

# Defined by Distance: The Road Trip and Queer Love in *Alice Isn't Dead*

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## Abstract

From a feminist media studies and cultural studies perspective, the contribution explores the fascinating, yet overlooked podcast series *Alice Isn't Dead* (2016-8). The podcast thematically centers around the complex relationship of culture and distance and develops different understandings of culture, as well as the experience of distance in a geographical, socio-economic (class mobility), or interpersonal-romantic sense. Tracing these conceptions and their attempts to define a collective US-American identity *differently*, the contribution focuses on the podcast's narration in the form of radio monologues by its protagonist, the exceptional trucker character Keisha, its take on the road trip and (female) mobility, as well as its representation of a queer love story. With an eye for the intersectional effects of gender, race, and sexual orientation, these readings mobilize a variety of cultural artifacts to explore the particular affordances of serialized fictional podcast storytelling. Of particular interest to the contribution are the intertextual echoes of tropes and themes of the road trip narrative and the road movie, as well as the podcast's ending as a turn toward homonormativity that is inconsistent with the queer temporalities and the capitalist critique developed by the podcast during its three seasons.

“Bitter cold and thin air. It hurts a little to breathe, and every time I do, the breath comes out visible. It's offseason, I think. Or maybe not many people come to this [northern] part of the Canyon. A great acreage of sheer nothing, a vast quantity of air. If we are a country made up more of distance than culture, then no wonder this is our most defining sight. We come to see the beating heart at the center of America, and it is a hole in the Earth. And then we take a picture of it, so that we can own a little bit of that distance.” (“North Rim, Arizona”)

## Introduction

1 After the mysterious disappearance of her wife, Alice, the initially unnamed protagonist Keisha of the fictional horror podcast *Alice Isn't Dead* (2016-8, short: *AID*) takes a job as a truck driver to search for her. During an extensive road trip across the US and its quintessential cultural spaces (gas stations, parking lots, motels, or factories rather than touristic sites), Keisha encounters surreal spaces, ghostly presences, and dangerous monsters, which help her understand the ‘weirdness’ of the American experience in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as well as her need for and love of her wife. She relates her experiences and thoughts through the truck's CB radio broadcasting system, addressing them to Alice. In this bonus episode released in-between the first and second season,

Keisha again turns to her truck's CB radio to describe to Alice her experience of visiting one of the US's most iconic sights, the Grand Canyon.

2 The Grand Canyon, the Niagara Falls, Northern California's redwoods, or Oregon's Crater Lake, etc., are "awe-inspiring manifestations of nature in America," Klaus Benesch writes, which "were often used as a foil for projecting utopian visions and idealizations of the nation's exceptional place among the nations of the world" (18). Less taken with the spectacular sight of the canyon, Keisha is instead fascinated by exactly this, its cultural function for national identity-building: this 'heart' of the US is nothing more than a 'hole in the earth,' a magnificent nothingness onto whose expansive emptiness visitors can project their own visions, identities, desires.

3 The podcast borrows heavily from the road movie, as this article will explore, yet as auditory media offers listeners a self-aware spin on the tropes of the cinematic genre. For example, Keisha's contemplative visit at a freezing Grand Canyon evokes different sentiments than the finale of one of the most memorable road movies set at the same location, *Thelma & Louise* (1991). In the last minutes of the film, Thelma and Louise refuse to surrender to the armada of police that corners them at the Grand Canyon and spectacularly commit suicide by driving their convertible over the cliff. Rather than such a grand declaration of female rebellion, Keisha's contemplative experience recalls French feminist philosopher Simone De Beauvoir's travel to the Grand Canyon in the 1950s. De Beauvoir's travel journal highlights her anticipation before visiting the natural sight, how its beauty overwhelms but remains curiously inaccessible to her: "I'd like something to happen. I look – that's all – and nothing happens. It's the same story every time, [...] things are here, and I am here, and we come face to face. But in the end, I'm always the one who gets up and goes away" (179).

4 Just like the US-American tourists that Keisha speaks of – and that she counts herself among ("we"), this passage of De Beauvoir's projects the desire to overcome the Grand Canyon's daunting expansiveness, either by hoping for "something to happen" or by photographing it 'to own its distance.' Both behaviors evoke 'culture' in the widest sense as a reaction to an overwhelming experience of distance. Aside from this bonus episode, at least four other episodes of *AID* address Keisha's understanding that the US is "a country defined as much by distance as by culture" (1.8; 1.10; 3.4; 3.6). Using this comment as a guiding idea, this article explores the relationship between US-American culture (such as a podcast) and distance. I argue that through two different conceptions of culture the podcast develops its own take on how to counter the challenge of distance: first, the regionally specific, quirky, and unexpected 'good culture' of weird

roadside attractions (and indie podcast series?) accepts and endorses distance, while, ‘bad’ capitalist, generic franchise consumer culture seeks to overwrite distance with disastrous effects. The article utilizes the notion of distance both in the implied geographical as well as an emotional, romantic sense for a cultural studies and gender studies inquiry in the podcast’s narrative and communicative forms, its depiction of the road trip and automobile travel, as well as queer love and domesticity.

