen's as a lyrical poet through a sociological study; in this book, he interviews ordinary Americans whose lives have been influenced by Springsteen and provides an insight into what Springsteen's music has meant to American culture. Even though it is an interesting read, Coles' analysis rests on the subjective accounts of the fans he questioned, and does not directly engage with Springsteen's lyrics. Another scholarly response to

Springsteen was written by Jim Cullen: *Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition*, which was published in 1997. Like Coles, Cullen also tries to situate Springsteen in American culture and history, but takes a more direct approach: he analyses Springsteen not only as a cultural heir to Walt Whitman and Woody Guthrie, but also to Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King. By doing so, Cullen provides a rather original and unusual perspective on Springsteen as a significant storyteller of the American experience and Springsteen's place in American culture. A very useful collection of critical essays on Bruce Springsteen was published in the literary journal *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies: A Journal of Criticism and Theory* in 2007; these essays all consist of a critical analysis of Springsteen as a cultural phenomenon and a close reading of his lyrics with regard to a variety of themes: from geography and place to multiculturalism and social justice. Finally, Roxanne Harde and Irwin Streight's collection of essays in *Reading the Boss: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Works of Bruce Springsteen* provide very useful close readings to Springsteen's lyrics, especially with regard to Springsteen's portrayal of gender and religion.

With the exception of the latter two, a lot of scholarly approaches to Springsteen lack a close reading of Springsteen's lyrics and are not concerned with what these lyrics seem to suggest about America and American culture; most authors seem to focus on Springsteen's image as an authentic American rock and roll musician, his political involvement, or his status in American culture in general (and generally come to the conclusion that Springsteen is as American as apple pie). In Elizabeth Bird's article "Image, Authenticity, and the Career of Bruce Springsteen", for example, she even declares Bruce Springsteen "a national monument" (39). Only a few articles and books on Springsteen, such as *Reading the Boss* and *A Race of Singers*, stem specifically from literary studies and American Studies, whereas most approaches come from music studies, sociology, and popular cultural studies. Each one of these academic fields provides its own perspective on the significance of Springsteen and his music, which makes for an interesting and broad diversity of theoretical models and disciplinary approaches. However, from an American Studies perspective, it is especially interesting to look at the ways in which Springsteen's song-stories interpret myths and symbols in American culture. One only has to look at the album cover of Springsteen's *Born in the U.S.A.* album, which portrays Springsteen in front of an American flag, with a red baseball cap sticking out of the back pocket of his blue jeans, to see that Springsteen indeed actively engages with images and symbols in American culture. It is an uncontested view that Springsteen provides a voice for the American 'other' in his song-stories, which are often

written from the point of view of a carefully constructed American working class or minority character, but it is perhaps even more interesting to see in what kind of 'America' Springsteen situates these characters. For example, when glancing over Springsteen's album titles, such as *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.*, *Nebraska*, and *Born in the U.S.A.*, we notice that Springsteen has a tendency to choose American place names as titles; he seems to be clearly stating that the stories he writes are *American* stories. This is further illustrated by song titles such as "Youngstown," "Atlantic City," and "New York City Serenade." Moreover, Springsteen also often uses the typically American images and metaphors of the road and the car. Song titles such as "Cadillac Ranch," "Stolen Car," and "Used Cars," and the cover of the album *Nebraska* which shows a long, deserted road, from the point of view of inside a car, illustrate this. Additionally, for his recently published autobiography *Born to Run*, Springsteen opted for a photo of himself leaning against a car for its cover. Furthermore, song titles such as "Wreck on the Highway," "Working on the Highway," "Highway Patrolman," and "Thunder Road" imply a preoccupation with the American highway, and some album and song titles carry connotations not specifically to the American highway, but ones that rather have to do with movement, such as "Born to Run," "Drive All Night," and "Racing in the Street." This theme of mobility (through the metaphor of the road, the car, or movement in general), along with the theme of place (such as specific American place names), seems to be a recurring aspect; these aforementioned examples are merely titles of songs and albums and imply that there is much more to be discovered about the kind of America that Springsteen portrays in his song-stories by specifically focusing on the themes of mobility and place. In my thesis, I will therefore focus on this research question: what do the themes of mobility and place signify in Springsteen's song-stories and (how) do they build a perspective on American culture and national mythology?

In order to answer these questions, in my first chapter, I will first examine how the themes mobility and place have been explained in academia, as these two themes have most notably been researched and analyzed in the academic fields of Cultural Studies and Cultural Geography. Then, I will look at the significance of the concepts of mobility and place within American culture, and more specifically, within American national mythology. In other words, what do the concepts mobility and place mean in American culture? Are these concepts significant themes within American national mythology? If so, how are they significant? One could think for example of the American mythologies of the Frontier thesis, of the Open Road, and of the American Dream. What kind of role do the themes of mobility and place play in these mythologies?

Next I will analyze the themes of mobility and place in Bruce Springsteen's song-stories by using the lyrics of his albums as case studies. In Bruce Springsteen's lyrical environments, what significance do these themes have? Or rather, what do mobility and place *mean* in Springsteen's lyrics with regard to the kind of America that he writes about? I will also, at times, provide a comparison between Springsteen's song-stories and narratives with similar themes of, for example, American writers Walt Whitman, John Steinbeck, and Jack Kerouac. For example, with *Song of the Open Road*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *On the Road* respectively, these American writers have engaged with themes of mobility and place in their works as well, and may provide an interesting comparison with regard to Springsteen's portrayal of these themes. For example, are there similarities or significant differences in how Whitman, Steinbeck, and Kerouac write about the American highway or American geographical locations and what their writings signify about mobility and place in American culture, and the ways in which Springsteen does so?

The analysis of Springsteen's albums will be divided over two chapters. In the first of those two chapters will contain an analysis of the themes of mobility and place in Springsteen's first three albums, *Greetings from Asbury Park (1973), N.J.*, *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle* (1973), and *Born to Run* (1975). These albums stem from the very beginning of Springsteen's career. In the last chapter, I will discuss a number of Springsteen's albums that came out during the late 1970s and 1980s, including *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (1978), *Nebraska* (1982), and *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (1995). Even though Springsteen has released a total of 18 albums throughout his career, I believe these albums provide a sufficient understanding of Springsteen's song-stories with regard to the themes discussed in this thesis. The albums that I will not discuss focus much less on the themes of mobility and place, and are therefore largely irrelevant for an analysis of such kind. Moreover, analyzing these six albums in a chronological order will provide a better understanding of how Springsteen has expressed the themes of mobility and place in his lyrics and whether or not there have been any significant changes in these portrayals.

What follows is a closer look at Springsteen's exploration of some of the most significant symbols and myths of America, which will hopefully lead to a better understanding of Springsteen's portrayal of what it means to be American as well as Springsteen's significance and place within American culture.

## Chapter 1

### **Theoretical Framework: The Concepts of ‘Mobility’ and ‘Place’ in Cultural Studies and American Culture and Mythology**

New Jersey, a crowded marketplace, my bedroom, Nijmegen, Disneyland, the river Waal, a dark forest; these are more than just locations: they are places. In Cultural Geography theory, a distinction is made between the concept of a location and the concept of place. What, then, do these aforementioned locations have in common that makes them ‘places’? According to Tim Cresswell, places are spaces which people have made meaningful: “they are all spaces people are attached to in one way or another – this is the most straightforward and common definition of place: a meaningful location. ... We experience it. The same cannot be said of location” (*Place* 7). A place, then, does not always have to be stationary. Cresswell gives the example of a ship: its location is constantly changing, but it may still become a meaningful place for those who have lived on the ship for a period of time. This approach to the concept of place therefore assumes that places are socially constructed. To say that a specific place is a social construct, is to say that the meanings ascribed to the place and the way we experience the place come out of our social and cultural milieu - through media, politicians, visitors, and the people who live there - in addition to our personal associations with the place (*Place* 30). Place, therefore, can be seen as a location with socially and culturally constructed meanings attributed to it. How, then, does this attribution of meaning happen? The most significant way in which this happens is through narrative. As the writer Wallace Stegner argues in his essay *The Sense of Place*: “[n]o place is a place until things that have happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends, or monuments” (202). Moreover, in the *Blackwell Companion to Cultural Geography*, the significance of narrative in the construction of a place is accredited to the importance of language in our society: “Narrative plays an important role in the construction of place, just as places themselves play important roles in narratives. [...] The human relationship to place is mediated symbolically, with our most important symbolic structure being language” (Price 122). Thus, place relies largely on narrative for its (symbolic) meaning, as “place-worlds are, fundamentally, story-worlds” (Price 206). Stories are, thus, an inherent aspect of the concept of ‘place’ in Cultural Geography. In other words, a place is not a place until it is remembered and characterized through narrative.

The concept of ‘place’ can also play an important role in the formation of one’s identity; as Wallace Stegner argues: “If you don’t know where you are, you don’t know who you are” (205). In Cultural Geography, this is called ‘place attachment’. Place attachment includes the formation of emotional bonds between an individual and a place, for example because you have lived there for a long time. Place attachment also includes the formation of an emotional bond between two or more people that is connected to a specific place – for example a group of people who lived together on a ship for quite some time. This can create a sense of nostalgia towards the place, and influence the way in which the place is remembered. Place attachment can give us a sense of ‘belonging,’ or communal unity. The more profoundly you are ‘inside’ a place, the stronger you may identify with the place. The more you are ‘outside’ the place, you may identify with or care less about the place. The *Blackwell Companion to Cultural Geography* describes this as follows: “The positioning [of] inside versus outside of place is an important distinction with respect to identity, resting as heavily as it does on belonging and exclusion” (Price 125). We tend to long for a place where we feel like we ‘belong’, because, generally, we fear the exclusion and isolation that comes with feelings of not belonging somewhere. This, according to Price, is “surely evidenced in the fact that exile – the forceful removal of the self from place – is one of the most universally grieved plights” (125). Being an insider is generally considered ‘good’, whereas being an outsider is usually signified as ‘bad.’ Outsiders, or those who lack place attachment in general, may be considered outcasts, strangers, foreigners, outlaws; in other words, they are considered to be the ‘other.’

In addition to places relying on narrative in order to be given meaning, ‘place’ can also be considered an essential element to understanding the stories we tell. As Tim Cresswell argues in his book *Place*, “place is not just a thing in the world but a way of seeing, knowing, and understanding the world” (11). In other words: through narrative we can understand place, but through place we may also better understand the story that is told. In American literary studies, for example, place in a story may indicate a character’s social environment; if the story is placed in a small, rural town in the American Midwest instead of a big, thriving city in the East, the story might not focus as much on individualism and opportunities as it might on community and regionalism. Additionally, the author’s choice of place in a story may also signify a specific portrayal of America; or, rather, what kind of ‘America’ the story positions its characters in. For example, in the early twentieth century, many American authors, including Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson,

wrote mainly about the American small town, considering the small town to be “the ideal setting for what were considered *real* Americans” (Hoover 19) and the “middle ground between the mythic ‘open’ West and the cultivated (and crowded and industrialized) East” (Hölbling 99). In many of these stories, the utopian community of the small town is celebrated, as opposed to the industrialized, anonymous, urban society of the East as well as the uncultivated wilderness of the West. In these stories, the American small town is considered the archetype and image of ‘America’, and the “true base of the great American society” (Hölbling 99). A portrayal of the American small town as typically American in stories can influence the way we understand the American small town as a ‘place’ in real life. On the other hand, ‘placing’ a story in an American small town also provides a better understanding of the cultural and social setting of the story, and in what kind of ‘America’ the story takes place. In other words: different places can generate different perspectives.

In American culture, the West as a place and Westward mobility holds a central position. For example, Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier thesis from the end of the nineteenth century emphasized mobility as a central aspect of American (male) identity and ideology. The national mythology of Manifest Destiny encouraged expansion to and settlement in the American West. In stories and essays from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the subject of westward mobility in America was not uncommon; journalist William Gilpin, who travelled from the East coast to the West in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, celebrated westward expansion as he wrote: “Divine task! Immortal mission! Let us tread fast and joyfully the open trail before us!” (qtd. in *The Tramp in America* 24). This is merely one example of many pieces of writing from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century encouraging westward expansion and presenting it as America’s destiny, mission, and “divine task.” Tim Cresswell explains this fascination with westward mobility in his book *The Tramp in America* as follows: “Mobility has often been portrayed as the central geographical fact of American life, one that distinguishes Euro-Americans from their European ancestors. ... While Europe had developed through time and in a limited space and had thus become overcrowded and despotic, America could simply keep expanding West” (19). Westward expansion was therefore a unique opportunity in America which was no longer possible in Europe at the time. Then, the emerging railroad system at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in America made both westward travel and life in the West easier: travel time became shorter, and goods could be transported across the country faster and more easily.

In American culture, mobility as a geographical concept is thus closely connected to American history, as well as American ideology and mythologies, based on themes of opportunity, freedom, innovation, and modernity. Cresswell notes that “few modern nations are so thoroughly infused with stories of wandering, of heroic migrancy and pilgrimage as are the Americans” (*The Tramp in America* 20). Others even argue that “more than almost anything else, [Americans] valued the freedom to move” (qtd. in *The Tramp in America* 20). It can therefore be concluded that the concept of mobility appears to be quite engrained in American culture, but in order to have a better understanding of how exactly mobility should be understood in the American context, we need a clear understanding of the concept of ‘mobility’ itself.

