MOTORCARS AND MAGIC HIGHWAYS: THE AUTOMOBILE AND COMMUNICATION IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE AND FILM

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Motorcars and Magic Highways examines the nexus between transportation and communication in the development of the automobile across the twentieth century. While early responses to the automobile emphasized its democratizing and liberating potential, the gradual integration of the automobile with communications technologies and networks over the twentieth century helped to organize and regulate automobile use in ways that would advance state and corporate interests. Where the telegraph had separated transportation and communication in the nineteenth century, the automobile's development reintegrates these functions through developments like the two-way radio, car phones, and community wireless networks. As I demonstrate through a cultural study of literature and film, these new communications technologies contributed to the standardization and regulation of American auto-mobility. Throughout this process, however, authors and filmmakers continued to turn to the automobile as a vehicle of social critique and resistance.

Chapter one, "Off the Rails: Potentials of Automobility in Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser, and Sinclair Lewis," establishes the transformative potential that early users saw in the automobile. I argue that Wharton's *A Motor-Flight Through France* (1908), for instance, offers the motorcar as a means of helping the leisure traveler develop a better sense of history and cultivating an aesthetic sensibility superior to that of the railroad passenger. Compared to the railway--a social force that standardized space and time and regulated mobility through fixed routes and schedules--all three writers believe the automobile makes the traveler more independent and provides a closer communion with the natural world.

Chapter two contrasts the linear, rational thinkers who characterize literary detectives from Sherlock Holmes through the Golden Age of Detective fiction with the hardboiled heroes of Dashiell Hammett and his disciples. I argue that while the former align with a society organized around rail travel and the telegraph, the hardboiled detective novel reflects the public's shifting relationship with police and state power as a result of the rise of the automobile's new power to

communicate through the two-way radio. Hardboiled detectives have an adverse relationship with often corrupt police departments who serve economic elites rather than the public interest. The success of these detectives depends not on mastery of arcane knowledge, but on physical strength and a mastery of geographic space, in contrast to the close confines of the English country house or the locked room. Finally, while the linear thinking and rational deduction of earlier detectives are aligned with the railway, hardboiled detective methods, which rely on gut instincts and agile, inductive reasoning capable of following disparate threads that appear and disappear suddenly, reflect the speed and independent mobility of the automobile.

Chapter three continues the analysis of the communicative automobile and the unstable urban space it creates by examining film noir. I argue that the automobile is a significant yet relatively unexamined element in film noir: the editing, shot composition, and special effects used in automobile scenes in such films as *Double Indemnity* (1944) evoke an unstable urban landscape that the automobile transforms: constantly shifting, difficult to navigate, devoid of landmarks, and concealing threats and snares from seemingly every direction. At the same time, films noir also reveal that many of the potential advantages perceived in the early stages of the automobile now lie unfulfilled. *Double Indemnity* picks up the comparison of automobile and the railway that characterized Wharton's, Dreiser's, and Lewis's texts, but the flexibility and freedom identified in those early texts have now devolved into impulsiveness and criminality. While the early automobile offered escape from the structural control and surveillance of the railway, films such as *The Killers* (1946) and *Out of the Past* (1947) reveal that the transportation infrastructure growing up around the automobile has rendered such escape unlikely.

Chapter four explores the public desire to communicate from the automobile to the outside world. The car radio made it possible for the state and corporations to broadcast to the automobile, but government regulations largely restricting the two-way radio to police departments and emergency services made it impossible to speak back. I demonstrate the anxiety of this violation of the autonomy of the automobile through close readings of Ralph Ellison,

Hunter S. Thompson, and Allen Ginsberg. Furthermore, I argue that artists responded to this imbalance by incorporating electronic communications equipment and the automobile into their compositional process. Examining the production histories and offering close readings of Tom Wolfe,. Thompson, and Ginsberg, I demonstrate that such writers combined communication technology and the automobile to create new artistic forms, such as New Journalism, and to compose critiques of American militarism and consumer culture.

Chapter five, "Solitary Bartlebies: Resistance to the Superhighway in Kerouac and Didion" examines Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays* (1971) in the context of the rise of the superhighway and the birth of the Interstate Highway System. Through a history of the superhighway, I demonstrate that the prevailing ethic was one of maximizing individual and national productivity. Like Melville's Bartleby, whose refrain "I would prefer not to" confounds his employer, Kerouac's and Didion's protagonists refuse submission, expressing their resistance through the automobile. Kerouac's Sal Paradise rejects the superhighway and its productivity ethic, instead hitching across the nation's back roads in an effort to establish new forms of community. Maria Wyeth in *Play It as It Lays*, on the other hand, subverts the superhighway ethic by ritually circulating through the Los Angeles highway system aimlessly without destination.

The final chapter, "Decline and Collapse on the Magic Highway," examines the development of and the artistic response to the intelligent traffic systems and fully communicative automobiles that characterize driving in the twenty-first century. Late twentieth-century writers have associated this new stage of the automobile with decline and collapse. Don Delillo's *Cosmopolis* details the full and final convergence of communications technology and the automobile, along with its dangers and possibilities, featuring a fund manager who crashes the global economy from the backseat of his limousine while driving across New York City. In many ways, this final integration of communication and transportation closes off many of the possibilities early motorists saw in the automobile, strengthening the neo-conservative state by

enabling direct and indirect control of individual mobility and strengthening corporations by intensifying the relationship between mobility and commercial consumption.

For Beth, my favorite traveling companion

and for Travis, whose adventures are just beginning

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Introduction

In the summer of 1902, several Chicago suburbs launched a crusade against the automobile. Not yet produced in numbers sufficient or at prices affordable for the masses, but no longer (in metropolitan areas, at least) rare enough to be a mere curiosity, the automobile was something of a nuisance for towns like Oak Park, Evanston, Glencoe, and Lake Forest. Chicago motorists frequently drove through these communities on their weekend excursions, paying little heed to the 8-12 mile-per-hour speed limits. To determine whether an automobile was speeding, local police would typically position officers at three intervals along city streets. The first officer would wave a flag when an automobile passed his position; the second officer, stationed a set distance down the road, would begin timing the automobile, and when it passed his own position, calculate the automobile's speed. If the car was found to be speeding, he would signal to the third officer who would then wave the motorist down.

There were two obvious problems with this system. The first was visibility: motorists could easily identify where the course began and either adjust their speed accordingly or else adjust their route in order to speed with impunity a few blocks away. By 1905, police in Glencoe had taken to hiding their officers in the grass on the side of the road, signaling one another electronically so as to avoid detection by motorists. Still, most offenders belonged to automobile clubs, and word of the locations of such speed traps spread quickly among members. The second problem—one shared by communities across the country—was how actually to enforce speed ordinances, given that a motorist who was disinclined to stop could in most cases easily evade police officers working on foot or by bike. Even a motorist who was gracious enough to stop could still speed off at

any time rather than paying a fine. The ultimate solution to this problem was to require that each automobile communicate its owner's identity through an identifying marker (the owner's name, initials, or registration number) painted or attached to the exterior surface. Such laws, first passed in New York in 1901 and in all 48 states by 1915, were vigorously resisted by automobile manufacturers and some motor clubs; deriding such laws as "class legislation," motorists challenged their constitutionality in court and frequently flouted them in public.

In the meantime, communities resorted to other means to enforce laws against "scorching." Rather than simply flagging speeding motorists down, they armed their speed traps with heavy ropes, steel cables, railroad ties, logs, large furniture wagons, and other impediments that could be pulled across the road to force speeding autos to stop. On July 27, 1902, several North Shore suburbs coordinated their efforts, setting up roadblocks from Evanston to Lake Forest along Sheridan Road. In Winnetka, police were armed with a rope to stretch across the road. In Highland Park and Lake Forest, officers planned to roll logs across the road, and as the *Chicago Tribune* warned: "If a driver going either north or south escapes the police in all these towns, he will probably meet his Waterloo when he encounters the steel cable stretched across the road in Glencoe" ("Woe for Devil Wagons").

This story is far from unique—the *Tribune* carried scores of articles about the "auto wars" in the suburbs for the next several years, and news of the skirmishes was also carried in national automotive journals such as *Motor Age.* Chicago's auto wars are revealing for a few reasons. First, as the experience of Chicago and other cities suggests, the automobile challenged a social order organized around other modes of mobility,

offering more speed and power than any other means of personal mobility while maintaining a freedom of navigation and personal control unavailable through rail travel. Second, the Glencoe police department's use of an electronic communication mechanism to monitor and capture speeders along local roads provides an early instance of the integration of communication technology and automotive transportation. Finally, these low-tech systems of ropes, logs, and steel cables used to stop speeding motorists anticipates the more technologically sophisticated means used to monitor and control movement in the active traffic management systems of the modern intelligent highway, which combines the transportation infrastructure of the superhighway with the communication infrastructure of the information superhighway.

Incumbent with the automobile's challenge to the regulation of mobility was a potential to challenge the social order in other ways. Early motorists and observers, including Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser, and Sinclair Lewis, whose work I will examine in Chapter 1, believed the automobile had the potential to, among other things, transform the public's relationship with nature, improve a sense of community, ease class relations, and enhance individual freedom. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, such optimism seems misplaced: our reliance on the automobile has caused immeasurable damage to the environment, is often cited by critics as a key factor in the destruction of inner city communities and urban sprawl, has exacerbated class conflict, and constrained motorists with heavy traffic and long commutes. How, then, did a technology which fostered such optimism among early users come to contribute so prominently to the same social problems that early users thought it might alleviate? By what means was an invention which so emphatically resisted the ordered, regulated

mobility of its day used to create a new transportation system in which mobility is yet more ordered and subordinated to political and economic interests? This dissertation offers a history of the automobile that pays particular attention to the integration of the automobile and communications technology over the course of the twentieth century, and demonstrates that this integration provides an important framework through which the American political and economic systems sought to resolve the challenge and transformative potential of the automobile.

Prior to the invention of the telegraph, as James Carey has noted, the functions of communication and transportation had been essentially identical, since aside from limited exceptions such as carrier pigeons and smoke signals, moving information meant moving people. Moreover, in separating communication and transportation, the telegraph subordinated the latter, with railway telegraph operators playing a central role in controlling the safe operation of multiple trains on the same line. This separation had profound effects on political and economic power. The telegraph made it easier to manage the periphery of empire from a central location, transforming politically powerful entities from "colonialism, where power and authority rested with the domestic governor, to imperialism, where power and authority were reabsorbed by the imperial capital" (163). The telegraph centralized commerce as well. It facilitated more expansive territories and hierarchies within business organizations, since business transactions no longer needed to be personal or face-to-face.

By the time the automobile emerged in the late nineteenth century, then, transportation and communication were no longer synonymous, and communications technology was used to control and regulate mass mobility along the railway. As I

demonstrate, the history of the automobile can be understood, to a significant degree, as an attempt to reconvene these functions of communication and transportation in the automotive space; while rudimentary automobiles relied on their drivers to communicate even the simplest message to fellow drivers and pedestrians, the modern automobile—and its driver—is fully integrated into the information superhighway through such devices as the cellular phones and smart phones, GPS navigation systems, and roadside assistance services such as OnStar. The telegraph was quickly incorporated as a means of controlling the railroad; likewise, the integration with communication networks, though taking much longer with the automobile, has made it easier to control and regulate automobility. More generally, just as the separation of communication and transportation created new possibilities for social relations and the dispersal and diffusion of power, the reconvening of these functions in the automobile facilitates new forms of community, new structures of power, and new means of resistance.

Motorcars and Magic Highways explores this process of reintegration. Individual chapters trace an episode in that history, unpacking the political and social implications of a stage in that development (the introduction of the two-way radio, for instance) through sources such as magazine and newspaper articles, popular fiction, and government documents, and then pairs that history with close readings of literary and cinematic texts. The historical context and close readings are mutually informative: the texts add texture to the history, revealing social and cultural changes wrought by the automobile along with the attendant anxieties and exhilarations; at the same time, the context gives nuance and shape to the texts themselves, revealing the historical significance of texts that have been generally overlooked (such as Sinclair Lewis's *Fresh*

Air and Larry McMurtry's *Cadillac Jack*), informing the study of genres (such as hardboiled detective fiction, film noir, and new journalism), and challenging conventional readings of canonical texts (such as Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*). Taken together, they reveal the role writers and filmmakers played in socially constructing the automobile and automobile culture, as well as the role the automobile played in transforming social relations and the literary imagination.

The opening chapter examines the automobile as an escape from the transportation and communication networks of the rail and the telegraph, providing a potentially productive disruption to the increasingly standardized, rationalized, and regulated space and time that these technologies helped to initiate. Chapters two and three concern the two-way radio. While the car radio enabled the passive reception of commercial broadcasting, the two-way radio allowed interactive communication from the automobile to the world; however, federal regulations and licensing requirements largely restricted its use to police departments and other emergency services. The two-way radio transformed the relationship between the police and the public and intensified the automobile's transformation of urban space, as I demonstrate in my studies of hardboiled detective fiction (chapter two) and film noir (chapter three). Chapter four explores the long history of automobile telephony, which speaks to the strong public desire to be able to communicate from the automobile to the world; attempts to integrate telephone and automobile begin as early as 1906, but the car phone was not widely available to the public until the 1980s. In the meantime, authors and artists improvised their own combination of car and communications, bringing electronic recording equipment into the automobile to compose their work, shaping new artistic forms in the process. The

final chapters turn to the development of the contemporary highway systems. Chapter five examines the interstate highway system, which created a national transportation network that complemented national communication networks and which was, like the rail networks the automobile initially provided escape from, highly standardized and regulated. This systematization was designed to maximize individual and national productivity; still, authors turned to the automobile to resist, celebrating the potential of earlier forms of automobility. Chapter six analyzes contemporary intelligent highway systems, which fully integrate transportation and communication networks, intensifying the ability of state and capital to regulate, control, and profit from mass mobility. In response to this final integration of communication and transportation, authors offer depictions of cultural decline and fantasies of collapse.

Reading the primary texts in this dissertation within that historical narrative reveals a constellation of themes important to American studies, including the relationship with the natural world, social class, standardization, mass culture, and the exercise of state and corporate power. Some of these themes fade in some stages and re-emerge in others, but in each case the automobile provides artists with a powerful vehicle for analyzing these forces and their evolution in American culture throughout the twentieth century.

With respect to class, the three texts examined in the first chapter reveal the automobile's rapidly shifting status as a class signifier in the opening decades of the twentieth century. While Wharton, writing when the automobile remains an expensive toy available only to the well-to-do, values the motorcar for keeping her separate from the masses traveling by railway, Dreiser values its potential to improve life for the

American worker, with whom his sympathies lie. For Lewis, whose work frequently relies on tension between lower classes which have heart but not taste and an upper class which has taste but lacks heart, the automobile has the potential to elevate the culture of the former and humanize the latter.

Whatever potential for class transformation may be invested in the automobile at its outset, this potential fades in later decades. Mastery of the automobile and the varied, expansive geography of the motorized city affords the mostly working-class hardboiled detectives with a certain power and vitality; still, that power is largely limited to carrying out the will of their wealthy clients. The film noir of the 1940s and 1950s, by contrast, makes clear that the automobile, contrary to Wharton's expectations, provides no protection for the wealthy, and any potential it offers working class characters to transcend class is ultimately revealed to be illusory. Class emerges again as a key factor in the final text of the final chapter, Don Delillo's *Cosmopolis* (2005), which follows a wealthy investment banker across Manhattan in a bulletproof limousine complete with all the amenities of home (including, of course, communication technologies such as satellite television and the internet). Almost a century after Wharton celebrates the automobile for the protection it affords the wealthy traveler, such protection has been reinstated, intensified even, in the hyper-communicative automobile. (A new incarnation of Dreiser's and Lewis's optimism, on the other hand, may still arise but is not yet in evidence.)

The automobile's relationship to nature and to the increased standardization of American culture in the 1900s is more complicated than one might initially suspect, given that America's dependence on the automobile has long been a source of concern for

environmental activists and social critics alike. Between the raw materials used to build automobiles, the fossil fuels they consume, the byproducts they emit, and the miles of landscape leveled for highways and parking lots, the environmental impact of the automobile is inestimable. Though manufacturers continue to market the automobile as a means to access nature, it is difficult not to notice the irony in the commercial trope featuring vehicles in majestic natural settings rather than on miles of concrete. But as obvious as the irony is now, the automobile did, in its early years, genuinely provide urban populations access to the great outdoors as well as a means of temporary escape from urban areas which, even then, were already rife with environmental problems. For the authors I examine in the opening chapter, the motorcar offered more opportunities to experience nature and provided a closer communion with nature than did the rail. The rhapsodic descriptions of roads and their surrounding landscapes suggests not an intrusion into the wilderness, but absorption by it. Though the hardboiled detectives examined in chapter two are primarily urban creatures, here too the automobile frequently provides access to rural and natural areas outside of the city. The detective's mastery of the automobile, including his ability to move between gritty urban spaces and the apparently (though not always actually) tranquil spaces outside the city, is often central to his success.

The analysis of film noir in chapter three reveals that faith in the idyllic automobile begins to dwindle. My analysis reveals not changing attitudes towards the automobile so much as changing attitudes towards the pastoral, though the two are certainly related. In a genre which often explores the confusing, dangerous, labyrinthine nature of the mid-century American city, characters often harbor fantasies of a simpler

life outside the city; though the automobile may indeed be able to transport them to such an environment, the reality rarely lives up to expectations. As I demonstrate, the failure of the pastoral ideal in these films is often a function of the automobile itself, which even as it makes the border between urban and rural more porous, facilitates the exportation of urban dangers to the countryside.

This emerging ambivalence towards the automobile and the natural world continues in the decades that follow. Some, such as the Merry Pranksters profiled in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and Jack Kerouac in *On the Road*, see the automobile as a path into nature, and even argue that the automobile can intensify the transformative effects of nature and the wilderness. Others are less optimistic: though Allen Ginsberg's "Wichita Vortex Sutra" entwines the automobile with nature, he also undermines the pastoral ideal by presenting the Midwestern landscape as the incubator for the Vietnam War. By the final chapter, no such optimism remains. The automobile may still provide theoretical access to nature, as it does in Larry McMurtry's *Cadillac Jack*, but that nature is largely illusory, existing (and accessed) primarily through the narrator's memory, whereas the bulk of the novel takes place in metropolitan Washington, D.C. Other authors are even less optimistic: the automobile takes the protagonists deep into the wilderness in Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, but these protagonists also seek to destroy automotive infrastructure in order to save the natural world they love. In Delillo's *Cosmopolis*, on the other hand, nature is simply outside the scope of the narrative. Though in its early stages the automobile genuinely brought its users closer to nature, by the middle of the century that potential has been complicated by the increased use and more developed infrastructure of the automobile.

By the end of the century, the merging of communication and transportation networks has foreclosed on the pastoral possibilities of the automobile.

Similarly, the automobile is both product and productive of mass culture and standardization. More than any other product, the automobile (and, specifically, Henry Ford) is associated with the initiation of mass production practices valuing standardization and efficiency. Beyond Fordist production models, the automobile has been associated with cultural standardization through its role in such phenomena as suburbanization, fast food and restaurant franchises, shopping malls, and so on. But while the automobile is both a powerful standardizing force and an essential site of regulation and control, it was not always thus. As I demonstrate in chapter one, the initial appearance of the automobile disrupted a social order organized around the disciplined, regulated, standardized mobility of the railway, and early users valued the machine in no small part because it provided an escape from the organized, systematic mobility of railroad travel.

Other scholars have examined how mass automobility was eventually organized and controlled, particularly after World War II. Communications scholar Jeremy Packer analyzed the process of disciplining mobility, particularly following World War II, in *Mobility without Mayhem* (2008), demonstrating how an emerging regime of safety supported by government regulations and the insurance industry helped bring the mass mobility of automobile culture under control. Like Packer, Cotten Seiler's *Republic of Drivers* (2008) examines post-war automobility through the lens of governmentality. My work supplements theirs by illustrating the role that the advances in the automobile itself, particularly its incorporation of communications technologies, played in its eventual

assimilation. In offering a long view of that process, my project also explores the mayhem that persists in the interim. This mayhem is particularly characteristic of the hardboiled fiction and films noir examined in chapters two and three. The texts I examine in chapters four and five reveal that the automobile retains the potential, in the right circumstances, to productively confront and disrupt established structures of state and corporate power.

The development of the hyper-communicative automobile expanded the power of the state and the reach of the market, and the texts I examine throughout the dissertation explore the new relationships among citizens, states, and corporations. The automobile also, in many cases, provides a vehicle of resistance to these new vectors of power. Power becomes a central issue in the second chapter, with the introduction of the two-way radio, which changed the relationship between the public and police departments. I argue that the history of detective fiction from Sherlock Holmes through the Golden Age of Detective fiction was heavily influenced by a society organized around railway travel. In contrast, hardboiled detective fiction, which sprung from the pages of pulp magazines in the 1920s, reflects the automotive age, breaking from previous detective stories in its treatment of space, in the characters and social institutions it represents, and even in the method of detection that its heroes employ. One of the most important distinctions is the hardboiled detective's adversarial relationship with police, who are depicted as corrupt, violent, and operating with unchecked power. This concern with police power remains preeminent into chapter four, which explores the composition of texts through the combination of the automobile and electronic recording equipment. The texts in question are often particularly critical of police power, and offer the automobile as a means of

resisting that power. Concern with economic power becomes more prominent in this chapter as well. Ginsberg's "Wichita Vortex Sutra," in particular, argues that the nexus of corporate power, military power, and the media is responsible for such travesties as institutionalized racism and the Vietnam War.

Chapter five brings capital to the fore as an oppositional force, with the rise of the superhighway helping organize a system of automobility designed to maximize productivity. The final integration of communication networks and transportation networks helps initiate an integration of economic and political power. The texts in chapter six observe a state largely subsumed by corporate power. Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* identifies a conglomerated cartel of governments and corporate powers replacing the state, while McMurtry's *Cadillac Jack* finds the economically powerful scavenging what remains of a state in the midst of cultural decline. In Delillo's *Cosmopolis*, the state has been rendered all but irrelevant in the face of global capitalism. Just as the telegraph, by separating communication from transportation, enabled new forms of economic power (the hierarchical corporation) and state power (nation and empire), the reintegration of these functions over the twentieth century has helped usher in an era of global capitalism. Even so, *Cosmopolis*, in which the protagonist crashes the global economy from the back of his limousine while driving across Manhattan, suggests that in the hyper-communicative automobile global capitalism has sown the seeds of its own destruction.

Chapter One: Off the Rails: The Potentials of Automobility in Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser, and Sinclair Lewis

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the automobile has been at the root of a variety of ills afflicting the modern city: urban sprawl and standardized suburbs, congested streets, and increased pollution. But while automobile culture's contribution to these conditions in the contemporary city is undeniable, they were also common complaints in the cities of the early 1900s, where the automobile was not (yet) the cause: the suburbs had been made possible by urban streetcar lines; the streets were clogged with a combination of pedestrians, horse-drawn vehicles, and streetcars, all sharing the same space; and the natural byproducts of animal-powered transportation were offensive to the senses and hazardous to the public health. As increased industrialization and urbanization exacerbated problems like these, the automobile was seen as a possible solution.

This chapter examines the optimism in this opening stage of American automobility as captured in three early automobile narratives: Edith Wharton's *A Motor-Flight through France* (1908), Theodore Dreiser's *A Hoosier Holiday* (1916), and Sinclair Lewis's *Free Air* (1919). These texts reveal the potential that early enthusiasts saw in the automobile to transform a modern, industrial world organized largely around railway travel. In an era where the increasing prevalence of machinery appeared to threaten both nature and the individual, the automobile had the potential to provide a deeper and more substantial relationship with the natural world and to restore a measure of freedom and self-reliance that had been destroyed by the standardization of industrial modernity.

Radical Potential and the Social Construction of the Automobile

Communications scholar Brian Winston has proposed a " 'law' of the suppression of radical potential"[1] to explain the delay between the invention of new and potentially transformative technologies, on the one hand, and their diffusion throughout society, on the other. Reacting against technological determinism, which holds that technology develops independently of social and cultural influences and that technologies drive social change by altering social structures, cultural values, and so on, Winston argues instead that societies mediate the introduction of new technologies. His is no grand conspiracy theory—rather he suggests that there will be various governmental, social, and economic institutions that have a stake in negotiating the most favorable transition possible as old technologies give way to new ones. This process "works in the broadest possible way to ensure the survival, however battered, of family, home and workplace, church, president and queen, and above all, it preserves the great corporation as the primary institution of our society" (*Misunderstanding Media* 25).