### **Podcast Communications and Unlikely Protagonists: On Loosing, Finding, and Speaking to Alice**

5 Podcasts are uniquely connected to the mobility of their listeners: frequently, listeners of *AID* mention on its Facebook page or the hashtag #Aliceisntdead that they catch up on episodes during their commute.<sup>1</sup> During each season, episodes were released weekly – allowing for ‘gaps’ between episodes and seasons that encourage listeners to speculate and respond in the kind of recursive feedback-loop typical of serial storytelling (see contributions to Kelleter; Sulimma, *Gender and Seriality*). Journalistic and academic discussions of *AID* have connected the show with the “booming market” for serialized podcasts in general (Barone), fictional horror podcasts specifically (Hancock 31), and queer representations in podcasts (Bainbridge 180-2; Capewell).

6 The podcast series is written by Joseph Fink known from the successful comedy-horror podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012-). Framed by prefaced by introductions and credits spoken by author figure Fink, the major ‘voice’ of *AID* is that of Jasika Nicole Pruitt who voices protagonist-narrator Keisha.<sup>2</sup> In the second season, Pruitt’s Keisha is joined by an antagonistic character without a name who hunts her (spoken by Roberta Colindrez), and in the third season by Alice herself (spoken by Erica Livingston).<sup>3</sup> Aside from these voice actors, *AID*’s accompanying eerie and complex soundscape is created by composer Disparition/Joe Bernstein.

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<sup>1</sup> While “post-*Serial* fictions are built for less taxing mobility,” Hancock and McMurty find that there is also a rise in non-commuting related “domestic and shared listening” (90), making any speculation on the listening practices of *AID*’s audience difficult.

<sup>2</sup> Among the paratextual accompaniments spoken by Fink are the surreal and themselves serialized sequences at the end of each episode. In the different seasons, Fink reads variations of the jokes “Why did the chicken cross the road?” (season one), and “Knock-Knock/Who’s there?” (season two), as well as quotes from George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871/2; season three). The metatextual and serialized pleasure that these puny endings offer listeners would warrant an entire article itself, so for now, it suffices to say that these endings in complex ways correspond to the episodes they succeed.

<sup>3</sup> While Alice also uses the truck’s CB radio, the podcast does not give any fictional justification for why listeners can hear the ‘hunter’s voice.

7 Even though *AID* shares a broadcasting-inspired narration and spooky atmosphere with its podcast sibling, *Night Vale* has a more humorous tone, is mostly episodic, and set in one fictional South-Western desert community. Whereas *AID*'s tone is more 'serious,' its story is serialized, and set across the United States. During her travels Keisha visits 28 of the 50 States of the US; and it comes as little surprise that a map figures prominently among the podcast's merchandise (see fig. 1). Often her radio monologues check in from the borders of states, demonstrating the road travel narrative's fascination for geographical and social borders (Laderman 27).

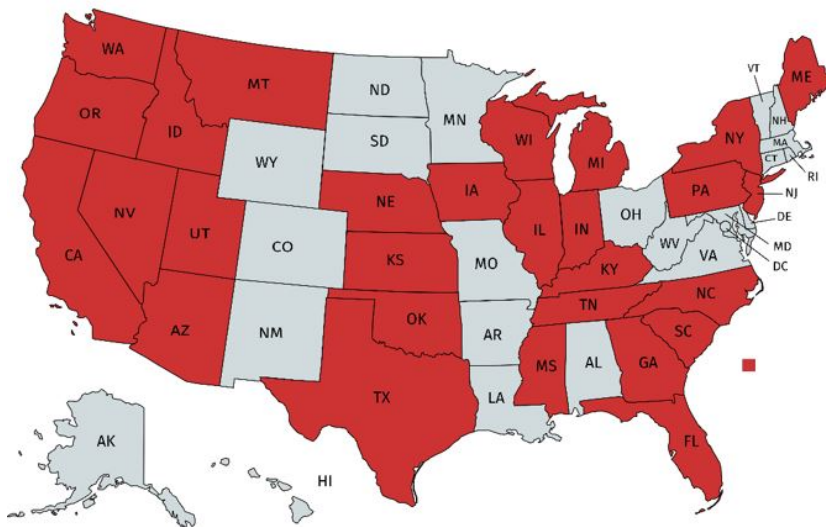


Fig. 1.: Listeners of the podcast can buy the above map of Keisha's road trip as merchandise. The lower map highlights the extent of her travels in 28 different states of the US.

8 *AID* is a story about the beauty and strangeness of travel – and by extension the beauty and strangeness of the US. But it also is, on a smaller scale, a story about one woman's heartbreak, and ultimately, a love story. After her wife disappeared without explanation, Keisha mourns her until

she spots Alice on the evening news, in a crowd assembled around a traffic accident. She keeps discovering such appearances: “I made a list of every place I saw you on the news, and that list became a map of America” (1.2). Because Alice seems to be all over the United States, Keisha begins traveling the country as a trucker for Bay & Creek Shipping, the ominous company that Alice is somehow connected to. Plot-wise, her travels in the first season are motivated by finding Alice and fighting their mutual enemy, the Thistle men.<sup>4</sup> In the second season, Keisha searches for information to understand the complex war that she and Alice are inexplicably mixed up in and tries to shake off a threat pursuing her, the ‘hunter.’ Meanwhile, in the third season, the reunited couple, Keisha and Alice, want to expose the sinister doings of the different institutions and actors mixed up in the ‘war’ to the public.

9 In its combination of the eclectic name Alice and the negative verb form, the podcast’s name may recall Teresa De Lauretis’s classic in feminist film theory to the feminist media studies scholar: *Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (1984). De Lauretis’ opening to the book carries weight for the podcast’s name:

The images or references suggested by the name ‘Alice’ are many and will probably vary with each reader. Whether you think of *Alice in Wonderland* or *Radio Alice* in Bologna; of Alice B. Toklas, who ‘wrote’ an autobiography as well as other things; or of Alice James, who produced an illness while her brothers did the writing; of Alice Sheldon, who writes science fiction, but with a male pseudonym [James Tiptree Jr.] (VII).

