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ABSTRACT

This paper, alongside its creative short stories, explores the intersection of spatial theory, human connection, and grief through Ryuusuke Hamaguchi's *Drive My Car* and an original series of short stories. Using Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopias, real places that function as real-life embodiments of utopias that represent and invert society, and Marc Augé's concept of non-places, transitory places defined by anonymity and contracts, this study explores how Kafuku's red Saab works as an evolutionary vehicle for processing grief. The red Saab, in *Drive My Car* as well as my own stories, functions as a heterotopia of crisis that breaks through the anonymity of non-places to establish true connections between its passengers. Through a waterfall process of connection, confession, and catharsis, the red Saab oversees a transition from solitary mourning to an acceptance of tragedy, allowing the heterotopia's passengers to reconcile the past with a sinister but real present, to learn, and to live anyway.

SHORT STORIES

JUNE. 2026.

My name is Antonio Juarez. I am an Uber driver. And I turn 56 years old today. There is more to my identity and life story than this, of course, but for the people in the back seat of my red Saab, Antonio Juarez who turns 56 years old today is all I will ever be. Today is a day I remember clearly, for summers in Northern California are sweet and shine as brightly in the memory as the light often did in those long evenings.

And today, what remained of the fading evening sunlight oozed in through every window of my old red car and dripped onto the laps of the three kids sitting behind me, their knees pressed together and their heads rolling back in laughter. Well, I say kids, but there's something old in the way their eyes meet each other's, something distant and alien and far beyond their years. It's something I've only ever seen when watching people depart from their loved ones after I've driven them to the airport. It's a hungry look, one that attempts to take everything in around them in excruciating detail to savor later. But still they're giggling and elbowing each other over something on the girl in the middle's phone like children, children drowning the weight of the world on their shoulders in each other's raucous laughter.

"Just say *yes* silly, you have literally nothing to lose. You're never going to have to see him again," the tall, lanky boy dressed in a bowtie and vest manages to say between fits of laughter.

"Guys, I swear if you don't stop laughing" the girl in the middle mutters in reply, and as she shakes her fist at the boy, dozens of black curls fall around her shoulders elegantly

“This is so much worse than Barcelona” the girl to her left says, clutching a bouquet of white flowers against her very white dress

To this comment the three of them burst out in an even more violent fit of laughter, clutching onto each other as tears threaten to ruin their delicately painted faces.

Their laughter dies out gradually, and I begin to hear the faint hum of the car against the road once more.

“I’m gonna miss this” the girl in the middle says, tucking a lock of curls behind her ear and looking up at the girl to her left and the boy to her right.

I glance back at them in the mirror, and even now I’m struck by the weight of those old eyes bearing down on young faces, otherwise untouched by the cruel whims of time. That sharp silence that lingered so soon after the warm embrace of laughter reminded me suddenly of an evening so many Junes ago. I don’t know why this memory came to me in that instant, and why with such vigor. Perhaps it was the magic of the golden California sunlight. Or perhaps it was the sight of tears forming lightly in the corners of brown eyes. But either way, what came with this cruel vision of death were the words she spoke to me that very night.

“Antonio” I remember her brown eyes meeting mine clearly even now, looking down at me as she whispered

“What we can no longer carry with us in time

we carry in our hearts forever.”

In retrospect I don’t know what possessed me in that moment, maybe it was the warm light trickling in through the windows of my Saab like a series of lazy rivers. Maybe it was how the silence that lingered after so much joy sickened me. Maybe it was how much those three pairs of brown eyes reminded me of the one I knew and loved so long ago. Either way, I gripped tightly onto the wheel in front of me, looked back at the kids in the back, their knees still pressed together, and said, hesitantly at first

“If-If I may”

The girl on the left lifted her gaze to meet mine, lifting an eyebrow.

“What we can no longer carry with us in time,
we carry in our hearts forever.”

Something in their faces softened when I said this. They glanced at each other, and I saw small smiles begin to form on their lips as they caught each other’s sheepish looks.

And now I watch as they stumble out of the car, arm in arm and giggling wildly again. There’s a large group of similarly dressed people waiting for them on the horizon. And they become one, pooling together like the light from the windows of my Saab does below my feet. And though tomorrow they may not carry their feet on this grass alongside those who they love most in this world, they will carry it forever somewhere else. That same somewhere else I carry that Northern Californian light with me in every waking moment.

MAY. 2027.

My name is Antonio Juarez. I am still 56 years old, and I am still an Uber driver. I drive a red Saab, the same red Saab my best friends and I used to collect magazine cutouts of, to pin to our walls as kids back in Panamá. We were three, and for a moment in time we were my entire world. But of course, for the people who sit in the back of my red Saab, Antonio Juarez who is 56 years old is all that I ever was and all that I ever will be. For those times are long gone.

The woman in the back of my red Saab today is particularly talkative. Which is nice. It drowns out the dull hum of my empty Saab against these even emptier highways.

“Of course, I’ve never been to London, so I don’t really know what to expect. I’ve never left the country at all actually... Have you ever left the country, Mr. Juarez?” she asks, one of her feet tapping restlessly against the door.

“I was born in Panama” I say, slightly uncomfortable at the thought of this answer leading to even more questions about myself and my life. Antonio Juarez who is 56 years old is all I should like to be. But she seems to have asked this question to distract herself more than learn about me, thankfully, for her only response is only a brief nod.

I see her fiddling with her necklace, gazing out at the lanes upon lanes of grey cement studded with even greyer cars.

“What brings you to London, if I may ask?” I say, suddenly taken by a wave of curiosity for this woman’s life. A curiosity I had not felt for anyone in many drives.