Running, driving to a friend’s house, traveling someplace, cycling home: these are all forms of mobility. The concept of mobility is generally understood as providing the possibility and the freedom to go anywhere. According to Ann Brigham, author of *American Road Narratives: Reimagining Mobility in Literature and Film*, the meaning of mobility is treated as a fixed and unchanging concept in most literature, and the definition of mobility is usually assumed as “unconstrained movement.” According to Tim Cresswell, however, in *On The Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*, the definition of mobility is more complicated than that. Whereas places are locations with meaning attributed to them; mobility is movement with meaning attributed to it. Cresswell explains this perspective as follows:

The movements of people (and things) all over the world and at all scales are full of meaning. ... Movement [merely] describes the idea of an act of displacement that allows people to move between locations, [before the] social implications of that movement are considered. We can think of movement, then, as the dynamic equivalent of location – contentless, apparently natural, and devoid of meaning, history, and ideology. If movement is the dynamic equivalent of location, then mobility is the dynamic equivalent of place. (*On the Move* 1)

If places are considered to be socially constructed, Cresswell considers mobility to be socially produced motions. Mobility is more than just movement: mobility is laden with meaning and ideology. What are the implications of the movement? What underlying idea or thought has encouraged the movement? Whereas movement merely signifies the physical relocation from point A to point B, mobility also has social implications: it can, for example, lead to a liberation from our constraints – society, the family, the familiar, the past,

and the self (Brigham 6). In a cultural context, mobility is therefore often associated with escape, possibility, or freedom.

We have already seen that the same holds true when we consider mobility in a specifically American context. Mobility, in American mythology, predominantly signifies freedom, opportunity, modernity, and the possibility of escape. Similarly, Ann Brigham mentions that mobility in American context is usually understood as the “American drive to move unfettered through space” (6). The word ‘unfettered’ here implies a sense of complete freedom; but Brigham then argues that mobility in the American context is actually more complex. “Mobility,” she states, “does not [merely] function as an exit from society/home/the familiar, but [it also] emerges as a dynamic process for engaging with social tensions” (8). In other words, mobility in American context should not only be regarded as the promise of escape or freedom, but it should also take into account the social environment in which the mobility is taking place. What is the reason for mobility? What are the social implications? What was the intended goal? This reasoning also resembles Cresswell’s definition of mobility as socially produced. Mobility then means much more than just the promise of escape: mobility also “holds the promise of providing a new perspective or location” (Brigham 9). Therefore, in the/an American context, mobility should not predominantly be about the significance of escape and freedom, as “it is a process of engagement – rather than escape. [The tensions of mobility] can be understood as taking place around issues of incorporation ... Crossing borders, pursuing distance, navigating new spaces, and reinventing oneself – these are all about incorporating subjects and spaces” (Brigham 8). Mobility, in the/an American context, also revolves around incorporation and a sense of belonging, as well as connecting places to each other and connecting people to places. The concept of place thus also plays a central role in how mobility is to be understood in American culture.

The mythology of the American dream also shows the significance of place with regard to how mobility is understood in American culture, as the American dream centers largely around homeownership. The American dream is a concept, an idea, or even an expectation that the American lifestyle promises all Americans the opportunity of a better life by working hard. A ‘better’ life in the context of the American dream usually means a wealthier life, including material success and homeownership. Homeownership, in this mythology, represents social and economic stability. Thus, the American dream is also associated with place attachment. Yet the American dream should be understood as a combination of the significance of place attachment and mobility: in order to achieve the American dream, and homeownership, mobility plays an important role. According

to Brigham, spatial mobility – movement from one place to another - can also function as a way to achieve a range of other ‘mobilities,’ for example economic and social (Brigham 3). In other words, this theoretical approach assumes that the freedom to go anywhere can also lead to the freedom to become anyone. This idea of mobility as having the freedom to become anyone is also essential to the myth of the American Dream, which centers around the expectation of upward social and economic mobility. This understanding of mobility rather emphasizes it as a means to get somewhere; both spatial and social mobility are encouraged as long as they result in ‘improvement’ (“Mobility as Resistance” 269).

If mobility is encouraged only as long as it results in improvement, mobility that does not result in improvement or lead to a destination is disapproved of. This is exemplified by the disapproval of those who are ‘too mobile,’ and those who use mobility as a form of rebellion and resistance. Geographer Tim Cresswell argues that “mobility as progress, as freedom, as opportunity, and as modernity sits side by side with mobility as shiftlessness, as deviance, and as resistance” (*On the Move* 1-2). Those who are considered ‘too mobile’ and who therefore lack place attachment, such as nomads or gypsies for example, resist the expectations and repressive effects of society (including institutions such as the state, family, and school), holding up a desire to “transcend borders” and “resist any attempts to contain or discipline” (Sharp 71). They are considered a threat to the stability of a community, because their placelessness is not in accordance with the idea of place as ideally moral and authentic. Mobility then poses a threat to the morality of place attachment, where those who lack place attachment are seen as outsiders. As Cresswell further explains, “while a concept such as place has been central to arguments about identity, morality, and ‘the good life,’ mobility has often played the role of a suspect ‘other’ threatening to undo the cosy familiarity of place-based communities and neighborhoods” (*The Tramp in America* 14). Following this reasoning, anyone who is *too* mobile, and therefore considered an ‘outsider’ of place (such as nomads, tramps, and gypsies, as well as migrants and refugees) may be considered an intruder, posing a threat to the community.

Mobility, then, can be used as a rebellion against the community, its authority, and social and cultural norms. Tim Cresswell suggests that the placelessness of mobility can mean a “form of resistance to the charms of the American dream” (“Mobility as Resistance” 249). In his essay “Mobility as Resistance: a Geographical Reading of Jack Kerouac’s ‘On the Road’” Cresswell illustrates this claim by providing a number of examples from American popular culture in which the theme of mobility is meant to represent resistance and rebellion. He focuses on Jack Kerouac’s novel *On the Road*, but he also mentions the theme of rebellion

in other counter-culture products, including the road movie *Thelma and Louise*, where two women go out on the road to resist male oppression and marital expectations. Based on these examples, Cresswell concludes that popular culture with mobility as a central theme may “simultaneously reflect and challenge central myths and assumptions [of mobility] in US culture” (“Mobility as Resistance” 252). Taking all of this into account, it can be concluded that there is a complex interplay between the concepts of mobility and place in American culture. Both seem engrained in American culture, but they can also contradict one another. Additionally, the concept of mobility in itself can be considered to be an integral part of American culture as well as a rejection of the societal expectations of an American lifestyle which encourages place attachment.

Additionally, the American road trip asserted Americans as mobile subjects. In American culture, the road trip holds a symbolic status: Ann Brigham argues that “the road trip is not merely the means but the actual manifestation of an authentic American experience” (11). Moreover, This idea of the road trip as a typically American concept can be traced back to World War I; the devastation of the European continent and fear of overseas travel helped to turn American travelers homeward and encouraged Americans to embrace their own country as a tourist destination instead (Brigham 2). Promoters of this domestic tourism idealized American history and tradition, creating what Brigham calls “[a new] nationalism that linked national identity to a shared territory and history” (2). Instead of a series of regions, Americans started to increasingly see the United States as a unified and national space. Additionally, research that stems from the early twentieth-century indicates that Americans were driving across the country more often than they were flying (Brigham 3). Whether the reasons for that were financial or because they were looking for a more American experience by driving through the diverse American landscape, it connected Americans to their country. For example, Frederic F. van de Water announces in his 1927 road narrative that he and his fellow travelers “were no longer New Yorkers, but Americans,” identifying his road trip across the country as a “method of incorporation, [resulting in] a new, nationalized identity” (qtd. in Brigham 14).

The ways in which place and mobility are (re)constructed in narratives have increasingly been explored by literary scholars since the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Larson 1071). Lars Erik Larson, author of *Literary Criticism's Road Scholars at the American Century's Turn*, notes that “critics have wandered far beyond their English departments, gleaning the fields of [for example] urban studies, [but] above all cultural geography to find a vocabulary for describing the experiences and consequences of space and

place within stories;" a practice that has been named "topoanalysis" by Gaston Bachelard (Larson 1071). Among the many places of investigation, including American cities and regions, the American road has gained attention as an American symbol of mobility, placed quite centrally in the nation's culture, infrastructure, and mythology (Larson 1071). "In the vast United States, and in our vaster imaginations," Brigham explains, "the road offers new horizons to an individual liberated from the confines of home and society" (4). In addition to being a symbol of mobility, the road also connects places to each other, and it provides people access to other places. The road can therefore be considered to hold a significant position in an American culture of mobility and place.

The American mythology of the Open Road centers around the idea of the road as a symbol of freedom and possibility in the American land. The myth of the Open Road has signified the road as a symbol for freedom and possibilities in American culture; as Ann Brigham states: "from pioneer trails to the latest car commercial, the 'open road' has continually been perceived as a mythic space of possibility" (10). In his 1856 poem, "Song of the Open Road," Walt Whitman celebrates the possibilities of the American myth of the Open Road. The poem is divided into two main parts: in the first, Whitman addresses and celebrates the road itself, and in the second part, Whitman invites the reader to travel the road together. Whitman's "Song of the Open Road," according to Gordon Slethaug, who analyses the poem in *Hit The Road Jack, Essays on the Culture of the American Road*, is "more than just a means of going from one place to another; it is also a metaphorical path of life from past to present or youth to death ... and the universal way of spiritual progress" (17). Whitman emphasizes the individual development that may come from mobility, in addition to celebrating the road as a means to see the beautiful American country: "Here is realization, here is a man tallied – he realizes here what he has in him, the past, the future, majesty, love" (Whitman 6.87-89).

With "Song of the Open Road," Whitman laid the groundwork for the 20<sup>th</sup> century road narrative. Road stories and travel stories had been around for quite a while, but the rising significance of the automobile and the American road have created a uniquely new genre of the American road narrative in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ronald Primeau defines the modern road narrative as a prose narrative "by and about Americans traveling the highway" in his book *Romance of the Road: Literature of the American Highway* (Primeau ix). Primeau's definition is also largely used by other scholars in their writings on American road narratives, and it is worth noting that this definition excludes stories of non-Americans and limits road narratives to stories of transportation by car - even though the literary influence of the road narrative can

be traced back to Whitman's "Song of the Open Road," in which the narrator traveled by foot. Furthermore, in these road narratives, the road is often used as a metaphor of a space outside of any social order, a space of openness, escape, and freedom, and a space where, basically, anything is possible. In most road narratives, the protagonist (usually a white American male) travels the American road on a specific quest or simply to get away. According to Ronald Primeau, the road narrative can be categorized into four main subjects within the genre. The first category includes narratives of 'road protest,' in which the characters usually use the road as "a key space for fighting normative uniformity" (Larson 1074). Primeau mentions that in this category "the decision to go on the road most often arises from some dissatisfaction or desire for change. The ensuing adventures and the writing of the narrative often take the form of social and political protest" (15). These stories revolve mostly around mobility as a form of resistance. The second category includes the narratives in which the road is used as a search for a national identity. According to Primeau, this category includes the American road authors who "feel strongly that their country's history is short by world standards, [and] this need for defining a national identity sends many writers on the road in search of their country" (15). These stories then revolve mostly around the theme of getting to know America. Parallel to the search for a national identity, Primeau argues that the third category of road narratives focuses on the search for the individual self on the road. As exemplified in, for example, Whitman's "Song of the Open Road", these stories revolve around a sense of individualism and personal development by traveling the road. Then, lastly, Primeau argues that the fourth category of road narratives includes the parodies which deviate from the standard road narratives regarding subject and narrative structure. According to Primeau, "one of the continued attractions of road literature has been its reliance on older and more traditional narrative structures" which is why these experimental road narratives are quite rare (15).

A well-known American road narrative is Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, which was first published in 1957. The novel is often considered to be the archetype of the road narrative, as with *On the Road*, "the [genre of the] road novel gained notoriety, respect, and a sense of direction" (qtd. in Slethaug 29). Kerouac's so-called 'buddy narrative' follows two friends in the 1950s, marked by the consumption boom. During this decade, new and used cars, as well as gasoline, were relatively cheap, and "Americans wanted mobility and freedom from duress [and] travel for recreation, adventure, business, and relocation accelerated across the United States" (Slethaug 28). Kerouac's novel, in which the mobility and the car symbolize adventure and rebellion, can therefore truly be considered a product of its time.

Kerouac represents a new generation of “individualistic wanderers who could leave conventions and responsibilities behind and search for a new identity” (Slethaug 28). Additionally, the novel also focuses on Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty’s camaraderie, which, according to Nancy Leong, is a central theme to the road narrative: “Freedom is sweeter when shared with another ... The shared experience of traversing the road and chasing the American Dream [together] cements relationships” (314). Furthermore, in terms of Primeau’s four categories, this novel can be considered to portray mobility as a form of resistance by focusing on ‘the rebellious youth’. It also portrays mobility as the spiritual journey of protagonist Sal Paradise and his friend Dean Moriarty “along the open highway of America, in search of permanence,” not unlike the focus on spiritual development in Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road” (Slethaug 29). With the novel’s sense of restlessness and rejection of middle-class values during a decade of American prosperity, consumerism, and national optimism, “something distinctive in the American road story was born” (Slethaug 29).