Like the protagonist of *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), the podcast’s Alice has disappeared from her regular life. Similar to the cultural void that is the Grand Canyon, upon which any visitor can project their needs and desires, until the third season, Alice remains either the mediated ghostly presence of television news or the silent addressee of Keisha’s radio monologues. Keisha is well aware of their unequal communication: “‘we’ don’t talk. I do. You vanish. You aren’t. You are a – a gap, a nothing. And I talk into that nothing. I let my words float away, like Jackie on the waves” (1.4). Just like so many of her literary and cultural namesakes that De Lauretis mentions, Alice’s achievements, opinions, or emotions are subsumed and hidden behind those of others, most of all Keisha’s.

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<sup>4</sup> Keisha calls these supernatural serial killers the Thistle men because the first of their kind that she encounters wears a T-shirt with the word ‘thistle’ on it. All the members of this murderous community are cis-male, and white – Keisha mentions their unhealthy pale skin several times, making the threat they pose to woman of color Keisha one that is particularly racialized and gendered. In several scenes, Keisha’s descriptions of their attacks occur in terms that evoke sexualized violence and assault. However, despite their uniform masculinity, the Thistle men cooperate with the more diverse Bay & Creek, and the female ‘hunter’ in later seasons.

10 And yet, the podcast series does not let its eponymous character serve as a mere plot motivator for Keisha's travels, a sort of Ms. Macguffin, who could easily be replaced with a prized object like the feature-less princess that a fairytale knight wins at the end of the story. Instead, Alice suddenly appears to try to save Keisha in the final episodes of both the first season and second season. It is her who first speaks the name of the podcast's previously unnamed protagonist, Keisha. Through this naming, Alice claims narrative authority and the attention of the listener. While in the second season, Alice asks Keisha to let her do the mysterious work she feels a calling to, in the third season, the two lovers are reunited and Alice becomes a fully fleshed-out character. She travels with Keisha, and speaks directly to the audience, turning the listener into her confidante to confess what she is still afraid to tell Keisha. We learn, that she purposefully left to protect Keisha and now realizes that she made a mistake in underestimating her wife and the heartbreak that her leaving caused her.

11 Reflecting on how she first reacted to Alice's disappearance, Keisha describes her attempts to cope in self-help groups: "I sat in circles and talked about you. That's what we do now, right? As a civilization, we sit in a circle and we describe the shape of the monster that is devouring us. We hope, like a talisman, that our description will provide some shelter against it. It won't, though. We are helpless" (1.2). And so, Keisha takes to the road and finds actual monsters. However, the listener cannot overlook that Keisha's radio broadcast adopts the exact form of the group therapy that she deemed so fruitless: she sits (not in a circle but a truck) and talks (not to other group members but the podcast's audience) to make sense of her circumstances. Hence, *AID*'s narrative is made up of Keisha's attempts at communication and sense-making.

12 Communication in *AID* is fleeting, unidirectional, and can never guarantee a sender to reach their addressee. While Keisha tries to communicate with Alice through her CB radio, Alice reaches out to Keisha through her appearances on the news, and, in the episode "Signs & Wonders" (1.5), through cryptic billboards on the side of the highway. Punctuated by the sound of the radio switch, Keisha's CB radio monologues take the form of confession, witness account, or rambling trail of thoughts; yet, they always project a lyrical, poetic quality. Genre-wise, they are part audio diary, part epistolary fiction, part travel writing, part socio-political commentary, and part poetry.<sup>5</sup> In regard to the latter, it is the contemplative cadence and purposeful way of speaking that Pruitt

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<sup>5</sup> Her narration tends to switch between two chronologically different strands: one that strives toward an effect of immediacy and narrative 'live'-ness, when Keisha describes things that she sees while driving or recalls what happened right before she picked up the radio's microphone, and the other, retrospective strand recalls her past.

adopts for her Keisha as well as the rich metaphorical range of Keisha's descriptions that creates the effect of a spoken word performance or poetry reading. This lyrical dimension of the podcast in combination with the eerie musical accompaniment lends itself particularly to affective investments of listeners.

13 A podcast can be described as an "intimate aural medium," Stacey Copeland finds, that allows for a "deep affective experience" and the possibility to challenge gendered, heteronormative presumptions due to this affective pull (210). Tellingly, Keisha's monologues are followed not only by the podcast's listeners but a fictional audience as well – Keisha's enemies. One Thistle man mocks her for her attempts to reach Alice: "I'm not much for talking. Not like you. 'Oh, Alice! Hi, Alice! It's me, Alice!'" (1.10). His comment unconvincingly seeks to cast Keisha as representative of not one but two tiring gendered stereotypes, the female stalker who is unhealthily invested in her romantic partner, and the gossipy 'chatterbox.' Serial podcasts allow listeners to reflect on such stereotypes and their intersectional prejudices. Such didactic potentials are especially relevant because, as I argued elsewhere, when it comes to the gendered 'doing' of voice, "essentialist notions of pitch, vocal range, speaking melody, etc. stubbornly persist ... Hence, people whose voices do not fall in the surprisingly narrow realm of gender conformity that is constructed *through* voice are objected to constant misgendering, e.g. on the phone" (Sulimma, "Mute White Woman", 328).