While Winston draws inspiration for his model from Ferdinand Braudel's discussion of technology in the industrial revolution, he is careful to clarify that his own work deals specifically with communications technology. The examples that he uses to illustrate his point (both in *Misunderstanding Media* and in his later collection of case studies *Technologies of Seeing*) are drawn from this field, including such things as the telephone, the microprocessor, and HDTV. While the automobile is not explicitly a communications technology, and while some communications technologies could be slowed by regulatory apparatuses (the Federal Communications Commission, for

[1] The quotation marks around "law" are Winston's own: "It is recurrent enough to be a 'law' but not certain enough in its operation to be a law" (*Misunderstanding Media* 24.)

example) that don't have a specific cognate with the motorcar, Winston's model is still useful in thinking about the automobile. Steam-powered automobiles had been created in the 18th century, the first patent for a road vehicle powered by internal combustion was issued in 1807, widespread experimentation with gasoline-powered automobiles was underway by the 1870s, and the first working gasoline-powered automobile in the United States was produced in 1893; yet, diffusion of the technology to the public was not widespread until after World War I.[2]

Drawing from Winston's model, the lag between invention in 1893 and diffusion in the 1910s would represent the suppression of radical potential. Certainly there are a variety of factors that explain diffusion in the 1910s, particularly the mass production of the Model T, which (any good Ford hagiographer will tell you) made the motorcar affordable for the masses. But Ford's Model T was not the least expensive car on the market when it rolled off the assembly line in 1909. (Nor was Ford's the first automotive assembly line: though not as efficient as Ford's, Oldsmobile began using an assembly line in 1901.) At $850, the Model T was less expensive than many high-end cars, to be sure, but still more expensive than, among others, the Oldsmobile Runabout, which had been selling for around $650 as early as 1903. There were also dozens of other small motor manufacturers who offered similarly priced models in the early years of the twentieth century. As Ford invested heavily in expansion and trimmed his profit margins in favor of sales volume, the price of the Model T continued to drop in the years that followed—but so too did competing makes and models. In 1915, when the Model T's

[2] Precise figures for national automobile use are difficult to come by. However, in 1919 the *New York Times* reported that there were 365,874 private automobiles registered for use in the state, working out to approximately one per 28 people ("Motor Car Growth" 54). New York had both the highest population and the highest number of automobiles, though some states had more cars per person.

price had dropped to $490, the Chevrolet sold at the same price, and there were other cars on the market selling for as little as $295 (*Cyclopedia of Automobile Engineering* 369).

The oft-told tale, then, of how Henry Ford introduced the masses to the automobile, which then proceeded to take over the world, is more complicated than it initially appears. There were other factors aside from the lack of a perfect assembly line impeding the automobile's rise. Most notable, perhaps, was the issue of the Selden patent. A controversial patent granted to George B. Selden in 1895 covered most of the gasoline-powered automobiles manufactured in the United States (or imported from abroad) throughout the first decade of the twentieth century. Selden, who never actually manufactured an automobile, had originally filed his patent for the engine in 1879, but by amending the patent in the years that followed he delayed the formal granting of the patent until 1895, by which time others had begun to produce working automobiles. Since patent laws at the time would secure the initial patent for 17 years, this delay was important, allowing Selden to hold off until there was a clear possibility that the patent might be profitable. As controversial as the patent itself were the actions of the Association of Licensed Automobile Manufacturers, the organization of automakers who paid licensing fees on the Selden patent. The ALAM licensing agreement gave them the power to exclude other automobile manufacturers from the license, and they then used their combined resources to litigate against manufacturers, importers, and dealers involved with unlicensed machines. The ALAM even sought to intimidate and litigate against individuals who purchased or used unlicensed machines. "Isn't it Wisdom," announces an ALAM advertisement in a 1904 issue of *Country Life in America*, "to buy

from one of the members? You obtain freedom from patent litigation, a reliable automobile from manufacturers who are the pioneers in the industry" (ALAM 70).

Several independent manufacturers fought the patent in court, but even if they could drag litigation out until the patent expired—and even assuming no extension were granted on the patent—they could still be potentially liable for damages during the life of the patent, effectively putting these manufacturers out of business. The patent was, in the words of a writer to the editor of *The Horseless Age* in 1901, a "noose that is dangerously close round the financial windpipe of manufacturers of automobiles" ("Selden Suit" 20). Ford was particularly aggressive in challenging the patent, fighting the ALAM in court and in the press. He took out numerous ads in large papers across the country, arguing the legitimacy of his legal claim and also offering financial protection for Ford purchasers fearing lawsuits from ALAM. Ford's claim was finally victorious when a Federal appeals court struck down the patent in January, 1911, legally opening up the automobile industry to independent development. Perhaps as important as the legal victory was the publicity it brought, casting Henry Ford as the underdog fighting against the giant automotive trust in the interests of the people. "As a matter of fact," Ford wrote in his autobiography, "probably nothing so well advertised the Ford car and the Ford Motor Company as did this suit" (63).

The Selden patent is one factor that functioned as what Winston might call a "Braudelian Brake"[3] on the introduction of the automobile. In the meantime, various interests were positioning to thrive in the new era of automobility. The anecdotes of

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[3] Winston opens the introduction to *Technologies of Seeing,* in which he outlines the "suppression of radical potential more" fully, by quoting Braudel's *Civilisation and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century. Volume 1.*: "First the accelerator, then the brake: the history of technology seems to consist of both processes …" (1).

municipal police forces attempting to regulate automobile speed and "responsible" driving (an effort which culminated in the development of licensing and license plate laws) provides but one example. State and local governments passed a variety of regulations for automobile use, with an eye towards both public safety and public revenue. Various corporate interests, related directly and indirectly to the automobile industry, had a stake in such debates as whether steam-powered, gasoline-powered, or electric-powered automobiles would become standard. The outdoor advertising industry, which had seemingly plastered over every available surface in the city by the turn of the century, sought to capitalize on the production of a new, mobile market. The "Good Roads" Movement, sparked initially by the popularity of the bicycle, brought together individuals, businesses, and municipal and state agencies anxious to ensure that they were not left behind by the coming automobile boom. A full account of the additional factors (including tariff laws, for instance) that held back the automobile's diffusion and a full account of how various entities and institutions prepared for the automobile in order to ease its impact on the social fabric and the economic structure is beyond the scope of this study. Clearly, though, the history of the automobile and its widespread introduction is more complicated than a "Great Man" explanation or other determinist perspectives would allow.

As automobile narratives written by prominent American authors in the early stages of American automobility, the three books discussed in this chapter are a part of that process. Thinking about these texts as part of the social construction of the automobile is important for several reasons. First, while it is sometimes tempting to view early automotive enthusiasm about supposed benefits such as individual freedom and a

closer relationship with nature as rather naïve, given the contemporary reality of urban sprawl, traffic gridlock, peak oil, etc., we ought not too-casually dismiss their analysis through the benefit of hindsight; accordingly, this study seeks to take seriously the possibilities that Wharton, Dreiser, and Lewis identify in the automobile—not uncritically or at face value, as Andrew Gross has suggested that some literary critics of the automobile have done (80), but rather in their proper context as participants in a process of defining the automobile's possibilities. Furthermore, even as we now, in pursuit of solutions to the societal problems of a culture dependent on oil, find ourselves in the process of attempting to imagine a world after oil, writers of the early twentieth century sought solutions to the social problems (poverty, crime, pollution and public health) of increasing urbanization and industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; for the authors in this chapter, the automobile was a valuable vehicle for imagining alternatives. Finally, the ecologically essential task of adjusting automotive behavior in the twenty-first century requires an understanding of more than the merely rational components of American automobility. As Mimi Sheller argues: "A better understanding of the cultural and emotional constituents of personal, familial, regional, national and transnational patterns of automobility can contribute to future research programs and policy initiatives that resist the powerful yet ultimately unsatisfying aggregation of social data based on statistical quantification of individual preferences, attitudes and actions" (222). Understanding the investments—not just financial investment, but emotional and political investments as well—that early automobile users made in the automobile helps us better understand the social capital that continues to define our contemporary relationship with automobile culture. To fully appreciate these

early users' attitudes towards the automobile, we must examine an early industrial mode of travel, the railway, which the automobile supplanted.

Standardization, Industrialization, and the Railroad

The ascent of the railroad brought with it the rationalization and standardization of both space and time. The curves and changes in elevation that horse-powered traffic could accommodate with relative ease are irregularities that must be overcome for the railroad, which requires a flat, straight surface in order to operate safely and most efficiently. Fitting the countryside for the railroad required substantial earthmoving, in the form of embankments to make up for dips in elevation and cuttings to reduce increases in elevation. As Wolfgang Schivelbusch (1977) points out, this has the effect of alienating the traveler from the natural environment: "As the natural irregularities of the terrain that were perceptible on the old roads are replaced by the sharp linearity of the railroad, the traveler feels that he has lost contact with the landscape, experiencing this most directly when going through a tunnel" (25). The installation of the railway also transforms the natural landscape into an industrial one. Old barriers to travel and communication are overcome: hills are leveled, mountains tunneled through, ravines and rivers bridged. At the same time, though, the railroad itself provides new barriers in that crossing railroad tracks (as well as the embankments and cuttings sometimes associated with their construction) was potentially hazardous for other travelers. (Not merely a physical barrier, the railroad tracks also build social barriers into the landscape, as suggested in the phrase "the wrong side of the tracks.")

In the words of many nineteenth-century observers, the railroad annihilated space and time. (When the telegraph appeared, it too was said to annihilate space and time.) In

most cases, observers explained the turn of phrase by pointing out how much smaller the country was as a result of the railroad. General Samuel Curtis, for example, addressing an excursion commemorating a milestone in the building of the Union Pacific Railroad, spoke of an elderly man in the Allegheny Mountains whose only child had long since gone west:

> But the old man, to-night, opens the paper, and reads in the dispatches: "The Pacific Railroad: 270 miles beyond the Missouri; progressing two miles a day!" New hopes, new prospects, are before him, and the old man's eyes, dim with tears, at the prospect of railroad connections that annihilate space, and unite once more a family, otherwise separate for all time … How many fond hopes cluster about the links of this great national chain, that is to unite us with our friends in the mountains, and on the Pacific shore (*Great Union Pacific Railroad Excursion* 32).

Or, as a writer in the *Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineer's Monthly Journal* put it, through the railroad the "distant corners of nations are brought nearer the capital; the hamlet is in touch with the metropolis, and the citizen of one land feels a keen interest in the welfare of all nations. San Francisco is almost one-half nearer New York to-day, in point of time and comfort of travel, than Boston was one hundred years ago" ("Record-Breaking Speed" 557).

Yet it is important to note that the effect of the railroad on national space is not limited to shrinking the country. Rather, as Schivelbusch points out, the speed of the railroad "both diminishes and expands space":

> The dialectic of this process states that this diminution of space (i.e. the shrinking of transport time) causes an expansion of transport space by incorporating new areas into the transport network. The nation's contraction into a metropolis … conversely appears as an expansion of the metropolis: by establishing transport lines to ever more outlying areas, the metropolis tends to incorporate the entire nation. The epoch of the suburbs, of the amoebic proliferation of the formerly contained cities into the surrounding countryside, begins with the railroads (43).

As much as the railroad changed the way we perceive space, it also changed our relationship with time. This is most obvious in the development of standard time and time zones. Until the late nineteenth century, both local communities and individual railroads kept their own time. Most railroads calibrated their time to the city where the railroad was headquartered or to major stops along their route. As a result, railroad time differed from the local mean time in most communities as well as from the time kept by other railroads, so that stations serving multiple railroads might need to keep as many as eight different times. In creating a system of standard time zones, advocates touted the ability of the railroad to standardize time in a variety of disciplinary institutions: "There is no practical difficulty in having school time, church time, shop time and business time conform to railroad time. Railroad necessities will keep railroad time practically correct.… Let the time-pieces be all set to railroad time, let railroad time be fixed by the nearest observatory, and let business and other hours be changed to suit the convenience or necessities of the case" (International Institute for Preserving 8-9). Just as their

adjustments to the landscape[4] alienated passengers from natural space, by facilitating (even necessitating) the standardization of time the railroad had the effect of alienating individuals from natural time.

Even before its formal standardization, the railroad changed the way that Americans related to time. Henry David Thoreau, who did not share the national enthusiasm for the expansion of the railroad and telegraph,[5] observed that the railroad had already begun to regulate the country: "The startings and arrivals of the cars are now the epochs in the village day. They go and come with such regularity and precision, and their whistle can be heard so far, that the farmers set their clocks by them, and thus one well-conducted institution regulates a whole country" (1820). The railroad whistle trains the public to partition time and productivity according to its own schedule. Nor does Thoreau view this development positively: "To do things 'railroad fashion' is now the by-word; and it is worth the while to be warned so often and so sincerely by any power to get off its track. There is no stopping to read the riot act, no firing over the heads of the mob, in this case. We have constructed a fate, an *Atropos*, that never turns aside" (1830; italics in original).

The power of the railroad whistle to regulate and discipline productivity was also noted by William Makepeace Thayer, an author of biographies and juvenile fiction of moral instruction. The narrator of Thayer's *The Bobbin Boy* (1860) admires the ease with which the novel's 12-year-old hero Nat, who has left school in order to work in a factory,

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[4] Adjusting the common observation, noted above, that the railroad annihilates space, a writer for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* observed in 1854 that "they do, in fact, annihilate the landscape" ("Editor's Easy-Chair" May 1854, 844), suggesting the aesthetic and environmental degradation of the railroad as well as the philosophical alienation from natural space.

[5] "We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas," Thoreau wrote, "but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate" (1795).

adjusts to a life organized around the work bell. Nat even praises the factory bell to a former schoolmate, explaining that it helps train one to be punctual. “Nat struck upon a very important thought here,” the narrator explains. “Punctuality is a cardinal virtue, and the earlier a person learns to be punctual the better it is for him. Being obliged to obey the summons of a bell at just such a minute aids in establishing the habit of punctuality” (110). Moreover, railroad time is an important factor for developing such a relationship with time: “The man who is obliged to keep his watch by railroad time, and then make all things bend to the same, is more likely to form the habit of being punctual, than he who has not a fixed moment for going and coming” (111).

The railroad made individual mobility possible on a scale not previously seen, but this mobility was highly regulated, making the mobility of the populace easier to monitor and manipulate to serve governmental and business interests. Local quarantines during various epidemics of the nineteenth century provide an example. A quarantine conference for health officials from various southern states in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1889 outlined several suggestions for railroad quarantine, including stipulations that “Quarantine stations … should be established at convenient points on one or both sides of a town or station” and that “passengers to or from such infected point should only be received or delivered at the quarantine station, under the supervision of the quarantine officer in charge of the station” (Wyman 229). A quarantine called by several states and cities against New Orleans in the midst of a Yellow Fever scare called for “the establishment of detention camps on the lines of the railroads where travelers who desire to enter the quarantine territory may remain five days and proceed on securing a certificate of non-infection” (“Yellow Fever Quarantine” 113). Mass mobility organized

around the railroad, in other words, was advantageous in that it allowed the state to monitor and manipulate that mobility with relative ease.

The labor force provides another example of the railroad's utility in manipulating the mobility of the public. Theoretically, the increased mobility of labor should improve conditions for workers and make for a more just relationship with employers. But with the railroad, corporate interests could manipulate mobility both indirectly (by adjusting fares and routes) and directly, by bringing in trainloads of workers across the country in order to break strikes, as happened numerous times up until the early 1900s. Once strikebreakers were brought into remote locations, the railroad could also be used to keep them there, since it was often the only transportation available. To break the 1914 strike in Ludlow, Colorado, for instance, the mining companies enticed workers with land at low prices; brought in by the trainload, these workers (who weren't told of the strike in advance) then had no way to leave: "From the camps there was little chance of escape. Those who tried to leave were told they owed the company money for their transportation to Colorado, and that they would have to work it out. Guards, armed with rifles and clubs, made certain that none left" (Beshoar 127). Agnes Smedley, who grew up in the mining communities of southern Colorado, includes that control of mobility among the structures of oppression that characterize such company towns. In addition to the saloons, stores, and churches run by the Company, "the railways leading to the town were company railways" (100).

This, then, is the environment in which the automobile emerged in the 1890s. While initially a toy for the rich (as it certainly is when Wharton is writing *Motor-Flight*), by the time Dreiser and Lewis write their automobile narratives it is well on its way to

being an essential symbol of independence and economic success. While the railroad had become, for many, a force of alienation and domination, these writers find, in the automobile, a tool to move back to a more natural past or forward to a more equitable future.

Edith Wharton's *Motor-Flight* to the Past

Among the earliest automobile travel narratives, and the first written by an author with a literary reputation, Edith Wharton's *A Motor-Flight through France* (hereafter *Motor-Flight*) was first published serially in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1906, 1907, and 1908. *Motor-Flight* tells of a series of automobile excursions Wharton took through the French countryside, accompanied by her chauffeur Charles Cook, her husband Teddy, and on occasion her friend Henry James. Ever conscious of cultural change, Wharton sees the automobile as an escape from modernity. In a book that consistently values the spiritual over the technical, ruins over restoration, the medieval over the modern, Wharton presents the train as symptomatic of modernity and the automobile as its antidote. Compared to railway travel, the automobile provides a closer relationship with nature and the past, provides tools for her craft as a writer, and cultivates a superior aesthetic sensibility.

The opening sentence to *Motor-Flight* offers the bold declaration that "The motor-car has restored the romance of travel" (1). She then draws an explicit comparison with the railroad, suggesting that the automobile also restores other things that the railroad has destroyed, including aesthetic beauty and a sense of wonder: "Freeing us from all the compulsions and contacts of the railway, the bondage to fixed hours and the beaten track, the approach to each town through the area of ugliness and desolation

created by the railway itself, it has given us back the wonder, the adventure and the novelty which enlivened the way of our posting[6] grandparents" (1). The automobile's association with a premodern past, revealed in the celebration of the "wonder … which enlivened the way of our posting grandparents" is no minor advantage, since a particular relationship with the past is central to the aesthetic approach that Wharton reveals in *Motor-Flight*. She outlines her philosophy in the opening chapter, while musing about the Amiens Cathedral: "The world will doubtless always divide itself into two orders of mind: that which sees in past expressions of faith … only the bonds cast off by the spirit of man in its long invincible struggle for 'more light'; and that which, while moved by the spectacle of the struggle, cherishes also every sign of those past limitations that were, after all, each in its turn, symbols of the same effort toward a clearer vision" (10). The second perspective, "in which enfranchisement of thought exists in harmony with atavism of feeling," is, for Wharton, the more complex and rewarding, "permit[ting] one to appreciate these archaeological values to the full, yet subordinat[ing] them to the more impressive facts of which they are the immense and moving expression" (10). "A great gothic cathedral sums up so much of history … has cost so much in faith and toil … given collective voice to so many inarticulate and contradictory cravings" (10-11), that to truly appreciate such a monument requires not merely engaging it physically and intellectually, but also imaginatively, in order to "puzzle out [the] meaning" of the "accumulated experiences of the past" (11) that it contains.

Scholars have not failed to note the irony in Wharton's reliance on the automobile as the vehicle for such ventures into an imagined past. As Sidonie Smith argues, the

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[6] "Posting" here refers to travel by post-chaise, a light carriage, more luxurious than a standard stagecoach, associated with leisure travel before the railroad.

automobile "is the technological expression (product and cultural effect) of Western modernity and progress Wharton decries. It is only from within modernity that the picturesqueness of the French countryside, as opposed to the American landscape, achieves its value as desirable; for it is only from within modernity that the picturesque can be imagined as premodern and thus outside ravaging modernity's scope" (199). While the irony is certainly clear to the modern reader, however, it's worth reiterating that it is consistent with the value that early motorists placed on the automobile as "an escape from the supposedly debilitating environment of the city" (Flink 456). Moreover, the precise wording of Wharton's opening claim suggests more than a simple denial of the automobile's modernity. In summarizing her aesthetic approach to Amiens Cathedral, Wharton declares that "reverence is the most precious emotion that such a building inspires" (11). In light of this emphasis on reverence, the religious connotations of "the wonder" that Wharton finds restored in the automobile are significant, suggesting that in spite of its modernity the automobile conditions travelers in the proper subjective approach to such art and beauty.

It is also true that Wharton appears aware of the delicate balance between the past that the automobile reveals and the future that the automobile will create. Wharton rarely looks to the future in *Motor-Flight*, focusing instead on the relics and ruins of France's past. The one instance when Wharton does look forward comes while discussing a charming inn in Dourdan: "Now that the demands of the motorist are introducing modern plumbing and Maple furniture into the uttermost parts of France, these romantic old inns, where it is charming to breakfast, if precarious to sleep, are becoming as rare as the medieval keeps with which they are, in a way, contemporaneous" (32-33). Knowing that

an increase in automobile traffic will likely also increase the standardization of the French countryside (particularly since the "tout-and-tourist" element that she disparages would be unlikely to appreciate the charm of such an inn), Wharton recognizes that this access to the past may be fleeting. In availing the past to the traveler, the automobile also threatens to destroy it. Even so, this observation displays an ambivalence to that "destruction" of the past, since the aesthetic sacrifice is made in exchange for a development (modern plumbing) that will be a boon to public health. Despite her strong aesthetic convictions, Wharton also is aware that the towns she celebrates "are not museum pieces, but settlements of human beings" (49).

Wharton's relationship to mass culture provides another important context for understanding the role of the automobile in *Motor-Flight.* In her study of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature, Nancy Bentley examines the role that the emergence of mass culture played in shaping the literary identities and strategies of American authors of the era. While conventional narratives suggest literary figures either disdained mass culture or retreated into the private sphere of the literary in order to distinguish themselves from mass culture, Bentley demonstrates that writers sought to engage, understand, and incorporate key aspects of mass culture in their work. Understanding the artistic production around the turn of the century thus "depends on recognizing the context of mass culture not just as a source of friction but also as a spur to insight and high creativity" (10). In her reading of *House of Mirth*, for instance, Bentley locates the text's driving tension in the fear of an impending tragedy, which both Lily Bart and Lawrence Selden express in terms evoking mechanical disaster. This fear, Bentley argues, mimics a defining experience of the mechanical age in general and of

mechanical travel, particularly: the awareness of the ever-present potential for disaster. In this way, Wharton's fiction captures her ambivalence about modernity and mass culture: on the one hand, they are degrading and dangerous, as reflected in the emphasis on tragedy and decline; on the other, they are exhilarating and inspiring, as reflected in both the narrative energy they provide her fiction and in the delight Wharton herself takes in the trappings of modernity, particularly the automobile.

While some of this ambivalence is also evident in *Motor-Flight*, the text as a whole is far more enthusiastic about the mass culture object of the automobile. In chapter titles and in individual passages, Wharton's travelogue thrills at the prospect of speeding through the French countryside, with none of the attendant fear of a crash that structures *House of Mirth.* More than simple exhilaration, though, the automobile offers additional advantages, including a sense of wonder, a freer and more aesthetic travel experience, an itinerary free of the restrictions of train schedules or the advice of guidebooks, and the cultivation of a superior aesthetic sensibility. Wharton outlines these advantages largely by contrasting the automobile (still an exclusive mode of travel at the time) with another mass culture touchstone, the railway. Still, Wharton is conscious that the automobile will not remain exclusive, and *Motor-Flight* gives her the opportunity to engage mass culture even while maintaining a critical distance, celebrating the pleasures and potential of the automobile before mass production and mass consumption reduce it to merely another artifact of mass culture.

Moreover, the automobile has the tremendous advantage of allowing Wharton to engage in mass culture while simultaneously shielding her from the masses themselves. Freeing the traveler from "all the compulsions and contacts of the railway," the

automobile removes the traveler from the close quarters with strangers of the railway car and the hustle and chaos of the railway station. The masses are nowhere to be found in Wharton's travelogue, which focuses on the architectural elements of the various French communities she travels through rather than their residents. On a very few occasions Wharton does mention people that she encounters; where the rail deposits the traveler into a chaotic mass of humanity, however, Wharton's motorcar carries her past an assemblage of people, "from the canal-boatman to the white-capped baker's lad" who "pursued their business with that cheerful activity which proceeds from an intelligent acceptance of given conditions. They each had their established niche in life, the frankly avowed interests and preoccupations of their order" (28). In contrast to the railway, which brings wealthy travelers in close quarters and contact with other classes, the motorcar offers physical protection from such contact and enables Wharton to reassert the stability and superiority of a social order threatened by the rise of mass culture.

In the remainder of *Motor-Flight*, Wharton continues to seek that more direct communion with the past which the automobile makes possible. Among the chief pleasures of automobile travel is "the delight of taking a town unawares, stealing on it by back ways and unchronicled paths, and surprising in it some intimate aspect of past time" (1). The railroad, on the other hand, obscures the richness of these towns with "the ugly mask of railway embankments" and mediates the traveler's entrance through "the iron bulk of a huge station." In describing the motorcar's approach to Bourdeaux, across its "proud riverfront … [where] a screen of eighteenth-century buildings stretched along the crescent-shaped quay," Wharton remarks that the automobile "almost always, avoiding the mean purlieus of the railway station, gives one these romantic or stately first

impressions" (98). In some cases, the automobile provides more than first impressions, approximating time travel: "The approach to Nevers, the old capital of the Nivernais, carried us abruptly back to the Middle Ages, but to an exuberant northern medievalism far removed from the Gallo-Roman tradition of central France" (68-69). The motorcar transports the passenger not just to the past, but to an ideal time and space within that past.

The automobile provides a closer communion both with the past and with the natural landscape—a relationship, as Schivelbusch makes clear, which the introduction of the railroad distorted and disrupted. In Northern France, Wharton muses, "agriculture has mated with poetry instead of banishing it" (5), and the landscape and the automobile's movement through it, consequently, provides the traveler the experience of art. Both the highway and the view from it are described in artistic terms. The river and the castle ruins seen from the road between Montélimar and Lyons, for example, "compose a foreground suggestive in its wan colour and abrupt masses of the pictures of Patinier, the strange Flemish painter whose ghostly calcareous landscapes are said to have been the first in which scenery was painted for scenery's sake" (143). Later, on the road to Laon she finds a "region distinctively French, but with a touch of romance as Turner saw when he did his 'Rivers and Harbours' " (190). The road does not merely resemble art—it can also cultivate an artistic mind: in the commune of Soissons, home to a 12th-century cathedral, "Gothic art again triumphs, but in a different and milder strain," while the road from Laon to Soissons, "through a gently undulating landscape, prepares one for these softer impressions" (194). At other times, the view from the road and the road itself are rendered as poetry. Offering a near pun that might evoke any number of tragic literary

figures, including her own Lily Bart, Wharton summarizes the climb down into the Seine Valley to reach Rouen as “the poetry of the descent to Rouen” (18).