Another example of a well-known road narrative is John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, first published in 1939, which is before Kerouac’s *On the Road* became the archetype of the genre. *The Grapes of Wrath*, however, a novel that revolves around an American family escaping from their poverty in Oklahoma to a hopefully better life in California, is considered “pertinent to the developing myth and trope of the road” (Slethaug 26). The novel was published a little over a decade after Route 66 was completed in 1926; such highways made long-distance travel by car possible in the United States, and “the image of short-distance suburban family travel, typical of most travel in America [up to then], was subordinated to and suppressed by the larger mythical stereotype of the individual on a long cross-country journey” (Slethaug 26). Steinbeck’s novel combines these images of long-distance mobility and family. Furthermore, this novel can be considered a typical road narrative in which the protagonist(s) leave because of a desire for change, as the Joad family seeks to the road out of frustration and dissatisfaction regarding their current social and economic situation. This story, however, is less about voluntary resistance, personal transformation, or a search for national identity than it is about sheer survival and communal responsibility for an “impoverished and distressed white family whose community collapses because of unforgiving wind storms, corporate farming, and irresponsible bankers” (Slethaug 27). As opposed to Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road,” Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* is characterized by a critical undertone, as it criticizes a society that failed “to make equal allowance for all its people, particularly its marginalized underclass” (Slethaug 17). The novel is also rather critical of automotive technology itself, even though the Joad family seeks

refuge by means of automobility. Automotive technology, however, has created most of the social problems that are addressed in this novel. Especially the farmers are victims of the auto technology; for example, they are dependent on auto technology to farm their large lands, but then they get into large debts as the tractors and cars are too expensive. So, even though the journey of the Joad family is more of a necessity than a voluntary act, the novel in itself, in a way, “rebels” against the “driving machine” (Slethaug 28).

As illustrated by Steinbeck’s portrayal of the issues of the American, marginalized, lower class, mobility in road narratives may function to seek change with regard to the traveler’s social and economic circumstances; social class can therefore be considered a significant aspect of the possibility of both spatial and social mobility. Additionally, according to Slethaug, rejection of middle-class values and consumerism are a significant aspect of road narratives that center around rebellion (8). The promise of mobility to escape and start a better life elsewhere thus seems to be most relevant for the lower social classes in America. However, whereas the promises of (spatial and social) mobility seem to appeal mostly to the lower social classes in America, mobility in American culture is also still generally presented as a privilege for the white, Anglo-Saxon male. As Alexandra Ganser states in her book *Roads of her Own*, “American [myths and stories] of mobility, largely reflect the perspective of the white (male) Anglo-Saxon Protestant” (16). As stories of mobility largely focus on white, Anglo-Saxon males, Ganser continues to argue that “social power relations have clearly shaped (auto)mobility as much as any other social practice” (16). Gordon Slethaug also notes the white privilege of road travel in *Hit the Road Jack*, stating that even though the American road is supposed to signify freedom and possibility for every American who owns a car, the ‘Open Road’ is still a mythological construction about white travelers: “like the contours of citizenship, [the space of the American road is] established under specific regimes of racialized inequality and limited access” (80). Most road narratives focus on white characters and are written by white authors, but the road narratives that do center around black characters and/or are written by black authors “reveal the fraudulence of a space viewed as an essence, transcending class and color”; these black road narratives tend to focus on discrimination, harassment, and failure rather than freedom and opportunity and “do not concern the pursuit of the ideal self, unlike their white-authored counterparts” (Slethaug 83). As Slethaug summarizes the (unfortunately rather limited amount of) black road narratives: “so many black travelers were just not making it to their destinations” (83).

Additionally, the possibility of mobility is fundamentally gendered and stories of mobility are typically male stories. Alexandra Ganser argues that “the mythology of mobility has been marked by a distinct genderedness, built on the ideological division of spheres into the private, domestic, and feminine and the public, outward-bound, and masculine” (17). In other words, the road is a masculine space and adventurous road travel is also considered masculine, whereas domesticity and place attachment are considered feminine. This is also reflected in the genre of the road narrative: as argued in *Hit The Road Jack*, almost all of the characters that “hit the road” in the road narratives of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were male, and any women that accompanied them were written as secondary characters and/or sexual objects (99). Women in road narratives, if at all present, are often portrayed as passengers and companions, and therefore do not control the mobility and remain powerless in opposition to the male protagonists. Additionally, in road narratives that do focus on female protagonists on the road, the female characters on the road are characterized by what Alexandra Ganser calls “confined mobility”: they are not liberated by mobility, but rather confronted with the limitations that the road poses for female travelers (19).

Road narratives are thus closely connected to various aspects of American culture, such as American identity, mythology, and lifestyle as well as race, gender, and class. Even though each road narrative is an individual text, “it becomes part of the genre that represents a culture in dialogue about national and self-identity, social values, and opportunity” (Primeau 16). Studying the genre of the road narrative is therefore particularly interesting if we want to consider the significance of mobility and place in American culture. The American road narrative has, concludes Primeau, “evolved into a socially constructed vision of a community defining itself in motion” (17). This community, however, does not seem very diverse, and the road narrative is a genre that focuses mostly on the possibility of mobility for the white, male American. In *Roads of her Own*, Alexandra Ganser argues that “to get the full picture, the story of mobility in America needs to include less central stories, often untold: tales of marginality and exclusion, which cast a different light on the grand narratives of nationhood, of progress, of democracy, and of modernity” (Ganser 16).

Bruce Springsteen is known for writing about the lives of the American working class, and in doing so, the concepts of place and mobility often signify the economic and social circumstances of his characters. In his stories about the American working class, he situates his characters in a carefully constructed image of America, and by doing so, he provides a social geography of America. In his song-stories, he constructs images that “paint a complex,

detailed portrait of the social environment” (qtd. in Kearney 5). In her article “From ‘My Hometown’ to ‘This Hard Land’: Bruce Springsteen’s Use of Geography, Landscapes, and Places to Depict the American Experience” Marya Morris argues that Springsteen’s place-based imagery has been a hallmark of his career as a songwriter (3). In his lyrics, Springsteen often includes detailed descriptions of the towns, cities, highways, houses, factories, and porches, where his working class characters are situated. Some of these places are fictional, but most of these places are real places, located somewhere in the United States. Bob Crane, who considers himself a ‘Springsteen scholar,’ has found that Springsteen refers to more than 25 specific places in the state of New Jersey on his first four albums alone (Crane 404). Additionally, Crane found that, up until he published his book *A Place to Stand: A Guide to Bruce Springsteen’s Sense of Place*, Springsteen has referenced ‘home’ over 200 times in his songs, he has mentioned 33 different states, and he has references 46 different American cities or towns (Crane 404). In addition to these places, Springsteen also often uses non-specific places such as ‘the edge of town’ as metaphors for the characters’ emotional states. Crane then describes this link between the places and characters Springsteen mentions in his songs as follows: “Springsteen links the voices of his characters to the landscapes where they stand, with metaphorical power and revelation” (qtd. in Morris 3). The places that Springsteen describes, then, are not merely geographical references, but “instead, Springsteen allows [place] to take shape as a character, and, at its best, as a force that influences the choices and decisions of his protagonists” (Crane 404). This reminds us of Tim Cresswell’s definition of places as spaces that are made meaningful through narrative. If Springsteen pays careful attention to the construction of the places in his songs, they can then be considered essential to the stories he tells us about America and our understanding of the social environment of his American characters.

In addition to the specific places that Springsteen refers to, he also pays a lot of attention to the non-specific places of the American road and highway as places of refuge. In Springsteen’s lyrics, the road often signifies his characters’ “sense of freedom, limitation, opportunity, and confinement” (Morris 3). The road then, as a place, becomes meaningful for his characters’ search for a better life someplace else. Bob Crane analyses that many of Springsteen’s earliest songs, for example, were “full of romance for the open road and a belief that for anyone who wants it badly enough, there is a stretch of that road that gives us one final shot at hope, love, and opportunity” (409). Mobility in Springsteen’s song-stories is thus an often recurring theme, characterized by protagonists hitting the road out of pleasure or in

hopes of a better life. Brent Bellamy states in his article “Tear into the Guts: Whitman, Steinbeck, Springsteen, and the Durability of Lost Souls on the Road” that “Springsteen builds on the motif of the road from the concept of the American frontier and the desire to break into new territory” (235). This motif reminds us of the American road narrative.

Taking all of this into account, it is interesting to pay more attention to Springsteen’s (metaphorical) use of mobility and place in his song-stories, and especially to what Springsteen’s use of these two themes signifies about his version of America. Additionally, we can come to a better understanding of the cultural significance of Springsteen’s song-stories when we take a closer look at them in the context of the American road narrative.

## Chapter 2

### **“These Two Lanes Will Take Us Anywhere”: Mobility and Place in Bruce Springsteen's *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.* (1973), *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street shuffle* (1973), and *Born to Run* (1975)**

Bruce Springsteen's first two studio albums *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.*, and *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle* came out in 1973, only ten months apart from one another, and marked the beginning of Bruce Springsteen's career. After Springsteen had finished laying down the tracks for his first album, *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.*, he was asked by studio executives to choose a photo for his album cover. His label, Columbia Records, was encouraging Springsteen to choose a New York City themed cover, because of the success of musicians such as Carole King, Joni Mitchell, Van Morrison, and Cat Stevens at the time, who were all associated with New York City (Fury 79). Springsteen himself, however, wanted to remain true to his place of origin, New Jersey and chose an image of a post card from Asbury Park, New Jersey, as the cover of his first album. In an article in *Reading the Boss*, Springsteen is quoted saying: “The [Columbia Records executives] were pushing for this big New York thing, this big town. I said, ‘Wait, you guys nuts or something? I’m from Asbury Park, New Jersey. Can you dig it? New Jersey?’” (qtd. in Fury 79). Springsteen thus named his first album after his hometown, along with an album cover showing a postcard from said town. His first album is therefore considered a tribute to Asbury Park by many, and as David Hayes states in his article “From New York to L.A.: US Geography in Popular Music”: “For many American popular music artists, there is no more fitting a tribute to a geographic place of personal importance than to name a song after it” (87). In addition to the name and album cover specifically referring to Asbury Park, New Jersey, the East coast – and predominantly the small coastal town in New Jersey – also functions as the setting for most of the song-stories on Springsteen's earliest albums, as Springsteen clearly refers to and describes places such as the New Jersey Turnpike, the boardwalk, the beach, New York City, and of course Asbury Park. In his book *Songs*, Springsteen confirms that the song-stories of his first two albums are “twisted autobiographies ... rooted in the people, places hangouts, and incidents he'd seen and events he'd lived” (qtd. in Morris 4). Crazy Janey, Mary, Jimmie the Saint, Wild Billy, Little Dynamite, Hazy Davy, and Killer Joe are among the characters that inhabit Springsteen's song-stories of the East

coast on his first two albums. The detailed and realistic descriptions of New Jersey help to create a sense of community and shared experience with Springsteen's early audience. Many fans in New Jersey "not only know where some of these places are – Highway 9, the New Jersey Turnpike, the boardwalk, Greasy Lake – they feel a kinship with the songs' characters, whose lives mirrored their own as well as those of their families and neighbors" (Morris 3). In doing so, Springsteen declares his preoccupation with place and the setting of his song-stories and asserts that the song-stories he writes are undoubtedly American, or more specifically, local stories.

In contrast to his first two albums, Springsteen's third album, *Born to Run*, which was released in 1975, contained less specific references to geographical locations in the United States and focuses more on the theme of movement away from places; *Born to Run* is, according to Louis P. Masur, author of "The Geography of Born to Run," "less particularistic, and therefore more accessible and inclusive; for us to feel that we are partaking in the journey, not just hearing about it, it helps that the geography is largely generic" (31). In his book *Songs*, Bruce Springsteen himself has also explained that the geography of *Born to Run* is more inclusive: "When the screen door slams on 'Thunder Road,' you're not necessarily on the Jersey Shore anymore. You could be anywhere in America" (qtd. in Masur 31). That does not mean that 'place' is not significant on Springsteen's third album; with only a couple of exceptions, "all the stories on 'Born to Run' take place out in the street, on the highway, or in cars" (Morris 7). Springsteen has replaced the specific geographical references with more general and inclusive locations, but setting is still a significant aspect of his song-stories nonetheless. On *Born to Run*, Springsteen's characters have taken to the American highway, leaving behind their working class small town communities. As such, Springsteen's third album is one full of narratives of mobility. As stated by Elizabeth Seymour in her article "Where Dreams are Found and Lost: Springsteen, Nostalgia, and Identity," on his first three albums, Springsteen "paints a largely restorative [nostalgic picture] for the working-class street life he experienced; he paints a romantic image of nightlife on the streets, with kids running from their parents and authorities, in search of romance, adventure, and cars" (66).

Taking a closer look at Springsteen's use of the themes mobility and place in the context of American culture and mythology, I aim to demonstrate that, on his first three albums, Springsteen uses a rhetoric of freedom and escapism as well as metaphors of the road and the car that resonate with the meaning of the road in American culture, such as the

mythology of the Open Road, and which fit Springsteen's early song-stories within the genre of the modern American road narrative.

In American road narratives, escaping town is often understood as a protest against the town's social order and conventions. In his *Romance of the Road*, Ronald Primeau argues that road narratives can often be considered to take the form of a social protest due to the fact that the decision to go on the road most often arises from dissatisfaction or an urge for change from the tediousness of everyday life. Additionally, Primeau argues that "the small town has probably never been idyllic" and that "no individual has ever fully discovered a self [there]" (14). Staying in one place restricts personal development, especially in small town communities which come with certain customs and social conventions; breaking the routine by escaping town is therefore considered a form of social protest in most road narratives. Primeau argues this as follows: "In some ways, all road trips are protests. People leave home to change the scene, to overcome being defined by custom, tradition, and circumstances back home, and – at least for a little while – to construct an alternative way of living" (33). Similarly, Katie Mills, author of the book *The Road and the Rebel*, argues that road narratives such as *On the Road* replaced earlier connotations of the road trip as a familial, leisurely undertaking and instead established an imagery of the road trip as a form of social rebellion, stating the following:

These were the new 'trips' of the rebellious young; cars [and] speed consequently became an important part of the trope of the road ... replacing more benign associations of leisurely travel [with] another kind of American exceptionalism in which the young were perceived to launch out on their own and discover themselves, independent of family and cultural restrictions, to do what they wanted and go where they willed. The exceptionalist vision of personal freedom and self-transformation for young people in the fifties is deeply imprinted on the trope of the road. (qtd. In Slethaug 29).