14 To remain with gendered or racialized stereotypes, as a queer femme woman of color, Keisha is an unusual representation of a professional trucker – and an unusual protagonist of a road trip story. Unlike the podcast, the novel based on *AID* quickly establishes its protagonist as a woman of color when a stranger tells Keisha, "Honey, you don't look like the trucker type," and the omniscient narrator explains: "She wasn't big, she wasn't white, she wasn't male. Her hands shook as a rule, and her voice was soft when she spoke at all. But she drove a truck" (12).<sup>6</sup> The podcast is more subtle about such intersectional prejudice: after Keisha describes a man in a diner as a trucker based on his looks, she immediately second-guesses such assumptions implying that she should best know not to judge a book by its cover: "He looked like a truck driver... What does a truck driver look like!?" (1.1). But it is not only looking the part, Keisha also expresses how

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<sup>6</sup> After the podcast's conclusion, its producer and 'creator' Joseph Fink published the novel *Alice Isn't Dead* (2018) as a retelling of the podcast.

insecure she feels about driving the large vehicle, its noise and height, or the pains of sitting still for long periods of time.

15 This unease – at driving and traveling – initially serves Keisha to distinguish herself from Alice, “You were always the driver then. I didn’t like driving. I do now. Or maybe I’ve just convinced myself I do” (2.3). In her reading of female mobility in novels of the 1950s, Julia Leyda finds that “the power to drive fast, to escape a bad situation, to control the direction of her life, makes the automobile a potent symbol of freedom for women” (133). Even though alienating at first, the truck similarly becomes a powerful instrument for Keisha during the course of the podcast. Keisha employs the truck as a coping mechanism to deal with her anxiety (the pleasures of navigating the massive vehicle just as much as communicating through its radio system), and also as a practical tool to aid her search for Alice. With its truck inversed into a skull, the podcast’s memorable logo highlights the dangers of the road and the truck’s relevance for the podcast’s narration, themes, and characterization (see Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: The Podcast’s logo visually underscores its punny refusal to ‘bury your gays’ – and yet its insular version of a queer happy end seems incompatible with its road trip’s queer temporalities and its ideal of political organizing.



16 Central to Keisha’s characterization – and what aside from her gender, race, and sexual orientation marks her as such an exceptional protagonist for a road trip narrative – are her fears and constant anxiety. “I liked being home. It was the only place I felt safe” (1.8), she confesses, but also stresses that “home isn’t a place, home was a person. I can’t go home” (1.3). Having long struggled with her mental health, the loss of Alice hits Keisha not only as the betrayal of a romantic partner but as the loss of mental grounding. However terrified Keisha is in her everyday life, in several life-threatening scenes, she can calmly respond to the homicidal boasts of monstrous antagonists such as the Thistle men or the ‘hunter’ because of her fears: “A dark closet makes me afraid. The wind. Don’t feel proud because you joined their ranks. I’m used to fear” (2.10). The horrific enemies and frightening spaces that Keisha faces would scare anyone, yet, it is because her fear is habitual, a feeling she is very experienced with, that Keisha is able to take these monsters head-on.<sup>7</sup>

17 *AID* never has Keisha connect her anxiety to the discrimination or harassment she may have experienced due to her gender, sexual orientation, or race. There is something deeply rewarding to listeners to have a queer woman of color travel all over the United States by herself without any explicit experiences of racism, misogyny, or homophobia – but maybe even more unlikely than the supernatural elements of *AID*’s storylines. And yet, even though the podcast never explores how Keisha’s intersectional identity affects her mental health struggles and requires her to develop her resilience to weather everyday life, there are instances in which such readings particularly suggest themselves. When Keisha angrily anticipates and discredits the explanation that Alice will later give to justify her leaving, she says: “You think safety is an option that’s *available* to me? I haven’t been safe since I was born into this country, this angry, seething, stupid, could-be-so-much-more-than-it-is country! And *you*’re gonna keep me safe?!?” (1.5). Keisha’s statement may refer to the lack of security that a person of color and especially a queer person of color in the US will feel in the face of the institutionalized racism, homophobia, and sexism rampant in the United States (and many other countries, including Germany) sadly even in 2020.

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<sup>7</sup> The first season finale especially brings this point across when Keisha’s fear becomes a kind of superpower. Giving in to her anxiety gives her the strength to physically overpower and kill a Thistle man with her bare hands: “Anxiety like electricity. And I knew, in that moment, that anxiety is just an energy. It is an uncontrollable near-infinite energy, surging within me. And for once I stopped trying to contain it” (1.10).

### **‘A Road Movie to Listen to’: The Politics of a Podcast Road Trip**

18 *AID* is a story about a road trip through the US – as its beginning makes unmistakably clear: “this is not a story. It’s a road trip. Which...same difference. In a good one, the start is exciting, and the finish is satisfying, and we end up somewhere else...somewhere a long way away from where we started” (1.1). The road trip by car is a quintessential US-American cultural phenomenon that stands in the tradition of a wide range of media representations from Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957), *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (the novel: 1971; film: 1998), Britney Spear’s *Crossroads* (2002), or the most recent *Queen & Slim* (2019).