She looks up at the mirror to get a better look at my face, and suddenly her face lights up with a radiant smile.

“I’m going to visit my fiancé.”

To this I respond with a smile. Not as radiant as hers, for nothing can imitate the smiles of one who is in love, but just as earnest.

“Well, he sounds like a very lucky man” I say, suddenly aware of her features in my mirror. Straight black hair, cut off bluntly at her chin, tucked behind small bejeweled ears... Eyes always squinted in a smile, a wide, unabashed smile...

“No, I’m the lucky one” she smirks, looking out the window again and holding her necklace softly against her thumb. “He’s graduating next week. And we’re going apartment hunting.”

“Love is the greatest luck there is” I say, noticing the small golden ring on her finger. How similar it was to...

“Thank you Mr. Juarez. Are you married?”

“I was”

I see terminal 4, and I stop in the only space available between the ant line of vehicles and people, all bustling in and out of revolving glass doors.

I help her with her bags, and for a moment watch her disappear on the other side of the glass doors. Then I rejoin the highway, a red ant among grey, my mind closing in around short black hair and golden rings. How haunting it all was.

DECEMBER. 2027.

My name is Antonio Juarez. I am now 57 years old, and I am an Uber driver. I drive the same red Saab I drove on my wedding day. My wife loved this car, and she and I would drive for hours up the coast. Every time the light fills the windows of my old car my heart drops with the absence of her presence. It feels like yesterday when the light would pool into her seat and illuminate those brown eyes. She'd tuck her short hair behind her ears and I'd reach out to hold her hand while our red Saab crawled up the Northern Californian coast. This was long before Uber. Long before sickness killed the heart I once knew and loved better than my own.

It's Christmas week, and my backseat is constantly filled with button-nosed children and tired-eyed parents. But today I see a short, kind-faced man who couldn't have been much older than 40 stand outside a shopping centre as I pull in to pick him up. His arms are filled with presents, and as he leans over to fit them all into the trunk of my red Saab his face is obscured from my view.

I turn the key in the ignition, and as he opens the door I get a better look at that kind face. His eyes are dark and framed by extremely well-kept eyebrows. He has even better kept hair,

slicked back evenly and of a rich black colour. He has a red jacket, as pristine and untouched as the rest of him. And everything about his appearance makes me feel sick.

Sick to the stomach like a dying animal. So sick I think I'm going to throw up. And when our eyes meet in my rearview mirror I know he feels just as sick. His face loses its warm colour, and his hands fall limply to his sides. But it's only a 10 minute drive. And so I put my foot on the pedal just as I did 3 decades ago and wash away those eyes that once belonged to someone who was my entire world.

But it was not 10 minutes. There is a long line of cars ahead of us, all bellowing their horns at each other, and my phone's GPS blinks "ETA 40 minutes, heavy traffic" over and over again.

I see him shuffling nervously in my rear view mirror, and I try to say something over and over again, but nothing comes to my lips and I sit there in painful silence. That same, painful silence again, the one that whirls and pools in your stomach like a pond disturbed by a stone.

"Antonio" I hear him say, barely above a whisper

"Taylor you don't have to" I start, but then I catch a reflection of myself in my rearview mirror. My hair has withered and greyed. And my eyes! All grey and hanging, like moth-infested curtains dangling forlorn. And my mouth... a cold, hard, straight line.

"I know. But the kids have been asking about you. About their uncle Antonio. And I never know what to say. They miss her too. You're not the only one who misses her, Antonio."

My grip tightens around the wheel, and I mutter something spiteful under my breath. Taylor stutters and brings the palms of his hands to his face. I hear him sigh.

“I’m sorry, that came out wrong.

What I meant to say is that we miss you.”

I look back at the mirror, and this time his eyes meet mine and my sickness turns into something much more terrifying. Fear. I look into those eyes and I see the memory of her. The woman I have tried to drive from my mind in the very car she and I once drove together.

“Antonio, we all lost her. But we also lost you. And..” He stuttered

“I’m worried that you lost you too. You distanced yourself from everyone. Your two best friends, they still ask about you. And I never know what to tell them. And I can’t force you to come back to us. But I don’t want you to lose yourself. Please, Antonio. We only want what's best for you.”

A long silence ensues. The whirlpool in my stomach shifts from sickness to fear to a shattering wave of sadness and loss that washes over me and threatens to drown me with it.

“I-” I begin, not sure what to say or how to say it but I decide I should say it anyway

“I’m going back to Panama”

Taylor’s eyes widen, and he says softly “Panama?”

“I’m going to build Mimi’s house. The house we dreamed about as kids. With Joaco and Garcia. That’s why I’m working this job. I only need a few more hundred dollars. I hope to be there by Mimi’s birthday in March.”

Taylor reaches out and places a hand on the back of my seat, and I look over to meet his gaze directly and see his eyes glistening with tears.

We sit like this in silence. Even when the traffic dies down and the drive nears its end we remain like this, with his hand on the back of my seat and the hairs on the back of my neck reaching for the door.

...

I approach a large house, beautifully decorated with strings of Christmas lights. It has French windows and a beautiful dark oak door, in front of which I bring my red Saab to a halt. As Taylor reaches to open the door, I look back at him again, trying to bring my straight line of a mouth to a smile as I say

“Give my best to Ada and Alan for me, will you?”

He sighs. “Are you sure you don’t want to come in?”

“Yes. Maybe next Christmas.”