Perhaps the most important site that the automobile allows Wharton access to is Nohant, the location of George Sand’s country house. Wharton visits Nohant twice in *Motor-Flight*, once on her initial set of excursions (serialized in *The Atlantic Monthly*) and again a year later, accompanied by Henry James (though James is not mentioned in the text itself). Nohant is not the only site that Wharton visits more than once in the course of her travels, but it is the site where her narrative most conspicuously lingers.

James and Wharton shared a fascination with Sand’s life and work. James, whose own earlier excursions through France were also serialized in *The Atlantic Monthly* and then later published as *A Little Tour in France* (1884), had been unable to visit Nohant and was instantly jealous to learn Wharton’s French excursion (which she took shortly after visiting and motoring extensively with James at his home in England), included a pilgrimage to Sand’s home. “I’ve really been for weeks in the disabled state,” he wrote to Wharton in 1906, “with the bleeding wound in my side, produced by the Parthian shot of your own last [letter]—your fling back at me, over your departing shoulder, of your unutterable vision of the Nohant that I have all these (motorless) years so abjectly failed to enlighten my eyes withal” (65). James attributes his inability to visit Nohant to his lack of an automobile, since the flexibility of the motorcar provides a traveler access to sites not necessarily easy to visit with the fixed routes and schedules of the train.

Even before the pilgrimage to Nohant, though, it was clear that for Wharton and James the automobile itself had an imaginary connection to Sand. Wharton recalled in *A Backward Glance*: “One summer, when we were all engaged on the first volumes of

Mme Karnine's absorbing life of George Sand, we had a large showy car which always started off brilliantly and then broke down at the first hill, and this we christened 'Alfred de Musset,' while the small but indefatigable motor which subsequently replaced 'Alfred' was naturally named 'George' " (152-153). James, too, referred to a subsequent motorcar of Wharton's as Pagello or Pagellino, after a Venetian physician who, like de Musset, was among Sand's lovers. For Wharton, then, some of the same characteristics that she admires in Sand—liberated sexuality, economic independence, creative capacity—are embodied in the automobile.

Beyond improving the logistics of travel and restoring its romance, the automobile provided Wharton an important form for her development as a writer and an intellectual. It is perhaps natural, given some of the same characteristics that Wharton associates with the railroad, that a novelist would find the automobile a more fitting vehicle for the writing process. The novel, like the automobile, bends to the will of the individual, while the "compulsions and contacts of the railway, the bondage to fixed hours and the beaten track" do not permit the ambiguities, the multiple perspectives, the ability to pause to examine details, or the general flexibility with space and time that is the novelist's stock in trade. Wharton speaks to the importance of spontaneity over structure in her own approach to fiction while commenting on James's novels in *A Backward Glance*: "I thought, and still think, that he tended to sacrifice … that spontaneity which is the life of fiction. Everything, in the latest novels, had to be fitted into a predestined design, and design, in his strict geometrical sense, is to me one of the least important things in fiction" (190). The automobile also was an important tool for Wharton's creative process in that it provided her with material for her craft. Her only

two novels set in New England (*Summer* and *Ethan Frome*) are "the result of explorations among villages still bedrowsed in a decaying rural existence"—explorations conducted in her early automobile excursions from her home in New York (*A Backward Glance,* 153).

Of course, since the automobile transformed travel experience for Wharton, it also transformed travel writing specifically. Scholars of Wharton's travel writing have associated her early travel books, of which *Motor-Flight* is the last,[7] with the development of her personal aesthetic (St. Laurent) and her connoisseurship (Wright). Wright and St. Laurent both discuss *Motor-Flight,* but the role that the automobile, specifically, played in these projects warrants further attention. The automobile is a mode of travel uniquely suited to the personal aesthetic Wharton had outlined in her earlier books on Italy. What's more, in traveling by motorcar (a technology which inspired significant social anxieties about gender), Wharton reinforces the challenge posed by her connoisseurship, which resisted restrictive notions of what a woman's travel experience and woman's travel writing should be.

The table of contents for *Motor-Flight* calls attention to the automobile's influence on Wharton's travel and travel writing. The book's composition was more organic than the European travel book which preceded it (*Italian Backgrounds,* 1904), which offered separate and independent essays, most of which had been previously published in magazines such as *Scribner's* and *Atlantic Monthly*, some as many as ten years before collection in *Italian Backgrounds.* Most of the essays are rooted in a specific place within Italy; some titles reflect their rooted nature ("A Tuscan Shrine,"

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[7] Some critics have included her 1915 account of visiting French soldiers on the front lines of World War I, *Fighting France,* among her travel books, her next pure travel book was 1919's *In Morocco.*

"Picturesque Milan") while others foreground high-culture affinities, invoking Latin and Shakespeare ("Sub Umbra Liliorum," "A Midsummer Week's Dream"). The different sections of *Motor-Flight*, in contrast, offer movement through space ("From Rouen to Fountainebleu," "The Rhone to the Seine," "A Flight to the North-east"). While the table of contents in *Italian Backgrounds*, in the words of Mary Suzanne Schriber, "announces its erudite leanings," *Motor-Flight* both "foregrounds the narrative as an adventure" and is "more relaxed" (191). (Given the excitement of the automobile that permeates *Motor-Flight*, perhaps "casual" is a more apt description than "relaxed.")

In addition to the hint of adventure, the chapter titles in *Motor-Flight* also suggest movement; connections and continuities between disparate locations; and the importance of not just destinations and attractions, but the spaces in between. The automobile, as a mode of travel and a vehicle for travel writing, facilitates attention to each of these elements. The increased attention to movement—Wharton writes significantly more about getting to places in *Motor-Flight* than in *Italian Backgrounds*—is only natural, given the novelty of the automobile itself. Wharton acknowledges that the motorcar sometimes quickens her natural pace as a traveler, but defends this by arguing that the automobile makes possible "what is, in one way, the truest initiation of travel, the sense of continuity, of relation between different districts, of familiarity with the unnamed, unhistoried region stretching between successive centres of human history, and exerting, in deep unnoticed ways, so persistent an influence on the turn that history takes" (37). Wharton also relies on this sense of continuity in the beginning of the narrative; as she offers her first impressions of her first day of travel in France, she compares it to the English countryside she had only recently left, with her familiar automobile providing the

connecting thread: “It is a delightful country, broken into wide waves of hill and valley, with hedge-rows high and leafy enough to bear comparison with the Kentish hedges among which our motor had left us a day or two before” (2).

In its interest in the spaces between attractions, the “unnamed, unhistoried region stretching between successive centres of human history,” *Motor-Flight* is in some ways the culmination of the aesthetic project undertaken in *Italian Backgrounds.* That collection’s titular final essay argues that Italy “is divided, not in *partes tres,* but in two: a foreground and a background. The foreground is the property of the guide-book and of its product, the mechanical sight-seer; the background that of the dawdler, the dreamer and the serious student of Italy” (177). The guide-book is both product and productive of mass culture, and she condemns it by attaching to it the stigma of modernity: it produces “mechanical sight-seer(s).” The automobile opens horizons beyond this limited perspective and helps Wharton construct her own text as an alternative to the mass culture guidebook. In *Motor-Flight* she continues to examine and extol background details of the various cathedrals she describes, but the automobile also permits her to access the background details of France itself, not just as an object of external study but as a space that she herself can examine and explore.

The automobile helps to power another important aspect of Wharton’s travel writing in so far as her early travel books resist the gendered expectations of the genre. Schriber, who examines Wharton’s travel books within the context of a larger study of women’s travel literature from 1830-1920, argues that “Amy Kaplan’s observation that Wharton sought to dissociate her fiction from ‘woman’s fiction’ extends to Wharton’s writing of travel-as-culture as well … Wharton’s insistence on the right of women to

write about such presumably masculine subjects as science, politics, and history shows itself most keenly in the art history written into her travel accounts" (192). This insistence was not always well received by critics, as Schriber demonstrates. There was anxiety, likewise, among some in the public and the press, about the prospect of women and the automobile. In offering women increased mobility and an escape from the domestic space, the automobile threatened to undermine gender roles and expectations. This was true even for those who, like Wharton, relied on a chauffeur to drive. In the days when automobiles were still primarily toys for the wealthy, automobilists both male and female were more likely to be driven than to drive themselves; but for women the chauffeur was a potentially problematic figure, and the threat of "potentially transgressive cross-class liaison" (Smith 103) was a frequent source of public speculation and titillation (Scharff 20).[8]

That erotic potential of the automobile is also reflected in Wharton's language in *Motor-Flight.* Critics such as Sharon L. Dean, Shirley Foster, and Deborah Clarke have commented on the military allusions in the book, as in the delight Wharton takes in "taking a town unawares, stealing on it by back ways and unchronicled paths, and surprising in it some intimate aspect of past time" (1). Wharton "casts herself as the aggressor/coloniser seeking to appropriate the desired territory" (Foster 140) and imparts to the automobile "the aura of an invader" (Clarke 32). But without denying the passage's aggressive overtones or the colonial imagery contained elsewhere in the text, I would suggest that the passage carries undertones of the erotic as well. A misquote in Dean's analysis of the passage is instructive, presenting the town as the direct object of the

[8] A Henry James nickname for Wharton's chauffeur Charlie Cook, "Prince of Pagellists," reflects this; in keeping with their tradition of naming Wharton's cars after figures associated with George Sand, "Pagellist" is derived from Dr. Pietro Pagello, one of Sand's lovers.

author's surprise: she quotes the passage as "surprising it in some intimate aspect" (19). The transposition results in a more aggressive image, with the author intruding on intimacy rather than, as in Wharton's original formulation, inspiring it.

In charting her course as a female travel writer and motorist, the comparison with the railway is again illuminating, since one of the key advantages for Wharton is that the automobile empowers the individual to chart her own course through the landscape. The restrictions of the railroad and the prescriptions of the guidebook (Wharton disparages the "art excursionists" who rely on Baedeker guidebooks or the "tout-and-tourist element" which degrades the otherwise quaint French Medieval towns that she so admires) serve to direct travelers to pre-selected sites and attractions; but Wharton balks at having her itinerary authorized by others and dismisses those who would submit to the popular tastes that produce guidebooks (and which, in turn, guidebooks reproduce). Her task, as a traveler, is to find her own itinerary, and here the automobile, naturally, comes in handy.

In addition to providing more control over her itinerary, the automobile enables her to approach her destinations on her own terms, to commune more directly with "the hoarded richness of France":

> "It is easy enough, glancing down the long page of the Guide Continental, to slip by such names as Versailles, Rambouillet, Chartres and Valencay, in one's dash for the objective point; but there is no slipping by them in the motor, they lurk there in one's path, throwing out great loops of persuasion, arresting one's flight, complicating one's impressions, oppressing, bewildering one with the renewed, half-forgotten sense of the hoarded richness of France" (74).

With this power of self-determination, the automobile provides a metaphor for Wharton's development as a connoisseur, in spite of the critical resistance women faced approaching the topics and demonstrating the mastery that Wharton did. Her qualms about mass culture notwithstanding, this resistance to the gendered norms of travel writing demonstrate a challenge to the contours of high culture as well. Mass culture made conspicuous the changing role of women in public life in the late nineteenth century, and this increased visibility of women in the public sphere was one of the challenges of mass culture that literary culture (a predominantly masculine realm) sought to resolve. So entwined were mass culture and the emergence of women in public life that there was a "widespread tendency to see the mass culture industry itself as feminine in nature and feminizing in cultural effect" (Bentley 112). Wharton faced a similar critical resistance to her fiction: her analytical reworking of the domestic novel, to the "unease—even outright distaste" of some of her contemporary critics (Bentley 130) helps to stake a literary claim for domestic fiction. In drawing on the automobile to assert her claim to connoisseurship in *Motor-Flight,* Wharton employs the mass culture object of the automobile not merely as a source of inspiration, but also as a tool for reworking the literary.

Wharton finds the automobile liberating, allowing the traveler to set her own itinerary and freeing the traveler's imagination. In transforming the travel experience, the automobile cultivates a sense of independence and wonder essential to Wharton's aesthetic and expertise. Above all, the automobile's value lies in its connection to the past and its ability to restore the romance, beauty, and wonder that have been destroyed by the railway. Theodore Dreiser, to whom we now turn, also imagines the automobile as a

vehicle for connecting with the past. Dreiser, however, is also interested in how it may shape the future.

Dreiser's Hoosier Holiday

A Hoosier Holiday tells the story of a circuitous two-week automobile trip Dreiser took from New York City to Indiana in August 1915, accompanied by artist and fellow Hoosier Franklin Booth (who supplied both the illustrations to the published volume and the automobile that made the trip possible) and Booth's chauffeur, known to Dreiser and the readers as "Speed."

As a successful American author embarking on a tour of the country in order to get a better handle on the ideas and people that populate his native land, Dreiser follows in the footsteps of Washington Irving, whose *A Tour of the Prairies* (1835) announced the author's return to the country after 17 years abroad. In undertaking this tour in the automobile, though, Dreiser initiates a tradition that later attracted such writers as Henry Miller (whose *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* [1940] details his travels in the United States after returning from Europe in 1940) John Steinbeck (whose *Travels with Charley* [1962] recounts his 1960 cross-country road trip designed to help him reconnect with the country and people he made his living writing about), and John A. Williams (whose *This Is My Country Too* [1965] follows his travels across the country, documenting the status of race relations and exploring the possibility of an inclusive national vision).

Dreiser's *A Hoosier Holiday* was also not the first American book published about automobiling on America's highways. Effie Gladding (*Across the Continent by the Lincoln Highway* [1915]) and Emily Post (*By Motor to the Golden Gate* [1916]) both published accounts of cross-country journeys around the same time as *A Hoosier*

Holiday. While each of these texts are interesting in their own right, what distinguishes Dreiser's text is not merely his more substantial fame and literary credentials (Emily Post had published a handful of novels in the 12 years prior, but her most enduring fame as an etiquette authority was yet to come) but also the more ambitious scope of his narrative. Gladding's and Post's books rely on the novelty of the automobile and the Lincoln Highway (the nation's first transcontinental highway) for their raison d'être, but the automobile in Dreiser's narrative is much more a means to an end. Where Post's *By Motor to the Golden Gate* (which originated as a commissioned piece about the highway for *Collier's* magazine) more closely resembles a travel guide, Dreiser's text uses the automobile as a vehicle to explore not just the physical landscape, but personal, cultural, and historical landscapes as well.

Like Wharton, Dreiser was already a noted literary figure when he set out to publish his automobile narrative, having acquired fame through the success and controversy of novels such as *Sister Carrie* (1900), *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911), and *The Titan* (1914). Dreiser, too, had previously ventured into the travel book market, having published *A Traveler at Forty* (1913), an account of his first trip to Europe. When Booth, a co-worker of Dreiser's from his newspaper days, proposed to take Dreiser with him on his trip home to Indiana, Dreiser saw the opportunity to complete a project that had been on his mind for some time: "All my life I've been thinking of making a trip to Indiana and writing a book about it," Dreiser tells Booth, listing four Indiana towns he'd lived in as a youth. "Agree to take me to all those places after we get there, and I'll go. What's more, you can illustrate the book if you will" (20). Like Wharton, then, Dreiser sees the automobile as transportation through both space and time, providing communion with the

past, albeit a more near and personal past than the "huddled medievalism" that so compels Wharton. In addition to the attempt to commune with the past, Dreiser also uses the automotive space to meditate on the nation's future. While the inevitable failure of Dreiser's attempt to commune with the past becomes increasingly clear as the journey progresses, there at least remains cause for hope in the question of how the automobile might transform the future.

In grappling with the changes the automobile has wrought on the America of 1915, Dreiser, naturally, compares it with the railway, finding the former a far superior mode of transportation. "At best the railways have become huge, clumsy, unwieldy affairs little suited to the temperamental needs and moods of the average human being …. Should the discomforts become too great, as in the case of the majority of railroads, and any reasonable substitute offer itself, as the automobile, the old form of conveyance will assuredly have to give way" (92). Like Wharton, Dreiser condemns the railway for its effects on the world around it. Dreiser extends Wharton's complaint of the aesthetic violations to acknowledge the environmental and noise pollution it inflicts on the traveler: "Think what you have to endure on the ordinary railroad—and what other kind is there—smoke, dust, cinders, noise, the hurrying of masses of people, the ringing of bells, the tooting of whistles …" [92]. Absurd though it might sound to a modern reader, Dreiser's touting of the automobile's environmental advantages was not uncommon in the early days of the American automobile. In cities that were often coated with the soot of railroads and choked by "street dust"—a hazardous mixture of the dirt from unpaved roads and the dung deposited on top of it from heavy horse traffic, associated with a variety of respiratory and intestinal tract infections—there was reason to believe that the

automobile would provide a net environmental benefit, with the result that "human lives will be saved and much added to health and comfort" (Heinemann 289).

Echoing Wharton, Dreiser finds the automobile offering a more direct relationship with the natural world than does the railroad. While the railways are "freight logged and trainyard and train terminal infested, and four tracked and cinder blown" (92), travel by automobile provides "intimate contact with woodland silences, grassy slopes, sudden and sheer vistas at sharp turns, streams not followed by endless lines of cars" (93) and gives its passengers "freedom to seek ideal nooks and secluded places" (265). Throughout *A Hoosier Holiday,* Dreiser reinforces that advantage of the automobile with passages that reveal a writer deeply moved by this natural world, who "could think of nothing better than motoring on and on. That feel of a cool breeze blowing against one, of seeing towns and hills and open fields and humble farms go scudding by!" (63).

The extended attention to and appreciation of the natural landscape stand in sharp relief to the bleak urban landscapes that characterize Dreiser's fiction. For Dreiser's fictional characters, escape from that urban environment is impossible; the pastoral dream is obsolete and cliché, remaining only as a mockery, as in "the tinkle of a lone sheep bell o'er some quiet landscape, or the glimmer of beauty in sylvan places" which define the "blind strivings" of Carrie's heart as she sits by her window at the novel's end, "dream[ing] such happiness as [she] may never feel" (*Sister Carrie* 369). It is worth noting that *Sister Carrie* opens with Carrie boarding "the afternoon train for Chicago" (1) from her small Wisconsin hometown, thus setting her on the track to her ultimate alienation. The automobile, on the other hand, makes such scenes accessible, putting one in touch with a landscape where there are "no great factory chimneys cutting the sky in

every direction … but instead, windmills, and silos and red or grey barns, and cows, or horses, or sheep in the fields" (*Hoosier Holiday* 351).

Dreiser's narrator in *Sister Carrie* associates Carrie's reaction to the new landscape of the city with a "middle stage" of mankind's development, where "we see man far removed from the lairs of the jungles, his innate instincts dulled by too near an approach to free-will, his free-will not sufficiently developed to replace his instincts and afford him perfect guidance.… In this intermediate stage he wavers—neither drawn in harmony with nature by his instincts nor yet wisely putting himself into harmony by his own free-will." (*Sister Carrie* 56-57). In an early passage from *Hoosier Holiday*, Dreiser enacts this evolution, with the automobile as the vehicle of free will; as his first evening on the road in rural New Jersey demonstrates, the automobile connects him to the sublime: "We skirted great hills so close that at times, as one looked up, it seemed as though they might come crashing down on us. We passed thick forests where in this mid-August weather, one could look into deep shadows, feeling the ancient childish terror of the woods and of the dark" (38).

Like Wharton, who invokes Joachim Patinir to describe the landscape, Dreiser too mentions painters (Rembrandt, Salomon van Ruysdael, Charles-Francois Daubigny, and others) in explaining the towns and countryside they travel through. But the landscape, like the passengers moving through it, tells a story of its own, and Dreiser also explains the scenery through literature, both poetry and prose. The scenery on the road between Napoleon and Defiance, Ohio, "was so simple and yet so beautiful that it was like a dream—such a land as [Oliver] Goldsmith and [Thomas] Gray had in mind when they wrote" (265). Motoring through the countryside on the first night of the journey evokes

Edgar Allan Poe: “And so we sped on, passing a little farther on a forlorn, decadent, gloomy hamlet about which I wanted to write a poem or an essay. Edgar Allan Poe might have lived here and written ‘The Raven.’ The house of Usher might have been a dwelling in one of these hypochondriacal streets. They were so dim and gloomy and sad” (38).

However genuine the increased access to nature that the automobile may afford the urban factory worker, and however well-founded the hope that, as a University of Chicago professor wrote in *Popular Science* in 1914, through the automobile “out of door life will be encouraged and thus a further contribution to the betterment of human conditions brought about” (Heinemann 289), the negative consequences of increased automobility on the natural world are all too apparent now in an age of urban sprawl, fossil fuel scarcity, and rampant smog. While, as argued above, Dreiser devotes significant space to demonstrate the automobile’s communion with nature, he also intuits this fetishistic function the automobile plays in negotiating the modern industrial age, enabling the public to participate in industrialism even while disavowing its effects. Examining a collection of photographs that their chauffeur Speed had taken while on an expedition to plot the course of the Lincoln Highway, Dreiser remarks that “Crossing a great country like America, from coast to coast, visiting new towns each day and going by a route hitherto not much followed, one might gather much interesting information and many pictures (if no more than postcards) of beautiful and striking things” (159-60). Speed’s pictures, however, leave Dreiser entirely unsatisfied, as “the car is always in the foreground, spoiling everything” (160). The automobile, then, creates a series of double binds: it allows escape from the problems of the city, but only by participating in the process which creates those problems; it provides access to wondrous and striking

alternative spaces, but only by ruining them as well. These double binds threaten always to undermine whatever potential Dreiser ultimately identifies in the automobile. Whatever role it may play in transforming transportation, whatever freedom it provides, whatever improvement it brings to the condition of the average America—whatever benefit it constructs it also threatens to spoil everything.

In contrast to the isolating and alienating experience of the train, Dreiser's *A Hoosier Holiday* reveals the automobile as a communicative space, facilitating communication among passengers and with the people outside of it. Throughout the 2000-plus-mile journey, Dreiser, Booth, and Speed discuss their personal histories as well as the history, present state, and future prospects of the nation. Dreiser reproduces some of these discussions at length, and uses others as starting points to explain his own perspective on a variety of social, political, and metaphysical issues. Such reflections form a substantial share of the text, offering, in H.L. Mencken's estimation, "almost a complete confession of faith, artistic, religious, even political" (127). As the vehicle for Dreiser's self-reflection, the automobile provides the engine for that confession.

The automotive space seems particularly conducive to storytelling; as he drove, Speed, the chauffeur, "would tell stories, tossing them back in the wind and the perfumes" (40). Like the fresh air of the countryside, these stories are part of the fabric of motoring. Indeed, Dreiser's description of one of his favorite evenings on the trip suggests that the process of storytelling is entwined with the very movement of the automobile:

> It was all so moving—the warm air, the new silvery moon, the trees on the hills forming dark shadows, the hills themselves gradually growing dim

> and fading into black, the twinkling lights here and there, fireflies, the river, this highroad always high, high above the stream. There were gnats but no mosquitoes—at least none when we were in motion—and our friend Speed, guiding the car with a splendid technique, was still able between twists and turns and high speeds and low speeds to toss back tale after tale, of a daring and yet childlike character, which kept me laughing all the while (118).

In addition to the communication between passengers, the automobile also allows (in fact, requires) communication with the people who populate the landscape through which it moves. The freedom of the automobile permits Dreiser to stop to visit with Civil War veterans in Bath or a soap peddler outside of Binghamton, New York. Sometimes the automobile itself serves as a catalyst to conversation for curious locals, while at other times the demands of automobile travel—specifically, the need for information about good roads—require that Dreiser and his party strike up conversations with fellow motorists, police officers, and passersby. The automobile has, in fact, transformed the information infrastructure of the towns through which they pass:

> In the old days, when railroads were new or the post road was still in force, the depot or the inn was always the centre for a kind of gay travelers' atmosphere or way station exchange for gossip, where strangers alighted, refreshed themselves and did a little talking to pass the time. Today the garage has become a third and even more notable agency for this kind of exchange, automobile travelers being for the most part a genial company and constantly reaching out for information (69).