The American country, as widespread and diverse as it is, provides the perfect opportunity for young people to go out and develop themselves, away from the restrictions of their community and its social conventions. Furthermore, in his article "American Highways: Recurring Images and Themes of the Road Genre," Brian Ireland argues that in "the decade after World War II," which is also seen as the era of McCarthyism and conformity, "dropping out from society became a form of protest against a social order that many thought could not be reformed" (476). Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* is perhaps the best known and most

significant example of a literary road narrative in which the road trip takes the form of a social protest; a product of the “Beat” counter-culture of the post-World War II era, *On the Road* revealed a general feeling of “restlessness and resistance to middle-class values in the midst of American prosperity, consumerism, and national optimism, and something distinctive in the American road story was born” (Slethaug 29). Kerouac’s characters Sal and Dean rejected mainstream cultural values and travelled from town to town in hopes of finding social liberation, which could not be achieved by staying in one place (Slethaug 29). Kerouac’s characters want to leave behind the “conventions and responsibilities” of the “corrupted East coast,” and expected to find spiritual wisdom and new individual paths by traveling Westward. Because of road narratives such as *On the Road*, road trips became associated with the rebellious youth, who rejected place attachment and who by leaving town left behind social conventions and family restrictions in order to find personal freedom and social liberation, which could not be found by staying in the same place.

A similar idea is explored on Springsteen’s first three albums; even though Springsteen paints a picture of Asbury Park as a relatable all-American small town that at first sight seems rather nostalgic, relatable, and idyllic, the small town and its close-knit community is also portrayed as a tiresome place that is restricting the freedom and individual development of the young and rebellious characters. Many of the songs on his first three albums, *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.*, *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle*, and *Born to Run*, undoubtedly take place specifically in the small town of Asbury Park, as Springsteen refers to the name of the town itself as well as its beach, boardwalk, and Asbury Park street names such as Main Street and Kingsley Avenue. However, as stated by Daniel Wolff in his book *4<sup>th</sup> of July, Asbury Park: A History of the Promised Land*, Springsteen wrote the setting of his first three albums in such a way that “farm kids who had never seen the ocean, kids from nice suburban homes who were born to stay put, took Asbury as their own” (2). Springsteen describes life in Asbury Park and its community in such a way that it becomes relatable, and as Wolff argues, “the details are realistic, [and] you know this scene even if you have never spent a summer on the shore” (203). In doing so, Springsteen invites his listeners into his small town community, only to later declare that life there is rather unsatisfactory for the young and adventurous. The most notable example of this is the song “4<sup>th</sup> of July, Asbury Park (Sandy)” from the *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle* album. Springsteen starts off by describing a rather romantic dream landscape of Asbury Park, describing how the “fireworks are hailing over [Asbury Park] tonight” and he even compares

the town to “Little Eden.” In the first verse of this song, the narrator describes how, on the night of the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, the beach of Asbury Park is filled with lovers dancing along the shore, how the Asbury Park boys “dance with their shirts open” while chasing “them silly New York girls,” and how the kids play games in an arcade called “Pinball Way” on the “boardwalk way past dark.” Additionally, the narrator describes how “the aurora” rises above the ocean behind them, and how the lights on the pier illuminate the characters running down the beach. This description implies a festive, careless, and youthful atmosphere of the ‘boardwalk life’ in the idyllic town of Asbury Park on a holiday celebrating American freedom, the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. No matter how idyllic the setting, however, near the end of the song the narrator declares that he grew tired of the life that Asbury Park offered him: “I just got tired of hanging in them dusty arcades, banging them pleasure machines.” He feels as if he has outgrown the town, and he realizes that it is time to move on, as for him “this boardwalk life ... is through.” He then tells Sandy, his girlfriend, that she “ought to quit this scene too.” Similarly, in “Rosalita (Come Out Tonight),” also from *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle*, the narrator starts off by painting a picture of his small town community: “Dynamite’s in the belfry playing with the bats, Little Gun’s downtown in front of Woolworth’s trying out his attitude on all the cats, Papa’s on the corner waiting for the bus, [and] Mama’s home in the window, waiting up for us.” The fact that the narrator knows what everyone is doing in that moment indicates how close-knit and possibly even stifling their community is. He then urges his girlfriend, who is called Rosalita in this song, to leave town with him, telling “Rosie” that he wants to leave tonight and “make that highway run.” He then likens leaving town ( and therefore also their community), to ‘winning’ by stating the following: “winners use the door, so use it Rosie, that’s what it’s there for.” Rosalita’s parents, however, disapprove of Rosie’s relationship with the rebellious narrator “cause [he plays] in a rock and roll band,” and they have locked Rosie in her room, literally restricting her freedom. The narrator then announces that he is coming to “lend a hand, confiscate [her] and liberate [her]” from her controlling family. He ends his invitation to Rosalita by proposing a place where they can escape to, saying that he knows a “pretty little place in Southern California down San Diego way.” Furthermore, on the song “Born to Run,” off the same titled album, the narrator makes a similar plea to Wendy. This song does not specifically mention the town of Asbury Park, but we know that the song also most likely takes place there because of its references to “Highway Nine,” a highway running through New Jersey, the “boulevard”, and an indoor amusement park called “the Palace,” which is located on the Asbury Park boardwalk. In “Born to Run,” Springsteen includes no idyllic description of the town, and skips right ahead to a desperate plea to leave

town; for the characters of “Born to Run” the small town is namely a “death trap” and “a suicide rap,” and the narrator exclaims that they have to “get out while [they are] young” because “this town rips the bones from your back.” The town is thus considered a trap that stands in the way of freedom and further individual development. Additionally, in the song “Thunder Road,” the narrator invites his girlfriend Mary to leave town with him, claiming that they live in a “town full of losers” and that they are “pulling out of [there] to win.” Here, similar to the song “Rosalita (Come Out Tonight)” off the previous album, escaping town is compared to ‘winning.’ As we have seen, and as Louis Masur states in his article about Springsteen’s use of geography, Springsteen implies in these songs that small towns are “noxious places” and escaping town is considered “winning” (32).

In contrast with the tediousness of the small town, Springsteen portrays the city as exciting and full of opportunities, but also as a violent, dangerous place. Occasionally, the characters on *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.*, *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle* and *Born to Run* leave the setting of New Jersey and head for New York City. At first sight, it is portrayed as exciting and full of opportunities, where money can be made; for example, in "New York City Serenade" the characters Jackie and Billy "[are] gonna boogaloo down Broadway / And come back home with the loot / It's midnight in Manhattan ... It's a mad dog's promenade." Similarly, on "It's Hard to be a Saint in the City," the narrator says: "I could walk like Brando right into the sun / Dance just like a Casanova ... I was the king of the alley, mama." In New York City, the narrator can be who he wants to be and do what he wants to do. Yet, the city is not all it is perceived to be at first, as it is also a violent and corrupted place. For example, the narrator of “Incident on 57<sup>th</sup> Street” describes how his friend “Spanish Johnny” got into a fight in New York City, which he calls the “underworld.” Spanish Johnny returned “with bruised arms and broken rhythm and a beat-up old Buick.” On the *Born to Run* album, in the song “Meeting Across the River,” the narrator drives from New Jersey to New York city, “through the tunnel ... to the other side,” for a presumably illegal and dangerous but financially rewarding meeting: “Hey Eddie, this guy, he’s the real thing ... that two grand’s practically sitting here in my pocket.” However, they have to be careful, and it is implied that things have gone awry before: “We gotta stay cool tonight, Eddie ... If we blow this one, they ain’t gonna be looking for just me this time.” As a precaution, the narrator hands Eddie a gun: “here, stuff this in your pocket, it’ll look like you’re carrying a friend.” In this song, the city is portrayed as a dangerous, disorganized and corrupted place instead. There is also a social order within this criminal circuit, in which the

narrator of the song is dependent on the guy he is about to meet in New York City as well as the police who might come after him. The song “Jungleland,” portrays New York City as a rather violent place as well. The character “Magic Rat” drives from New Jersey to New York City for a night of entertainment, as he “drove his sleek machine over the Jersey state line,” then assembled the “midnight gang ... and picked a rendezvous for the night.” However, the rebellious “midnight gang” quickly gets in trouble with the authorities, and the “local cops ... rip this holy night.” New York City then quickly becomes a place of violence, and the Magic Rat ‘s “own dream guns him down as shots echo down the hallway ... [and] no one watches when the ambulance pulls away.” The city is a place where such violence no longer surprises anyone, as the New Yorkers “just stand back and let it all be.” The character Magic Rat gets shot and ends up wounded in New York City. The city’s violence and chaos is reflected in the nickname that New York City has been given in this song, namely Jungleland. In contrast to Springsteen’s portrayal of the small town as a rather tiresome place, the city is portrayed as disorderly, chaotic, but above all as corrupted, dangerous, and violent. The characters from New Jersey occasionally escape their town and head to the city, but these songs imply that the city, a chaotic and precarious place, as destination is not an option in their quest for liberation and personal development either. Place attachment, whether it is the city or the small town, should be avoided.

Instead, Springsteen’s characters take to the road in their search for liberation from social order and constraints; in Springsteen’s song-stories, the road symbolizes freedom and possibility, and, therefore, these song-stories can be considered manifestations of the American mythology of the Open Road. In American counterculture, the road is often symbolizes escape for young rebels like Jack Kerouac’s characters who wanted to “drop out” of society, and “on the road, [they] could be anything [they] wanted to be” (Ireland 476). In the American mythology of the Open Road, the American road symbolizes freedom as it provides both the freedom to go anywhere as well as the freedom to become anyone. This idea of the road symbolizing ‘freedom’ resonates strongly with Springsteen’s song-stories, in which the road provides and symbolizes liberation. As Brent Bellamy states in his article “Tear into the Guts: Steinbeck, Springsteen, and the Durability of Lost Souls on the Road,” Springsteen takes us from a “glimpse of freedom” on his first two albums (for example: “And I swear I found the key to the universe in the engine of an old parked car” on “Growing Up”) to the “path of freedom” on his third album (for example: “It’s a town full of losers and I’m pulling out of here to win” on “Thunder Road”) (234). Indeed, on his first two albums,

Springsteen already plays with the idea of escape and finding freedom on the road, as illustrated by for example “Wild Billy’s Circus Story” in which it is stated that “Nebraska’s our next stop” or by “Spirit in the Night” in which a group of young characters drive “about a mile down on the dark side of route 88” to a place called Greasy Lake for a night of dancing and drinking, but it is not until *Born to Run* that Springsteen really starts to explore the metaphor of the road and freedom. As Jason Stonerook observes in his article on Springsteen’s treatment of the themes ‘individuality’ and ‘community,’ on *Born to Run* “Springsteen’s characters are motivated by a search for individual freedom. At its most fundamental level, Springsteen’s sense of freedom is a form of liberation, a ‘freedom from’ something such as work, one’s hometown, or the past” (209). For example, in “Thunder Road,” the character is looking for liberation from his hometown, which he considers a “town full of losers.” The narrator is “pulling out of [there] to win” and the song is a plea to his girlfriend Mary to join him on this quest. He tells her that the road provides them with the possibility to go anywhere they want: “These two lanes will take us anywhere.” He invites her to “climb in [the] back” of his car and start their new, adventurous life together, and he tells her that this is their “chance to make it good somehow.” He then compares the car’s wheels to angelic wings, and the road to heaven: “we got one last chance to make it real, to trade in these wings on some wheels ... Heaven’s waiting down on the tracks.” Nowhere in the song does the narrator mention a destination that he has in mind, the focus is on being on the road, which in itself is already considered blissful. The narrator and his girlfriend ‘pulling out’ of town in “Thunder Road,” according to Brent Bellamy, is “a reiteration of the promise of America ... an ideological sense of freedom” (234). Similarly, in “Night,” the narrator takes to the road at night in order to experience liberation from his working life during the day. The narrator starts off by describing the tediousness of the working life: “You get up every morning at the sound of the bell, you get to work late and the boss man’s giving you hell.” In the working life, the narrator states, you are “just a prisoner of your dreams.” But after work, at night, the narrator puts his “faith in [his] machine [and] off [he screams] into the night.” The car, described as something “so pretty that you’re lost in the stars,” provides the narrator to go on the road, providing him blissful liberation from his nine-to-five job. On the road, he falls “in love with all the wonder it brings, [and] every muscle in your body sings as the highway ignites.” Springsteen portrays the road as a means of liberation from the working class life, which resonates with the meaning of the road in American culture; according to Primeau, “the road [means] freedom from schedules, commitments, memberships, and

credentials; the highway journey also suspends for a while definition according to one's origins, profession and geography" (69).

Additionally, the individual quest toward another place and a better life of Springsteen's characters resonates with the idea that the American Dream can be obtained through spatial mobility. In American culture, the mythologies of the Open Road and the American Dream are closely connected. According to Brian Ireland, the trope of the Open Road is a "microcosm of America itself; the journeys undertaken [on the road] are frequently associated with the search for the elusive 'American Dream'" (474). In other words, Americans take to the road in hopes of achieving a better life and better social standing elsewhere. According to Stonerook, this individual quest is an "intrinsic drive" for Springsteen's characters on *Born to Run* (210). For example, the narrator of "Born to Run" starts off by mentioning that he and his girlfriend are chasing a "runaway American dream" and that "someday," they are going to "get to that place where [they] really want to go," where they will "walk in the sun" and live the life they have always wanted to live. In "Thunder Road," the narrator mentions that they are "riding out tonight to chase the promised land" where they will live a better life. According to Jason Stonerook, these examples illustrate that Springsteen's characters "do not rest in their current position" and that "social mobility, the ability to improve one's standing in life, is therefore central to Springsteen's [song-stories]" (Stonerook 210).