He nods, reaches out to tap me on the shoulder once more, and then takes off towards the house with all its curving windows and spiralling lights. I watch as the door swings open and his back slips behind it. I stay and watch longer. I watch as he makes his way inside, and illuminated by the warm light behind all those magnificent windows I watch as two small children come rushing towards him, their little arms extended in loving embrace. He lifts them up, dropping all the pristinely wrapped presents he was carrying in the process, and showers them in kisses, against which they raise their arms in protest.

As I turn the key in the ignition and look in my rear view mirror to reverse, I steal one final glance at the house I once spent every Christmas evening at with my beloved Mimi to see a woman entering the room. She wraps her arms around the brother of my beloved Mimi just as I saw her do at their wedding so many years ago. That wedding in Northern California so many summers ago.

...

As I reverse into the driveway of my own humble apartment building, something in the backseat of my red Saab catches my eye. I startle, thinking that he may have left something behind and I'd be condemned to returning to that haunted house with its sinister French windows. But turning on the flashlight of my phone and reaching back into the backseat of my red Saab, I see a few green pieces of paper neatly tucked in behind what moments ago was Taylor's seatbelt. I lifted them towards the light and noticed, to my astonishment, several hundred dollars bills. I began to count. One.. two.. five hundred dollars. Five hundred dollars. Taylor.

MARCH. 2028.

My name is Antonio Juarez, and I am 57 years old. This is what I tell the lady at the check-in. She smiles back at me, handing me a white ticket that I promptly fold and tuck into my coat pocket. To her, Antonio Juarez who is 57 years old is all I will ever be. But that's okay, because it is not her life that I am living. I am Antonio Juarez, I am 57 years old, and today I begin anew. Today I become something that I have never been, not to anyone in the backseat of my Saab, not to my brother-in-law, not to myself. But, hopefully, I can become everything that I never was to her. My beloved Mimi. My poor, poor Mimi, how happy she was. She always knew what it was to be happy. And now, together in our house in Panama, we shall rest. We shall rest.

UTOPIAS & HETEROTOPIAS

In his essay, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias", Michel Foucault writes that while the 19th century marked an era obsessed with history, the modern era (which

would've marked the mid-late 20th century for Foucault, but his ideas nevertheless apply to the early 21st century, as it is still very close in time to his own life) marks a transition into the "epoch of space." He states that "we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed," and that instead of living lives chronologically from start to end, we are increasingly experiencing life as a network of connected points. The spaces in our life, the ones that already were in place as much as the ones that we construct ourselves, have never been more important in history than they are now. Which is why, given that Haruki Murakami's *Drive My Car* (upon which the film *Drive My Car* is based) is a 20th century spin on a 19th century play, I will be using Foucault to analyse this story's use of space, specifically the space that is the red Saab, a space which is best emphasized in the story's film adaptation.

Spaces have taken on different characteristics throughout history, from the medieval concept of space as simply where things were displaced to the Galilean concept of space as an infinity where things became extended instead of localized, more than just a point in their movement. But in his essay Foucault defines two kinds of spaces in particular as having a distinct influence on human affairs: utopias and heterotopias. Utopias are places that, ironically, have no real place. Foucault defines them more specifically to be "sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society." Utopias are either images of society in its most perfect form, or an image of the exact opposite of society. In either case the most dominating characteristic of utopias is that they are unreal. There is no shortage of examples of utopias in literature, and attempts at recreating them in real life. But more interesting, and for the purpose of this essay, more applicable, is Foucault's concept of a heterotopia.

Foucault claims that in every culture there can be found real places that are created at the very conception of society that act as a sort of "counter-site." These counter-sites are in

practice an “enacted utopia” (p. 4, Foucault) in which all the other real sites of that same culture are represented, contradicted, or otherwise turned upside down – all at once. And even if these kinds of places do have a physical location that can be identified and accessed, they are still fundamentally places outside of all other places. Foucault calls these esoteric spaces “heterotopias,” as a contrast to utopias, because they are so fundamentally different from all the elements that constitute them. The best way to understand heterotopias is by example, and this is why the majority of “Utopias and Heterotopias” is devoted to providing a long list of examples of heterotopias and their guiding principles. The most accessible of these is the example of a mirror. A mirror is a utopia in that it is a place that does not exist, it shows you existing in a place where you do not in fact exist. But a mirror is also a heterotopia, because it occupies a very real place in reality, and it therefore becomes a portal between yourself and the utopia of the mirror. It is a heterotopia in that it is both real and unreal at the same time.

But in order to understand heterotopias more specifically, and then apply them to an analysis of *Drive My Car* and the short stories that preface this project, we must divide them into the 6 principles that Foucault does in his essay. The first principle is that aside from no single culture in the world failing to make up a heterotopia, there isn’t a single type of “universal heterotopia.” However, heterotopias can be classified into two types. The first type is defined by Foucault to be “heterotopias of crisis.” These tended to form in “primitive societies,” and were privileged or sacred spaces where people in a state of “crisis” (teenagers, pregnant women, the elderly, etc.) could find refuge. The second type is what heterotopias of crisis have morphed into with the progression of times: heterotopias of deviation. Examples of these include psychiatric hospitals, prisons, retirement homes, etc. These heterotopias are essentially heterotopias of crisis shifted from the sacred to the functional.