As the automobile has transformed sites and means of communication within small towns, so too is its influence evident in Dreiser's own production of *A Hoosier Holiday*. For one thing, the book resists the rigid linearity of the railroad from the outset. The opening paragraph tells readers about Booth's proposing the trip while at a party, but rather than moving forward from that point, Dreiser plunges immediately into the past, offering a second paragraph explaining how he and Booth had met as coworkers ten years before. The remainder of the chapter leaves Booth altogether and veers off on a side trip into Dreiser's boyhood memories of Indiana. This establishes a pattern of side trips and detours of thought that will play throughout the book. Train travel precludes such diversions while the automobile permits them, and just as Dreiser and Booth take a circuitous route through the eastern United States (often deciding on the fly which road to take), Dreiser repeatedly derails the narrative of *A Hoosier Holiday.*

As with Wharton's *Motor-Flight*, Dreiser's book also reveals the author's attempts to negotiate the emergence of mass culture, through both the automobile itself and through Dreiser's fascination with the picture postcard. The postcard emerged at about the same time as the automobile—the first souvenir postcards were introduced at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, the same year the Duryea brothers road-tested the first American-made motorcar. Scholars Andrew Gross and Gary Totten have each used Dreiser's celebration of and reliance on the picture postcard in *A Hoosier Holiday* to argue that the supposed liberation and individuality of the automobile is already an illusion, prevented and co-opted within a commodified system of travel that will ultimately work to standardize and destroy the very uniqueness that (it is widely assumed) made such travel interesting in the first place. However, Dreiser is more

conscious of this process than either Gross or Totten acknowledges. Bentley's argument in *Frantic Panoramas*—that literary writers sought to engage and incorporate aspects of mass culture in their own work—provides a better framework for understanding Dreiser's treatment of the postcard. Rather than marking his surrender to mass culture, the postcard is the artifact through which Dreiser meditates on mass culture.

On more than one occasion, Dreiser refers to their habit of, upon arriving in a new town, going first to the drug store to examine the postcards and thereby learn what in the town might be worth seeing. He even devotes an entire chapter to the postcard, in which his fondness for that artifact inspires him to reflect on the first time he encountered various other great advancements of the age, such as the telephone, the electric light, and the soda fountain. Still, it is important to recognize that Dreiser's style in *A Hoosier Holiday* is occasionally ironic. In discussing the effects of immigration, for instance, he claims that from reading "magazine sociology" he had "been fast coming to believe that America, east, west, north, and south, was being overrun by foreigners who were completely changing the American character, the American facial appearance, the American everything" (48), but that his observations "from the first hundred miles or so we had traveled" (49) now suggested otherwise. In light of that ironic tone, his assertion that in first examining the postcards at the drug store he could "almost invariably discover all there was to know about a town in a scenic way, or nearly all" (217) is more complicated than a simple celebration of the new medium. Importantly, the most arresting scenes they find on their tour—the Tunkhannock Viaduct in Nicholson, Pennsylvania, and a set of three bridges outside of Painesville, Ohio—were not previewed through postcards. Likewise, Dreiser's commentary on the content of the

postcards offers a critique of the shallowness and artificiality of mass culture. “What is there to photograph, you might ask, of any of these places, large or small? Well, waterworks and soldiers’ monuments and the residences of principal citizens and so on and so forth … there was scarcely a village that did not contain a rack somewhere of local views, if no more than of clouds and rills and cattle standing in water near an old bridge” (217).

Dreiser’s ambivalence towards the postcard is clear when he compares them to high art, as he does when describing his entry into Hicksville, Ohio. The scene is worthy of immortalization at the hands of great artists: “Poets may come and poets may go, a Gray, a Goldsmith, a Burns in every generation, but this thing which they seek to interpret remains forever. A Daubigny, a Corot, a Ruysdael, a Vermeer, all American born, might well interpret this from generation to generation” (268-269). But Dreiser’s own desire and ability to do so himself is diverted: “I wanted to sing about it or sit down in some corner somewhere and rhapsodize on paper. As it was, after exchanging a few words with a farmer who wanted to hear the story of our tour, we went to look for some picture postcards of Hicksville, and then to get something to eat” (269). Rather than a cause for celebration, postcards here represent a compromise of Dreiser’s craft and the pursuit of true literary or artistic beauty. Even here, though, the critique of the postcard and of mass culture is wrapped in layers of ambivalence. Dreiser’s desire to “sing a song about” Hicksville calls attention to his own contribution to (and dependence on) mass culture: Dreiser claimed to have helped his brother, minstrel performer and Tin Pan Alley songwriter Paul Dresser, with the words to “On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away,” and Paul’s income as a songwriter helped pull the family from poverty during Theodore’s

youth. (Later in the journey, Dreiser finds a postcard commemorating the song's composition and quoting the title line.) Then, too, while the postcard may appear to have diverted the artistic energies the town inspires, it did not do so permanently, as the production of *A Hoosier Holiday* itself testifies. Dreiser's relationship with the postcard, then, is not one of simple acquiescence to or celebration of the consumerist perspective that it represents; rather, he acknowledges their benefits and pleasures, but also their limitations. Through the automobile, as the picture postcard, Dreiser can participate in mass culture and even incorporate it into his own artistic production, even while maintaining a critical distance.

Dreiser's ambivalent relationship to mass culture parallels an ambivalence towards the masses themselves, and throughout most of the book he vacillates between admiring the average American's ambition, zeal, and "gay, self-sufficient soul" and condemning their conformity, banality, and failure "to grasp the first principles of intellectual progress." And yet it is just this tension which, for Dreiser, makes his native land so interesting and worthy of exploration. "From the point of view of patina, ancient memories, and the presence of great and desolate monuments," Dreiser acknowledges, critics might be right to think America "a most uninteresting land to travel in" (61); but traveling to see "the youth of a great country" (61) provides pleasures of its own: "Nothing is more interesting to me than the general spectacle of life itself in these thriving towns of our new land—though they are devoid of anything historic or in the main artistic (no memories of great import). I cannot help speculating as to what their future will be. What writers, what statesmen, what arts, what wars may not take their rise in some such place as this?" (65). The automobile provides Dreiser with the ideal means

for such travel, both because the logistical advantages of the automobile opens up to artistic exploration and representation those towns not on the rail line and because Dreiser sees the nation's mechanical and technological prowess, which the automobile itself represents, as the source of its greatest potential.

Free Air and the Open Road

Unlike Wharton's and Dreiser's travel narratives, Sinclair Lewis's *Free Air* is a work of fiction, though based on a real automobile trip Lewis and his wife Grace took from Minnesota to Seattle in 1916. *Free Air* first appeared serially in the *Saturday Evening Post* early in 1919, and when it proved popular with readers in that venue, he saw the opportunity to expand it into a novel, which was published later that year. Commercially the book's sales suffered from the fact that the entire book (with only slight alterations) had already been published serially in the *Post*, and critically the book has been overshadowed by *Main Street* (1920), which would be published less than a year later. Lewis, too, favored the latter book, and wrote the former (according to an author's inscription quoted by James T. Flanagan) "to make it possible to write 'Main Street' " (2n). But while critics and the author alike viewed it as a light romance, and while it lacks the character depth and incisive criticism into the provincialism of small-town life one finds in *Main Street*, this earlier novel is revealing, particularly with respect to the progressive potential of the automobile in American life. In his body of work as a whole, Lewis dissects both the upper classes, which have an appreciation for culture but which lack sufficient feeling for their fellow man, and the lower classes, which have the good hearts missing in the leisure class, but lack their good taste. The automobile, in *Free Air*, provides a means of potential synthesis.

The heroine of the novel is Claire Boltwood, a Brooklyn Heights socialite whose father, an executive at a railway supplies firm, is in ill health from spending too much time and energy at work. To restore his health, Claire convinces him to motor from Minneapolis to visit wealthy relatives in Seattle. Since her father does not drive, Claire herself must navigate the rough roads and wilderness that made up the western portion of the Yellowstone Trail in 1916. While at the town garage in tiny (fictional) Schoenstrom, Minnesota, she infatuates the garage's owner, Milton Daggett who, unbeknownst to her, overhears her travel plans and decides to leave his hometown to follow her to Seattle. Following far enough back to remain unspotted, Milt can intervene when Claire and her father find themselves in a variety of predicaments: being stuck in the "prairie gumbo" mud of rural Minnesota, dealing with engine trouble, encountering a dangerous hitchhiker, and having their brakes fail on a mountain road. Along the way, of course, as befitting the conventions of the genre, Claire and Milt fall in love.

Like Wharton and Dreiser, presents communion with nature as a fundamental advantage of the automobile. The novel does not indulge in lengthy descriptions of the landscape quite as frequently as the other two books, though Lewis, who hoped that the book might boost both tourism in his home state and the good roads movement, celebrates the marshlands of rural Minnesota: "Never a tawny-beached ocean has the sweetness of a prairie slew" (66). More important than simply the beauty of the landscape, though, is that the automobile allows the driver to become part of that landscape. Driving through Western Minnesota, Claire "was so intimately in among the grain that the fenders of the car brushed wheat stalks, and she became no stranger, but a part of all this vast-horizoned land" (67). So thoroughly is the driver integrated with

nature that even while driving the automobile Claire becomes a passenger of nature itself: "she let the car creep on, while she was transported by Armadas of clouds, prairie clouds, wisps of vapor like a ribbed beach, or mounts of cumulus swelling to gold-washed snowy peaks" (67). The car moves itself, while passengers are carried forward by the beauty around them.

For Claire, who has no chauffeur to drive her, let alone fix her flats or dig her out of the mud, the close contact with nature that the automobile provides is more than symbolic. In such tasks as finding a creek to gather water for the radiator, digging her car out of a mudhole, or putting chains on the tires to drive out of a small stream, life on the road requires her to engage the elements. As the narrator observes while Claire searches for shrubbery to put between her tires and the prairie mud: "Claire had never expected to be so very intimate with a brush-pile. She became so." But this experience imparts a practical knowledge: "As though she were a pioneer woman who had been toiling here for years, she came to know the brush stick by stick—the long valuable branch that she could never quite get out from under the others; the thorny bough that pricked her hands every time she tried to reach the curious bundle of switches" (15-16). The automobile provides a relationship with nature which is valuable not only for nature's inherent beauty but also for its transformative effects; through the experience of being "so close to earth, [Claire] recovered the feeling of struggle, of triumph over difficulties, of freedom unbounded" (365).

Like Wharton, who draws on the earlier mode of travel by post-chaise to make her case for the automobile, Lewis connects the automobile with an earlier mode of transport, but uses figures of boats and water travel to establish the particular benefits of

the automobile. The cars, particularly Claire Boltwood's majestic roadster, are referred to as boats, for instance, and the drivers are frequently referred, like those behind a riverboat wheel, as pilots. While driving in rainy weather, with the raindrops gathering on the windshield, Claire "fancie[s] she [is] piloting a drowned car in dim spaces under the sea" (3). Elsewhere, as Milt drives the car down a mountain road, a sleeping Claire is awakened by an oncoming car and catches "only a thunderous glimpse of the stolid driver; a dark, hooded, romantic figure, like a sailor at the helm in a storm" (230).

This imagery is appropriate for a couple of reasons. For one, while the tradition of travel by post was fully entrenched in pre-rail Europe (where Wharton's travels take place and which her narrative favors), travel by water was more important within the United States. More importantly, in connecting the automobile to water travel, Lewis connects the motorist to the mythic American figures of the riverboat pilot and the ship captain. From Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (published in 1851 at the peak of the whaling industry in the United States) to Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (published in 1896, when the way of life in such maritime villages was threatened by industrialization), the sea captain was an important figure in the American imagination as well as in American literature. Likewise the pilots who captained riverboats through the nation's network of waterways were romantic figures. "When I was a boy," recalled the most famous pilot of all, Mark Twain, "there was but one permanent ambition among my comrades in our village on the west bank of the Mississippi River. That was, to be a steamboatman" (30). In Twain's case, the romantic associations did not fade with age and experience. In *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) he recalled with great affection his time as a pilot: "I loved the profession far better than any I have followed since, and I took

measureless pride in it. The reason is plain: a pilot, in those days, was the only unfettered and entirely independent human being that lived in the earth" (105)—more so, Twain argues, than kings, clergymen, or even writers. Lewis's comparison with water travel, then, celebrates the independence and freedom that the automobile provides.

Though the railway would surpass the waterways as the most significant means of moving people and goods about the country, the mechanization of the railway made the engineer an inadequate replacement for the pilot as a romantic hero. Safely piloting a steamboat required a great deal of knowledge and skill in "reading" the river for signs of danger. Engineers, by contrast, don't guide the train—iron rails and the electric impulses of the telegraph do, meaning that, as Schivelbusch points out, "an engine-driver can never aspire to the social role of 'a captain on dry land' … his true status [is] that of an industrial worker, an operator of a machine" (38). When waterways surrendered to railways as the dominant mode of transportation, the free and masterful figure of the riverboat pilot fades without an adequate replacement.

The automobile, on the other hand, does require skill to maneuver, and in those days when many rural roads were scarcely more developed than wagon trails, picking the safest and surest line often required attention and skill. Indeed, among the first things that impresses Claire about Milt is his skill in safely navigating his tiny "bug" (which she perceives as "a toy—a card-board box on toothpick axles" [24]) through the same muddy terrain that had already ensnared her own roadster: "Where she would for a tenth of a second have hesitated while choosing the best course, he hurled the bug straight at the hole, plunged through with sheets of glassy black water arching on either side, then viciously twisted the car to the right, to the left, and straight again, as he followed the

tracks with the solidest bottoms" (24-25). As the automobile, in Wharton's view, restores to travel a sense of romance that the railroad had destroyed, Lewis's depiction of the automobile recovers a romantic figure which the railroad had eclipsed, conferring some degree of the prestige and romance of the maritime or river pilot upon the motorist.

Free Air also joins the other two texts in contrasting the automobile with the railroad. More explicitly than Wharton or Dreiser, Lewis uses this comparison to explore class distinctions. Claire's upper-class acquaintances, for example, evince a sense of horrified fascination with the types of people they imagine she must have met while traveling among the motoring masses. Amidst the motorcars on the western highways she finds herself "companionable with families of workmen, headed for a new town and a new job, and driving because a flivver, bought second-hand and soon to be sold again, was cheaper than trains" (119). There are also other wealthy motorists on the road, but in contrast to the "sagebrush tourists" who camp along the way, the "limousinvalids," as Lewis calls them, "insulated from life by plate glass … looked out at the campers for a second, sniffed, rolled on, wearily wondering whether they would find a good hotel that night—and why the deuce they hadn't come by train" (120). For those, like Claire, willing to engage in the world around them (both the natural world and the world of the masses), the automobile can be a transformative experience, while for others it can remain as antiseptic as rail travel.

The class distinctions in these modes of travel are also reflected in the characters, particularly Claire's father, Henry B. Boltwood. As an executive in a firm that sells railroad supplies, his identity and status are intertwined with the railway. Moreover, he himself fits in Lewis's category of "limousinvalids." Concern for his physical and mental

health after a nervous breakdown from overwork is what prompts Claire to take him on the road in the first place, and while he reluctantly agrees to the automobile trip, he himself cannot drive (either on the trip or in his everyday life back home, where he relies on a chauffeur). He rarely has any useful insight for the various automotive complications that arise during their trip. Like the travelers that Lewis describes, he worries about what the evening's accommodations might entail and occasionally speculates over whether they should take the train, eventually convincing Claire to forego the automobile and complete the last leg of their journey by rail. Mr. Boltwood's attitude towards Milt Daggett reflects the class connotations Lewis assigns to railway travel. "His relations with young men in cheap raincoats," the narrator tells us when the raincoat-wearing Milt first rescues the Boltwoods, "were entirely monetary. They did something for you, and you paid them—preferably not too much—and they ceased to be" (27). Likewise, in dismissing Milt at the end of their second meeting, when Milt fixes a malfunctioning distributor cap, "Mr. Boltwood's manner did not merely avoid Milt, it abolished him" (83). Jeff Saxton, Claire's most persistent wealthy suitor from back East, likewise wields his sense of class superiority as a weapon against Milt (whom he accurately perceives as a threat for Claire's affections), and he too favors the train, sending Claire an urgent telegram while they're on the road: "Received letter about trip surprised anxious will tire you out fatigue prairie roads bad for your father mountain roads dangerous strongly advise go only part way then take train" (72).

Claire, too, occasionally pines for the relative ease and luxury of the Pullman car; but she also feels the romantic pull of the open road and willingly surrenders to the charms of the automobile. For Claire, those charms consist of two primary benefits: first,

self-reliance, and second, communication with a more diverse community. Her desire to be independent and self-reliant is one of her inspirations for taking to the road in the first place. Though she once imagined her future to hold "babies and a solid husband," by the novel's opening she finds herself chafing at the "hulk of marriage drifting down on her frail speed-boat of ambitions" (12-13). While she acknowledges Saxton's solid prospects (he is a successful businessman in the copper trade), she also tires of his unadventurous demeanor and particularly resents his tendency to "manage" her. Saxton wants her to take the train instead of driving because it would be safer and easier, but the very challenges of motoring are central to its appeal, as Claire discovers the morning after her first muddy day on the road: "She didn't want all good road. She wanted something to struggle against. She was stiff as she crawled out of bed, but a rub with cold water left her feeling that she was stronger than she ever had been; that she was a woman, not a dependent girl" (45). This struggle for self-reliance is a recurring theme, and while at novel's end she does submit to marriage, her new suitor Milt admires her for the independence and self-reliance that the automobile has helped her to cultivate. In developing her self-reliance, that "feeling of struggle, of triumph over difficulties, of freedom unbounded," automobility has also made it possible for Claire to fashion her own identity, to "be herself, good or bad, ignorant or wise, with this boy beside her" (365).

The automobile also allows Claire to communicate and find community with a broader range of people. Her social peers express "how dreadful" it must be "to have to encounter so many common people along the road" (136), and after her first night on the road Claire herself is initially galled at the apparently abrasive behavior of the staff and guests at the hotel in Gopher Prairie (coincidentally, the setting for *Main Street*). But the

next morning she realizes that she had taken their Midwestern friendliness for mocking: "Why, they aren't rude. They care—about people they never saw before. That's why they ask questions! I never thought—I never thought! There's people in the world who want to know us without having looked us up in the Social Register!" (46). Out on the road, the communication and sense of community she feels with other drivers and with those she passes becomes an important pleasure. She gets a thrill from hailing "as though it were a passing ship" (68) a car displaying a banner indicating their common destination of Yellowstone, and she feels "a new sensation of common humanness" (68) when the engineer of a passing freight waves and whistles his horn in greeting. Later, momentarily yearning for the ease of train travel, her enthusiasm for the road is rejuvenated when "a lonely, tight-haired woman in the doorway of a tar-paper shack [waves] to her, and in that wistful gesture Claire [finds] friendship" (122). Whether exchanging information about roads, picking up travelers along the way, or simply waving at those "common" folks who, to her surprise, Claire finds "to be her own people" (122), this sense of community is a key part of the experience of traveling by automobile. It represents, the narrator remarks numerous times, Claire's venturing "into democracy." Just as the automobile buoys the individual with the experience of independence, so too does it create community with an awareness of *inter*dependence. After all, "if drivers can't help each other," Milt Daggett explains to her after fixing her distributor, "who can?" (80).

The automobile's facilitation of communication also accounts for its primary benefit to Milt Daggett. Unlike Claire, Milt requires no long-distance automobile trip to prove his independence or self reliance. The son of a pioneer doctor who had since (like Milt's mother) passed away, Milt trained himself as a mechanic and by 25 was "the

owner, manager, bookkeeper, wrecking crew, ignition expert, thoroughly competent bill-collector, and all but one of the working force of the Red Trail Garage" (25). But while Milt is thoroughly capable of looking after himself, the automobile allows him to communicate with a broader world. Tiny Schoenstrom, which "tends to leak off into jungles of tall corn" (52) offers a very limited horizon, and when Milt expresses a desire to try his hand someplace larger, his best friend assumes he means Gopher Prairie. At their first meeting, Milt confides to Claire that he had never even been out of Minnesota.

His road trip broadens horizons other than the geographic; once he reaches Seattle he enrolls in engineering school at the University of Washington, but even before then Claire has aided his cultural development. Milt, who "read[s] much, though not too easily" and does "rouse to the marvels hinted in books and magazines" (56), finds little opportunity for intellectual kinship in Schoenstrom, where he knows but one person beside the priest who actually reads books. After he fixes Claire's distributor out on the road, though, she loans him two books she has brought with her: *Congo,* by Vachel Lindsay, and *Youth's Encounter,* by Compton MacKenzie. Milt reads as he camps by the roadside, and eventually draws on them for guidance in later conversations with Claire. She expands his cultural horizons in other ways, too, and without losing the best of his "small-town values" (such as honesty, loyalty, and kindness), he has decidedly outgrown his hometown's limitations by the end. "Schoenstrom must have been a little dull, after very many years," Claire tells him as he realizes he would no longer fit with life back home, rejecting the idealization of small-town life that was common at the time and anticipating one of the underlying themes that Lewis would explore in *Main Street*: "This stuff about the charm of backwoods villages," Claire argues, "the people that write it

seem to take jolly good care to stay in Long Island suburbs!" (350). In this efficient turn of phrase, Claire both reminds Milt of the limitations of his background and acknowledges the limitations of her own, which she has discovered only by venturing out of Brooklyn Heights[9] and "into democracy." By marrying the best of the common people with the best of the cultured class, the automobile allows both Milt and Claire to transcend the limited perspectives imposed by their respective backgrounds.

Standardization, Stagnation, and the Automobile

At first glance, *Free Air*'s optimism towards the automobile may be undermined partially or completely by the sharply-honed satire of Lewis's more famous follow-up novel. Where the light-hearted and optimistic *Free Air* is enthusiastic about the potential of the automobile, *Main Street,* which elaborates Claire's critique of small town America through the eyes of the idealistic reformer Carol Milford Kennicott, is more ambivalent. Lewis places the automobile prominently in his satiric prefatory description of Gopher Prairie's Main Street: "Main Street is the climax of civilization. That this Ford car might stand in front of the Bon Ton Store, Hannibal invaded Rome and Erasmus wrote in Oxford cloisters" (6). Elsewhere, explaining America's aspiration "to succeed Victorian England as the chief mediocrity of the world," Lewis observes: "Such a society functions admirably in the large production of cheap automobiles, dollar watches, and safety razors. But it is not satisfied until the entire world also admits that the end and joyous purpose of living is to ride in flivvers, to make advertising-pictures of dollar watches, and in the twilight to sit talking not of love and courage but of the convenience of safety razors" (249). In comparing *Free Air* to *Main Street,* Andrew Gross builds on these

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[9] "New York's First Suburb," as described in the subtitle to *Old Brooklyn Heights* (1961), Clay Lancaster's famous architectural history of the neighborhood.

characterizations to suggest that the dull standardization of *Main Street's* Gopher Prairie, "both a way station and the terminal point of Claire Boltwood's 'voyage into democracy'" (89), is an unavoidable consequence of the expanded automobility represented in *Free Air*. Gross uses this reading of Lewis's two novels to support his thesis about road narratives in general: "early motorists who enjoyed a degree of mobility unimaginable a few years before, found themselves confronted by the standardized landscape their own mobility helped create" (80).

While a surface reading of this interpretation of *Main Street* may support such an interpretation, however, it overlooks a number of important factors. For one thing, the automobile is not exclusively a negative force in the latter novel. Among the complaints lodged about such towns is that they exploit the surrounding farmers rather than serving their needs (261); the automobile, however, allows the surrounding farmers to communicate with one another more easily and to partake more freely of whatever limited opportunities the town may offer. It is also worth noting that, while our heroine Carol frequently grows tired of the townspeople's fascination with motorcars, the dismissal of the automobile is also associated with class prejudice and anti-labor sentiments. The declining influence of the town's Yankee aristocracy, for instance, is embodied in the character of banker Ezra Stowbody, who is unhappy that "nobody was impressed in this rotten age of automobiles by the 'spanking grays' which Ezra still drove" (51). Meanwhile lawyer Guy Pollock, whom Carol briefly thinks might be a kindred spirit, reveals his true colors when he objects to her interest in social justice: "Democracy is all right theoretically, and I'll admit there are industrial injustices, but I'd rather have them than see the world reduced to a dead level of mediocrity. I refuse to

believe that you have anything in common with a lot of laboring men rowing for bigger wages so that they can buy wretched flivvers and hideous player-pianos …" (198). While *Main Street* satirizes the townspeople's enthusiasm for the automobile, so too does it critique those who most vocally object to the automobile, whether they are unhappy snobs like Ezra, are opposed to the working class like Guy, or simply unaware (like Carol) of the importance of the automobile in the life of individuals in the community.

More importantly, the historical timeline does not support the assertion that the automobile is responsible for the standardization that Lewis depicts as so objectionable in *Main Street.* "The threat posed by Main Street is standardization," Gross argues (89); but the relationship between the citizens of Gopher Prairie and their automobiles is a symptom of that standardization, rather than a cause. In the world of *Main Street,* meaningful regional differences between towns is already an illusion: "Nine-tenths of the American towns are so alike that it is the completest boredom to wander from one to another," the narrator claims. "Always, west of Pittsburg, and often, east of it, there is the same lumber yard, the same railroad station, the same Ford garage, the same creamery, the same box-like houses and two-story shops" (259). But this observation is situated in a conversation that takes place in 1916, the same year in which *Free Air* is set, before the automobile has taken over most American towns, let alone had the opportunity to standardize a nation. It is anachronistic, then, to ascribe the standardization bemoaned in *Main Street* to the same mobility that *Free Air* celebrates. Indeed, "the universal similarity" of these towns is but "the physical expression of the philosophy of dull safety" (259)—a philosophy which the automobile helps Claire, in *Free Air,* to transcend. What's more, the fact that Lewis, like Dreiser, presents American small towns as already

standardized undermines the conventional wisdom that the widespread automobility and the construction of the interstate highway system in the second half of the twentieth century single-handedly erased regional differences and standardized the American landscape.