19 Scholars have found travel occupying the US-American literary and cultural production in profound ways. For Elsa Court, mobility constitutes “the foundation of American literature, which posits that the only way to define such a vast country is through inland movement” (3). And, Julia Leyda points out how “American national identity has always concerned itself with movement – into the wilderness, across the continent, into middle and upper classes, into outer space” (18). Leyda especially understands movement here in both the geographic and a social-economic movement of class belonging. Even though *AID* seems only concerned with geographical distance, and possibly the emotional distance between two partners in a romantic relationship, as the series progresses, it increasingly addresses the injustices of the kind of social-economic movement that Leyda has in mind here.

20 The graphic novel *Are You Listening* (2019) by Tillie Walden depicts a queer road trip across Texas by two female characters, mechanic Lou and teenager Bea.<sup>8</sup> In many ways this coming-of-age narrative is the exact opposite of *AID*; after all, the comic book’s pleasures are exclusively visual. Yet, both the podcast and the comic offer a queer version of the road trip narrative that excels at balancing different modes: the fantastical, vast distances and landscapes with the small, intimate experiences of their troubled protagonists. Just as Keisha fights the Thistle men, Lou and Bea are chased by creepy cismale agents of the Office of Road Inquiry. In both stories, men represent official institutions that pose a danger to queer women. While Keisha battles her anxiety, Lou is often paralyzed by her anger; and just like Keisha struggles with Alice’s disappearance, Lou and Bea are haunted by traumatic past events.

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<sup>8</sup> On her travels Keisha is mostly alone, but sometimes accompanied by a teenage sidekick, Sylvia, who seeks and revenge on the Thistle men for murdering her mother.

21 Walden opens the graphic novel with a beautiful, abstract rendering of a map of Texas overlaid by the first stanza of Adrienne Rich's "Itinerary" (1951): "The guidebooks play deception; oceans are a property of mind. All maps are fiction, all travelers come to separate frontiers" (see fig. 3). The poem taps into a rich cultural history that occupies postcolonial studies, the notion of maps and frontiers as cultural constructions steeped in colonial dynamics. While they may follow the US-American myth of colonialist pioneers, neither Keisha nor the protagonists of Walden's comic are willing to cast their travels in the terms of expansion, frontier, and discovery. Keisha knowingly disbands with such images when she states "I'm not a frontier tracker and the highway isn't signs and twigs, it's a truck on a road. We don't leave tracks." (2.3). The frontiers that Rich addresses are not necessarily spatial but deeply personal, they are different for every traveler. The distances that these queer characters travel and the spaces that they cross are often deserted. However, these spaces are no version of a postindustrial Terra Nullius: their vastness does not promise opportunities or potentials, but reeks of loss, mourning, and strange preternatural forces.

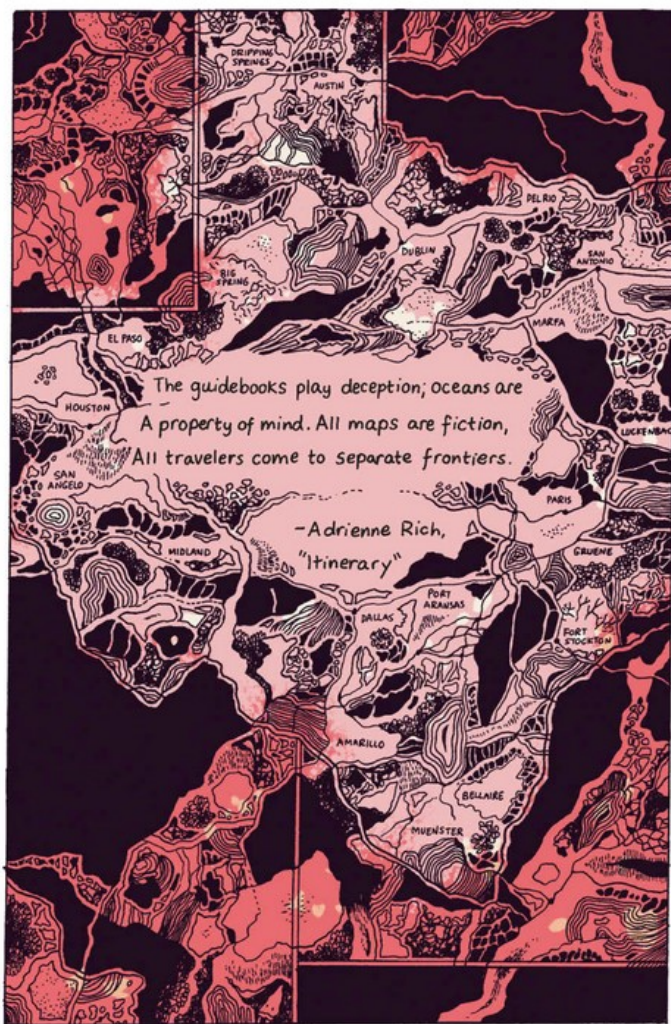


Fig. 3: The first page of Walden's *Are You Listening* beautifully illustrates the road trip of its queer protagonists with the lines from a poem by Adrienne Rich. Both Rich's poem as well as Walden's comic book offer resonant context for *AID*.

22 In several interviews, Joseph Fink has stated his love for overlooked weird or obscure roadside attractions to serve as an inspiration for Keisha’s travels (Barone). Some examples of such roadside attractions that Keisha stumbles upon and that listeners could also visit are the desert ballet of Marta Becket in Death Valley Junction (2.6), the “monastery” at Crystal Springs Rest Area on I280 (2.7), or the vortexes in Sedona, Arizona (1.7). Aside from the spooky and supernatural, the road trip of *AID* often takes the form of the quirky, random, and endearingly strange. “America has weird things in it. It has so many miles, so much space to put the weirdness in” (1.10).