The second principle is that as a society's history unfolds, an existing heterotopia can function in a very different way as time and the culture which adopts that heterotopia changes. Take, for example, cemeteries. Cemeteries are unarguably heterotopias in that they are nothing like the rest of cultural spaces humans occupy and yet they are fundamentally connected to all of them, as they're the end point of all cultural activity in any cultural space. Until the end of the 18th century cemeteries were placed at the heart of a city or town and always next to a church. In a time dominated by a belief that your soul would ascend to heaven or burn in hell, what happened to your physical body wasn't a great priority. But as the question of resurrection (and all Christian beliefs, for that matter) became increasingly questioned in the 19th century and onwards, we see the appearance of a hierarchy of tombs. We see bodies in charnel houses, in individual tombs, as well as in the churches themselves. Foucault claims that as society has become more atheistic, it has established a "cult of the dead," and from the 19th century and onwards we observe that suddenly everyone has a right to the physical space that is the coffin, and cemeteries are built further and further away from the previously Christian hearts of cities.

Besides heterotopias being sites of refuge that are subject to change depending on the times, the third principle of heterotopias is that they are capable of juxtaposing in a real place several places that are themselves incompatible. The oldest example that Foucault gives of this is the garden. Think of the gardens of the ancient Persians. These gardens were sacred spaces meant to unite the four distinct corners of the world. In reality, all the different parts of the world cannot exist in one place, but in the heterotopia of the Persian garden they exist in impossible simultaneity. To make matters more interesting, carpets were initially recreations of these gardens, and thus the rug becomes this same heterotopia that not only compresses the space of the universe, but can move through it seamlessly.

The fourth principle of heterotopias is that just as they are impossibly linked to space, they must also be impossibly linked to time. Heterotopias are most frequently connected to a specific instance in time, and indeed operate at full capacity when they cause some departure from the traditional concept of time. There are also heterotopias which, in contrast to being linked to some sort of an eternal accumulation of time, are linked to the concept of time being temporary. An example of such transitory time heterotopias are carnivals that only exist in a cyclical, temporary interval, in which they are filled with people, stands, and all the life in between.

The fifth principle of heterotopias is that they “presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable.” This is best understood by reverting back to the very first principle of heterotopias, and that is that they somehow serve a specific subgroup of individuals in a specific state. By restricting their access to a limited number of accessors, heterotopias become isolated, self-containing and self-defining objects. But they are as accessible as they are isolated, by virtue of the fact that they *do* make themselves accessible to a select few. This principle in specific will become clearer shortly as I delve into the applications of heterotopias to Kafuku’s red Saab.

And the sixth, and final, principle of heterotopias is that they must have some function or purpose with respect to all the space remaining, all the space that is not included in the heterotopia itself. The way in which heterotopias do this is divided between two extremes. Their purpose is to either expose all the reality that surrounds heterotopias as more of an illusion than the illusion of the heterotopia itself, or to create a reality that is as perfect as our true reality is imperfect.

NON-PLACES

Another way to understand spaces and their evolutionary role in society is provided in Marc Augé's book *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Augé defines a particular kind of space that has come to dominate society that he defines as the “non-place.” What a non-place is at its core is a space produced by all the conditions of modernity that differ from other spaces in that they cannot be defined as related to history or any source of identity at all. Non-places create what Augé calls a “solitary contractility” where people only interact with the non-place through signs, screens, and formal contracts – never through people, identity, or culture. And thus the easiest way to distinguish a non-place from its surroundings is to search for what it is not. A place is interconnected and relational, and has at least some entanglement with identity and history. If a place does not have these, then it must be a non-place.

In non-places, multiple people do coexist, but they do so without ever interacting. People in non-places are passengers or customers, and their only common sense of identity is that within this non-place they don't have one. Non-places can contain references to history, but these references are a curiosity, a place of memory, rather than something lived and integrated into the fabric of the non-place itself. Any reference to history within a non-place cannot be a true component of it, and it functions more like a painting on the wall of a gallery. As already mentioned, non-places are the concrete real-world manifestations of supermodernity. But more specifically, non-places are characterized by three metrics of excess. An excess of events, an excess of space (and the subsequent shrinking of the world that comes from this excess of space, as in telecommunications or transport), and an individualization of references. An individualization of references is an interesting paradox in which as the individual becomes more entangled in history than ever, the world's collective anchor points for shared identity become increasingly weaker, and history drifts from the communal to the individual. An example of this is how people in the modern era aspire to be

these self-contained entities who interpret information for themselves and by themselves instead of seeking an external source of interpretation that would be found through a community practice such as religion. The supermodern condition of an excess of individualization of references can be seen as the world around us increasingly emphasizes the personal and internal. Personal fulfilment, personal appearance, and personal appearance have all trumped their historical communal equivalents.

The actual mechanics of non-places follow very closely from their definition. All the interactions in a non-place do not occur between individuals. They occur through text, instructions, prohibitions, information such as “no smoking” or “take right-hand lane,” and prompts on a cash dispenser, among other things. All movement within a non-place, from entry to exit, is governed by a contract such as a ticket or credit card. Time within a non-place is experienced as what Augé calls a “perpetual present,” in which time is measured through units such as schedules, timetables, and delays instead of being measured relative to historical points of reference (think back to how deeply historical the way we classify the year, the months, and even the 24 hours in a day is). Another curious aspect of non-places is that individuals within non-places can never truly be members of those non-places. Everyone in a non-place is a spectator, even when they’re surrounded by thousands of other people, because they’re alone and all their communication with the environment is silent. A final interesting aspect of non-places is that they, unlike Foucault’s heterotopias, never exist purely. Places can be found within non-places and non-places can exist within places. Some examples of non-places to keep in mind before we get into specific examples of non-places in *Drive My Car* are all forms of transport and transit, supermarkets, accommodation like hotels, technology and infrastructure, and leisure parks and sport spaces.