Even though Springsteen's characters on *Born to Run* sometimes express hopes of finding a destination, the focus of the song-stories remains largely on the prospect of mobility itself. According to Frank P. Fury in his article in *Reading the Boss*, the characters in "Born to Run" are the "young and restless, [who] move through their settings as if they were eternally homeless, yet enjoyed being so" (81). For example, in the song "Born to Run," the narrator invites his girlfriend Wendy to join him in his escape out of town, which he calls a "death trap," and together, the narrator says, "we could break this trap, we'll run until we drop, baby we'll never go back." The goal is to keep going. The narrator has no clear destination in mind, as long as they are liberated from their hometown and on the move. The narrator in "Born to Run" wants to go find the perfect destination for himself and his girlfriend, but he does not know where that is or how to get there, and repeatedly mentions that until they get there, they are "tramps" who are just "born to run." Therefore, the goal, for the time being, is movement itself, being on the road. The narrator of "Born to Run" actually repeats numerous times that they are "tramps," vagabonds who are always on the move and essentially placeless. Walt

Whitman, in his poem “Song of the Open Road,” also considers those who travel the road “tramps,” as he mentions that those in “superior journeys” are the “tramps of days” (verse 13). By describing Americans on the road as “tramps,” both Springsteen and Whitman create an image of the traveling American as a restless wanderer. According to Brian Ireland, the idea of “Americans [as] a restless people” is not uncommon in American culture, as he argues that Americans are often portrayed as “imbued with a kind of nervous energy that manifests itself culturally through the mediums of literature, film, and music” (474). He argues that this “restlessness” of American people can be traced back to various “commentators on American life,” including Frederick Jackson Turner and his frontier thesis, an idea revolving around Americans moving westward, and Ralph Waldo Emerson who once said that “there is no truth but in transit” (Ireland 474). In *On the Road*, the characters Sal and Dean stay constantly in motion. According to Ireland, for them, “the journey has no goal and no end [and] the road is life” (478). The idea of Americans as restless wanderers therefore seems to be imbued in American culture.

Furthermore, like in many road narratives, Springsteen’s song-stories very often center on the young and rebellious “anti-hero.” Brian Ireland observes that in the road genre, nearly all of the characters are young and rebellious and concludes that road narratives are also naturally appealing to youth culture “as the road offers adventure, escapism, and opportunity” (477). Additionally, according to Ireland, “the idea of having villains as heroes, or at the very least, heroes with questionable morals, is prevalent in the road genre” (477). As such, road narratives often have an “antihero as hero” (477). In road narratives, this is reflected in, for example, Kerouac’s *On the Road*, in which the “heroes” are “thieves, thugs, [and] womanizers” (Ireland 477). Likewise, in Springsteen’s song-stories the characters can definitely be considered young and rebellious. As we have seen, Springsteen’s characters have an urge for (continuous) movement and want to escape from their hometown. And, as Tim Cresswell states in his book *The Tramp in America*, those who are seen as “too mobile,” such as vagrants, hobos, tramps, and wanderers,” are considered a “threat to the rooted and moral existence of place” (21). In other words, those who are constantly on the move rebel against the social conventions of place-based communities. Springsteen’s characters, who are “born to run” would therefore definitely qualify as anti-moral and rebellious antiheroes. In Springsteen’s “Thunder Road,” the narrator even literally acknowledges that he is not a hero, as he tells Mary: “Now I’m no hero, that’s understood.” Additionally, it is often stressed that Springsteen’s characters are still young. In “Born to Run,” the narrator specifically states that

now is the time to “get out” as they are still young. In “Growing Up,” off the *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.* album, Springsteen describes the rebellion that comes with growing up, and doing the exact opposite of what is expected of you from your community, stating: “When they said ‘sit down,’ I stood up... Ooh, growing up.”

Moreover, in road narratives as well as Springsteen’s song-stories, the characters on the move are usually male. According to Ireland, it is rare in the road genre for a male and female character to travel together, but that instead “the formula is usually same-sex relationships – two men traveling together, or more rarely, two women” (481). In this respect, the road narrative reflects traditional roles played by men and women in society, as women, when they do appear in the road genre, are “usually portrayed in stereotypical, male chauvinist ways – as whores in *Easy Rider*, as sex objects in *On the Road*, or as defenseless victims in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*” (Ireland 481). Similarly, in Springsteen’s early song-stories, the narrator is usually male, and females are often “sex objects, foils, and avenues of escape [who are] located predominantly in the private sphere, or the domestic” (Seymour 63). On his first three albums, Springsteen’s male narrators often “roam the streets in cars or sit on the beaches looking for pretty girls to fulfill their needs” (Seymour 64). For example, in “Spirit in the Night” the female character “Crazy Janey” is positioned as a sexual object for the male’s pleasure as he describes how she “kissed him just like only a lonely angel can” and they ended up “making love in the dirt.” In “The E Street Shuffle,” the character Little Angel is described as “[driving] all the local boys insane,” and is therefore portrayed as “the object of men’s sexual fantasies” (Moss 173).

In contrast to the usual formula in road narratives of two men traveling the road together, in Springsteen’s song-stories the male narrators often encourages women to accompany them on their escape. In “Born to Run,” the narrator wants Wendy to leave the “death trap” with him, and asks her to “wrap [her] legs around [the] velvet rims” of his motorcycle. The narrator would still drive the motorcycle, with Wendy merely as a passenger, leaving Wendy without agency in their escape. In “Thunder Road,” the narrator invites Mary to go along with him on his quest out of town. He tells her that she can “waste [her] summer praying in vain for a savior to rise from these streets,” but that he could be that savior: he can offer her “redemption beneath this dirty hood.” In other words, he believes that he can ‘save’ her by taking her away in his car. Then, the narrator pleads Mary to go with him as he just does not want to be alone: “Don’t turn me home again / I just can’t face myself alone again.” Later in the song, it is implied that the narrator is not specifically interested in Mary

but rather in female company in general when he states: “You ain’t a beauty but hey, you’re alright.” This implies that the narrator does not really love Mary, and that she would merely be a remedy against loneliness on the road. From these lyrics, Ann Bliss concludes that Springsteen’s women “do not exist as characters in their own right” (136). Female characters such as Mary and Wendy are written as secondary characters, who are asked to come along on the narrator’s attempt to escape only to please the sexual needs of the male narrator and to avoid loneliness. The male narrator is still the one in charge of the escape. As such, Springsteen asserts mobility as something masculine. Furthermore, Bliss argues that the songs “Thunder Road” and “Born to Run,” illustrate that “independence and freedom” are portrayed by Springsteen as “the core of mythic masculinity” (137). Rebellion and the search for independence, she argues, are “crucial to masculine development” (135). This notion of masculinity ties in with the male narrators in Springsteen’s universe, who search for freedom and independence through rebellious attempts to escape town in their cars and on their motorcycles. The narrator’s masculine identity is therefore largely asserted by the male narrator’s possibility of mobility.

In the song-stories of Springsteen’s first three albums, the car is an important metaphor for possibility and freedom and provides the literal means for road travel and escape. In American culture, the automobile, or the “hot rod,” is often understood as a symbol of economic stability and consumerism, of progress, and of opportunity. As Chris Lezotte states in his article “Born to Take the Highway: Women, the Automobile, and Rock ‘n’ Roll,” in the period after World War II, in which American economy boomed, suggesting that the American Dream was actually possible, the “symbol of that American dream was often a new automobile” (164). Similarly, historian Tom Engelhardt points out that, in the 1950s, the car became a symbol of America’s freedom to consume: “with the car, one could consume space itself [and] go freely wherever the highway went. No popular concept of freedom then existed without access to ‘wheels’” (qtd. in Ireland 477). Thus, in American culture, the car is inherently connected to the idea of freedom and possibility. In road narratives, the car also symbolizes freedom and provides the opportunity to go on the road. Without the car, there would be no destination to reach. For example, in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, the mobility offered by the car is “what allows the Joads to hope for a future of plenty” (Bellamy 231). In Springsteen’s “Growing Up,” the narrator exclaims that he “found the key to the universe in the engine of an old parked car.” In other words, the car literally allows him to explore the universe. In “Thunder Road,” the narrator’s car offers “redemption” and his

“wheels” take him to the “promised land.” In “Born to Run,” it is the “chrome-wheeled, fuel-injected” cars that provide a way out of the “death trap” of a town that the narrator lives in. And, finally, in “Night,” the narrator puts his “faith in [his] machine and off [he] scream[s] into the night.” As we have seen, the road is an important metaphor for freedom, but in Springsteen’s America, freedom or escape would not be possible without the “dirty hood” of the car providing “redemption” (“Thunder Road”).

As concluded by Frank P. Fury in his article in *Reading the Boss*, the “characters from Springsteen’s first three albums tramp their way through his back streets, back alleys, open highways, deserted beaches, boardwalks, and front porches, all of which seem to promise escape or sanctuary” (80). On these albums, place attachment is often avoided by the characters, and the main theme of the song-stories is the possibility of escape and freedom. The small town and its community are restrictive of freedom, and Springsteen’s “tramps” feel as if they belong outside this community. The characters believe that they will only feel truly liberated once they are no longer limited by social order. The city, even though it is more exciting and provides more opportunities than the small town, likewise fails to provide the redemption that Springsteen’s characters are looking for; it can only be found on the road. The road and the car symbolize freedom and escape in Springsteen’s America, and the rebellious attitude of Springsteen’s young characters on the road reflects the rebellious nature of youth culture. As such Springsteen’s stories fit right in the category of American road narratives, alongside novels such as Kerouac’s *On the Road* which celebrate youth- and counterculture as well as the possibilities and adventure provided by the road and car. The road remains a masculine space in Springsteen’s road stories, a place of refuge for working class, adventurous boys and their hot rods. In conclusion, the characters in Springsteen’s universe believe that the American Dream is within reach, as long as they dare to get out of town and hit the road.

## Chapter 3

### “The Promise is Broken”: Mobility and Place in Bruce Springsteen’s *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (1978), *Nebraska* (1982), and *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (1995)

After *Born to Run*, Springsteen turned away from writing about romantic escapism and personal experiences, and took on a different narrative approach in which he focused more on the working class characters and setting of the song-stories. When Springsteen went on VH-1 Storytellers in 2005, he explained that on the albums following *Born to Run*, he started to explore a different, less autobiographical, approach to his songwriting, in which he “took on a character” and tried to “walk in his shoes” (qtd. in Morris 12). In doing so, Springsteen started to listen more to folk artists concerned with the working class such as Jimmie Rodgers, Johnny Cash, and Hank Williams and he started to draw inspiration from the folk tradition for his musical compositions as well as his lyrical themes (Garman, “The Ghost of History” 277). As Garman observes, Springsteen specifically became inspired by Woodie Guthrie’s so-called “hurt song”: folk songs in which “the collective pain, joy, and hopes of working-class experience can be articulated and historicized” (“The Ghost of History” 198). The characters in hurt songs “may often, but not always, have strayed to the wrong side of the law, [and] they are [often] victims of injustice themselves” and the hurt song “seeks to frame [these characters] sympathetically, and to look for larger and social and political causes for the injustice” (Dolphin 46). Hurt songs often describe the usually dire circumstances of the working class, mostly white, male workers in factories, mills or mines, and as such hurt songs are typically socially and politically conscious. The music of the hurt song, according to Guthrie, therefore needed to remain bleak and uncomplicated, as simpler music would better get the message across (Dolphin 48). Springsteen already took on this new musical and lyrical approach on *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, released in 1978, but Guthrie’s influence can especially be heard on *Nebraska*, a solo album by Springsteen, released in 1982, on which he uses no other instruments than merely his harmonica and acoustic guitar. As Garman states, “throughout the album [*Nebraska*], Springsteen’s haunting vocals, backed with minimal guitar arrangement and sharp harmonica blasts, narrate class-conscious tales of desperation” (“The Ghost of History” 204). After *Nebraska*, Springsteen released a number of albums that, with regard to musical style, went back to the rock and roll tradition, such as the well-known *Born in the U.S.A.* album. However, in 1995, Springsteen

returned to the Guthriesque "political and aesthetic traditions of the hurt song, [addressing] the social problems caused by racial and class oppression" on *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (Garman "The Ghost of History" 284). Like *Nebraska*, this album is a "strikingly uncommercial, largely acoustic album on which minimalist guitar, organ, and harmonica arrangements provide a background for an unsettling collection of narratives" (Garman "The Ghost of History" 284).

Along with Springsteen's increasing interest in the folk tradition and writing about the working class experience, his approach to the themes of the Open Road and the American Dream also changed. In this chapter, I aim to illustrate that on *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (1978), *Nebraska* (1982), and *The Ghost of Tom Joad* (1995), Springsteen explores the broken promises of the American Dream and the limitations of the Open Road through narratives of working class characters for whom spatial mobility and social mobility have proven impossible. Instead, he writes narratives of mobility to draw our attention to issues such as socio-economic inequality and the alienation and struggles of the American working class.