23 The sense of vast emptiness of the US that *AID* so astutely chronicles – and that makes weird roadside attractions so unique and special – should not be necessarily be understood only as landscape devoid of human habitation. As any moviegoer will recall, the road movie has a distinct iconography of expansive landscapes, spectacular vistas, and encompassing horizons. Keisha’s descriptions reference such visual imagery, yet just as often mention empty parking lots, deserted farmhouses, or postindustrial factories. It is especially her experience of commercial highway service areas, suburban malls, and sideway commerce associated with drive-in culture that project feelings of isolation, disorientation, or a kind of postindustrial melancholy coupled with the sense that something is wrong: “We must have decided this, right, at some point? That we wanted it all to look the same? And I can understand that decision. We all like to feel somewhere familiar. . . . But we have paid a price for this” (2.4). Thus, Keisha implies that there has been some kind of consensus or contract, that she does not exclude herself from,<sup>9</sup> but whose outcome was never intended to take on this shape. So what does the podcast refer to here? Neoliberal privatization, automobility, consumerist capitalism? My guess is all of these and much more. *AID* seems to suggest that one way the US responded to the disorienting emptiness of its distance was to fill it with franchises, with consumer sameness, negating all those special and unique experiences that Keisha cherishes in the weird roadside attractions.

24 Such sameness, that is the capitalist and consumerist product conformity of global franchises, becomes a way to feel at home anywhere, to create a comforting illusion to cope with the massive vastness of the US. By highlighting on the homogeneity of consumer culture, *AID* differentiates capitalist ‘bad culture’ from the quirky, regionally specific roadside attractions Keisha cherishes. Commercialized culture thus is not only an addition (“distance and culture”) but

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<sup>9</sup> In general, Keisha never excludes herself from any harsh observations about the US; she is careful not to be judgmental of other’s circumstances, for example, to not judge people living in rural surroundings when she lives in the urban Bay Area in California. “Oh, god, am I being condescending? I am, aren’t I? Shit” (1.3).

an assumed antidote to distance, at the cost of losing regional specificity. In other words, while the consumer culture of franchises presents itself as an antidote to distance by emphasizing generic ‘sameness,’ it seeks to displace the distance that is so formative to a collective US-American identity. Meanwhile, the weird sites that Keisha visits during her travels embrace and even depend on distance, they have to be found in order to be appreciated. The antagonistic Thistle men allude to this understanding of Keisha’s when one of them repeats her exact words to legitimize their existence in the first season finale.

‘America,’ he said. ‘A country defined as much by distance as culture. America embraces its distances. Empty spaces and road trips, but there is always a price. *We are* that price. We are creatures of the road. We feed on distance, on road trips, on emptiness, bodies by the side of the highway.’

The Thistle men may benefit from the country’s vastness but it is commercial uniformity that hides their gruesome deeds. The Thistle men are themselves characterized by such uniformity, they appear as interchangeable and without any defining individualistic characteristics. Keisha responds with anger to their above statement “Don’t try to make poetry out of the blood on your hands.” While through her radio monologues Keisha may make poetry out of her travels, fears, and pain, she does not want the murder and exploitation of her enemies to resemble her own words.

25 To both Keisha and the podcast’s listeners, the larger mystery, which extends beyond the series’ seasons, remains hard to grasp until the final season. Initially, Keisha zooms in on the ‘big bad’ of the first season, these Thistle men, a community of supernatural, cannibalistic serial killers, who also have close ties to and the support of the government. At first, it appears as if Keisha’s (and Alice’s) employer, the trucking company Bay & Creek is also a military organization fighting the Thistle men. However, the ‘hunter’ reveals that the nature of this battle is a grotesque kind of checks and balances, a hidden scheme of massive institutional proportions in which seeming opponents participate in an orchestrated battle play that they all benefit from. “While having two sides is convenient, it turns out, it’s not absolutely necessary,” she explains, “War is a very useful thing, Keisha. It allows for a lot of messiness, a lot of freedom, and we are a country that enjoys messiness and freedom” (2.10). Keisha and Alice had considered themselves chess pieces caught between the battle lines but now decide that they need to upend the game altogether. They become vigilante terrorists, the “derelict bombers,” who blow up their enemies’ warehouses hidden among ruins; contact a journalist for a tell-all-story, and are disappointed when this story is released but ignored by the general public.

26 It is at this point that *AID* leaves the road trip genre and becomes a lesson in community organizing. During her travels, Keisha had frequently encountered the name Praxis as a mythical force against the evils they are battling. While she had hoped that finding Praxis would allow her to join an effective, powerful institution, she comes to realize that they have to create Praxis themselves in a laborious, slow process of grassroots organizing. Keisha and Alice already are connected to a “whisper network of weirdos and freaks and outsiders” (3.2) which they utilize to create the structures at a local level that will become a national movement, Praxis. Keisha and Alice start meetings where they let others do what Keisha has been doing all along: narrate their experiences and share their own stories: “A thing seen on the roads that didn’t fit into the narrative this country had made for itself. There is a power in telling your own stories. The ones we knew were true, the ones we hadn’t realized anyone else would believe” (3.7). It is from these gradually expanding meetings that they build a kind of citizen army which in the penultimate episode faces off against the combined forces of Thistle and Bay & Creek, successfully overthrowing them in a violent battle. Among the people fighting alongside Keisha and Alice are most of the minor characters that Keisha had encountered in the three seasons of the podcast. Hence, it is no secret superhero team-up but her past connections and encounters that are revealed as the antidote against evil.