HOW DRIVE MY CAR TURNS NON-PLACES INTO HETEROTOPIAS: CONNECTION, CONFESSION & CATHARSIS

To connect Foucault's heterotopias and Augé's non-places to *Drive My Car*, we must look at how the movie frames the red Saab against its external environment and how the plot of the movie evolves within it. By analyzing the specific scenes and dialogues that occur within this car, we can see how the car acts as a heterotopia for catharsis, connection, and subsequent growth within the non-places of Hiroshima.

1. The Tyranny of the Non-Place

Augé defines non-places as spaces governed by solitary contractuality and an excess of space where all individuals existing in a non-place are removed from any sense of shared identity or history. An example of such a space is the motorway. When we see Kafuku driving at 37:30 and 39:00, this image of a non-place is emphasized in the sheer expanse of the empty Hiroshima motorways in contrast to the small red Saab. The car, and Kafuku inside of it, loses its identity for a moment as we see it pooling into the mass of cars, all stripped of any sense of identity on the bare Hiroshima highways. Hiroshima is itself incredibly historical, but all traces of that history disappear in the grey roads that Kafuku's measly car crawls across. But the red Saab doesn't remain in this pool of nameless vehicles forever. As is visible at the 39:00 minute mark, Kafuku's car stands out in bright red relative to the rest of the highway, suggesting that this car isn't the perfect "nameless observer" that Augé defines to be the condition of people within a non-place. The red Saab calls attention to itself, and cannot permanently disappear into the crowd. It has an identity.

2. The Solitary Heterotopia of Grief

Augé claims that heterotopias never exist alone, and that different places can form inside them. Kafuku's red Saab is an example of this, and it in particular functions as a heterotopia within a non-place. Initially it is an extraordinarily isolated heterotopia, opening its doors exclusively to Kafuku.

The first indication that the red Saab is a heterotopia stems from its unique relationship with time. Kafuku uses the red Saab as a method to keep the memory of his dead wife alive by listening to her tape recording of *Uncle Vanya* and reciting the lines that she leaves out. In the first instance of Kafuku listening to this recording, we physically see the movie cut to a scene where his wife is alive and creating the recording. And every time Kafuku replays the tape, he not only listens to but actively becomes part of a memory that no longer exists in time. The red Saab thus establishes an impossible link to time, and while externally it transports Kafuku from Tokyo to Hiroshima, internally it keeps him trapped in a time where Oto was still alive

From here, it's simple to see that the red Saab fulfils *all* of Foucault's requirements for heterotopias. Kafuku, in accordance with the first principle of heterotopias, is very much a man in crisis. He's grieving for his deceased wife and daughter. The Saab with a tape rolling inside of it constitutes the perfect example of a heterotopia which acts a sanctuary for Kafuku relative to the world around him, by allowing him to commune with a ghost. Here, in this sanctuary, Kafuku can relive and even partake in a memory that he elsewhere cannot. The heterotopia of the Saab will see a transformation as Kafuku's life outside of it changes, but this point is developed more in subsequent paragraphs that detail Kafuku's interactions and relationships with Misaki and Koji. As with the third principle, the red Saab juxtaposes the reality in which Oto is alive and the one in which she is not. In accordance with the fifth the

heterotopia of the red Saab opens and closes itself to whoever physically enters the car and partakes in the recreation of the memory of Oto. And finally, the red Saab fulfils the sixth principle of heterotopias in that it creates an illusion of Oto's continued existence, exposing the outside reality in which she does not exist as even more illusory than the illusion of her existence inside Kafuku's red Saab.

3. The Saab Shifts From a Solitary to a Connected Heterotopia

Of course, the heterotopia of the red Saab doesn't remain open exclusively to Kafuku. As the world changes externally to the car, so too does the nature of the heterotopia within that car begin to adapt to the world around it. This change occurs when Kafuku's red Saab transitions from a solitary heterotopia that serves only him to one that fosters the connections he makes—primarily with Misaki, but also with Koji. These are the connections that ultimately retire Kafuku from his life as a man in crisis.

This transition towards connection begins with Misaki. Initially, Misaki's role as a chauffeur mirrors the behavior typical of individuals within non-places. She has a contract with Kafuku and with the business that Kafuku is working for as a director, and initially Kafuku only interacts with Misaki through this contract. They sit in silence, and Misaki drives him from one place to another. Transportation is, after all, a non-place. And though Kafuku treats Misaki well—for example, by offering that she stay inside the car to protect herself from the elements—they don't break the non-place barrier until their relationship attains significance outside of the chauffeur-passenger contract.

The reason Misaki is able to form a significant connection with Kafuku outside of their chauffeur-passenger contract is because she enters Kafuku's heterotopia. When Misaki

is asked at the 47:15 mark to play the cassette, she becomes witness to all the same aspects of the heterotopia of the red Saab that Kafuku is. However, Misaki isn't fully incorporated into the heterotopia until she is aware that the voice in the recording is Oto's. Until then, she is only a witness to the heterotopia, not a fully assimilated member, a membership that she fully gains at 1:30:00. When Misaki confesses that she likes the voice behind the tape and asks whose it is, Kafuku finally admits it is his late wife's. Misaki can now be said to be fully incorporated into the heterotopia of the red Saab, as not only is she witness to all its constituent principles, she fully understands that the tape is a relic of the past and can be assimilated into the surreal and illusory environment of the red Saab. Now, upon being fully incorporated into this heterotopia, Misaki branches out and forms her first truly personal connection with Kafuku. When Kafuku asks her where she learned to drive so well, she tells him of her mother and her abuse, the Sapporo, and the pressures she faced at such a young age. The film, at 1:36:00, then cuts to another juxtaposition of the car against the motorway. Only this time the motorway is much smaller in contrast, as if the heterotopic world inside the car has dramatically expanded relative to the world outside it.