Even more problematic in *Main Street* than the standardization that Gross attributes to automobility is the stagnation that precedes it. More damaging than the sameness between towns is the sameness within any such town. While some people may be satisfied by small-town life, "the unimaginatively standardized background" prompts "the more intelligent young people (and the fortunate widows!) [to] flee to the cities with agility [and] the most protesting patriots of the towns [to] leave them in old age, if they can afford it, and go to live in California or in the cities" (*Main Street* 257). Milt's experience in *Free Air*, though, suggests that rather than being an agent of standardization, the automobile provides an antidote to this local stagnation. The movement of the automobile sets Milt (and Claire) free from the stasis that oppresses Carol Kennicott in Gopher Prairie.

Free Air presents an optimistic view of the possibilities of motoring to increase and diversify communication between regions and backgrounds. The experience of the open road transforms the imaginative and intelligent Milt and Claire. Although Lewis never wrote another road novel, we might imagine that, were he to send the conservative, insular, less imaginative residents of Gopher Prairie onto the nation's highways, they would not be transformed by the open road, but would instead transform the road itself, into the image of their own safe, staid, familiar hometown Main Street. That is to say, with respect to the postwar standardization of the American highway, its fast food

franchises and filling stations, its interchangeable interstate exits featuring strip malls lined with identical retail outlets and casual restaurants, the fault lies not with our cars, but with our selves.

Conclusion

These books by Wharton, Dreiser, and Lewis, represent the earliest attempts by American writers to respond to the automobile and assess its effects on modern life. In comparing the automobile to the railway, the mode of transportation more directly associated, at the time, with modernity, these authors find a modern transportation that might help restore a relationship with nature and which also offers additional freedom and self determination for the traveler. Each of these early texts imagines the automobile, not yet the quintessential symbol of modernity, as an escape from modernity and its consequences. For Wharton, the automobile allows escape from modern efficiency and sterility to the beauty and wonder of Medieval France. For Dreiser, the automobile allows escape from the social inequality, congestion, and pollution of the modern city. For Lewis, the automobile allows escape from the stifling social organization and stagnating intellectual life of suburban parkways and small-town Main Streets.

It may be tempting for a modern reader to view such fantasies of escape as delusional; so closely has the automobile become associated, in our cultural imagination, with such issues as suburban sprawl, congestion, and concerns about air quality that it is easy to forget that such issues actually predate it. A century of car culture appears to have closed off many of the possibilities these authors identify in the automobile, but it does not follow that the possibilities were anything less than real, either for these authors or for the thousands of fellow Americans who likewise invested, both financially and

emotionally, in automobility. Such were the perceived benefits of the automobile that Robert and Helen Lynd's Middletown Studies, which began just five years after Lewis published *Free Air*, finds a public that would rather go hungry than lose access to their cars: "A woman who had just returned to the store a new winter coat because her husband had lost his job said she planned to cut down on 'picture shows'—'but I'll never cut on gas! I'd go without a meal before I'd cut down on using the car' (63). Half a decade after Lewis celebrates the possibilities of automobility in *Free Air*, the automobile has become more valuable to many Americans than any other luxury, and would be more difficult to forego than a necessity such as food.

In the decades that would follow, as both automobility and urbanization increased, the automobile would certainly, in ways that have been widely discussed, transform American urban space. Urban space, in ways that have not been as closely analyzed, would also transform automobility. In the next chapter, I use the lens of the hard-boiled detective story and film noir to examine the relationship between the automobile and urban space from the 1920s through World War II.

Chapter Two: Calling All Cars: Changing Urban Geography in Hard-boiled Detective Novels

Between March and July, 1929, listeners to Chicago's WGN radio station occasionally found an evening's program of classical music interrupted by police bulletins alerting patrol officers to the location of a robbery, an assault, an attempted suicide, or some other emergency. Chicago was among the first cities to use radio technology to coordinate patrol cars in the field, but in early 1929 the city owned neither a radio station nor the necessary equipment to broadcast. Having read a story in his newspaper about the nation's first police radio system in Detroit, *Chicago Tribune* publisher Robert McCormick donated receivers for several Chicago patrol cars and volunteered the *Tribune*'s radio station (WGN being short for "World's Greatest Newspaper") as the transmitter.

The arrangement provided the police department the opportunity to experiment with a radio system, helped police commissioner William F. Russell lobby the city government to invest in more cars and more radio equipment (including a separate transmitter to take the signal off the commercial airwaves), and gave McCormick's *Tribune* the opportunity to promote both its radio station and its civic involvement. For three months the newspaper ran stories celebrating the system. The *Tribune*'s radio critic Elmer Douglass even got in the act, sprinkling comments about police notices into his published commentary about the musical programs provided by the likes of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra or the Chicago Welsh Male Choir. "I never fail to get a big kick out of those squad calls," Douglass writes. "One is conscious every time the police warning gong is sounded that criminals or potential criminals who may hear it are shaking in their

boots lest some day that same gong may be sounding for them" ("Elmer Defends Police Calls"). With headlines like "W-G-N Flashes to Guide City's Crime Fighters," "Bandits Caught in 8 Minutes by W-G-N Flash," and "Radio Balks Suicide; Helps Catch Burglar" the *Tribune* made clear that its radio station, more than any individual police officer, deserved the credit for reducing crime.

The arrangement was too successful to last: three months after the first police bulletin was broadcast on WGN, Russell had convinced the city council to invest $152,000 to build a transmitter and provide additional receivers. Municipal control over the signal was important, since one flaw in the initial system was that the public could hear the reports as well. According to the *Tribune*, this often resulted in crowds gathering to gawk at reported crime scenes ("Year Old Police Radio Is Husky Crime Battler"). An anecdote reported in a 1930 *Popular Science* article revealed a yet stronger reason to separate the police bulletins from the commercial airwaves: "A woman reported to police headquarters that a burglar was looting an apartment across the street. Station WGN sent out a general alarm to all squad cars equipped with radio ..." When the first officers arrived, though, the burglar was already gone: "In one corner the radio was going full blast and under its lid was tucked this note: 'Dear Radio Man: Thanks for the tip-off. You're a swell announcer. I'm signing off now,' " (Teale, 140). Whether the prowler actually penned that prose or it was merely departmental folklore, the anecdote illustrates an inherent tension in the emerging network of mobile communications between its potential to support police work and its potential to undermine it.

The rise of mobile communications was but one factor in a rapidly evolving urban landscape in the years between World War I and World War II. The reorganization of

urban space was fueled by, among other factors, increased migration from rural areas to the city, the rise of mass culture and spectacle, increased bureaucratization of city services (water, electricity, sewage, health, roads, etc.), and, of course, the increasing presence of the automobile. Both the literary genre of hardboiled fiction (and, more specifically, the hardboiled detective novel, which first appeared in 1929 and became more prominent in the 1930s and 1940s) and the filmic genre of film noir (which emerged in the 1940s and 1950s, and which often used hard-boiled detective novels as source material) are concerned with this evolution of urban spaces and its consequences on those who populate them. In a 1944 *Atlantic Monthly* essay, "The Simple Art of Murder," Raymond Chandler (who is, along with Dashiell Hammett, the most successful and important early practitioner of the hardboiled detective genre) spells out the genre's urban concerns. Evaluating Hammett's contribution to crime fiction, Chandler proclaims that Hammett "took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley" (988). The new type of detective story that follows (which Chandler terms "realistic detective fiction") must concern itself with the gritty realities of urban life characterized by criminal power, dirty money, and political corruption: "a world where you may witness a hold-up in broad daylight and see who did it, but you will fade quickly back into the crowd rather than tell anyone, because the hold-up men may have friends with long guns, or the police may not like your testimony" (991). The anonymity of the crowd is a prime effect of increased urbanization, and Chandler presents both the criminals and the police as threats to the average citizen (a suggestion which, as I discuss below, is characteristic of hardboiled detective fiction).

Despite the clear relationship between hardboiled fiction and urban space, scholarship about the genre has tended to focus on other factors, such as its relationship to New Deal liberalism (Sean McCann's *Gumshoe America*), its influence on film noir (Gene D. Phillips's *Creatures of Darkness*), and its literary reputation and influence, particularly on more recent crime writers. A handful of scholars have examined the analysis of urban space in hardboiled detective fiction. Thomas Heise's "'Going Blood-Simple Like the Natives': Contagious Urban Spaces and Modern Power in Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*," for example, examines Hammett's first novel in light of urban concerns about the inherent potential of crowded urban spaces to spread not only contagious diseases, but also dangerous ideas. Scholars of film noir (which I will examine more fully in the following chapter), on the other hand, have long emphasized film noir's representations of urban space, with a threatening and unstable urban cityscape as an underlying characteristic of the genre. Edward Dimendberg's *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, which uses the body of films noir from 1939 through 1960 as a text through which to construct a history of American urban spaces in transition from the modern to the postmodern city, is but one example. Such discussion of the urban landscape has (to varying degrees) also prompted discussion of the automobile's effects on that landscape, but the presence of the automobile itself has received relatively little attention in discussions of film noir and virtually no attention in discussions of the hardboiled detective novel.

In this chapter I argue that understanding the hardboiled detective novel requires analyzing the role that the automobile and automobility play in the generally urban spaces that their characters inhabit. The Sherlock Holmes mode of detective fiction is

consistent with the reorganization of space and social order resulting from the telegraph and railway; the automobile disrupts that order by making the automotive subject mobile in a way that the surveillance gaze is not—at least until the proliferation of the two-way radio, which made it simple and efficient to coordinate the efforts of police automobiles throughout urban space, thus mobilizing the gaze. The hardboiled detective story emerges from this moment of instability. Examining the importance of the automobile in works by Hammett and Chandler, who originated the genre, as well as writers who followed in the hardboiled vein (including Ross Macdonald, Dorothy B. Hughes, and Chester Himes), I demonstrate that the genre articulates this moment of crisis and its implications for urban space.

In examining the hardboiled detective story as a genre particularly suited to its historical context, I am particularly interested in three factors which Michel Foucault identifies as of central importance to the exercise of power in a society moving away from disciplinary structures towards a more mobile populace: speed, communication, and territory. In a 1982 interview with Paul Rabinow, Foucault explains that while the enclosures of disciplinary society provide an architectural solution to the spatial problems (disease, political unrest) of industrial urbanization, technological advances of the nineteenth century initiated a new set of spatial problems in the process of governance. These problems, Foucault explains, revolve around “three great variables—territory, communication, and speed” (“Space, Knowledge, and Power” 350). The adoption of first the automobile and then radio communications by American police departments demonstrates the struggle of the state (through the police departments) to establish dominion over these three great variables. Appearing at roughly the same time as these

developments in police technology, the hardboiled detective novel depicts a landscape in which speed, communication, and territory remain subject to contest and renegotiation. Before turning directly to the works themselves, then, a brief history of the automobile as a tool of police work will help to establish the historical context.

Police Departments and the Automobile

The world's first police car (and an electric one at that) appeared in Akron, Ohio, in 1899, several years before automobile use became widespread among the general public.[10] Innovative as the world's first police car may have been, it did not last. On August 22, 1900, a mob more than one thousand strong set siege to Akron's city hall, intending to find and lynch Louis Peck, an African-American man accused of assaulting a white child. The police department, aware of the possibility of mob violence, had actually taken Peck to Cleveland several hours before, but even after representatives from the crowd were permitted to search both the jail and the city hall, the crowd remained unsatisfied and threatened to destroy city hall unless police turned the prisoner over. An adjacent wood building was set ablaze (with the expectation that the fire would then spread to City Hall), and when firefighters showed up to fight the fire, rioters cut their hoses and fired shots at them. (The building was slow to catch fire, and the crowd eventually used dynamite to finish the job.) While city hall was burning, "members of the mob having a peculiar sense of humor, pulled the automobile patrol wagon from the station … and, amid the cheers of thousands, the wagon was run up and down the street, bumping into telephone poles and curbstones, and finally running down a steep incline

[10] Some sources (see Dempsey and Forst, Roth, and Siegel) correctly identify Akron as the first city to operate a police vehicle, but identify the Ford Model T purchased by the department in 1910. This was actually Akron's second motorized police car, and appeared on the streets after other city police departments (including Detroit) had begun to use the automobile.

into the canal" ("Troops Guard Akron") . Though the car was recovered the next day, the incident still reveals the impotence of automobile policing against a public more numerous and more powerful.

By the end of the decade, other departments were experimenting with using police cars. Detroit was perhaps the first, with a Packard that Police Chief Frank Croul paid for personally in 1909 (Jarvis, White, Wilson, and Woody 26). Police cars allowed for a faster response time, but that was mitigated by the difficulty of communicating with the car itself. Initially, a department's car would be garaged at police headquarters and then dispatched in case of an emergency. This was quicker than dispatching emergency forces by other means, but still gave suspects plenty of time to flee. To solve that problem, Detroit developed a system with patrol booths spread throughout the city. When an emergency call came into headquarters, they would then call an individual booth to dispatch the police car. Again, this improved response time, but was hardly an efficient use of departmental vehicles. Police cars could only be mobilized after the fact, and patrolling neighborhoods would cut cars off from contact with headquarters.

As the automobile became more popular with the public, it naturally became more popular in the pursuit of criminal enterprise, and while police departments were grappling with the inefficiencies of incommunicative patrol cars, criminals were making more efficient use of the automobile for purposes from bootlegging to bank robbery. The automobile, as much as the Tommy Gun, is an icon of the battle between police forces and gangsters during the 1920s and 1930s. The most famous example of the gangster's automobile is the "Bonnie and Clyde Death Car": the bullet-ridden Ford that Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker were in when they were gunned down by Texas and Louisiana

lawmen has been displayed as an attraction for decades at amusement parks, casinos, state fairs, and so on, and has been referenced in such diverse cultural texts as Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (2005), Luis Alberto Urrea's *Into the Beautiful North* (2009), and the video game *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010).

The increased public mobility put police at a disadvantage, but radio provided a potential solution by enabling wireless communication over long distances. Detroit again led the way, experimenting with radio cars in the early 1920s. Given the technology—radio receivers were bulky and not always reliable, particularly while in motion—the system was imperfect, but by 1929 the city had its own radio station with several cars in operation. Other cities followed suit, led (as noted above) by Chicago. The radio increased the efficiency of automobile patrols substantially. Before the radio patrol car, for instance, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department employed two automobiles to serve each of its substations: a "call car" that was idle at the station until dispatched after an incoming call and a "patrol car" that moved through the community but was out of contact with the substation.[11] In 1933 the Sheriff's Department began experimenting with radios in their patrol cars, with broadcasting alerts by special arrangement with the city's police radio service. As an LA County sheriff's department report on the experiment explains, "neither the Call Car, nor the Prowler, nor both together, though both performing their several functions, constitute a very efficient weapon against crime" ("Survey" 41). A single radio car could perform the tasks of both the call car and the patrol car more efficiently than either, and also be available to help cut off escape routes or assist with emergencies in other parts of the county as necessary. Even when there is

[11] These patrol cars were also known as "Prowl Cars" or "Prowlers"; the term's criminal and predatory connotations reinforce the sense often found in hardboiled detective stories that the police can be as dangerous as any criminal.

no emergency, the survey concludes, “the units of this mobile screen move through their allotted areas, a source of protection and security to the law-abiding citizen, a constant menace to the evil-doer” (56).

Since both the call car and the patrol car could be converted and dispatched as radio cars, the introduction of radio service made it possible to double the number of automobiles actually patrolling a district without investing in any additional vehicles. The survey for the LA County Sheriff’s Department, for example, recommended no new automobile purchases but would still more than double the number of cars actually patrolling. At the time of the report, 19 of the department’s 57 cars were assigned to nine substations (52); presumably, nine of these were call cars waiting in the substation, nine were out on active patrol (but without radio contact) and one was a relief car. The report recommends 24 radio-equipped cars to include 21 active patrol cars, two relief cars, and one for the officer in charge of the entire radio patrol (51-52). The introduction of radio communication, then, resulted in more efficient and more numerous police patrol cars. This pattern held for other cities as well. The Detroit Police Department, for instance, had 24 patrol cars and 8 radio-equipped cruisers in 1928, the year that (following seven years of experimenting) their radio system was fully effective and operational (“Sixty-Third Annual Report” 11). Five years later, the department had 114 radio patrol cars, though the total number of cars in the department had increased only from 343 to 379, and ten years later the number of patrol cars had increased to 172 out of 371 total cars (“Sixty-Eighth Annual Report” 48; “Seventy-Third Annual report” 74). In ten years, the number of police cars in the streets of Detroit had increased more than five-fold, while the population of Detroit had only grown about three percent. It was not the automobile

alone, then, but the integration of the automobile and communication that really changed the nature of police work; the radio transformed the automobile from a useful but highly inefficient police tool to a central, organizing element of the modern police department.

The move towards radio patrol cars also fundamentally changed the relationship between police and the public, with the faceless police cruiser replacing the walking beat cop as the most recognizable symbol of police authority. The expansion of the radio patrol marked, as Mike Davis writes in his discussion of the LAPD in *City of Quartz* (1990), "the beginning of dispersed, mechanized policing" (251). Rather than walking through a community, interacting personally with its people and places, the radio patroller was enclosed in the automobile. (Notably, the LA sheriff's survey specifies that the enclosed car is more suited for radio patrol than the open cars that were still, at the time, fairly common.) While beat cops circulating through the community would typically be summoned directly by citizens in need of help, radio officers were dispatched to trouble by headquarters. Foot patrol involved direct contact with citizens in a variety of settings and for a variety of purposes other than investigation; but radio patrols engaged primarily in response to a crime or some other emergency.

Overshadowed by the increased efficiency of the motor patrol, these less desirable effects were not initially obvious, but began to come to light in the 1960s. A 1967 report of the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice argued that "the most significant weakness in American motor patrol operations today is the general lack of contact with citizens except when an officer has responded to a call.… [M]ost patrol officers have few opportunities to develop closer relationships with persons living in the district" (34). As observers in the decades that followed increasingly pointed

out, the shift from a police force organized around walking beats to one organized around patrol cars fractured the relationship between police and community. This is not to say that the relationship between beat cops and their communities were without antagonism, but the combination of speed and communication in the radio patrol car coincides with a shift in the domain of the patrolman: while foot patrol may suggest involvement with a community, motor patrol is concerned centrally with *territory*.

New Modes of Detection

While the hardboiled detective genre reflects this shifting emphasis to speed, communication, and territory, Golden Age Detective Fiction, against which the hardboiled school reacted, was more closely attuned to the disciplinary structures of a waning era. The history of the American detective story dates back to Edgar Allan Poe and his three "stories of ratiocination"—"The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), "The Mystery of Marie Roget" (1842), and "The Purloined Letter" (1844). The short stories feature C. August Dupin, a supremely rational and knowledgeable detective who solves seemingly impenetrable mysteries thanks to his superior intelligence, rationality, and observation. Detective fiction in the decades that followed developed along similar lines, with detectives relying on logic and command of knowledge to reach deductive solutions. Dupin was a primary influence on Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Holmes inspired countless imitators in what became known, by the 1920s, as the Golden Age of Detective Fiction. The hardboiled school, which first emerged in pulp magazines in the 1920s, reacted against this tradition with detectives who relied on gut instinct as much as their head and who had quick fists to match their quick wits. While Golden Age fiction, I

argue, is rooted in the linear logic of the railroad, the hardboiled response is driven, to a substantial degree, by the emergence of automobility.

Two late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century figures are particularly important in establishing the traditions against which the hardboiled detectives stand: Sherlock Holmes and Allan Pinkerton. Like the railway, Holmes's method of detection is linear; pieced together, the clues track to a single, supposedly inevitable conclusion. Holmes has two primary advantages in his battle with criminals: his keen powers of observation and his command of logic. Picking up on clues that escape the average mind, Holmes puts those pieces together to lead him to the only possible conclusion that the facts allow, and the challenge for the reader is to identify the same clues and reach the same "inevitable" conclusion. In truth, Holmes's conclusions are not always really inevitable, and while Watson often speaks of Holmes's "peculiar facility for deduction" (Doyle 634), his method actually relies more heavily on induction, and "involve[s] presumption and conjecture, and the ever-present possibility of going wrong" (Makinson 176). Still, the fact that Holmes and Watson both conceive of it as deduction is telling in that it reinforces the linear nature of Holmes's process of detection. The frequently-employed metaphor of links and chains, likewise, highlights his linearity. For Holmes, solving a mystery involves constructing a "chain of reasoning" (489), and a mystery is solved when, as he tells Watson at the end of "The Problem of Thor Bridge" (1922), "every link is now in its place and the chain is complete" (1548). For Watson, the process of narration is, as he describes it in "The Adventure of the Empty House" (1903) "supply(ing) those missing links which make up the whole of that remarkable chain" (700). Like the links in a chain (or the slats of a railroad track), the clues and steps that

Holmes relies on are distinct, connected, and lead in a single direction. The structure of Holmes's approach thus evokes the linearity of the railway.

The context and content of Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories are also infused with the railway. As Christopher Redmond says, "it is hard to think of Holmes's England without thinking of trains" (141). The majority of the original 56 stories and four novels in the Holmes canon mention the railway at some point, and numerous London stations are mentioned by name in various stories. Holmes and Watson take several train journeys over the course of their investigations, both within London and to places outside the metropolis. Given the centrality of the railway to life in Victorian London, it is unsurprising that trains would provide content for Doyle's fiction or that the tracked, linear logic of the railway would inform Holmes's method of detection.

Allan Pinkerton is also closely associated with the railroad. Born in Scotland in 1819, Pinkerton came to the United States in the 1840s and found work as a detective in Chicago before starting the Pinkerton National Detective Agency, which would become the largest private police force in the world. The agency's reputation was built largely through their work protecting the interests of railroad companies—providing security, investigating employee theft, and battling with train robbers, for instance. In the late nineteenth century, the agency became known primarily for its anti-union activities, including infiltrating labor organizations, providing protection for strikebreakers, and neutralizing labor activists through means both judicial and extrajudicial. Many of the most famous strikes the agency was involved with, including the Great Railroad Strike of 1877, the Great Southwest Railroad Strike of 1886, and the Pullman Strike of 1894, directly involved the railroads. Though Pinkerton passed away in 1884, before some of

these strikes took place, the agency that bore his name was, from its inception through the early twentieth century, closely aligned with the interests of the railroad.

Unlike Sherlock Holmes, Pinkerton's method does not rely on logic or on a chain of reason, but instead on the power of vision, as reflected in the company's famous logo of an open eye. (See Figure 1.) The power of vision is important in Holmes as well, in that his powers of observation and keen eye for detail—"I see no more than you," Holmes tells Watson, "but I have trained myself to notice what I see" (1446)—are essential to his success; Pinkerton's method, though, focuses not on the observation of details but on the surveillance of suspects and potential criminals. As the Sherlockian metaphor of links in a chain of reason evokes the linearity of the railroad track, one of Pinkerton's chosen metaphors connects his method of surveillance to the network of railroad tracks that spread out over the country in the late nineteenth century. Discussing his investigation of a series of thefts in the mail system, Pinkerton muses: "I had to conduct my inquiries with the greatest circumspection, whilst I spread out my *tentacula* in all directions, hoping and believing that sooner or later I would solve the mystery" (*Byron as Detective* 167; italics in original). The image calls to mind Frank Norris's description of the railroad as a "leviathan with tentacles of steel" in *Octopus* (1901), and Pinkerton imagines his network of surveillance, like the railroad, spreading across the continent.

The railroads were the breeding ground for that network (his early work with railroads involved sending undercover detectives to monitor employee behavior) as well as a crucial tool in perpetuating it. Pinkerton understood the value of the railroad for criminals, noting for instance that traveling bands of thieves were likely "to select a town

where a railroad train will pass through during the early hours of the morning, as this enables them to get safely away, frequently before the robbery is discovered, and certainly before suspicion attaches to them" (*Thirty Years* 180). With train travel as the primary method of rapid movement between locales, mastery of the railroad network enhanced the power of Pinkerton's surveillance network, and his books recount stories of his detectives following suspects' movements through train stations and rail yards, arresting suspects in the confines of railroad cars, and using their knowledge of train routes and schedules to track down suspects. A space organized around railroad transit helps to support and stabilize the surveillance networks that are central to Pinkerton's method.

Both Holmes and Pinkerton were influential on the development of the detective story in the early twentieth century. Holmes, who first appeared in 1887, was easily the most famous literary detective in the world; by the turn of the century had spread to the stage (beginning in 1899, Doyle wrote three plays featuring Holmes) and screen (the short film *Sherlock Holmes Baffled* [1900] was the first of more than 200 films to feature the character). Pinkerton, too, had success in the literary field; he was, as Christopher Raczkowski says, "both the author of the first systemic, nation-wide surveillance network in America and the author of seventeen memoirs narrating that surveillance whose popular success did much to inspire a dime detective novel industry that mushroomed in the second half of the century" (633).[12] Pinkerton indirectly influenced the detective novel in another way: Hammett worked as a detective for the Pinkerton agency in the years before and after World War I, and his experience with the agency's anti-labor

[12] Pinkerton was the author of record for these works, but how much was written by him and how much by ghostwriters is not entirely clear.

crusades provided inspiration both for his first novel, *Red Harvest*, and for his later political commitment to the American left.