27 Keisha and Alice’s insights into organizing Praxis sounds like a manual for how to start a movement: “It is an overwhelming goal to organize a country, but it starts with the people around you” (3.7); “The only way to overthrow power is by driving in the thinnest edge of the wedge and then methodically and constantly tapping it in for years” (3.8). This is especially interesting when comparing Keisha and Alice’s aspirations to change society through the people living in it with the road trip genre’s refusal to allow for a re-integration into mainstream society, its stories of individual rebellion and societal exit rather than the reform to strenuously transform society.<sup>10</sup> On the surface, their organizing follows the goal of forming a kind of army to battle their supernatural enemy, the coalition of Thistle and Bay & Creek with the support of the conspicuously absent US-American government. But at a closer look, what Keisha and her ‘comrades’ are battling is not supernatural, but similarly ungraspable and interwoven with the Government: a capitalist

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<sup>10</sup> Especially at the core of the US-American road movie is its protagonists’ desire to leave behind their previous lives, including the conformity and norms of mainstream society. Such stories are about (often youthful) rebellion with countercultural potentials.

combination of commodification, privatization, and institutions. Keisha formulates her version of labor and class criticism:

“We are a country defined more by distance than by culture. But that distance is defined by the people in it. We give context to our miles. We are the fine parts that make up the heavy machine that heaves global events forward . . . I thought about millions of hands and what they could do if they all reached the same direction and grasped” (3.6).

This ‘power to the people’-rhetoric is very clear on who it seeks to mobilize, the millions of hands involved in manual labor, but aside from the supernatural figurehead of Thistle, it is vague on who to organize against, who it is that does the exploiting here. And so, Praxis defeats their supernatural foes and allows the survivors to return to their previous lives.

### **The Serialized Queer Love Story’s Rock and a Hard Place: Emotional Pay-Off vs. Homonormativity**

28 Even in an increasingly globalized world, it takes time to travel distances, and *AID* demonstrates how to experience the US-American vastness requires an investment of time resulting in a curious experience of temporality. To *The Huffington Post*’s Jillian Capewell, the podcast transmits an “uncanny feeling of timelessness, hours spent without seeing another house or vehicle, only to eventually stumble around a gas station snack aisle at an unknown hour trying to figure out which state you’re in.” The experience of timelessness and loss of orientation caused by travel can productively be connected to queer studies’ scholarship on queer temporality. As an introduction to the notion of queer time, Jack Halberstam describes it as a break with “reproductive temporality” (4) that is:

about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing. . . . Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death. (2)

*AID*’s queer road trip offers listeners the possibility of such a break with linear temporality geared toward reproduction as a kind of social productivity. Instead, the time Keisha spends on the road is almost opposed to normative conceptions of time. This is why the ending of the podcast seems surprising in its neat resolution and return to such normative temporalities.

29 In an on-the-nose-symbolism for the potentials of deserted and decaying places, in episode 3.7, Keisha and Alice find out that through the old speaker systems left in abandoned fast-food chain restaurants they can listen to themselves in a parallel universe in which Alice never left and

they never got involved with Thistle, Bay & Creek, or governmental conspiracies. Metatextually mirroring the podcast listener of *AID*, they become absorbed in these alternative stories, but realize “in that other world, the two of us weren’t doing anything about it. We were letting it happen, so that we could live our quiet lives. In that world, we too were part of the monster” (3.7). Breaking down the barriers between the listeners and the characters, this realization fuels their activism and ideally seeks to mobilize viewers as well. Yet, in the last episode of the podcast, Keisha and Alice return to this ‘quiet life’ in the hope of having defeated Thistle and Co., of having saved the world. So if their battle is a thinly veiled symbol for labor and class critique, what does their life after ‘the end of capitalism’ look like?

30 Their alternating monologues describe the progression of their home life in gorgeously intimate details. Mostly these are simple, domestic activities, comforts that tend to be missed when one is traveling: cooking dinner after work, taking a shower, laying on the couch together, sleeping next to another, making each other coffee, developing new hobbies, but also raising their daughter together, and letting the past, painful adventures slowly reside into the background. Their description of their relationship and home life takes the format and style of the 1960’s comic strip “Love Is...” by Kim Casali, featuring a naked, cute-ified heterosexual couple in everyday situations that express their care, devotion, and attraction to another. There is great empowerment for queer listeners to be found in the moving depiction of Keisha and Alice’s romance along such terms. For example, accompanied by the clicking sounds of a tape recorder, the lovers say

**Alice:** Love is each of us showering before bed, one after the other. We can’t shower at the same time, because we like very different temperatures of water, and that’s love too. I brush my teeth and she pees. The fog in the mirror gives way to a portrait of the two of us preparing to sleep. It’s a portrait of love, and we look at it every night.

**Keisha:** Love is the hours we spend under a blanket on the couch, and love is also the hours we spend apart, earning a living so that we can return to the couch, once more lie down together. Love is the beat of the heart and the passage of air and it’s the circulation of fluids and it’s the equilibrium of all the functions that sustain us.