This connection between Kafuku and Misaki only strengthens with the development of the film. At the 1:38:00 mark Kafuku asks Misaki to take him anywhere in Hiroshima, and consequently he (knowingly or unknowingly) uses the red Saab to establish a better connection with Misaki. Here, Kafuku is using the red Saab to deliberately learn more about his chauffeur, and thus breaks from the contractual norms between chauffeur and passenger. By breaking from this contract Misaki confesses to witnessing the death of her mother, driving straight after the funeral to Hiroshima, and her subsequent life as a driver.

4. Dissolution of the Chauffeur-Passenger Contract

Augé notes that non-places rarely exist in purity. Other places can exist within them. And while the non-place contract between passenger and chauffeur is broken by many of Misaki and Kafuku's interactions in and outside of their heterotopia, the ultimate dissolution of this contract occurs at 2:15:00. Kafuku sits in the front seat next to Misaki, no longer a backseat customer, and explicitly breaks the rule he set at 47:00 to not smoke inside the car. They sit side by side, draw out their cigarettes, and smoke together as friends, as two individuals who have broken all the barriers between them of contractility and anonymity. Thus, the heterotopia inside the red Saab opens itself to Misaki, breaks the barriers of their contract by dissolving the non-place within the Saab, and becomes a place around which true emotional connections can form between individuals previously stripped of all individuality in the tyranny of non-places.

5. The Heterotopia of Confession

From a heterotopia of connection develops a heterotopia of confession, where individuals within the heterotopia of the red Saab confess to the parts of their life they otherwise do not mention—the parts of their identities that are only hinted at silently in other parts of the film.

The most crucial scene of confession occurs at the 2 hour mark, when Koji and Kafuku sit side-by-side in the backseat after returning from the bar (necessitated by Koji's own car being repaired). Bathed in darkness, offset only by the yellow glow of passing streetlights, Koji looks at Kafuku and states bluntly: "I'm empty. There's nothing inside of

me.” This is not a confession to *feeling* empty, but a blunt, cold admission of something he *knows* to be true of his soul.

Koji goes on to confess that he finally understands Kafuku’s theory regarding *Uncle Vanya* being a play that is meant to “question him.” He admits, in a lowered voice, that he felt that same existential questioning in Oto’s plays, and that he came here to Hiroshima in a desperate hope to feel that again. Koji concludes: “That bit about Oto bringing us together is true after all. I finally understand.” During this confession, the camera is distinctly fixed on Kafuku, forcing the audience to take in every subtle twitch of his lip and flicker of his eye. This reinforces that the heterotopia of the red Saab ultimately belongs to Kafuku; Koji’s confession is delivered *to* him, for *his* benefit. Kafuku grows in this moment, realizing that no matter how much he ignored Oto’s infidelities, her connection with Koji undeniably existed and was strong enough to bring Koji all the way to Hiroshima to perform *Uncle Vanya* with Kafuku as his director.

This is immediately followed by Kafuku’s own profound confession regarding his daughter’s death. He reveals: “Oto and I, we had a daughter. She died from pneumonia when she was 4. If she were alive now she’d be 23.” The camera pans to Misaki, where she glances back at Kafuku in the rearview mirror. Kafuku continues confessing: “Our daughter’s death marked the end of our happy times. Oto quit acting. I quit working in TV and returned to theatre. Oto was lethargic for years,” putting words to the scenes that preceded his move to Hiroshima for the first time. Kafuku then admits, and it is at this point that his confessions seem to be delivered uncontrollably and to the benefit of himself more than anyone else, the nature of Oto’s stories, how she gained inspiration for writing them, and that these stories “became a bond that helped us overcome our child’s death.” This knowledge isn’t necessary to Koji nor to Misaki, and indeed seems to be part of a conversation that Kafuku is having with himself, a conversation in which he comes to terms with the confessions that have laid

dormant in his mind for years. Kafuku confesses to Oto sleeping with other men, to how fulfilling their relationship was, to how he never doubted her love for him, and even to how he believed that Oto “contained within her a spot I couldn’t look into, where something dark swirled.” Kafuku’s expression amidst these confessions is far from cathartic, making these confessions a confrontation with his truth, but not yet a full assimilation of these truths into his heart.

6. The Mirror of Confession

Just as the red Saab’s ability to form connections transformed the lives of Kafuku and Misaki, its role as a confession booth of sorts dramatically shifts their perspectives on the outside world. When Koji asks Kafuku why he never confronted Oto about her affairs, Kafuku responds with the fact that “the thing I feared most was losing her.” At 2:05:00, the camera pans back to Koji, and his demeanour of superficiality seen throughout the film vanishes. He asks gravely “Isn’t it possible that she wanted you to hear her out?”

Koji then finishes Oto’s unfinished story about the high school girl whose hopeless love for her classmate Yamaga drives her to break into his house to leave personal items hidden throughout his room. Koji explains that the intruder was a burglar, and upon seeing the girl in Yamaga’s room, attempted to assault her. The girl, in a desperate attempt to free herself, murders the burglar, and flees Yamaga’s house. But the next day at school Yamaga acts as if nothing happened. Koji whispers: “Something terrible has happened, and she is to blame. The world acts as if nothing has changed. But the world has definitely changed to something sinister,” and in an attempt to prove that there’s something fundamentally different about the world and she’s to blame, the girl stands in front of the newly placed security camera in front of Yamaga’s house and confesses into the camera over and over again “I

killed him.” The implication here is excruciatingly clear, and it is an implication that Oto was experiencing a dreadful, internal terror, and longed for Kafuku to confront her about it.