By the 1920s and 1930s, when the originators of the hard-boiled school begin to publish, the detective genre was dominated by what was called Golden Age Detective Fiction. In *Murder for Pleasure* (1941), the first book-length treatment of detective fiction, Howard Haycraft identifies 1918-1930 as the golden age, but Raymond Chandler, in his 1944 essay "The Simple Art of Murder," argues that "for all practical purposes it is still here. Two-thirds or three-quarters of all the detective stories published still adhere to the formula the giants of this era created, perfected, polished and sold to the world as problems in logic and deduction" (980) As the term *hardboiled* implies, temperament marks one of the key departures from the genteel settings, detectives, and criminals of the Golden Age. Their settings are urban streets and alleyways rather than country estates, and their protagonists are men (almost exclusively, though there were female writers in the hardboiled style) who were familiar with those streets rather than the manor. The culprits of Golden Age detective fiction were from the upper class—as Willard Huntington Wright (who, writing as S. S. Van Dine, authored a popular series of detective stories featuring Philo Vance, whom Chandler called "probably the most asinine character in detective fiction" ["Simple Art" 985]) proclaimed, a servant would be "too easy of a solution" and a professional criminal would be out of place; the culprit must instead be "a decidedly worth-while person" (130). By contrast, the hardboiled genre, as Chandler said of Hammett, "gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand, not with hand-wrought dueling pistols, curare, or tropical fish" ("Simple Art" 989).

Such differences reflect an urban sensibility to the hardboiled genre which contrasts with the frequently rural sensibility of the Golden Age. But more than simply a shift from “walks along the Downs” to the “mean streets” of the city, the emergence of the hardboiled genre also reflects social transformations wrought by the automobile. The geography of the Golden Age novel is often enclosed and isolated, like the Styles Court in Agatha Christie’s first novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), which begins with the narrator arriving at “an absurd little station, with no apparent reason for existence” (7). Culprits and victims are thus isolated and lack the mobility that the automobile affords. Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) goes a step further, with the various suspects (all of whom turn out to be collaborators in the crime) unable to escape surveillance, detection, and ultimately exposure because of the enclosure of the train itself. The hardboiled genre, on the other hand, offers a much more expansive geography, and connects its characters and crimes to the material conditions of the world they inhabit.

Beyond geography, the approach to detection in the hardboiled genre deviates from the logic and deduction that is central to the classic detective story; Holmes’s “chain of reason,” and the logical detectives that followed him in the Golden Age, reflects the linear process of the railroad, but the detectives in the hardboiled genre rely as much on their guts (both in the sense of gut instinct and in the sense of raw courage) as they do their heads. While the clue-puzzle structure of Golden Age fiction required careful plotting, such that the reader could construct a chain of reason along with the detective, hardboiled stories tend to be structured more loosely. For his part, Chandler was “notoriously indifferent to the exigencies of plotting in his novels” (Shoop 207). A

famous (though perhaps apocryphal) account of the screen adaptation for Chandler's *The Big Sleep* provides a telling example. According to the legend, when neither director Howard Hawks nor screenwriter William Faulkner could agree on how Owen Taylor, a minor character in the story, had died, Hawks sent a telegram to Chandler to solve the mystery. Chandler, who would later admit that "Dammit, I didn't know either" (*Selected Letters*, 156), deflected the question with the quip "the butler did it."[13] The rise of automobility renders Pinkerton's method untenable as well. The system of surveillance Pinkerton helped to construct was supported by the network of railroads, and with the rise of individual mobility powered by the automobile that network became unstable; the hardboiled detective genre reflects that instability, as its protagonists must work to navigate a geography that is consequently more expansive and more uncertain.

In my study of the hardboiled genre, I focus particularly on the works of Hammett and Chandler, who are especially useful for a few reasons. First of all, both writers were tremendously influential on the genre and helped to establish its conventions. Hammett is widely regarded as the originator of the hardboiled genre, though there were several other writers (Carroll John Daly, for instance) working along similar lines for the pulp magazine *Black Mask* in the 1920s. As Chandler says, Hammett "was one of a group, the only one who achieved critical recognition, but not the only one who wrote or tried to write realistic mystery fiction" ("Simple Art" 988). Still, that critical recognition as well as his commercial success spawned several imitators. In some sense, Chandler might be

[13] The story is often repeated, though the details change. Gene D. Phillips recounts a conversation with Hawks which includes the telegram and Chandler blaming the butler (56). Chandler, too, remembers a telegram from Hawks and Bogart; while he doesn't report his precise response, he claims that studio head Jack Warner chewed Hawks out for wasting seventy cents on the telegram (*Selected Letters* 155-156). In Fredric Jameson's telling, Hawks and Humphrey Bogart called up Chandler after a long night of drinking and arguing about the film's plot (33). David Reid puts Hawks and Faulkner (rather than Bogart) on the Hollywood end of the telephone line (32). Other versions circulating have Chandler responding to the question with "how the hell should I know?"

considered among that number, but his own commercial and critical success distinguishes him. Their most famous detectives, Hammett's Sam Spade and Chandler's Philip Marlowe, are synonymous with the genre.

Also important is the fact that Hammett and Chandler, as the earliest prominent voices in the hardboiled genre, begin their careers in the 1920s and 1930s, while the automobile is still in the process of transforming American society. As such, their work is particularly attuned to the effects and potential effects of this new technology on the experience of urban space. James M. Cain, often considered the third major figure of hardboiled fiction, fits this profile as well; however, his most famous work (which includes *The Postman Always Rings Twice* [1934], *Mildred Pierce* [1941], and *Double Indemnity* [1943]) is not actually detective fiction, and so in this analysis takes a back seat (so to speak) to Hammett and Chandler.

Finally, Hammett and Chandler are particularly significant because of their influence on the related genre of film noir, which I will examine in more detail in the next chapter. Hammett's influence on film noir extends from his influence on crime fiction, and several of Hammett's works inspired film noir adaptations. Most notably, there were three film versions of *The Maltese Falcon* in the eleven years after its publication; the most famous of these, John Huston's 1941 version with Humphrey Bogart, is a seminal work of film noir and is widely considered among the greatest films of all time. Chandler, too, saw his work adapted into film noir. Moreover, Chandler was directly involved in film noir as a screenwriter in the 1940s. With director Billy Wilder, he wrote the screenplay for the classic adaptation of *Double Indemnity* (1944), for which he received

an Academy Award nomination. (His original screenplay for *The Blue Dahlia* [1946] also earned a nomination.)

While my analysis will focus on Hammett and Chandler, there are several other authors whose work is useful for understanding hardboiled fiction as an expression of the transformative effects of automobility. Chester Himes produced the first novels organized around African-American detectives with his Harlem Detective series about Coffin Ed Johnson and Gravedigger Jones. Although written in the 1950s, later than most of the works examined in this study, the first of these books, *A Rage in Harlem* (also known as *For Love of Immabelle*; 1957) reveals much about the place of the automobile in Harlem in the early 1950s. *In a Lonely Place* (1947), by Dorothy Hughes, tells the story of a serial killer in Los Angeles after World War II, and the burgeoning car culture of that time and place features prominently. Finally, the early novels of Ross Macdonald, the first follower of Chandler's and Hammett's to gain acclaim in his own right, is of interest for his sense of the expanding geography of southern California in the rise of car culture, particularly in *The Moving Target* (1949) and *The Drowning Pool* (1950).

Private Detectives and the Police

One of the most important differences between the hardboiled detective and his counterpart in the Golden Age is his relationship with official authority. Suggesting a discomfort with the expansion of police power in the decades after World War I, hardboiled detectives have a vexed, often adversarial relationship with the police and other authorities. The original hardboiled novel, Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*, provides a clear example. Appearing first as a serial in *Black Mask* in 1927 and 1928 (at the same time that Detroit was experimenting with the first police radio system), *Red*

Harvest was reworked and published as a novel in 1929 (the year Chicago began experimenting with theirs). The book is narrated by the Continental Op (short for operative), an otherwise-unnamed agent of the Continental Detective Agency, and is drawn from Hammett's experience working for the Pinkerton Detective Agency and from a labor conflict in Butte, Montana, between the IWW and the Anaconda Copper Mining Company in the late 1910s and early 1920s.

The novel tells the story of Personville (though the locals often call it Poisonville, and the words are used interchangeably throughout the text), a town run by Elihu Willson, who in addition to owning the local mine, the local bank, both local newspapers, and being "at least part owner of nearly other enterprise of any importance," also owned "a United States senator, a couple of representatives, the governor, the mayor, and most of the state legislature" (9). When the story begins, though, Willsson has lost control of the town to civic corruption and competing criminal factions. The Continental Op is initially summoned by the industrialist's son, local newspaper editor Donald Willsson, presumably to investigate the town's corruption; however, Donald is killed before they can meet. The Op soon learns that Poinsonville's criminal element was brought to town by Elihu himself, in response to a strike at the mine by the IWW: "The strike lasted eight months. Both sides bled plenty. The wobblies had to do their own bleeding. Old Elihu hired gunmen, strike-breakers, national guardsmen and even parts of the regular army, to do his … He won the strike, but he lost his hold on the city and the state. To beat the miners he had to let his hired thugs run wild. When the fight was over he couldn't get rid of them" (9). Pinkerton agents were not infrequently among the gunmen and strike-breakers hired to do the bleeding on behalf of capital, as Hammett himself was in Butte.

Hammett's description outlines both legitimate and illegitimate forces aligned against labor and suggests that the criminality of Poisonville is a natural and inevitable consequence of its commitment to industrial capitalism. Elihu Willson is unconcerned with this criminal consequence until it threatens his own safety, and when one of the gangsters attempts to kill him the night after Donald's murder, he hires the Op to "clean this pig-sty of a Poisonville" (39). Worried that Elihu might make peace with his "playmates" (as the Op calls the town's leading gangsters) and call the project off, and unwilling to be simply yet another hired gun, the Op agrees to the task only if Elihu pays in advance and gives him a free hand to run the investigation as he sees fit. His tactics are explosive but effective, playing various factions against each other to ignite a bloody gang war.

The forces of law and order in *Red Harvest* are every bit as corrupt and dangerous as the town's criminal element. Shortly after meeting the Op and learning of his mission, Noonan, the town's police chief, tries to dispose of the Op in an ambush intended for one of the gangsters. Although he and the Op later mend fences and Noonan does help with the investigation, he is interested only to the extent that he can marginalize his underworld enemies, enrich his underworld friends, and keep the attention of the investigation off of himself. At various stages in his process the Op crafts a number of alliances—with Noonan, with the local IWW leader, with more than one of the criminal bosses, and with a femme fatale who is likewise entangled with figures from all sides. These alliances are always uneasy and unstable, however, and nobody can be fully trusted—not the law, not the client, and not even the fellow Continental detectives whom the Op brings in from the San Francisco office to assist him. When he becomes a suspect

in one of the ensuing murder investigations, he worries that one of the detectives sent to assist him will turn him in, and he alternately whitewashes the reports he is required to send to his San Francisco branch manager or avoids sending them at all, knowing they could cost him his job. Though his manager is "also known as Pontious Pilate, because he smiled pleasantly when he sent us out to be crucified on suicidal jobs" (108), the Op generally refers to him as the "Old Man"; he generally refers to his client, Elihu Willsson, the same way (though without the capital-case letters), suggesting in the detective agency's structure an abstraction of the localized corruption that Personville represents.

The Continental Op's isolation in an unstable social terrain is characteristic of the hardboiled private eye. Classical detectives, generally speaking, had a cozier relationship with law and order. Even for Sherlock Holmes, who sometimes resents Scotland Yard and delights in succeeding where they fail, the professional rivalry is ultimately both genial and collaborative—although Holmes refers to Scotland Yard inspectors Lestrade and Gregson as "the pick of a bad lot" (23), the lot is bad because of conventional techniques and a lack of imagination—not because they lack morals or professional ethics. Hardboiled detectives, however, must deal with police departments that are corrupt as well as incompetent, and the relationship is often hostile. Noonan tries to set up the Op up to be killed in a crossfire between police and a rival gang early in *Red Harvest.* In *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), Sam Spade must investigate the murder of his partner even while fending off a police officer eager to pin the crime on him. Chandler's Philip Marlowe, who once worked for the DA but was fired for insubordination ("I test very high on insubordination," he explains to his client in *The Big Sleep* [10]) repeatedly tangles with the police. He is arrested in a murder investigation and then used by the cops

(without his knowledge) as bait to capture a murderous gangster in *The Long Goodbye* (1953), is beaten up by police officers and committed to a sanitarium in *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940), and is beaten up and framed for drunk driving and then for murder in *The Lady in the Lake* (1943). Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer is himself a former police officer who left the force because "there were too many cases where the official version clashed with the facts I knew" (*The Drowning Pool* 156). In *The Moving Target,* the murderer at the heart of Archer's investigation turns out to be his friend and presumed ally on the local police force, while in *The Drowning Pool* (1950), Archer is almost killed in an ambush after a corrupt cop sells his whereabouts to a local crime boss and is then blackmailed by the local police chief who (as badly as the crime boss, though for different reasons) wants to stop Archer's investigation into the murder of a wealthy local matriarch. In such an environment, where neither legal authorities nor clients nor co-workers can be considered more trustworthy or ethical than criminals, and where the official channels are as dangerous as any back alley, the hardboiled detective can afford to follow no one, but must always chart his own course.

Speed

Chester Himes captures the effect of access to speed on the populace in *A Rage in Harlem* (1958) when the novel's protagonist, Jackson, hails a cab to take him to his girlfriend's sister's home. Startled at the driver's reckless driving—he "made a U-turn in the icy street as though he liked skating, and then took off like a lunatic" (17)—Jackson comments that he's in a hurry, but not in a hurry to get to heaven. The driver, however, "wasn't thinking about Jackson. Speed gave him power and made him feel as mighty as Joe Louis. He had his long arms wrapped about the steering wheel and his big foot

jammed on the gas, thinking of how he could drive that godam DeSoto taxicab straight off the mother-raping earth" (17). The description evokes the scene in Richard Wright's *Natve Son* (1940) in which Bigger Thomas, hired as the driver for a wealthy white Chicago family, takes the car out for the first time: "He had a keen sense of power when driving; the feel of the car added something to him. He loved to press his foot against a pedal and sail along, watching others stand still, seeing the asphalt road unwind under him" (63). In the midst of the alienating effects of increased urbanization generally (an effect often exacerbated by specific policies directed towards African-American communities such as Harlem and Bigger Thomas's South Chicago), the speed and ease of movement that the automobile provides imbues its driver with a sense of power and control.

Of course, that feeling of power is not sustainable, either for Bigger Thomas or presumably for Jackson's cab driver, who, like Jackson and the rest of Harlem's residents, is subject to systematic police repression. As the narrator later observes after the driver of a horse-drawn junk wagon helps Jackson (now on the run from both a gang of murderous grifters and the police detectives out to arrest them) by lying to a policeman even after Jackson tried to steal his wagon, "colored folks in Harlem didn't want to get caught by the police whether they had done anything or not" (85). The police car is the most visible symbol of that power, and can communicate that power at variable speeds. After one of the detectives is assaulted by one of the grifters, the cars move through Harlem quickly: "Red-eyed patrol cars darted about like angry bugs, screaming to a stop, cops hitting flatfooted on the pavement, picking up every suspicious-looking character for the lineup. A black hoodlum had thrown acid in a black detective's eyes and black

asses were going to pay for it as long as black asses lasted" (90). But at slow speeds the cars are equally threatening, as when they scour the neighborhood for a specific suspect sometime later: "The cops turned the car up Park Avenue on the wrong side to show their power. The red light beamed like an evil eye. They drove slowly, flashing the adjustable spotlights along the sidewalks, into the faces of pedestrians, into doorways, cracks, corners, vacant lots, searching for a colored boy who had picked up a bloodstained knife among the half-million colored people in Harlem" (118). In a community where citizens are systematically shut off from traditional avenues of power, and where state power is an ever-present threat, ready to express itself suddenly and randomly like "angry bugs," or slowly, methodically, and comprehensively, like an all-seeing "evil eye," the automobile provides a rare opportunity to express a desire for power, however fleeting or displaced that power may be.

Though the Continental Op rarely drives himself, he does enjoy the exhilaration of speed in automobiles driven by others, and when he goes along with Chief Noonan on to raid a rural roadhouse, he has the opportunity to experience the effect that police speed has on the rest of the population: "The chief's car got away first, off with a jump that hammered our teeth together. We missed the garage door by half an inch, chased a couple of pedestrians diagonally across the sidewalk, bounced off the curb into the roadway, missed a truck as narrowly as we had missed the door, and dashed out King Street with our sirens wide open. Panicky automobiles darted right and left, regardless of traffic rules, to let us through. It was a lot of fun" (112). The chaotic scene suggests the threat of police speed to the public, and the description of the pedestrians, which "we … chased … diagonally across the sidewalk" suggests intention on the part of the police, as though the

show of force and the infliction of terror were the goal as much as the apprehension of criminals. The other automobiles are personified as panicky, and like the "angry bugs" that attack Harlem's streets in Himes's novel, are said to be darting back and forth, mere bugs themselves in relation to the mobilizing force of Noonan's police department.

For Philip Marlowe, mastery of speed through the automobile is essential to success as a detective. Skill in the automobile is part of what sets Marlowe apart from others in this world, particularly with respect to tailing subjects. At the beginning of *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe is hired by the wealthy and elderly General Sternwood to deal with Arthur Geiger, the proprietor of a rare book store, who is blackmailing Sternwood's youngest daughter Carmen. He quickly discovers that the book store is a front for a pornography ring, and parks his car on Sunset Boulevard to stake it out. Eventually Geiger emerges from the store and gets in the passenger side of a cream-colored coupe. "The coupe went west on the boulevard," Marlowe explains, "which forced me to make a left turn and a lot of enemies, including a motorman who stuck his head out into the rain to bawl me out" (31). The difficult maneuver required at the beginning of the task makes following Geiger challenging and gives Geiger the opportunity to disappear, but Marlowe catches "sight of him two or three times and then ma[kes] him turning north into Laurel Canyon Drive" (31). Pinpointing Geiger's location once the car turns onto a side street requires Marlowe to pass the coupe and then double back, but in doing so he finds Geiger's house. Good thing, too: while waiting outside the house he hears a scream and investigates to find Geiger has been shot while taking pictures of Carmen, who is sitting nearby, drugged and naked; Marlowe can thus investigate the scene of the crime and return his client's daughter safely to the Sternwood house.

While Marlowe's command of the roadway helps him keep ahead of other interested parties, other characters are less effective behind the wheel. The following day, for example, Marlowe hires a cab driver to tail a delivery truck leaving Geiger's store, but when he tells him to get closer to the truck, the driver "couldn't or wouldn't do it … There was a lot of traffic and the fresh-faced kid tailed from too far back. I was telling him about it without mincing words when the truck, now far ahead, turned north again" (53). It is only by chance that Marlowe sees it again as they prowl through the neighborhood. Even less effective than the cabbie is the man who tries to tail Marlowe. Marlowe watches the car in his rearview mirror for two days before he gets fed up and confronts the driver, Harry Jones, who initially denies that he was following anyone. Jones is a small-time hood who has been following Marlowe, hoping to sell him some information about the location of Eddie Mars's wife, Mona, whom Marlowe (and the police) believe to have been involved with the missing bootlegger Regan. But Jones is out of his depth, as Marlowe repeatedly spots the tail and shakes it easily before tiring of the game and confronting the driver. Jones is murdered shortly thereafter by one of Eddie Mars's henchmen. Unlike Marlowe, he cannot successfully navigate the mean streets of the novel's milieu, and his lack of skill behind the wheel presages his demise. Marlowe, on the other hand, can tail others as well as to spot and evade those tailing him.

For Ross Macdonald's detective Lew Archer, like the driver of Jackson's cab, speed provides a sense of power. As Archer drives Miranda (daughter of Ralph Sampson, the missing oil baron he has been hired to find in *The Moving Target*), through an open valley on the way to see some land her father had donated to a spiritualist, he keeps "the speedometer needle stuck halfway between eighty-five and ninety" (108). When Miranda

teases him for speeding, he explains: “I like a little danger. Tame danger, controlled by me. It gives me a sense of power, I guess, to take my life in my hands and know damn well I’m not going to lose it” (109). (In the case of Archer and Miranda, the speed and danger also facilitate communication: “At fifty” miles per hour, Archer says once the mountain ascent slows them down “we had nothing to say to each other.”)

For Archer, the power of speed has real-world consequences since, as with Marlowe, his mastery of the automobile is essential to his success as a detective. Early in the novel, he tails Fay Estabrook, a once-famous actress involved with the missing Sampson, from a Hollywood studio to her home in the Hollywood Hills. He doesn’t worry that she will spot his blue convertible following her (“Los Angeles County was crawling with blue convertibles, and the traffic on the boulevard was a kaleidoscope being shaken” [40]), but the job does require all of his skill behind the wheel, as she swerved “in and out of lanes, driving furiously and well. In the overpass I had to touch seventy to keep her in sight. I didn’t think she was aware of me; she was doing it for fun. She went down Sunset at a steady fifty, headed for the sea. Fifty-five and sixty on the curves in Beverly Hills. Her heavy car was burning rubber. In my lighter car I was gambling at even odds with centrifugal force. My tires screeched and shuddered” (40). Like Archer, Estabrook appears to enjoy the danger and power of speed, although in this case Archer must confront the raw physical force imposed by speed—a power that is not under his control but rather threatens to destroy him. Skilled motorist that he is, Archer maintains his speed and follows Estabrook to her house, which he eventually learns is the nerve center for a human smuggling operation.

Sherlock Holmes and Allan Pinkerton needn't chase their subjects down, since the knowledge of railroad timetables is sufficient to catch their prey, but the hardboiled detective must meet speed with speed. For the citizen driver, the sensation of speed may often provide a sense of power, and the police officer may use speed both as a tool for fighting crime and as a show of force to the community in general. In an urban environment in which speed is an increasingly important variable in organizing and maintaining the social order, the sensation of speed provides the hardboiled private eye a sense of power and is a vital tool in their process of detection. While a skilled detective may match the public and the police in terms of speed, however, he is at a distinct disadvantage with respect to communication.

Communication

The likes of Philip Marlowe, Lew Archer, and the Continental Op did not have access to the same communications technology that police departments were developing in the 1930s and 1940s, since police broadcasts were moved fairly quickly to noncommercial channels and since two-way radio communication was not available to the public until the development of the Citizen's Band following World War II. Still, the automobile provides the hardboiled detective rich possibilities for communication with clients, suspects, and potential allies, as well as a tool for understanding the complex landscape through which they move. This is not to say that such devices never appear in hardboiled detective novels. Communications technology is used to setup roadblocks to cut off escape lines after a bank robbery in *Red Harvest* and to capture a fleeing suspect in *The Lady in the Lake,* for instance. For the most part, however, the radio was a tool

available only to the police and not to the private detective, and, as we have seen, the hardboiled detective's working relationship with police was often less than cordial.

One brief mention of such technology in *Farewell, My Lovely* is worth examining more closely because it highlights the rivalry between Marlowe and the police force and also connects the use of radio technology with more archaic methods of monitoring driver behavior. As the novel opens, Marlowe meets Moose Malloy, a short-tempered, dimwitted hulk of a man just recently released from prison. He presses Marlowe into service helping him find his former girlfriend, but before the investigation really gets underway, Malloy kills an African-American bar owner and flees the scene. The police detective assigned to the case, Nulty, is lazy and incompetent, and draws the assignment precisely because the murder of an African-American owner of a "dine and dice emporium" is a low priority for the Los Angeles Police Department. After initially trying to enlist Marlowe to do his legwork on the case, Nulty becomes convinced that the police have Malloy in hand:

> "We got Malloy all lined up. We really got him this time. We make him at Girard, headed north in a rented hack. He gassed up there and the service station kid recognized him from the description we broadcast a while back. He said everything jibed except Malloy had changed to a dark suit. We got county and state law on it. If he goes on north we get him at the Ventura line, and if he slides over to the Ridge Route, he has to stop at Castaic for his check ticket. If he doesn't stop, they phone ahead and block the road. We don't want no cops shot up, if we can help it." (798).

Broadcasting the description over public airwaves appears to have helped, since someone has identified the suspect and informed the police of his whereabouts, and Nulty has enough confidence in the network of roadblocks coordinated from police headquarters that he believes Malloy is contained. His confidence is misplaced, however, because the motorist in question turns out not to be Malloy, so the officers attempt to arrest the wrong man; in the resulting altercation, the man assaulted two police officers, "pulled one side off their car, (and) threw the radio in the ditch" (829) before the cops subdued him with batons. The reliance on the radio network is part of Nulty's laziness, and results in violence and random chaos rather than order.

First opened to traffic in 1915 and then paved a few years later, California's Ridge Route, "one of the greatest engineering achievements ever brought to a conclusion in Southern California" provided the most direct path between Los Angeles and Bakersfield, "linking closer Los Angeles and the inland empire of the San Joaquin" (Shettler VI2); by extension, it also provided a quicker path to important cities farther north, such as San Francisco and Sacramento. It was, according to *Popular Mechanics,* the "first mountain road ever built looking exclusively to motor travel" (Hogg 193). Even so, the road was a dangerous one, and after a high number of fatalities in 1935 and 1936, the head of the California Highway Patrol attempted to slow traffic down on the highway by a method reminiscent of the attempts to curb speeding in the early days of the automobile. Drivers would be stopped at Castaic "for a rigorous inspection of tires, brakes, lights, windshield wipers, mirrors, signal devices, loads. The driver is inspected for sobriety. Those who are let through are given a card stamped with the time of discharge and stating that the speed limit is 45 m.p.h. At the other end of the section

another officer collects the ticket, [and] notes by the elapsed time whether the driver has been speeding" ("Transport: Ridge Route Tickets"). This is the "check ticket" that Nulty refers to. Like the early-century sheriffs who devised timed courses and roadblocks to battle scorchers when they had no automobiles of their own, the Highway Patrol resorts to low-tech measures to fight dangerous drivers on the Ridge Route.