In this way, the podcast begins and ends as a queer love story that is disrupted through a road trip with supernatural horror elements and a lesson in community organization. *AID* refutes the “bury your gays”-trope of film and television,<sup>11</sup> and if one considers the reference to life and death in the podcast’s name, it does so in a self-aware and even punny manner. As Jessica Seymour’s

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<sup>11</sup> The website *TV Tropes* has compiled an extensive list of this prevalent plot development for queer characters in audiovisual media: <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BuryYourGays>.



contribution to this issue of *Gender Forum* demonstrates, there is a great wealth of queer representations in fictional podcasts (also: Bainbridge; Copeland) compared to other media formats. While I definitely share such sentiments and find this ending of Keisha and Alice's story beautifully rendered, this queer listener could not but find such an ending a tad disappointing as is so often the case with the conclusions of serial narratives in any media.<sup>12</sup>

31 Without wanting to diminish the emotional payoff of the podcast's ending for many listeners, I find *AID*'s final departure from the queer temporalities of the road trip – which it had spent three seasons exploring — to be in favor of an idealized conception of marriage as a life-long commitment and the foundation for nuclear family-building to conform with norms upheld in neoliberal and conservative agendas. While often assumed to only apply to heterosexual lifestyles, such ideals can also be homonormative. With the notion of homonormativity, Lisa Duggan describes a neoliberal “politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demoralized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (179).<sup>13</sup> Overall, the podcast failed to deliver on its progressive promise of institutional critique, even though it did deliver the rare, exceptional ending to a queer love story as a happy ending. For all its solicitous criticism of living in the US, of its institutions, of capitalism, consumerism, and the exploitation of manual labor, *AID* never extends such criticism to marriage as an institution and the nuclear family. In the end, Keisha and Alice's domestic bliss seems like a traditional Hollywood romantic ending – which yes, is exceptional for queer couples – but still conforms to normative conceptions of romance, family, and generational reproduction that compromise a form of living sanctioned by exactly those capitalist and consumerist systems that Keisha and Alice appeared to battle.

32 However, Keisha and Alice's daughter is named after their road trip and battle companion, the teenager Sylvia who had become a mysterious, supernatural force for good by the end of the third season, an oracle. While the series explains little about these figures, listeners do learn that the identity-less oracles experience time simultaneously rather than linear. Any such character

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<sup>12</sup> Because serial storytelling strives toward narrative continuation rather than closure, it is difficult to end a serial story in a manner that is satisfying to all audiences. As television scholar Jason Mittell puts it, “the final moments of any finale are clearly atypical, as a conclusion always begs further reflection, contemplation, and, in the case of such ambiguity, analytical interpretation” (337).

<sup>13</sup> Duggan does importantly differentiate and not equate heteronormativity and homonormativity: “I don't mean the terms to be parallel; there is no structure for gay life, no matter how conservative or normalizing, that might compare with the institutions promoting and sustaining heterosexual coupling” (191).

stands out in serial storytelling which aspires toward linear progression but for coherence has to recursively has to manage what has been told before (see Kelleter). The oracle that was previously called Sylvia is in this regard perhaps the figure that best embodies the potentials and disruptions of queer temporality. That Keisha and Alice name their child Sylvia, the result of their nuclear family and return to homonormative domesticity, may undermine the podcast's surprisingly conservative happy end to some extent.

## Conclusion

33 Even in an increasingly globalized and highly mediated world with aeromobile travel replacing long-distance car drives and internet users being able to glimpse photographic impressions of most places, for *AID*, the distance of the US remains and can be shrunk neither by planes nor Google Maps. All attempts to fill this vastness with neoliberal corporations and consumerist sameness are dangerous undertakings, and should to be countered by grassroots communities of travelers and workers, the people who have learned to appreciate regional weirdness.

34 This article evoked a multitude of cultural artifacts and feminist writing to explore the podcast series *AID*, Simone De Beauvoir's travel writing, the queer graphic novel *Are You Listening*, *Thelma & Louise*, Teresa De Lauretis's scholarship, Adrienne Rich's poetry, the "Love Is..."-comic strip. Putting such materials into conversation with *AID* has helped me understand the podcast's exceptional take on gender, traveling, and storytelling about and as political organization. I have analytically utilized my frustrations with the podcast's ending, which arguably has a great emotional pay-off, even though this pay-off to me diminishes the larger socio-political lessons and revolutionary aspirations – its version of capitalist critique and political organizing – and the queer temporalities of travel that the rest of the series had explored in such nuance.

35 Keisha's final monologue metatextually reflects the affective and temporal difference between the series overall and its final episode: "This is where our road trip ends, I guess. The two of us in our living room on a day, any day. Nothing big happens on this day. ... I never forgot how lucky I was. I wouldn't have lived any other life" (3.10). But again, it would have been important to hear from another life of hers, one in which Keisha and Alice were able to maintain their activism and community organizing. A life lived to counter the perilous effect of neoliberal capitalism beyond a single spectacular battle; a life in which the happy end to a queer love story did not have to be insular, quiet, and incompatible with activism and community. Allowing its protagonist Keisha rest and happiness, the podcast fortunately does not give in to the seductive illusion that

ending systemic evils such as neoliberal class injustices is a quick task. The last word (or the last fictional word, aside from author figure Fink) is that of the supernatural ‘hunter’ who remains watching Keisha and foreshadows that the war will continue beyond Keisha’s life span. “Keisha and Alice. They never saw me again. The cycle I live by is much longer than any one person’s life could ever encompass. So they died, with their happy ending. For them it was permanent. As permanent as the Earth. As permanent as the moon. Oh, Alice. I wanna start by saying... [evil laugh] Shit!” Her last line is another mocking jab at Keisha’s radio monologues and her devotion to Alice. I just wish our favorite anxious trucker would have had the chance to respond.

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