As portrayed in, for example, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, mobility's promise of freedom and improvement often does not hold true in American culture. In his book *Romance of the Road*, Ronald Primeau discusses the downside of mobility, arguing that mobility can also create an "idealized ... delusion of 'progress'" (83). According to Ronald Primeau, since the automobile came to symbolize a "magical space of liminal possibility" in American culture, for some there has also been tension and debate regarding whether the car is "liberating transportation or an insulating and confining compartment" (83). The modern car and road do not only provide "speed, excitement, and vitality, but also a sense of ... seclusion [and] refuge" (83). In other words, the car and the road, even though they largely symbolize the possibility of escape in American culture, can also be considered confining and alienating. In his article "Tear into the Guts: Steinbeck, Springsteen, and the Durability of Lost Souls on the Road," Brent Bellamy also argues that "the American culture of persistence creates a double gesture that maintains the road as a durable yet flawed American metaphor, advocating freedom while formally suggesting confinement" (225). Thus, even though the road generally represents freedom in American culture, the road also has its limitations. This approach to the road and mobility resonates with John Steinbeck's road narrative *The Grapes of Wrath*, which, according to Brent Bellamy, "represents the road's deceptive nature, and as an American novel with a sustained popularity, it indexes ongoing working-class struggles" (225). The "ideological sense of freedom" which

is usually symbolized by the road does “not hold true for the Joads or for many Oklahoma families forced to migrate” in *The Grapes of Wrath* (Bellamy 234). In this novel, mobility is not a romantic notion of opportunity, it is rather a necessity for survival. Additionally, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck also emphasizes the disadvantages of the car, illustrating that they are machines that can break down and leave you stranded; at one point, Steinbeck describes cars as “limping along 66 like wounded things, panting and struggling. Too hot, loose connections, loose bearings, rattling bodies” (Steinbeck 122). Even though the car is an essential aspect of the journey and destiny of the Joad family, as “without them, there would be no promise of survival and no West to reach ... Their offered mobility is what allows the Joads to hope for a future of plenty,” in the end, “the respite found in the automobile [turns out to be] false” for the Joad family, leading to violence and starvation instead of the happy ending they sought after (Bellamy 230, 225).

Like *The Grapes of Wrath*, Springsteen’s *Darkness on the Edge of Town* no longer represents mobility as a means to freedom and escape, but instead the album reveals the limitations of mobility as it fails to lead to improvement. The scenes on this album become much more dreary and pessimistic and the song-stories now imply that the characters are unlikely to go anywhere. Springsteen himself has stated the following about his fourth album: “The possibility of transcendence or any sort of personal redemption felt a lot harder to come by. ... I intentionally steered away from any hint of escapism and set my characters down in the middle of a community under siege” (*Songs* 68). Furthermore, Brent Bellamy argues that Springsteen explores total disillusionment in *Darkness on the Edge of Town* and that the album can be characterized as “the realization of a white, lower-class kid who discovers that the world is not his oyster” (235). Whereas the characters on *Born to Run* dreamed of an escape, *Darkness on the Edge of Town* rather describes the lives of a number of working class characters who were unable to escape or whose attempt to escape has failed, and who now feel essentially stuck in the working life.

On this album, the road and the car as symbols of mobility have persisted, but their meaning has changed. Whereas the road and the car first symbolized freedom and the possibility of escape, for the working-class characters on *Darkness on the Edge of Town* they now only hold false promises. For example, in “Something in the Night,” the road does not lead to salvation as the narrator describes how his attempt to escape has failed and his car was burned: “We tried to pick up the pieces, and get away without getting hurt / But they caught us at the state line, and burned our cars in one last fight.” Instead of a successful escape, the characters are left “running burned and blind, chasing something in the night.”

According to Bellamy, this song reveals the “harsh, beat-down truth” of the road. Instead of promising freedom and escape, the road and the car now imply a sense of melancholic purposelessness, as the narrator now drives around town rather aimlessly: “Well I’m riding down Kingsley, figuring I’ll get a drink / I turn up the radio loud so I don’t have to think.” According to Bellamy, the song “Something in the Night” is “essentially a song about emptiness [and] a man ... trapped by his dream of freedom” (236). Similarly, the song “The Promise” on *Darkness on the Edge of Town* also explores the broken promises of the road. “The Promise” is a reiteration of *Born to Run*’s “Thunder Road,” in which the narrator advocates freedom on the road, only “The Promise” tells us that the character’s attempt to escape has failed. The narrator describes how he “followed that dream through the southwestern tracks” and “drove [his] Challenger down Route 9, through the dead ends and all the bad scenes” hoping for a better destiny. Then, however, real life kicked in as the narrator needed money, and he had to sell his self-built Challenger. Without money and without a car, chasing the ‘dream’ on the road then becomes a “fight you can’t win, every day it just gets harder to live the dream you’re believing in.” Here, Springsteen seems to suggest that the possibility of escape is a privilege not granted to those of the working class, as this character simply cannot afford to stay on the road. Instead, the narrator ends up “far away from home, sleeping in the back seat of a borrowed car.” The narrator feels defeated, and he exclaims that “the promise was broken” as he “cashed in a few of [his] dreams.” As his attempt to escape failed, the narrator is left with a feeling of emptiness and despair; the narrator mentions that he has to “go on living” but his shattered dream “steals something from down your soul [and] something in your heart goes cold.” At the end of the song, “The Promise” literally refers back to “Thunder Road” a couple of times, stating that on “Thunder Road, [there’s] something dying down the highway tonight” and that on “Thunder Road,” the narrator “[took] it all and [threw] it all away.” In “The Promise,” the narrator followed his dream of freedom but ended up with nothing. As concluded by Bellamy, and as illustrated by these two songs, the characters on *Darkness on the Edge of Town* “have bused out frontier-bound only to find that they are now trapped ... They have traded in their angelic wings for wheels, and now the only mobility they are afforded is to drive aimlessly, searching for salvation in the middle of badlands and at the end of the deceitful road” (235). The characters on *Darkness* experience total disillusionment regarding their dreams of freedom and escape, and instead, they are left stranded.

Consequently, on *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, social mobility and achieving the American Dream are not a possibility for Springsteen's working class characters. Because spatial mobility did not lead to improvement or social mobility for Springsteen's working-class characters, they are now left stuck in their working class environment and feeling deceived by the promise of America. In "Badlands," for example, the narrator denotes that the American Dream is not attainable, when he mentions that you can "talk about a dream [and] try to make it real," but that you are then just "[spending] your life waiting for a moment that just doesn't come." Additionally, in "Adam Raised a Cain," the narrator says: "Well Daddy worked his whole life for nothing but the pain." In other words, the promise of working hard and achieving a better life proved untrue for the narrator's father. Furthermore, in "Something in the Night," the narrator also suggests that social mobility and economic improvement are impossible to achieve: "Well you're born with nothing, and better off that way / Soon as you've got something they send someone to try and take it away." In "The Promised Land," the working-class narrator is driving "on a rattlesnake speedway in the Utah desert" as he "head[s] back into town." The narrator is returning to town after he was "driving all night chasing some mirage." The word 'mirage' here implies that the narrator has realized that the American Dream is merely an illusion. Instead of a successful escape, he is now "working all day in [his] daddy's garage" There is a sense of irony here: the narrator works in a garage, fixing cars and thus providing others the chance to get away, when his own attempt to escape has failed and he remains stuck in the working-class life. He complains that he has "done [his] best to live the right way" as he "[gets] up every morning and [goes] to work each day." But even though he works hard, nothing really changes and it drives him crazy: "But your eyes go blind and your blood runs cold, sometimes I feel so weak I just want to explode, explode and tear this whole town apart, take a knife and cut this pain from my heart." He advises his audience to "blow away the dreams that tear you apart" and to "blow away the dreams that break your heart" as the American Dream has proven an illusion for the narrator of this song. Despite all of this, the song ends on a rather hopeful note, as the narrator will try one last time to escape: "I packed my bags and I'm heading straight into the storm." It will not be easy, but after everything, he still "[believes] in a promised land." Lastly, on *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, the song "Factory," emphasizes the dull repetitiveness of the working life, suggesting that change and improvement are not within reach for the working-class characters of *Darkness*. The narrator describes the daily routine of a working-class man in his town as follows: "Early in the morning, factory whistle blows / Man rises from bed and puts on his clothes / Man takes his lunch, walks out in the morning light / It's the working, the working,

just the working life.” Eventually, the never-changing working life can end up ruining someone emotionally, as “men walk through these gates with death in their eyes,” or even physically, as the “factory takes [your] hearing,” but there is nothing you can do about it, as the men working at the factory depend on that job for their income and, as such, the factory “gives [them] life.”

As a result of the broken promises of the Open Road and the American Dream, Springsteen’s working-class characters on *Darkness on the Edge of Town* feel alienated and placeless. In “Streets of Fire,” for example, the narrator expresses a sense of placelessness as he mentions that he is “wandering, a loser down the track.” He further articulates his alienation and sense of placelessness when he says: “I live now, only with strangers / I talk only to strangers / I walk with angels that have no place.” In “Badlands,” the narrator feels invisible as he mentions that he wants to “find one place that ain’t looking through [him].” In the title track of the album, the narrator mentions that he can be found in the “darkness on the edge of town,” or, in other words, at the edge of the community, feeling invisible and alienated. The narrator has been “dragged down” to a place where he is alone and cut off from society, and “where no one asks any questions, or looks too long in your face.” Stonerook also stresses the alienation of the narrator and observes that he is “out of sight but nearby enough if anybody cares to help him” (220).

On *Nebraska*, released in 1982, Bruce Springsteen continues his new trend of narrative writing, with stories of the American working class in the early 1980s, a time in which a new white-collar economy arose that largely left out the working class who continued to lose their jobs (Seymour 71). As Morris argues, on *Nebraska*, “Springsteen documented in a very detailed way the hardships that Reaganomics brought upon people on the lowest rung of the socioeconomic ladder – the working poor, illegal immigrants, single parents, and others” (12). In an interview from 1984, Springsteen explained that “*Nebraska* detailed the stories of desperate people searching for meaning in their lives but who found themselves abandoned by their community” (qtd. In Stonerook 221). Therefore, similar to the characters on the *Darkness on the Edge of Town* album, the characters of *Nebraska* belong to the socioeconomically marginalized group of American society. As Ryan Sheeler mentions in his article “The American Outlaw as Storyteller in Bruce Springsteen’s *Nebraska*,” this album shows “the other side of the myth of the American Dream, [which has] eluded them” (1). Springsteen drew part of his inspiration for this album from observing people around him, in society, in news, and in film. Additionally, for the name and song-stories of this album, Springsteen drew inspiration from lower-class man Charles Starkweather, who went on a

murder spree in Nebraska in the late 1950s and then fled to Wyoming with girlfriend Caril Fugate. According to Sheeler, Starkweather's deeds earned him the electric chair as well as "a spot in American folklore as a symbol of the young man down-on-his-luck who achieves notoriety" (3).

On *Nebraska*, Springsteen turns the American icon of an 'outlaw' into the storytellers of this album. The 'outlaw' is part of America's history and folklore, and According to Ryan Sheeler, the "cultural landscape in America from the past two hundred years is littered with tales of bandits, outlaws, thieves, [and] renegades" (1). Images of the American outlaw especially thrive in times of political and economic unrest; for example, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, around the time of the Civil War in the 1860s, tales of "gunfighters rose to prominence, as the battle between good and evil was set in small Western towns [with] saloons, card houses, railroads, country stores, and boarding houses" (2). Then, during the times of the Great Depression in the 1930s, when national economy was in great disarray, crime in America, such as bank robbery and bootlegging of illegal liquor, elevated in the 1920s and 1930s, spawning images of gangsters such as Al Capone and Bonnie and Clyde in the media and popular culture (Sheeler 2). "Desperate people are often the product of desperate times and upbringings," Sheeler argues, and they often seek "the American Dream of wealth, prosperity, and independence, only to find it has eluded them" (2). The American outlaw as a character is intriguing according to Sheeler as they pose the question whether "their circumstances are what caused them to be this way" (Sheeler 3).

Through tales of outlaws on *Nebraska*, Springsteen draws more attention to the dire socio-economic circumstances of unfortunate working-class characters for whom the American Dream is out of reach. According to Ryan Sheeler in his article on the American Outlaw as a storyteller on Springsteen's *Nebraska*, the characters of this album are the criminals, the downcast, the poor and vagrant who are living on the other side of the American Dream (1-2). In his book *Songs*, Springsteen explains that the album *Nebraska* contemplates what happens to people "when [they] become so thoroughly untethered as to feel no connections to community" (138-139). As a result, *Nebraska* is comprised of "tales of murder, robbery, [and] economic unrest" and "outlaws and outcasts [are turned] into storytellers" (Sheeler 1). For example, in the song "Johnny 99," we meet a man who is laid off from his job and ends up shooting a store clerk. The character, named Ralph, worked at an "auto plant in Mahwah" that was shut down, so Ralph "went out looking for a job but he couldn't find none." Out of despair, he got "drunk from mixing Tanqueray

and wine, got a gun, [and] shot a night clerk.” The city then supplied him a public defender but this makes no difference, as the judge is “Mean John Brown.” This judge gives him a sentence of 99 years in prison, hence the character’s nickname “Johnny 99.” Then, Ralph pleads for some compassion on the judge’s part because he feels failed by the system: “Now judge, I got debts no honest man could pay, the bank was holding my mortgage, they’ve taken my house away.” He then shows some remorse, but continues to plea that his action was a result of desperation: “Now I ain’t saying that makes me an innocent man, but it was more and all this that put that gun in my hand.” This song emphasizes the character’s despair, and Sheeler argues that, in this song, Springsteen makes a plea “for the common man who just so happened to suffer through an unfortunate set of circumstances, caused in part by his decision-making” (7). This song reveals the problem of working-class unemployment and implies that there is no sufficient system for them to fall back upon. Instead of being helped, they are judged. As Bryan Garman observes, the characters in these song-stories “narrate ... experiences not in terms of individual success or failure, but as products of complex social and historical forces” (*A Race of Singers* 2). It is not just the story of “another bad man gone wrong,” but it is a story of a man whose social and economic conditions have shaped his life and which have driven him to despair (Garman, “The Ghost of History” 282).