Hammett's *Red Harvest* finds the Continental Op along for the ride on several different car chases, but the most important with respect to communication technology and policing comes when the Op goes with Police Chief Noonan on a police raid in the country. At this point in the story, the Op has played Noonan against Whisper Thaler, who runs the town's gambling racket, by convincing the chief that Thaler was responsible for killing his brother a few years before. Whisper escapes from jail after being arrested for the murder, and the Op is in Noonan's office when the chief gets word that Thaler is holed up in a roadhouse outside of town. The chief puts all cars in motion to raid the roadhouse and block off all possible escape routes, and the Op rides along with the chief. Thirty minutes out of town they find the Cedar Hill Inn, and after someone inside opens fire, the gathered cops respond by unloading all of their ammo on the roadhouse. But Thaler is not among the dead inside, and as Noonan is assessing the damage a motorcycle cop arrives to announce that Willsson's bank has been robbed in the meantime. "Noonan cursed savagely, bawled: 'He's foxed us, damn him! Back to town, everybody!'" (115). The incident reveals the inefficiencies still remaining with using the automobile for police work; since headquarters and the police cars cannot communicate with one another, the mobilization of the force in one direction leaves it vulnerable to attack.

For his part, the Op, who arrives in Personville by train, does not appear to have a vehicle of his own. He never speaks of driving and gets around town by foot or by using the streetcar. To some degree this puts him at a distinct disadvantage: “There is nothing in running down streets with automobiles in pursuit” (188), he observes on one occasion when a black coupe of unknown occupancy begins to follow him down a dark street. But his lack of an automobile also reinforces the centrality of the automobile in navigating the unstable social landscape as much as the physical one; riding in the cars of others both reveals and alters the shifting alliances that power his effort to play the various warring factions against one another. Near the beginning of the story he rides in Noonan’s car to arrest Thaler for Donald Willsson’s murder; but after Noonan double-crosses him, he escapes with Thaler in another police car, this one driven by corrupt cops on Thaler’s payroll. The escape in an automobile provided by Thaler changes the Op’s allegiance, and when he next visits Noonan, he brings Donald Willsson’s actual killer (a bank cashier otherwise unrelated to the story), thus spoiling Noonan’s attempt to frame Thaler for the crime. (Unlike the classic detective story, which is organized around the solution of a specific crime, the initial crime in the hardboiled detective story usually serves only to set events in motion; other, more serious crimes will almost certainly follow.)

With the real killer found, Thaler is no longer subject to arrest; since his playmates have thus made peace, Elihu wants to call off the investigation. After yet another attempt on his life, however, the Op is unwilling: “I don’t like the way Poisonville has treated me,” he tells Thaler. “I’ve got my chance now, and I’m going to even up” (62-3). The Op meets again with both Noonan and Thaler but takes himself to and from the meetings (presumably either on foot or by streetcar), signifying his

independence from each. With both Thaler and Noonan unfriendly, the Op works to secure an alliance with Dinah Brand, who is Thaler's girlfriend but has gathered several other lovestruck admirers, including Donald Willsson and his killer (who acted out of jealousy for Brand's attentions). The Op wins her allegiance at a boxing match where Thaler has bought off one of the fighters; unbeknownst to Thaler, the Op convinces the same fighter not to throw the fight and then lets Brand know that the fix is off, thus giving her a chance to hedge her bets. Their alliance is sealed after the fight when he sees her in her car with Thaler standing in the road beside it:

> It seemed to be a nice family party. I wouldn't have joined it if the girl hadn't seen me and called:
>
> "My God, I thought you were never coming."
>
> I went over to the car. Thaler looked across the hood at me with no friendliness at all.
>
> "Last night I advised you to go back to Frisco." His whisper was harsher than anybody's shout could have been. "Now I'm telling you."
>
> "Thanks just the same," I said as I got in beside the girl. (74)

His actions in response to Thaler are as important as his words, since in getting into her car he seals his alliance with Brand. Once again the automobile is both a tool for and signifier of his efforts to navigate the social landscape of Poisonville.

This pattern continues as the book progresses: the Op again rides with Noonan after making his peace with the chief; he meets a new gangster, Reno Starkey, while riding in Brand's blue Marmon; and later rides with Reno (who, after Brand is found murdered and the Op becomes the primary suspect, is his only remaining ally) on the

climactic raid against bootlegger Pete the Finn. Unlike the stories of the Golden Age, where, according to Van Dine's "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories," "the reader must have equal opportunity with the detective for solving the mystery" (129), the reader has little choice but to follow in *Red Harvest,* since the Op plays his cards almost as close to the vest with his readers as he does with his adversaries. But while the twisting plot is sometimes hard to follow, the automobile does provide some insight into the detective's relationship with the major players at any given time.

The automobile also provides clarity for the Op himself. After escaping the gunfight between Reno and Pete the Finn (who is killed in the process), the Op visits Elihu Willson one final time, convincing the old man (using love letters Elihu had written to Dinah Brand as blackmail) to fire the entire police force and have the governor send national guard troops to secure the safety of the town. Leaving Willson's house, he becomes wary when a mysterious black coupe begins to follow him; fortunately, the driver is Mickey Linehan, one of the agency detectives assisting on the case. "Better keep driving while we talk" (188), he tells Mickey as he gets in, and then he reveals how Willson's letters came to his possession. Brand's death is still unsolved, and because the Op was known to be with her at the time of her death he remains the primary suspect; since he was under the influence of Laudanum when Brand was murdered, he too cannot be certain that he did not kill her. When Mickey protests that the Op's information about Willson's letters "don't seem to put any fingers on any murderers," the Op responds that "it clears the way some," and they proceed to a warehouse where, in a final meeting with a dying Reno, they will finally learn for certain that the Op is innocent and that Reno himself had killed Brand by accident.

Only then does the Op speak of driving a car himself. “The job’s yours from now on,” he tells Mickey. “I’m going to duck. I ought to be in the clear, but I know my Poisonville too well to take any chances. I’ll drive your car to some way station where I can catch a train for Ogden.… Stay with the job, and let me know when it’s wise to either take my own name again or a trip to Honduras” (198). His plan reveals the difficulty of traveling by train: since he may still be a marked man in Personville, he can’t afford the public departure of the local train station, and must instead drive to someplace out of the way. (The condition of roads in the Mountain West of the 1920s would likely have made driving the entire trip impossible.) Moreover, the Op speaks of driving himself only after he has the situation in hand: all the town’s leading gangsters are dead, he knows what happened to Brand, and he knows that outside authorities will soon be intervening. Having relied on vehicles driven by others to navigate the dangerous terrain of Poisonville, only now that the situation is in hand does he command his own.

Dorothy B. Hughes’s hardboiled novel *In a Lonely Place* offers the automobile as the medium through which victims of a serial killer can identify the criminal to the police. While not a detective novel, per se, the novel does overlap with the detective story in that Dix Steele, the protagonist and the character who limits the narrative perspective, is (or claims to be) writing a detective novel while living in Los Angeles shortly after World War II. His best friend, Brub Nicolai, with whom he served in the war, now lives in Santa Monica Canyon and is a detective for the Los Angeles Police Department. When the story begins, Brub, along with the rest of the LAPD, is preoccupied with a serial killer who has raped and strangled one victim each month for the last six months. Steele volunteers to help his old friend with the investigation, though harboring the secret that

he, himself, is the killer. The book, then, involves the process of detection from the perspective of the detected, and Steele, while certainly cautious around his police detective friend, remains convinced that he is always a step ahead of the investigators and that his secret self remains undetectable.

For much of the novel, Brub also believes that the murderer may continue to escape justice. The nature of the city makes detection difficult: “It’s like hunting a needle in a haystack,” he tells Steele when they first discuss the case together. “Los Angeles is too big—too sprawling. You can’t patrol every street every night, all night. He’s safe. A maniac walking the streets, looking just as normal as you or me, more normal probably” (32). The sprawl of the city, which both fed and in turn was fed by the expansion of the automobile, makes preventing such crimes virtually impossible and apprehending perpetrators almost as unlikely.

Even so, as both Steele and the police are aware, the automobile holds the key to solving the crimes. One of the early concerns that Steele has, after renewing his acquaintance with Brub and beginning to discuss the case with him, is the possibility of tire tracks giving him away: “somewhere in the back of his mind, he remembered that all tires had distinguishing marks, like fingerprints. Could they get a cast of tire marks from dry concrete?” (43). The comparison to fingerprints is telling, reinforcing the connection between the automobile, which has fingerprints like a human, and personal identity. When Steele cautiously questions Brub about the possibility (as usual, using his career as a mystery writer as an excuse for the inquiry), Brub puts his mind at ease, explaining that there were too many tracks on the pavement by the scene for the police to identify the correct one, and so the tire marks, like the killer, get lost in the crowd. Steele’s car, too, is

useful for getting lost in a crowd. Steele is living in the apartment of a friend, who has also left his black coupe for Steele to use: “He’d have preferred something flashier, a convertible or open brougham, but there was advantage in a black coupe. All black coupes looked alike at night” (22). The automobile, then, can help him to blend in, to disappear.

Ultimately, the automobile does provide the evidence that connects Steele to the murders. Early in the novel, Steele goes with Brub and another homicide detective, Lochner, to investigate the spot where the most recent victim was discovered. They find no clues at the scene, nor do they really expect to, because the perpetrator is too careful, too professional. “The experts have been over every inch with a microscope … The only place we’ll find anything is in his car,” Lochner tells Steele. He then explains that the dust associated with the specific places the criminal was known to have been—a back canyon road and Simon’s Drive-in restaurant—could be identified if it were found in the automobile, thus placing the automobile’s owner at the scene. Steele tries to take precautions accordingly, and conspicuously revisits the scenes of some of his crimes so that he might have an explanation for why such dust was found in his car. But in the end it doesn’t matter, as detectives search his car without his knowledge and uncover traces of his various misdeeds—the incriminating dust, the fingerprints of one victim, lint from another’s coat, and hair from a third’s suit. The automobile, and the sprawl that surrounds it, protects him in the course of his crimes, making him invisible and undetectable, but so too does it ultimately seal his demise. In this way, *In a Lonely Place* captures the tension between the automobile’s variant effects—while on the one hand it destabilizes disciplinary structures, making surveillance difficult or impossible and making criminal

behavior undetectable, on the other hand it strengthens the gaze of the police, allowing them to connect that which is practically invisible (dust, fibers, and so on) with Steele.

The automobile also facilitates communication between the hardboiled detective and his environment. At one point in *The Big Sleep,* Marlowe observes a gray Plymouth sedan in his rear-view mirror; having seen the same car earlier, he knows he's being followed, so he "gave it a chance to catch up with me on a quiet street. It refused the offer, so I shook it off and went about my business" (126). Marlowe extends the offer not to the driver, but to the car itself. This personification of the automobile reflects the degree to which one's identity is, in this environment, subsumed by the automobile one drives. It also reinforces Marlowe's mastery of his environment, suggesting that he knows the landscape well and communicates freely with its features.

Lew Archer, too, demonstrates his ability to read the landscape in *The Moving Target.* After tailing Fay Estabrook (an actress who has an unknown relationship with Ralph Sampson, the oil baron he has been hired to find) to her home in Beverly Hills, he finds the garage door open and sneaks inside to look around. "The garage was enormous," he observes, "big enough to hold a two-ton truck with space for the Buick to spare. The queer thing was that it looked as if a heavy truck had recently been there. There were wide tire marks on the concrete floor, and thick oil drippings" (41). The image hearkens back to the trackers and cowboys of the western genre, crouching to the prairie floor to read animal tracks and sign. The clue is important, but he doesn't realize how important until he visits a spiritual retreat on land that Sampson has donated to a local guru. The guru doesn't welcome Archer's investigation, but does agree to let him look inside a large storage shed on the grounds; as the guru moves from the doorway of

the shed, Archer sees “the imprint of a tire in the clay at the edge of the gravel where his foot had been. It was a wide truck tire. I’d seen the herringbone pattern of the tread before” (119). Eventually he sees the tracks a third time, outside a shack in the countryside, and the connections help him to uncover a human trafficking ring whereby illegal immigrants are trucked in to work as cheap migrant labor in the nearby agricultural fields.

Though not able to integrate communications technology and the automobile to the same degree their police adversaries can, the hardboiled detective uses the automobile as a tool for communication in a variety of important ways. It provides a space for communication with other important players and supplies information that helps the detective understand and navigate the social and physical terrain in which they work. This ability to read the landscape is particularly important given that, with the revolutions in speed and communication that provide the context for the genre, the territory of the hardboiled detective novel is particularly complex.

“You Seem to Get Around”: Territory

In contrast with the isolated and contained geography of the Golden Age detective story (which typically takes place in a country house and not infrequently involves a locked-room mystery), the hardboiled detective story offers an expansive and complex geography. Hardboiled detectives cover a lot of ground in the course of their investigations and must remain competent and comfortable as they move among the halls of official power, the enclaves of the ruling class, the fancy gambling and liquor palaces of the leading gangsters, and the dark alleys and damp apartments of the small-time criminals.

When Philip Marlowe arrives at his wealthy client's mansion at the beginning of *The Big Sleep,* he sees above the doorway "a broad stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armor rescuing a lady who was tied to a tree and didn't have any clothes on but some very long and convenient hair" (3). The image sets up a comparison with the setting of Golden Age detective fiction, suggesting (along with the other trappings of the Sternwood home) what W. H. Auden, in a *Harper's* essay on detective fiction, called (borrowing from the title of a Henry James story) the "Great Good Place" that serves as the archetypal setting for Golden Age detective fiction; the gritty urban milieu of Chandler's fiction, on the other hand, concerns the "Great Wrong Place" (265).

In addition to commenting on setting, the image provides a potential metaphor for the detective himself. In studying the window, Marlowe muses that if he lived in the house he "would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him. He didn't seem to really be trying" (4). Marlowe, then, appears as a modern-day knight, ready to take up the out-of-place and out-of-time medieval knight's task of rescuing the damsel in distress. The chivalric image has long drawn attention from scholars, beginning with the first book on Chandler's literary legacy, Philip Durham's *Down These Mean Streets a Man Must Go: Raymond Chandler's Knight* (1963), and critics have used the concept of chivalry to explore Chandler's analysis of modern life and gender.[14]

Although the comparison between Marlowe and the knight of yore is significant, the text also calls attention to a key difference: the knight's inferior mobility. In his initial observation of the window, Marlowe observes that the knight "was fiddling with the

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[14] See Ernest Fontana's "Chivalry and Modernity in Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep,*" Charles J. Rzepka's "I'm in the Business Too: Gothic Chivalry, Private Eyes, and Proxy Sex and Violence in Chandler's *The Big Sleep,* and Sharon Devaney-Lovinguth's *Modernism and Gender in the Novels of Raymond Chandler*.

knots on the ropes that tied the lady to the tree and not getting anywhere" (3). In saying the knight is "not getting anywhere," Marlowe notes a lack of progress in the chivalric project of rescuing the damsel, but the phrase also implies a lack of mobility, both physical and financial. ("You can't make much money in this trade," Marlowe tells General Sternwood's daughter Vivian, "if you're honest" [56].) When Marlowe returns to the mansion at the end of the novel, he notes that the knight "still wasn't getting anywhere" (209). Marlowe may not be getting anywhere financially, but between his visits to the Sternwood mansion he has scarcely stopped moving physically.

His second day on the case provides a salient example. On the day he began working on the case, he had found General Sternwood's blackmailer dead in his Laurel Canyon home with Sternwood's daughter Carmen, naked and high on laudanum, nearby. He begins the second day at his Hollywood apartment and, after learning from his friend Bernie Ohls at the DA's office that the Sternwood's car and chauffeur have been found floating in the Pacific Ocean, drives 6 miles to the Hall of Justice downtown.[15] He then rides with Ohls 30 miles to Lido Fish Pier[16] to investigate the scene. Ohls then takes him 25 miles back to Hollywood and drops him off by Grauman's Chinese Theater. He eats at a lunch counter and walks a few blocks to Geiger's book store on "the north side of [Sunset B]oulevard near Las Palmas" (22). He hires a cab to follow a delivery truck for about three miles from the store to an apartment building that he learns belongs to Joe Brody, a gambler who once blackmailed General Sternwood and has taken over Geiger's

[15] Chandler's depiction of Los Angeles blends both real and fictional locations. For instance, Marlowe lives in the fictional Hobart Arms apartment building, which the text places near the (real) intersection of Kenmore and Franklin. Getting to the blackmailer Geiger's house, Marlowe tails his subject's car along Sunset Boulevard to Laurel Canyon Boulevard until it turns on Laverne Terrace, a fictional name for what is likely Lookout Avenue (Sawicki 28). Accordingly, the mileages listed here are estimates.

[16] Though there is a real place called Lido Isle in Newport Beach, Los Angeles, the distance (which is specified in the text) and the route they take (Sunset Boulevard and the coast highway) suggest that Lido Fish Pier is Malibu Pier.

pornography racket now that Geiger has been murdered. He then takes another cab several miles to his office building,[17] where he meets with Carmen's sister Vivian, and then back to the Hall of Justice so he can pick up his car. He drives the 10.5 miles to Geiger's house in Laurel Canyon, then back to Brody's in East Hollywood. After Geiger's driver/lover arrives at the apartment and kills Brody, believing Brody killed Geiger, Marlowe captures the man and takes him back to Geiger's, where he calls Ohls. He then follows Ohls to meet with the District Attorney at the DA's home near Lafayette Park, before returning home to Hobart Arms around eleven that night. All told, he travels more than 100 miles in and around Los Angeles, as a driver and as a passenger, guiding himself and tailing various suspects. His travels continue as the case continues, taking him down the coast to the fictional towns of Las Olindas, which lies "through a series of little dank beach towns" (149), and to Realito, forty miles east of the city.

As we have already seen, Marlowe's skill with the automobile is essential to his success as a detective, and his skill at covering territory comes in handy as he continues his investigation. That he was the first to discover Geiger's murder comes in handy, for instance, because he can remove his client's daughter Carmen from the scene and, more importantly, because it allows him to control the scene of that crime for a period of time. He decides to delay reporting the murder to the police, since that would essentially be turning the territory of Geiger's house over to them; instead, he investigates the scene further the following day, which enables him to discover connections between subjects in the case that he otherwise might not have been aware of.

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[17] In later novels, his office is on the sixth floor of a building near the corner of Hollywood and Ivar, a few blocks from Hollywood and Vine; in *The Big Sleep*, however, his office is on the seventh floor of an unnamed building, and Marlowe gives no concrete description of its location.

Ultimately, his ability to navigate the Great Wrong Place helps him survive his meeting with Eddie Mars, a powerful gangster whom Marlowe first runs into when he returns to Geiger's home the next day. When Mars vaguely threatens Marlowe with calling the police to implicate him in Geiger's murder, Marlowe, assuming that Mars had some hand in Geiger's racket as well, explains that someone else has already moved in to take Geiger's inventory. (He discovered this when he had the cab tail the delivery truck from Geiger's store, as discussed above.) "You seem to get around," Mars tells Marlowe, impressed by this new information. Unlike the knight of old, who is "not getting anywhere," Marlowe gets around town, mainly by automobile, and his mastery of that terrain is essential to his success.

The novel's expansive geography, and the protagonist's mastery and free movement through it, is typical of the hardboiled detective genre. Other Chandler novels find Marlowe traversing a similarly expansive territory—to Tijuana in *The Long Goodbye* and to a rural lake resort near San Bernardino in *The Lady in the Lake.* Though Hammett's *Red Harvest* is set in the small city of Personville, it includes excursions to speakeasies, roadhouses, and hideouts dotting the countryside away from town, in addition to the sites of official power (the police station and jail), of the power-broker behind the scenes (Elihu Willson's house), of gambling halls and bootleggers' warehouses, and so on. Macdonald's Lew Archer moves between Santa Theresa (based on Santa Barbara) and Los Angeles and through various mountain roads and locales to the east in *The Moving Target,* and in *The Drowning Pool* (1950) bounces between LA and a series of resort communities further up the coast, with an excursion to Las Vegas and the Nevada desert thrown in for good measure. The Great Good Place, clearly, does

not occupy nearly as much territory as the Great Wrong Place. In the former, evil is unexpected and must be expelled in a project of restoration. In the latter, on the other hand, evil is expected and, with no hope for expulsion, there is only navigation.

The territory of the hardboiled detective novel is significant both for its expansive nature and its complexity, as it bears the scars of the social, economic, and industrial upheavals of the modern age. Again, *The Big Sleep* provides a representative example. Marlowe's client General Sternwood is a wealthy widower, one of Los Angeles's leading industrialists, who is "pretty far gone in years to have a couple of daughters still in the dangerous twenties" (4). Although the blackmail is Sternwood's stated reason for hiring Marlowe, he is more interested in discovering the whereabouts of the bootlegger Rusty Regan, ex-husband to the General's other daughter Vivian. Regan was "the breath of life" to the wheelchair-bound Sternwood, spending hours with the old man "sweating like a pig, drinking brandy by the quart, and telling [him] stories of the Irish revolution" (11). Marlowe's investigation into the blackmail uncovers multiple murders, a pornography ring, and several other Sternwood family secrets. The novel opens with Marlowe arriving at the Sternwood mansion, complete with butlers, chauffeurs, and more than one "stained-glass romance," such as the image of the knight discussed above. Yet as Marlowe leaves the Sternwood mansion he connects it clearly to the material conditions that make it possible:

> I stood on the step breathing my cigarette smoke and looking down a succession of terraces with flowerbeds and trimmed trees to the high iron fence with gilt spears that hemmed in the estate. A winding driveway dropped down between retaining walls to the open iron gates. Beyond the

> fence the hill sloped for several miles. On this lower level faint and far off I could just barely see some of the old wooden derricks of the oilfield from which the Sternwoods had made their money. Most of the field was public park now, cleaned up and donated to the city by General Sternwood. But a little of it was still producing in groups of wells pumping five or six barrels a day. The Sternwoods, having moved up the hill, could no longer smell the stale sump water or the oil, but they could still look out of their front windows and see what had made them rich. If they wanted to. I didn't suppose they would want to (21).

Chandler establishes a continuity between the veneer of wealth, with the pleasant landscaping that evokes a country house, and the less savory circumstances of its origin. The appearance of respectability that wealth provides the Sternwoods is merely a façade, cleaning up their image just as their oil fields have been mostly cleaned and turned into a public park. Though the Sternwoods may not want to look at the source of their wealth, it is still visible to the public, since working wells remain even in the public park. Chandler, who himself worked in the oil industry prior to his success as a writer, did not hold such families in high regard. "No one has [a good time] nowadays except the crooks and the oil millionaires," he wrote to publisher Jamie Hamilton in 1954, adding in parentheses: "there may be a slight distinction here but I was in the oil business for about ten years and the distinction is very fine" (*Selected Letters* 367). The Sternwoods' past in oil, then, is an unsavory one.

The passage reinforces the connection between the hardboiled detective genre and the material conditions of the modern world—a connection which stands in opposition to

the genteel isolation of Golden Age detective fiction. Other hardboiled novels make similar gestures in their opening pages and chapters. Describing Personville, for instance, the Continental Op says "the smelters whose brick stacks stuck up tall against a gloomy mountain to the south had yellow-smoked everything into uniform dinginess. The result was an ugly city of forty thousand people, set in an ugly notch between two ugly mountains that had been all dirtied up by mining" (4). Early in Macdonald's *The Moving Target*, in which human traffickers smuggling aliens in from Mexico feature prominently, the narrator describes the approach to beautiful Santa Theresa through "a mile of slums: collapsing shacks and storefront tabernacles, dirt paths where sidewalks should have been, black and brown children playing in the dust" (17). In its commitment to a realistic depiction of crime, hardboiled fiction frequently connects crime to the material exploitation of natural resources and of people.

Given the relationship between the automobile and the oil industry, this move in *The Big Sleep* is particularly interesting, connecting the upheaval and uncertainty represented in the hardboiled genre to the automobile itself. Later the connection is reinforced, as the oil fields which signify the underlying misdeeds that structure the Sternwoods' wealth turn out to be the scene of a literal crime. On a return visit to the Sternwood mansion, Carmen asks Marlowe to take her down to the old wells to teach her to shoot. Marlowe then has the chance to see "what made [the Sternwoods] rich" up close. The scene is characterized by oil stains and piles of rust, with "the stagnant, oil-scummed water of an old sump iridescent in the sunlight" (218). Rather than shooting the can that Marlowe sets up as a target, Carmen fires four shots at Marlowe at close range. Having anticipated this, Marlowe has loaded the guns with blanks, and later reveals that

the missing Regan had been subject to a similar, though more successful, attack from Carmen, and his body had been disposed of in the sump. The oil fields, suggestive of a sinister past in the family's rise to wealth, is by the end of the novel shown to be literally where the bodies (or body, at least) are buried.