In this exchange of confessions, Kafuku and Koji serve as mirrors for the other’s grief, turning blunt confession into the necessary groundwork for catharsis. Koji summarizes this process wonderfully: “Even if you think you know someone well, even if you love that person deeply, you can’t completely look into that person’s heart. You’ll just feel hurt. But if you put in enough effort, you should be able to look into your own heart pretty well... If you really want to look at someone, then your only option is to look at yourself squarely and deeply.” He knows he’ll never have a complete picture of the woman Oto was, and he also knows how deeply he loved her. And now, by cathartically accepting these truths through tears and stolen glances, Koji’s perspective on life and how to live it is changed forever.

7. Kafuku and Misaki’s Ultimate Catharsis

Kafuku’s and Misaki’s catharsis, the assimilation of the realities they have been confronted with, occurs at the red Saab’s final destination: the snowy hills of Hokkaido, resting beneath the remains of Misaki’s childhood home.

Crucially, this catharsis doesn’t need to take place inside the red Saab. The car has already done its job. It served as an incubator for their vulnerability, isolating them from the world and giving them the space necessary to confess to their truths. But true catharsis for the heterotopia’s true passengers requires stepping outside of this sanctuary and grounding these realizations in the unforgiving reality of the external world.

At 2:30:00, standing amid the snow, Misaki is confronted with the ghosts of her past. She confesses that her mother had a separate personality, Sachi, born of trauma when Misaki was only 14. At 2:38:00 Misaki admits: “Sachi was the last beautiful thing in my mother

condensed. Sachi was my only friend.” She reveals that her refusal to act during the mudslide was partly because she knew saving her mother meant saving her abuser. Just as Koji was confronted with the true nature of his relationship to Oto and then had to cathartically accept and live with these truths by incorporating them into a lesson that “to look into the hearts of others we must first take a good look at ourselves,” Sachi now goes through this same process with respect to her relationship with her mother. She understands why her mother had such a split personality, and she understands her own complicity in her mother’s death. And by leaving Hiroshima to visit that same place for the first time and leaving behind flowers, she can fully come to terms with that reality.

At 2:41:00, Misaki turns to Kafuku and asks if it would be hard for him to accept everything about Oto as genuine, and if “maybe there was nothing mysterious about her. Would it be hard to think that she was simply like that?” Here we see Kafuku’s catharsis, the first time he visibly expresses the grief he experiences over the loss of Oto. Stripped of the car’s protection, standing in Hokkaido with the young woman who drove him here, he finally lets go of his ghost: “I let something genuine slip by. I was so deeply hurt, to the point of distraction. But because of that I pretended not to notice it. I didn’t listen to myself, so I lost Otto, forever. Now I see. I want to see Otto. I want to yell at her, berate her, for lying to me all the time. I want to apologize, for not listening, for not being strong. I want her back. I want her to live. I want to talk to her just once more. I want to see her, but it’s too late, there’s no turning back. There’s nothing I can do.”

This scene of Kafuku completely breaking down into tears occurring not at his daughter’s funeral, nor when his wife died, but here, atop a mountain in Hokkaido with his chauffeur proves that only a heterotopia can drive one to such an emotional precipice. Kafuku embraces Misaki, and echoing the famous last lines in *Uncle Vanya*, says: “Those who

survive keep thinking about the dead. In one way or another, that will continue. You and I must keep living like that. We must keep on living. It'll be okay. I'm sure. We'll be okay."

Beginning with Koji, and ending here with Kafuku, we see how an acceptance of tragedy flowers into a philosophy of life that the victim of tragedy can live by. It is spurred into existence by a connection with others, first noticed amongst the weeds through a confession of said tragedy, and brought to life by a cathartic acceptance of that tragedy. And all of this occurs within or at least through the red Saab, the heterotopia that links Kafuku and Misaki to a past that does not exist and ultimately allows them to let go of that past. And thus, when we see Misaki driving off into the horizon in that same car, no cassette or Kafuku in sight, we know it has done its job, and can close itself to grief forever more.

8. The "Waterfall" of Connection, Confession, and Catharsis

The heterotopic ability of the red Saab to take in people in states of crisis and then "cure" them of those crises occurs in three waterfall stages: the first, is by fostering connection amongst the people within the red Saab. Connection between agents in the Saab ultimately leads to a confession of their deepest, darkest, and most fundamental truths as the kinds of connections the Saab forges are not superficial but incredibly introspective. And once we're confronted with our own truths and they lie scattered before our eyes, the only next step is to accept them for what they are, and to accept all the painful feelings that come with acceptance.

CONNECTIONS TO SHORT STORIES

It would be an incredibly difficult task to incorporate every element of *Drive My Car* and the behemoth of analysis above into a story, and would quickly exceed the scope and timeframe of this project. That being said, I have drawn many distinct parallels between my original short stories and the analysis of *Drive My Car* as a heterotopia that invades non-places to perform the task of allowing people to come to terms with their tragedies and live despite them. I wrote these stories in hopes that my analysis of *Drive My Car* can be made simple and intuitive.

The red Saab that Antonio Juarez uses as an Uber vehicle is the same form of heterotopia as Kafuku's. It's a red Saab, and has a distinct connection to a time in which a deceased wife once existed. Only in my short stories, this connection to time is not established through a specific cassette tape, and it is not established immediately at the start of the story. The specific link to time is visible at the end of every short story, when Antonio is reminded of a scene from the past that brings him back to a time when his wife, Mimi, was alive. These scenes are brought to his memory through human connection, as I wanted to emphasize the importance of otherness in bringing the protagonist towards catharsis. For example, in the first story, dated June 2026, Antonio is reminded of a piece of wisdom his wife once gave him when his passengers appear to fear time slipping away from them and what that would mean for their friendship. Interpersonal connection here waterfalls into confession of one's past tragedies much more distinctly in my short stories than it does in *Drive My Car*, and occurs periodically at the end of the stories so as to solidify its cyclicity.