A similar narrative on *Nebraska* is “Highway Patrolman.” The narrator of the song, a man named Joe Roberts, is “a sergeant out of Perrinville” and has a brother named Frankie who “ain’t no good.” Then Joe Roberts gets a call and learns that Frankie beat up someone in a local bar: “Well the night was like any other, I got a call about a quarter to nine / There was trouble in a roadhouse out on the Michigan line / There was a kid lying on the floor, looking bad, bleeding hard from his head / There was a girl crying at a table, and it was Frank, they said.” Frankie flees but is chased by his brother, the narrator, who says: “I went out and I jumped in my car and I hit the lights / Well I must have done one hundred and ten through Michigan county that night.” The narrator follows his brother all the way to the Canadian border, where he “pull[s] over the side of the highway and [watches his brother’s] taillights disappear.” He lets his brother escape, because, he says, “when it’s your brother, sometimes you look the other way.” Then, the narrator mentions that Frankie “went in the army back in 1965,” explaining that his brother was drafted in the Vietnam War, whereas Joe Roberts “settled down ... took Maria for [his] wife” and became a highway patrolman. Here, Springsteen seems to suggest that Joe Roberts, who did not go to war, was

lucky enough to lead a normal life whereas Frankie's fate was less fortunate as he was sent to Vietnam and came back as a traumatized and violent man. This song, describing a car chase between a police officer and his unlawful brother, uses a narrative of mobility to reveal an underlying critique of the Vietnam War: a country sending unfortunate, and probably unwilling, working-class men to war, who end up traumatized and without the opportunity of a better life upon return. Springsteen again seems to suggest that the character's social circumstances have driven him to despair and a life of crime.

In "Mansion on the Hill" from *Nebraska*, 'place' is used as a theme to indicate class relationships and to draw attention to the social marginalization of the working class. In this song, the narrator describes a luxurious mansion literally and symbolically towering over the working-class town: "There's a place out on the edge of town, sir / Rising above the factories and the fields / Now ever since I was a child, I can remember that mansion on the hill." The mansion is also literally separated from the rest of the town as it is surrounded by "gates of hardened steel / Steel gates that completely surround, sir, the mansion on the hill." The cold, hard steel represents the "lovelessness of the mansion, and more importantly, emphasizes the workers' place in their community," according to Bryan Garman ("The Ghost of History" 227). The mansion represents a higher socio-economic class, unattainable for the working-class characters. Because of the steel gates, the workers are disconnected from the higher-class family living in the mansion and, living and working at the bottom of the hill, they are also literally positioned in a lower place, symbolizing the alienation of the working class from higher classes. The narrator tells us that they also sometimes literally look up to the mansion: "At night my daddy would take me and we'd ride through the streets of a town so silent and still / Park on a back road along the highway side / Look up at that mansion on the hill." Additionally, the narrator mentions that he and his sister would "hide out in the tall corn fields, sit and listen to the mansion on the hill," where "in the summer all the lights would shine, there'd be music playing [and] people laughing all the time." According to Frank Fury, this is a rather Gatsby-esque description of the mansion which adds to its sense of exclusiveness (87). The contrast between the unexciting working town, described as silent and still, and the liveliness of the mansion, where music is played and people laugh, symbolizes the desolation of our working-class characters. Bryan Garman observes that the mansion on the hill is where "the 'haves' go to put some distance between themselves and the 'have nots'" ("The Ghost of History" 227). Garman concludes that in this song, Springsteen "relies on geography to demarcate class relationships" (Garman "The Ghost of History" 227).

In “Used Car” from the album *Nebraska*, the car is used as a symbol of working-class poverty. The narrator in this song is a young boy from a working-class family who are in the process of purchasing a new car. However, his parents cannot afford the car they want to buy, and the salesman is “telling [them] all about the break he’d give [them] if he could, but he just can’t.” His father ends up buying a cheap, used car, which is actually considered “brand new” to the poor family. The narrator even feels somewhat ashamed that his family cannot afford a new car, and he describes that the neighbors “come from near and far” to watch as the family “pull[s] up in [their] brand new used car.” At that moment, the narrator, embarrassed of how the car reveals his family’s economic standing, wishes that his father would “just hit the gas” and drive away. As stated by Sheeler, the narrator’s shame in “Used Cars” illustrates that “economic status ... can make a person feel like an outsider” (5). Additionally, “Used Car” refutes the idea that hard work can get you out of poverty; the narrator states that his dad “sweats the same job from morning to morn” and yet they cannot afford an actual new car. Consequently, the narrator promises himself that, if he ever has the money, he will buy a new car instead of a used car, representing his new socio-economic status: “Now mister the day the lottery I win, I ain’t ever gonna ride in no used car again.” Whereas Springsteen’s early albums “emphasized the liberating potential of the car,” this song is a good example of how Springsteen’s approach to the theme of the car has changed (Fury 85). In this song, the car rather represents “metaphorical imprisonment” in a working-class environment instead of possible liberation from it (Fury 85).

In 1995, on *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, Springsteen continues to write about the disillusionment of mobility as his working-class characters are left stranded under poor circumstances, but this album includes a new focus on immigration and the Mexican border (Morris 13). In an interview with the “New York Times Magazine” in 1996, Springsteen explained that “the struggling blue-collar workers he wrote about in *Darkness on the Edge of Town* ... and the edgy alienated types who populate *Nebraska* ... confront the same issues as the cast of immigrants and Californians in *The Ghost of Tom Joad*” (qtd. in Morris 13). On this album, *The Grapes of Wrath* character Tom Joad is returned to narrative by Springsteen. According to Bellamy, on this album “the road has been completely dismantled as a symbol of pure freedom and instead represents formal confinement, leaving the working-class characters ... in a state of lack” (225). Moreover, he argues that “where *Darkness on the Edge of Town* struggles with the road, *The Ghost of Tom Joad* is overcome by it” (Bellamy 238). In the title track “The Ghost of Tom Joad,” Springsteen paints a picture of a homeless community, stranded on their way to the “promised land,” much like the Joad family in

Steinbeck's novel. In this song, the narrator carefully describes the poor circumstances in which he ended up. He observes "men walking along the railroad tracks" and melancholically asserts that they are "going someplace [where] there's no going back." He then describes how they are all eating "hot soup on a campfire under the bridge," and how the "shelter line [is] stretching around the corner." The narrator is stranded someplace where "families [are] sleeping in their cars in the southwest" and where they are being watched by "highway patrol choppers [who are] coming up over the ridge." At the end of the first verse, the narrator sums up that they have "no home, no job, no peace, no rest." He then sarcastically "welcomes" his audience "to the new world order." By using this term, he seems to critique the Bush administration in the early 1990s, who regularly used this term in the post-Cold War era, and imply that they were overlooking their own poor and underprivileged citizens in their focus on global governance and economics as the song paints a picture of a poor, homeless community. Furthermore, in "The Ghost of Tom Joad," cars are no longer machines that function to find freedom, to reach better destinations, and to chase dreams along the highway; they have become the homes of those who are stranded along the railroad tracks and under the bridge. The mobility of the highway patrolmen's choppers is in stark contrast with the immobile community, stranded in the shelter line. In all, this verse reveals theme of severe inequality. Then, the narrator explains their living conditions, describing how they live "in a cardboard box underneath the underpass ... Sleeping on a pillow of solid rock / Bathing in the city aqueduct." The narrator started off with "a one-way ticket to the promised land" but ended up with a "hole in [his] belly and a gun in [his] hand." He did not make it to the "promised land," and now instead has to live under dire, even violent, circumstances. He no longer believes that the highway leads to the promised land, as he continually watches other journeys come to a terrifying end too. He concludes the song by stating that "the highway is alive tonight, but nobody's kidding nobody about where it goes." The illusion of the highway leading to a better destination is shattered, and the American Dream has proven a lie for them. Now, he is just "sitting down here in the campfire light, with the ghost of old Tom Joad." In this narrative, Springsteen evokes Steinbeck's character of Tom Joad, who is widely known as a working-class archetype from the American road narrative *The Grapes of Wrath*. In doing so, Springsteen suggests that his characters belong to the same social class as Tom Joad did and that, like Steinbeck's novel, the song-stories on this album function as social commentary. Additionally, he speaks specifically of the *ghost* of Tom Joad, implying that the problems of the working class addressed by Steinbeck in 1939 were still haunting the United States in 1995, when the album was released. In "The Ghost of Tom Joad," Springsteen draws

the attention to working-class poverty and social inequality and illustrates that the myths of the American Dream and the Open Road, which he wrote so optimistically about on his early albums, are not within reach for everyone. As Bellamy concludes, in this song, “Springsteen’s imagery brutally cuts away the old idealism – the dream of freedom” and the characters are “left unfulfilled by the dream of freedom ... [and they are] left running scared, remnants of the road, with no place to go” (240).

Furthermore, in *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, Springsteen uses the themes of mobility and place to draw attention to the problems faced by undocumented Mexican immigrants crossing the Mexican border to California in hopes of living a better life. Instead of finding a well-paying job and living the American Dream as expected, Springsteen’s Mexican characters end up in the drug circuit. In his book *Songs*, Springsteen explains that, for this album, he drew inspiration from the “frequent news reports on border and immigration issues that he’d seen on television and read in the Los Angeles Times while living in California in the late 80s and 90s” (qtd. in Morris 14). Since Springsteen is considered a national cultural icon who had until then mainly been writing narratives of the American working-class, his turn toward narratives of Mexican immigrants was a new direction for Springsteen. These songs, as Lifshy argues, written exclusively in English, “are not principally for export. He represents, instead, the nation to itself. ... [He mediates] Latin America to the working-class individuals who form his core audience” and attempts to create an understanding of the hardships the Mexican immigrants face, such as problems finding a well-paying job and making ends meet (236). According to Gavin Cologne-Brooks, this album is a result of Springsteen’s “commitment to the plights of other beleaguered groups (such as undocumented border crossers [...]) that grows from Springsteen’s earlier empathies for blue-collar Northeasteners” (qtd. in Lifshy 237). Similar to Springsteen’s early, romantic stories of working class kids wanting to ‘get out’ and hit the road, *The Ghost of Tom Joad* contains one rather hopeful and romantic song describing an imminent crossing of the Mexican-American border. On “Across the Border,” the Mexican narrator wants to leave behind his “pain and sadness,” and expects to find happiness in the United States, where, according to the narrator, “pain and memory [will] be stilled,” and where “love and fortune will be [theirs].” In this song, the narrator is rather hopeful regarding the journey across the border paints a rather poetic picture of the supposedly beautiful destination: “[Where] sweet blossoms fill the air, [and] pastures of gold and green, roll down into cool clear waters.”. Yet, with the exception of “Across the Border,” *The Ghost of Tom Joad* mainly draws attention to Mexican immigrants failing to find a job and live a better life when they finally reach the

United States. “Sinaloa Cowboys,” for example, is a tragic song about two Mexican brothers who travel to California and unfortunately end up in illegal drug trade, and where one of the brothers dies. The characters, called Miguel and Louis, “came north ... to California three years ago” and “found work together in the fields of the San Joaquin ... [working] side by side in the orchards / From morning till the day was through / Doing the work the hueros wouldn’t do.” Since the work is hard and the wage is low, Miguel and Louis eventually end up in illegal drug trade in Sinaloa, where “some men ... were looking for some hands [...] cooking methamphetamine.” The narrator suggests then that the wages in the orchard are very low, and that the drug trade pays very well: “You could spend a year in the orchards / Or make half as much in one ten-hour shift / Working for the men from Sinaloa.” However, it is also very dangerous work, and one night the shack exploded as “Miguel stood watch outside.” He then went inside to save his brother and “carried Louis’ body over his shoulder down a swale / To the Creekside and there in the tall grass Louis Rosales died.” Whereas the narrator of “Across the Border” expected to find happiness and fortune, “Sinaloa Cowboys” portrays the tragic reality of Springsteen’s Mexican immigrant characters.

Whereas Springsteen’s early song-stories mainly took place in the American East, many of the characters on *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, *Nebraska*, and *The Ghost of Tom Joad* now find themselves in the American West, which fails to live up to its expectation of the “promised land” and is instead portrayed as a violent and relentless place. The American West is most often the destination in American road narratives; as Primeau observes, “while the East coast is notable for its urban sprawl and monuments of an Anglo-American heritage, travel itself is almost synonymous with [westward movement], to the region that still offers the most spaciousness and for many is still the promised land” (62). Brian Ireland argues that in the road narrative genre “westward pilgrimage is often associated ... with a physical and spiritual movement from the constricted ‘Old World’ culture of the East to the wide-open spaces and freedom of a seemingly unclosed western frontier” (475). In many road narratives, such as in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the West has therefore been portrayed as a “symbol of new hope” and the characters of road novels often travel westward expecting to find “the American Dream” beyond the frontier (Primeau 63). However, Ireland observes that many protagonists also end up disappointed (482). For example, in Kerouac’s *On the Road*, the characters seek their future in the West but find that once they get there, it is the “end of the road ... and nowhere to go but back” (qtd. In Ireland 482). For Kerouac’s characters, the West cannot fulfill its promises, and they are “forced to ... retrace [their] steps back across the

‘groaning awful continent’” (Ireland 482). Moreover, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the West “holds the same promise as the frontier had done for previous generations, but, unlike the frontier in a previous iteration of American consciousness, the West does not live up to the hopes of the Joads and other Oklahoman families” (Bellamy 227). In Steinbeck’s novel, the West is first depicted as a land of potential, and of hopes and dreams, in which the “freedom of opportunity is opened,” but instead the West ends up only “offering exploitative work and an alienated way of life” (Bellamy 228). Here, the West represents a place where the American Dream is expected to be found, but also where this same dream is shattered. As Springsteen once remarked himself, he also used to consider the American West a “place of rebirth .. where people go to try and get things right” (qtd. in Morris 13). However, on his later albums and on *The Ghost of Tom Joad* particularly, Springsteen portrays the “unforgiving realities of today’s American West, where the lure of prosperity has put a lot of people on a fast track to false promises” instead (Morris 14). For example, in “The New Timer” on *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, the narrator, originally from the East, is confronted with the false promises and relentlessness of California. The narrator tells us that he “left [his] family in Pennsylvania” and “hit the road,” driving from New Mexico to Colorado [and] California to the sea.” He met a guy named “Frank in east Texas” who helps him get a job in Firebaugh, California. However, the narrator is soon disillusioned with the promises of the West as the work is hard and the workers are treated badly: “I hoed sugar beets outside of Firebaugh / I picked the peaches from the Marysville tree / They bunked us in a barn just like animals / Me and a hundred others, just like me.” The narrator tells us that he lost touch with Frank, and that eventually “they found him shot dead outside [Stockton, California] / His body lying on a muddy hill / Nothing taken, nothing stolen / Somebody killed him just to kill.” The West, with its failed promises of having a good job and achieving prosperity, is also portrayed here as a violent and cruel place, where you can get killed for no reason. Then, the narrator imagines Frank’s parents sitting at the kitchen table, wondering where their son is, as he lies awake “outside the Sacramento Yard ... [staring] out into the black night.” The song ends with the following passage: “My Jesus, your gracious love and mercy / Tonight, I’m sorry, could not fill my heart / Like one good rifle / And the name of who I ought to kill.” This passage suggests that the narrator has become violent and unforgiving, wanting to kill whoever killed his friend Frank. According to Brian Ireland, portrayals of the West as violent are not uncommon, as the “road genre contains frequent use of myths and symbols of the American West or the frontier, such as references to cowboys, ... pioneers, gunslingers, [and] shoot-outs” (475). Writing the West as a violent place therefore, in a way, continues a ...

traditional imagery from the history books (Ireland 475). Springsteen, then, uses such traditional imagery of the West in order to back up his claims of the West as an unforgiving place, where promises are broken and dreams are shattered.

Some song-stories on Springsteen's later albums take place in the American Midwest, which Springsteen presents as empty and desolate, reflecting the alienation and despair of Springsteen's working-class characters. The Midwest, according to Ronald Primeau in *Romance of the Road*, is also "a crucial region in American road narratives - ... with the plains and prairies serving as places for taking stock along a dull and flat landscape that frees the mind from excessive goal orientation" (64). For Kerouac, for example, the area is "wild and lyrical" and admired by *On the Road's* character Dean Moriarty for its fast roads (qtd. In Primeau 64). The Midwestern landscape, according to Primeau, is often considered "extremely [monotonous and boring] as you drive hour after hour, getting nowhere, wondering how long this is going to last without a turn in the road, without a change in the land going on and on to the horizon" (65). In addition to its monotony, the Midwestern landscape is also characterized by its "flatness and great emptiness" (Primeau 65). This emptiness of the Midwestern land also reflects a sense of desolation; as Primeau argues, the "Midwestern prairie gives off the scent and feel of American loneliness" (65). Given that most of Springsteen's song-stories on *Nebraska* concern rather unfortunate working-class characters who feel marginalized within their community, the name of the album can be considered to reflect the characters' loneliness, desperation, and alienation. Moreover, the *Nebraska* album cover shows a rather gloomy black and white picture taken from the front seat of a car showing only a long, deserted, muddy road. The album title in combination with this image implies a "spiritual wasteland," desolated and empty, "reflecting the characters' state of mind" (Fury 82).

Lastly, Springsteen's lyrical universe is a patriarchal one: it is the working-class men who headed out to chase the American Dream on the road on Springsteen's early albums, and now it is working-class men who failed in doing so and are now facing the consequences, working hard and struggling to make ends meet. For example, in "Factory," "man rises from bed and puts on his clothes" and "man takes his lunch, walks out in the morning light." In "The Ghost of Tom Joad" it is "men" who are "walking along the railroad tracks" in search of a better life in California. In Springsteen's universe, the American Dream is a dream for men. As stated by Pamela Moss in her article "Where is the Promised Land," in Springsteen's universe "gender relations within the working class are patriarchal. Women are relegated subordinate roles. Men are active individually in the working class; women remain attached to

men either as a refuge, or as a sexual object instrumental in his quest” (177). For example, in “Atlantic City,” the narrator mentions that he got a job, but that he had “debts that no honest man can pay.” In other words, debts are to be paid off by the men in the family. The narrator then buys “two tickets on that Coast City bus” for himself and his female partner, and they head off to Atlantic City so the narrator can try his luck there. The narrator repeatedly tells his female partner: “put your make up on, and fix your hair up pretty, and meet me tonight in Atlantic City.” Here, the female is attached to the man in his quest to pay off his debts by gambling, but she has no agency whatsoever. Her only role is to join him on his trip and to be pretty.

In conclusion, on *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, *Nebraska*, and *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, Springsteen uses the themes of mobility and place to reveal social injustice faced by his working-class and immigrant characters. Instead of writing song-stories that can be considered road narratives, celebrating the road and the car as American symbols of possibility and freedom as he used to do before, Springsteen now turns the themes of mobility and place into metaphors of class relationships and socio-economic inequality as his song-stories become a form of social commentary, much like John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. After Springsteen’s early song-stories, which focused largely on advocating escapism, these three albums reveal the eventual stagnation of his working-class characters. Springsteen himself remarked in an interview that he gave in 1988: “I realized that after I’d put all those people in all those cars [on *Born to Run*], I was going to have to figure out some place for them to go” (qtd. in Cologne-Brooks 39). On these three albums, Springsteen continues to write stories of working-class protagonists but concludes that the American Dream and the opportunities of the Open Road are not for everyone. Mobility’s promises of freedom and a better life found elsewhere turn out to be false for these characters, and instead they are faced with the hardships of socio-economic inequality; they are poor, jobless, desperate, and left with little hope of improvement. Spatial mobility has not led them to a better place, and it did not result in social mobility. Escape no longer seems an option. The car and the road remain significant themes on these albums, but the metaphor changes: instead of freedom, they now also signify the characters’ confinement and stagnation. Moreover, cars and places have come to symbolize class relationships in these song-stories and function to reveal social inequality. As Springsteen’s song-stories increasingly start to function as social commentary, he also no longer limits his characters to American blue-collar workers. On *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, he includes narratives of another community in search of the American Dream: Mexican

immigrants, presumably undocumented, crossing the border toward the promised land. However, similar to the fate of our American working-class protagonists, the American Dream is out of reach for this new cast of characters as well. Lastly, on most of these songs, the setting of Springsteen's song-stories has changed from his home state New Jersey to Midwestern and Western states. Whereas on the early albums, the small towns in the East symbolized confinement and the West was supposed to signify the promised land, on these three albums, it turns out that wherever the promised land may be, it is not in the Midwest or West either.

## Conclusion

I began this thesis asking the question of what the themes 'mobility' and 'place' signify in Springsteen's song-stories and how they contribute to Springsteen's perspective on American culture and national mythology. First, I took a closer look at the meaning of these two concepts as explained in the academic field of Cultural Studies. Tim Cresswell, a renowned cultural geographer, argues that when one considers 'mobility' and 'place,' one should look at the social and cultural circumstances of the movement or location in question. So, what is the intention behind a certain form of mobility? What is the cultural significance of a certain place? Both of these concepts are significant in American culture and mythology as well. For example, one could consider the phenomenon of the 'road trip' in American culture.

Countless movies have been made and many stories have been written in which the American road trip is a central theme. The idea that American road travel provides endless possibilities is central to the American mythology of the Open Road, symbolizing America's promise of freedom. Many American authors have written about the mythical American road, including Walt Whitman, John Steinbeck, and Jack Kerouac, in "Song of the Open Road," *The Grapes of Wrath*, and *On The Road* respectively, and stories centering around the myth of the American road have come to form their own genre of the American road narrative. In these stories, American characters – usually white, working-class men, take to the road in hopes of a better life elsewhere. The concept of 'mobility' is thus inherently connected to American mythology and culture.

Additionally, the concept of 'place' is also significant in American mythology and culture. For example, in the frontier myth, the American West is perceived as 'the promised land'. In many road movies and novels, including for the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the destination of the road trip is the American West, where many believe they will finally get to live the American Dream. The idea of 'place attachment' is also significant in American culture, as those who are 'too mobile' are considered tramps and vagabonds who threaten the stability of a community grounded in a certain place. Those who are constantly on the move and are not attached to a single place are thus considered rebellious. This idea has been put to narrative in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, a product of counterculture, in which Sal and Dean Moriarty, who are constantly on the move, have become archetypal rebellious characters.

Then, I analyzed how Springsteen portrayed the themes of mobility and place in the lyrics of six of his albums (*Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.*, *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle*, *Born to Run*, *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, *Nebraska*, and *The Ghost of Tom Joad*) and how they resonate with American mythology and culture. Both the concepts of ‘mobility’ and ‘place’ often return in the song-stories of Bruce Springsteen. Springsteen often refers to places in his lyrics, both specific American locations as well as more universal places. At first sight, Springsteen's song-stories may therefore simply seem slightly patriotic, especially since he is often considered to be a national cultural icon. However, Springsteen uses place to paint the setting of his song-stories carefully, and the places he writes about all seem to signify a deeper meaning. In most of Springsteen's early song-stories, the small town in New Jersey means restriction, the American city means chaos, and the American West means opportunity. The road and the car as places provide the possibility of escape and freedom. On his later albums, however, place also sometimes signifies a character's literal place in society in Springsteen's lyrics. When the characters are abandoned to the "edge of town," looking up to a luxurious "mansion on the hill," place as a theme is used to emphasize the feelings of alienation and inferiority of Springsteen's working-class characters.

The concept of mobility also often returns in Springsteen's lyrics. In the lyrical universe of Springsteen's early albums, mobility means the possibility of a better life someplace else, but it also sometimes means flight. Mobility in Springsteen's lyrics on *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.*, *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle*, and *Born to Run* is inherently tied to the belief that if it is not good where you currently are, it must be better somewhere else. The theme of mobility is mostly manifested through the symbolic use of the road and the car in Springsteen's lyrics. Springsteen's young and rebellious characters take to the road in hopes of a successful escape from the restrictions of their community, and the car and the road are portrayed as symbols of freedom. This resonates with the American mythology of the Open Road, and Springsteen's celebration of the road and the car in his early song-stories are similar to the ways in which the road and the car are celebrated in Kerouac's *On the Road* and Whitman's "Song of the Open Road." However, as Brent Bellamy has concluded, for Springsteen, "the road is a mixed metaphor" (235). On Springsteen's later albums, the road as a space of opportunity no longer exists, and becomes a place of broken promises and confinement instead. On *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, *Nebraska*, and *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, some working-class characters see their cars go up in flames, or have to sell their car when they are in need of money, or the road has taken them all the way West but the characters still end up living in their car under the bridge; as such, they

lose the possibility of mobility and their immobility symbolizes the little hope our working-class characters have of improvement. Through mobility, or rather their immobility, Springsteen illustrates issues of socio-economic inequality and working-class poverty in the United States. For some characters, the car has become a place to sleep in instead of a promise of freedom.

The American Dream, chased by the young characters on Springsteen's early albums, proves to be out of reach for the grown-up, working-class characters of Springsteen's later albums. They have chased the "promised land" expecting to achieve the dream, only to find that the dream is out of reach. No matter how hard Springsteen's characters work, in garages, on farms, or in factories, for none of Springsteen's characters has hard work led to improvement. As Morris concludes, on Springsteen's later albums, he "recognizes that opportunities depend very much on who you are, which to a large degree is determined by where you are from" (13). His working-class characters, living in small town communities, are left hopeless.

Whereas the characters of Springsteen's first three albums yearned for individual freedom, which they believed could be found on the road, Springsteen's later albums discussed in this thesis illustrate the consequence of these quests. As he himself stated in an interview in 1988, "when individual freedom [is not] connected to some sort of community or friends or the world outside ends up feeling pretty meaningless" (qtd. In Cologne-Brooks 39). In other words, the emphasis on individual freedom as the ultimate goal is replaced by an awareness of the significance of community. Springsteen's later albums tell us the stories of those who feel alienated from community due to their social class, and as such attempt to create an understanding of the less fortunate Americans for whom the American Dream remains out of reach.

In conclusion, Springsteen's young working-class kids, still "growing up," firmly believed that they were "born to run" as they traveled the "thunder road" on their way out of Asbury Park, New Jersey. They make a small stop for a "New York City Serenade," but then quickly continue their journey through the "badlands" and "Nebraska" toward "the promised land." They find out, however, that there are "streets on fire" and that there is a "darkness on the edge of town." They spend some time "racing in the street" and mindlessly chasing "something in the night," but end up working in a "factory," just like their parents, and driving "used cars" instead of impressive hot rods. And finally, at the end of the road, they find "the ghost of Tom Joad" waiting for them, who concludes that unfortunately little has changed for

America's working-class heroes on the road since Steinbeck first wrote about Tom Joad's struggles in 1939.

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