As in *Drive My Car*, Antonio's red Saab sees a transformation from being an Uber vehicle to the car that takes Antonio towards a reconciliatory future in Panama through a series of personal transformations that take place within the Saab. We can see this in the way

Antonio's Saab functions increasingly less like an Uber as the story progresses. In the first story, he transports three kids and doesn't significantly break the chauffeur-passenger non-place contract apart from imparting a small piece of wisdom. But in the second, as he's taking a young fiancé to the airport, he has a true human conversation with her. He learns about her destination, her motivations, and we even learn of his wife here for the first time. This passage marks the point at which Antonio is explicitly confronted with the passing of his wife, and this confrontation is a direct consequence of the connections he establishes outside of the non-place contract of the Uber, making it less of an Uber and more of a vehicle of grief processing. And finally, when Antonio comes face-to-face with a face from the past, the Uber takes Antonio towards his final destination (Panama) as much as it takes Taylor to his home. We see the final transformation in the Saab in the final story, when Antonio is no longer an Uber driver, and therefore the Saab is no longer his vehicle, just as Kafuku's heterotopia ceases to be his once it has solved its purpose in enabling him to process his grief.

In the same way Kafuku's Saab juxtaposes realities, so too does Antonio's juxtapose the reality in which Mimi was alive with the one in which she is not. I do this here by beginning each story with a recollection of the past. By beginning each story with a memory, such as the time when Antonio was united with his friends in Panama or when he and Mimi drove up the coast in the same car he now uses as an Uber, the reality in which Mimi was alive is kept alive inside the car, because it's kept alive inside Antonio's mind. And this juxtaposition becomes very obvious to the reader because it's literally held up in front of each and every short story.

And finally, Antonio's car fulfils its functions of being a heterotopia by opening and closing itself to distinct individuals and depicting the world outside it as illusory through illusion in the same manner as Kafuku's. The heterotopia in my short stories is only fully open to Antonio by virtue of the fact that Antonio's memories are only his, and since the

things he recalls within the red Saab are the same sort of heterotopic key that Kafuku's cassette tape and the voices behind it were for Kafuku and Misaki, Antonio's red Saab is a heterotopia that only opens itself to Antonio. I tried to depict the way in which heterotopias, and especially Kafuku's heterotopia, make the world around them more illusory through illusion through the fragmented, mirage-like reminiscences at the beginning of every story. The red Saab, in constantly connecting Antonio to his past, is an illusion of times and people that no longer exist. But it is an illusion that makes the times he's reminiscing even more of an illusion, as these memories are brought to the reader in fragmented highly descriptive pieces of another man's life with something always seemingly missing.

The heterotopia in *Drive My Car* is unique in that it resolves Kafuku of his crisis of grief through a waterfall process of fostering connection, enabling confession, and bringing about catharsis through the acceptance of grief. I wanted to emulate this same phenomenon in *Drive My Car* by dividing it into three main episodes and a fourth conclusion, just as there are in my analysis of *Drive My Car*. The first story demonstrates how connection is always the first step in the resolution of guilt within a heterotopia. The kids' fear of a loss of connection, and that fear is what reminds Antonio of his own old connection to Mimi. And by imparting Mimi's wisdom unto the kids he's chauffeuring, Antonio establishes a connection with them, albeit a momentary one. That connection becomes more prominent and waterfalls to confession in the second story, when establishing a connection with a woman travelling to London is what leads Antonio to confess the death of his wife. In the final complete story, through a connection and confrontation with Taylor, meant to mirror the connections and confrontations we see between Kafuku and Koji, we see Antonio accept the truth of his wife's death, and incorporate this into his life through a philosophy of completing what she couldn't by moving back to Panama to build the house they always dreamt of. And to depict the cathartic nature of acceptance and transformation of grief into philosophy, I intended

Antonio's "I am Antonio Juarez, I am 57 years old, and today I begin anew. Today I become something that I have never been, not to anyone in the backseat of my Saab, not to my brother-in-law, not to myself" to mirror the cathartic and ultimately philosophical nature of Kafuku's final monologue.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the best understanding of the red Saab and how it functions in *Drive My Car* is as a physical manifestation of the tumultuous process that is grief. Both Kafuku's and Antonio's cars begin as an oasis of memory, trapping their drivers in a perpetual present where the voices of the dead remain forever with them. However, by opening this restricted space to others and by using this space as a means to reach out to others, the red Saab goes from a place of isolated mourning to a heterotopia of connection. The waterfall-like effect of the Saab moves from fostering deep interpersonal bonds to enabling the confession of dormant tragedies to finally allowing for a cathartic acceptance of these tragedies demonstrate that ultimately, what it takes to let go of one's ghosts is to grip onto others. And once this heterotopia has fulfilled its main purpose of "curing" the passengers in crisis, it closes itself to grief entirely, and transitions from a vehicle of grief to just another mode of transit once more. As we see Misaki drive off into the horizon, and Antonio check in for his flight to Panama, we see that coming to terms with tragedy is not the end of the story, but a prerequisite to living anyway. Just as in Sonya's final monologue in *Uncle Vanya*, the resolution the passengers of the red Saab achieve suggests that while the weight of what we can no longer carry in time remains in our hearts, we must continue to endure and live until, at last, *we shall rest*.

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