There is no such vivid description of industrial decay in Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*, but there is a scene that reveals the automobile's transformative effects on the urban landscape as a human space. As with the aforementioned scenes, it comes early in the novel, shortly after Sam Spade gets a late-night call that his partner, Miles Archer, has been found dead. The book is set in San Francisco, and Spade takes a cab to "where Bush Street roofed Stockton before slipping down to Chinatown" (14). This is a reference to the Stockton Street Tunnel, which had opened fifteen years before *The Maltese Falcon,* and was significant for both engineering reasons (it was the first of San Francisco's municipal tunnels to be built) and economic reasons (opening up the North Beach neighborhood for commercial development). Hammett was familiar with the tunnel and the surrounding neighborhood, having lived on Monroe Street, just a short block away from "where Bush Street roofed Stockton."[18] Burritt Street, where Archer's body is found, is a short alley on the opposite side of Bush, halfway between Stockton and Monroe.

After getting out of the cab, Spade sees a crowd gathered around the entrance to an alley a few yards away, presumably where his partner's body has been found; Spade "cross[es] the sidewalk between iron-railed hatchways that opened above bare ugly stairs, went to the parapet, and, resting his hands on the damp coping, looked down into Stockton Street" (15). Hatchway is originally a nautical term, often referring to trap

[18] In 1988, Monroe Street was renamed Dashiell Hammett Street in the author's honor.

doors, suggesting the instability of Spade's position. Spade moves to the parapet, an architectural feature specifically associated with a defensive military position, as though the contact with the wall's "damp coping" (architecturally the cap of the wall, though the word has the archaic meaning of "meeting in the shock of combat" [*OED*]) provides protection and reassurance in the urban landscape.

As Spade looks down at Stockton Street, "an automobile pop[s] out of the tunnel beneath him with a roaring swish, as if it had been blown out, and [runs] away. Not far from the tunnel's mouth a man [is] hunkered on his heels before a billboard that held advertisements of a moving picture and a gasoline across the front of a gap between two store-buildings" (15). The man, it turns out, is looking at Spade's partner's body; having been shot in the alley above, he fell through a fence and came to rest behind the billboard. Just as the oil infrastructure hid the body of Rusty Regan and the Sternwood sisters' sins in *The Big Sleep*, the commercialized landscape (including a commercial specifically for gasoline) conceals death in *The Maltese Falcon.* The automobile is rendered as a projectile, a missile launched from the bowels of the city. The words Hammett uses to describe the automobile are likewise sometimes associated with gunfire: the "pop" of a pistol, the "roar" of a machine gun, a victim who is "blown" away. The image also imagines the landscape as a monstrous living entity, as though the city has "blown out" a car from the tunnel's "mouth"; since the car does not drive away but runs, it too is part of that living landscape. This is again reinforced later when we learn that Archer's body was discovered when "a machine turning threw headlights" on the damaged fence (17), prompting a foot patrolman to investigate. Spade, for his part, shows no sign of being at all shaken by the appearance of the automobile. Indeed, standing at the parapet above the

tunnel's mouth and putting his hands on the coping immediately before the automobile appears, it is almost as though he has launched the missile himself. The landscape may be unstable, violent, and even monstrous, but the hardboiled detective remains in full command.

Conclusion

The urban landscape changed considerably in the first half of the twentieth century, thanks in no small part to the automobile. As the urban population became more mobile, the disciplinary structures and institutions that characterized early industrial society lost some of their utility. While disciplinary society was organized around enclosures and surveillance, the increasing integration of communications technology and the automobile overseen by police departments from the 1920s through the 1950s reflects an emerging emphasis on the new variables of speed, communication, and territory. The hardboiled detective novels of Dashiell Hammet and Raymond Chandler, as well as later practitioners such as Ross Macdonald, Dorothy Hughes, and Chester Himes, reflect the tensions and anxieties of that transformation. The social and political structure of this new industrial society, in the hardboiled novel, as corrupt as the criminal underworld which it brings into being as a condition of its own existence, and the hardboiled hero stands in opposition to both the criminal underworld and the legitimate power structure with which it is often entwined.

But the hardboiled detective is a heroic figure, who goes "down these mean streets" of the modern age "neither tarnished nor afraid" ("Simple Art" 991-2). He handles the disruptions of modern life more effectively than the average man, and his mastery of speed, communication, and territory makes him an effective counterpoint to

the corruption of the modern world. In the next chapter I examine film noir, which similarly addresses the effects of urbanization. But while the hardboiled detective novel offers a heroic (if not always effective) response to the modern world, films noir frequently concerns protagonists who lack the heroic capabilities of the hardboiled detective.

Figures

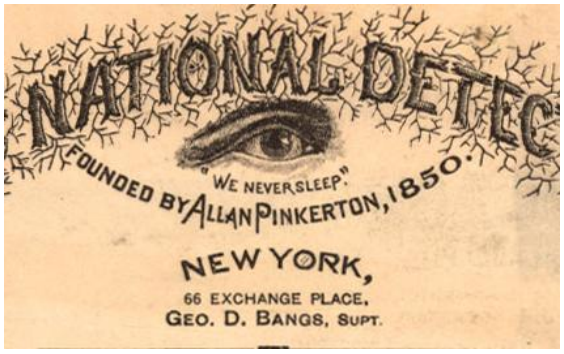

Fig. 1 – advertisement for Pinkerton's National Detective Agency, 1885.
Advertising Ephemera Collection - Database #A0160. Emergence of Advertising On-Line Project. John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising & Marketing History
Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library
http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/eaa/

Chapter Three: Automobiles in Film Noir

Urban spaces figure heavily in film noir, and automobiles, as they do in hardboiled detective fiction, provide a tool for navigating the uncertain terrain of the evolving American city. The characters and situations are often similar, given the close relationship between the genres: hardboiled detective stories served directly as source material for several films noir and indirectly influenced others, and writers in the hardboiled vein often worked in film, both adapting their own work for the screen (for example, W. R. Burnett authored *High Sierra* and co-wrote the John Huston adaptation), adapting the work of others, or writing original screenplays. Still, it would be a mistake to simply lump hardboiled detective fiction and noir together, since there are important differences between the two. As a subgenre of crime fiction, hardboiled detective fiction is characterized by attitude (tough, cynical, plain-spoken) whereas noir is largely characterized by atmosphere (bleak, fatalistic). (A text can, of course, be both, but it needn't be.) A more important difference is the protagonist: unlike the hardboiled detective novel, not all noir heroes (or antiheroes) are private eyes. Instead, noir films often revolve around more or less regular citizens who find themselves, whether of their own volition or simply through bad luck, outside or askew of the law. Film noir, then, concerns not only the perspective of those detecting but also those resisting detection.

Scholars of film noir have long emphasized its representations of urban space, with a threatening and unstable urban cityscape as an underlying characteristic of the genre. Edward Dimendberg's *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity,* which uses the body of films noir from 1939 through 1960 as a text through which to construct a history of American urban spaces in transition from the modern to the postmodern city, is but

one example. But in spite of the prominent role of the automobile in transforming that landscape, the presence of the automobile itself has received relatively little attention in film noir scholarship. One explanation for the lack of attention to the automobile in film noir is the scholarly focus on reading the noir urban landscape in symbolic terms; as Dimendberg says, "Treating the city as expression of some underlying myth, theme, or vision has tended to stifle the study of spatiality in film noir as a historical *content* as significant as its more commonly studied formal and narrative features" (9; emphasis in original). Dimendberg's study intervenes by analyzing film noir's urban spaces not as a mythic landscape but as a representation of the tension between two modes of urban life—that which was predominant in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and was fading away, and the modern city which was in the process of emerging following World War II as a result of technological and social changes. As Dimendberg observes: "Nostalgia and longing for older urban forms combined with a fear of new alienating urban realities pervade film noir. The loss of public space, the homogenization of everyday life, the intensification of surveillance, and the eradication of older neighborhoods by urban renewal and redevelopment projects are seldom absent from these films" (7).

In particular, Dimendberg identifies two modes of urban spatiality: the centripetal space of the 1920s and 1930s, when increased urbanization meant attracting greater populations to a concentrated urban core, and the centrifugal space of the post-war years, when increased urbanization involved the geographic spread of an urban environment across a dispersed urban territory. Film noir is particularly interesting for Dimendberg because the period of classic film noir covers the period of transition from centripetal to

centrifugal spaces. Centrifugal space, with its sprawl and decentralization, changes the relationship between subject and landscape and values new modes of perception and representation organized around movement and speed. The automobile, of course, is one of the primary forces driving this transition into new urban forms. Building on Dimendberg's work, this chapter argues that the automobile in film noir functions as both a representation of the instabilities (moral, social, economic, and so on) of this new urban form as well as a means of navigating that landscape.

The term "film noir" has proved somewhat amorphous over the years, with considerable disagreement over whether or not noir constitutes a specific genre, when the genre emerged and waned, whether specific titles should be included in the canon, and so on. Generally speaking, I take the classic period of film noir to cover the 1940s and 1950s, with a handful of titles from the 1930s prefiguring the emergence of film noir and a large number of titles from a variety of genres influenced by or directly emulating film noir in the decades since. Scholars have expended considerable energy arguing how film noir is most accurately characterized. Thematically, films noir are often pessimistic, featuring morally ambiguous characters trapped in situations that provide only cloudy moral opportunities and foreclose happy endings; but while the general mood of film noir can certainly be described as dark, not all films noir fit neatly into the category. The narrative structure of film noir is often convoluted, including both plot twists in the "present" of the film as well as frequently relying on narrative flashbacks; voiceover narrations are common. Visually, film noir is characterized by black and white film; low-key lighting with stark shadows and high contrast; frequent use of extreme angles (both high-angle and low-angle shots); canted framing, in which characters and their

environment are slightly askew; and interior framing.[19] While each set of characteristics accurately describes a significant number of films noir, there are also exceptions to each, and so film noir continues to evade a full and precise definition.

More important, for my purposes, than precisely defining the category of film noir is examining how specific texts within the category represent the automobile and automobility. Scholarly attention to film noir has long focused on such archetypal elements as the city itself or the femme fatale; I argue that the automobile is also a significant and frequently overlooked figure in the noir cycle. The automobile highlights the unstable landscapes characteristic of film noir, just as film noir reveals the automobile's importance to the public as a means of navigating those landscapes. The relatively few noir studies addressing the automobile tend to focus on its negative aspects, as in Mark Osteen's "Noir's Cars: Automobility and Amoral Space in American Film Noir," which identifies the automobile as a site of ambivalent morality. In his study of the American city in film noir, Nicholas Christopher rightly acknowledges the automobile's transformative effect on the modern American city's shape and infrastructure; his analysis touches briefly on the automobile as a figure of noir in its own right, identifying it as a space of isolation, sexual transgression, and "unbridled aggressiveness" (94). This tendency to focus on the negative aspects of the automobile in discussions of film noir is perhaps a consequence of the typically bleak outlook of noir in general; however, it may also be influenced by an awareness of the negative consequences of automobile culture that are obvious now several decades later. Closer analysis reveals that noir films demonstrate considerable ambivalence toward the automobile, which contributes to the unstable and centrifugal nature of modern urban

[19] For an overview of noir's visual elements, see Place and Peterson.

space but is also the only effective tool for navigating it. These films are fairly consistent, however, in rejecting the association of the automobile with the individual will; in keeping with a strong undercurrent of fatalism running throughout film noir, the automobile is frequently an instrument of fate.

Rear Projection in *The Lady in the Lake* and *Murder, My Sweet*

Films Noir are not generally noted for their use of special effects; however, the one effect characteristic of noir—the rear projection process shot—has automobility at its center. Developed in the 1930s, rear projection puts actors in front of a translucent screen while a pre-filmed background is projected on that screen from the opposite side. The technique was made possible by the development of new technologies coincident with the advent of sound cinema in the 1930s. The effect was used for battle scenes (*The Plainsman* [1936]), ocean settings (*Captains Courageous* [1937]) and wide open spaces in innumerable B-Westerns.[20] Other means of creating similar effects—such as the visually-superior but more expensive and technically-complicated front projection process and the simpler, digital technology of the green screen matte process shot—have largely replaced rear-projection process shots in recent decades, and rear projection has become associated with cheap production values and unconvincing special effects.

Because the effect is less photo-realistic and less spectacular than more complicated special effects predominant in the post-*Star Wars* era, rear projection has, as Julie Turnock points out, been largely overlooked by film scholars, both as a general topic and as a specific, local effect. Rear projection's primary advantages—"speed, efficiency, consistency, and controllability" (Turnock 160)—make it a natural fit for

[20] For a brief history of rear projection technology, see Balio, 131-33. For an analysis of the significance of rear projection as a subject of inquiry for film scholars, see Julie Turnock's "The Screen on the Set: The Problem of Classical-Studio Rear Projection."

films noir, which were often produced on tight schedules and tighter budgets. Though used for a variety of backgrounds from the 1930s through the 1970s, perhaps the most common employment of rear projection—and certainly its most common employment in films noir—involved automobile scenes, with rear projection providing the scenery that passes through rear and side windows. Discussing the use of rear projection to supply the crowds in a train platform in *Phantom Lady* (1944), Dimendberg oserves: "A rear projection sequence of a crowd appears when they arrive at their destination, as if to underscore their lack of connection to other people" (33). The use of rear projection in many automobile scenes in the noir cycle underscores a similar lack of connection between the characters and the world around them, as well as providing other insight into settings and character.

The 1946 adaptation of Raymond Chandler's *Lady in the Lake* (directed by Robert Montgomery, who also plays Marlowe) is an example of a noir film that effectively uses rear projection to comment on the urban landscape. Montgomery's approach was innovative in that the film was shot almost entirely from Marlowe's point of view, with the camera—and thus the viewer—standing in for Marlowe: the camera moves accordingly when Marlowe walks, sits, or stands; it rotates when he turns his head; and shakes and falls when he gets knocked out with a punch to the face. Other than the opening scene, when Marlowe faces the camera to introduce the story and the gimmick, and a handful of similar narrative interludes, we see Marlowe only as a reflection in the mirror or as a disembodied hand reaching out for a glass or a piece of paper. While an interesting experiment, the technique is ultimately unsuccessful: the novelty wears thin fairly quickly; the technique drastically limits the power of editing,

making some scenes monotonous; and the artificiality of the performance is heightened by actors constantly staring directly at the camera or, in Montgomery's case, rarely being more than a disembodied voice.

Still, the first-person technique does make for some interesting and original scenes, including the film's only automobile sequence, in which Marlowe is chased and eventually run down by another driver. The scene takes place after Marlowe has interviewed the parents of a missing woman and is leaving their house. The viewer accompanies the camera to the car on a nice residential street and slides with Marlowe into the driver's seat. The car shakes as the door closes, helping to obscure a cut that replaces a physical foreground through the windshield with a rear projection of the same scene. As the car moves away from the curb, Marlowe (and thus the camera) glances to the left at a car parked on the opposite side. We see Marlowe's hands on the wheel as he drives down a tree-lined block which ends with a right turn. The camera again turns back to see the other car turn on its lights and pull out after Marlowe. The blind spot between the driver's window and the back window obscures another cut as Marlowe turns his head back to the road; however, the rear-projected road ahead when Marlowe turns his head forward is clearly not the same road we were on when he glanced back, and when he turns at the end of the block it is quite clearly a different block. It is disorienting in that, while no obvious time has elapsed and while the viewer has not left Marlowe's perspective, one no longer has a sense of place. The literal disruption of special continuity, occurring at precisely the moment that Marlowe realizes he is being followed, is jarring for the viewer, underscoring the danger and uncertainty of his environment.

The car scene continues down a dark, car-lined street; only the road directly ahead, illuminated by Marlowe's headlights, is visible, while headlights and streetlights flicker in the dark distance. Though clearly a paved road, the image is jittery, so that the distant lights and nearby parked cars bounce noticeably and are never clearly in focus, adding to both the scene's building tension and the sense of disorientation. As Marlowe approaches a parked car on the right, the camera turns in that direction, and it appears momentarily as though there might be a collision, until his gaze settles on the rearview mirror, through which the trailing car is clearly visible and pulling up close to Marlowe's rear. For a moment the camera holds that gaze, and the relative stasis of the trailing car, boxed in the mirror at the center of the frame, contrasts with the blurred scenery of the roadside, which now, since it is in the direct line of vision rather than the periphery, appears to be moving even faster.

As Marlowe retrains his attention on the road ahead the lights in the distance go out of focus momentarily, obscuring another cut in which the rear projection footage is looped, so that we are now actually watching the same block that we saw shortly before. Once again Marlowe turns his head as he approaches a parked car on the right and again focuses on the car in the rearview mirror. But the rear-projected streetscape is the same image we saw the first time he glanced over. (See Figure 2.) The looped footage in the rear projected road ahead again subtly disrupts the sense of spatial continuity. There is a sudden cut to the road straight ahead, now clearly a different stretch of road, exacerbating the disorienting space of Marlowe's automobile ride. One can tell by the light cast on the road that the other car is overtaking Marlowe; then another sudden cut to the view through the driver's side window shows the other car alongside, a spotlight shining

directly at the driver/camera, and as we hear the sound of the crash the camera spins, simulating the car rolling over on the roadside. Although the film's low budget (as with most of the other examples in this chapter) likely prompted the use of rear-projection footage in the car chase and the low-tech rotating camera simulating the crash, the technique is effective. In addition to the visual interest and tension provided by the special effects in the sequence, the non-continuous and looped rear-projection footage and the jumpy editing at the end of the chase present automobility and the experience of speed as chaotic and disorienting.

The rear projection footage used throughout the chase scene evokes the anxieties of centrifugal space, which "hinge upon temporality and the uncertainty produced by a spatial environment increasingly devoid of landmarks and centers and often likely to seem permanently in motion" (Dimendberg 172). The initial sequence on the suburban street speaks to the loss of landmarks, since the house that marks the end of the street (as discussed above) simply disappears after the (concealed) cut in the rear-projection footage, even though the car is ostensibly on the same block. This is reinforced, after Marlowe's car turns the corner, by the lack of detail in the road ahead aside from flickering headlights or streetlights in the distance. The sideways glance of the camera/Marlowe, at the same time, offers a landscape that appears itself to be in motion. The repetition of footage echoes a complaint frequently leveled against suburban tracts: that all houses and all blocks look the same.

The sequence also illustrates what Jerold J. Abrams, borrowing from Umberto Eco's analysis of three different types of labyrinth, identifies as film noir's characteristic structure: the rhizomatic maze. Where classical detective stories are structured around an

earlier form of labyrinth (what Eco calls a mannerist labyrinth) which, while deceptive and unpredictable, can be navigated by pure reason, the rhizomatic maze "has no center; it has no perimeter; and, worst of all, it has no way out" (Abrams 72). Particularly associated with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, rhizomatic structures are distinct from root systems in that they are non-linear, grow not vertically but rather spread in all directions, and start from an assumption of multiplicities rather than unity. The rear-projection backgrounds in film noir reflect this rhizomatic maze, with the looped footage undermining the presumed linearity of the road itself.

Even as the monotonous landscape and lack of landmarks make navigation difficult, there are dangers lurking, as the near collisions with the cars on the side and the blinding light of the spotlight suggest. These dangers, moreover, include institutions that ought to provide safe harbor rather than threat—shortly before going to interview the missing woman's parents, Marlowe theorizes that a local police detective was involved in her disappearance; this same detective, it turns out, is in the car that runs him off the road.

Edward Dmytryk's *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), based on Chandler's second novel, *Farewell, My Lovely,* also effectively uses rear projection to create meaning in several shots featuring the automobile, providing not just commentary on the landscape but also on Marlowe's mental and emotional state as he works his way through it. The film opens with Marlowe (played this time by Dick Powell) being interrogated by police officers. As he answers their questions, the camera moves through the window of the interrogation room into a city street, crowded with automobiles and lined with neon. With Marlowe's voiceover providing a bridge between different time frames, the street scenes appear to exist both in the "present" of the interrogation room and in the past in Marlowe's office

where his story begins. Marlowe explains that he had been looking for a missing person, but “I never found him. I just found out all over again how big this city is. My feet hurt, and my mind felt like a plumber’s handkerchief.” As Marlowe says this, the shots of the city street bring us closer to the bustle of the city: the first shot, from just outside the interrogation room, is several stories above the street, the next about eye-level for a pedestrian, looking back towards a street corner; the third from ground level in the center of the street itself, as an automobile comes from the right towards the camera, passing very close in front of it, suggesting the danger of the urban landscape. We then move up to Marlowe’s office, looking in at him from the outside through his office window before a cut brings us inside the office with him.

Once there, Marlowe speaks of a sense of separation from the city: “There’s something about the dead silence of an office building at night—not quite real. The traffic down below was something that didn’t have anything to do with me.” He is above it, and disconnected from it. But shortly after this pronouncement, he looks to his window and sees a hulking image of a man, his head and shoulders larger than life as he appears to look down at Marlowe from outside the window. A flashing neon light from the street below comes on, and the image fades, leaving the background cityscape visible again. As the neon light goes off, the image again appears; Marlowe, startled, turns around to find Moose Malloy, the ex-con whose search for a former girlfriend will set the movie’s plot in motion. His reflection in the window is a projection, enlarged to make him appear even bigger than he is. The images of the urban landscape, Marlowe’s feeling of separation from the same, and the unsettling appearance and disappearance of Malloy’s oversized reflection, as though on the outside looking in, combine to suggest the disorienting,

inaccessible, and potentially hazardous nature of the city landscape. The sequence also suggests the impermanent nature of the modern city, as elements of the landscape (including buildings and businesses) appear and disappear regularly. (Indeed, the reason Moose comes to see Marlowe is he needs help tracking down a woman who used to work at a club that no longer exists, having gone out of business while he was in prison.)

The use of rear-projection in the film's automobile scenes reinforces both this impression of the landscape and its effect on Marlowe. The first automobile sequence is a rural scene, as Marlowe drives a client to the countryside north of Los Angeles to buy back some stolen jewels. After an establishing shot of an automobile on the Pacific Coast Highway, we see Marlowe from the front, through the windshield, with the dark road in the background through rear projection. The camera then moves inside the car, showing us Marlowe from behind, with the rear projected road ahead of him visible through the windshield. The lighting of the car actually gives us three separate Marlowes to look at (Figure 3): the physical Marlowe in the front seat, with the back of his head and shoulders and his left arm visible; a reflection in the rear-view mirror, which shows his nose, left eye, and left cheek; and a faint reflection in the windshield, which shows the left half of his face and which fades in and out, depending on how bright the projected foreground is. (Like the startling reflection of Moose Malloy in the opening scene, this third Marlowe appears and disappears depending on the light.) Since the exchange will take place in the middle of nowhere, Marlowe is naturally concerned about what dangers may await, and Marlowe and his separate reflections reinforce the character's anxiety. They also accent Marlowe's feeling of being under surveillance: "We were watched. I

didn't see anything; I felt it." The multitude of Marlowes visible onscreen reinforce his position as one being looked at.

The rear projection footage seen through the car windows is again used to reinforce Marlowe's psychological state later in the film. Marlowe escapes from an asylum, where some corrupt officials have sent him to be drugged and detained with the hope that he would reveal the location of the jewels. Shortly after escaping he winds up in the backseat of a cab, still visibly reeling from the drugs. The rear projected background through the back window shows a few headlights and streetlights at first, and then more; then as the cabbie turns a corner, the lights from cars, lampposts, and neon spin to the side as though swirling, suggesting both his clouded mental state and the disorienting nature of the world around him.

In *Murder, My Sweet,* the disconnection between individual and landscape is suggested not only by the content of the rear-projected images but also by the quality of the rear-projection process. Some films (such as *Double Indemnity*) strive for and achieve a fairly high degree of realism with rear-projection process shots; the projected image blends effectively (with respect to contrast, picture quality, and so on) with the automobile structure in the foreground, and lighting schemes integrate the separate images, both by concealing depth cues that would separate them and by bringing the actors into the world of the projection. (For instance, as a streetlight passes in the projected image, an appropriately timed and positioned flash of light would pass over the faces of characters inside the car.) The rear projection in *Murder, My Sweet* does not achieve that level of realism, with contrast levels that clearly distinguish the projected image from the foreground and lighting schemes that are clearly distinct. In the

aforementioned rural scene, for example, the only apparent light source within the scene is the car's dashboard controls, and even these provide no real light, judging by their appearance in a shot taken from the backseat; yet, both Marlowe's face and his passenger's in the backseat are perfectly illuminated, even as the night is so dark that virtually nothing in the background is visible. (See Figure 4.) The difference in realism between rear-projection in *Double Indemnity* and *Murder, My Sweet* may be partly a function of the former's substantially higher budget[21] or its considerable assemblage of talent.[22] However, the lack of realism in the latter film's rear-projection scenes reinforces the disconnection Marlowe feels from his environment (as his comment "the traffic down below … it didn't have anything to do with me" in the opening monologue demonstrates).

Neither of these films (in spite of the automobile-centric nature of their source material) spends as much time with the automobile as do some other noir films, including those I examine in the remainder of the chapter. Still, these two Raymond Chandler adaptations amply demonstrate that rear projection is one way that the film noir automobile articulates concerns about the changing urban landscape and its effect on the individual subject. Many other films noir employ rear projection in similar ways,[23] and I

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[21] Though *Murder My Sweet*'s fairly large $400,000 budget "represented a muscle flexing on the part of RKO indicating its desire to compete with major studios" (Hare and Annakin 52), Paramount's budget for *Double Indemnity* was $980,000 (Biesen 230 n. 47).

[22] Director Billy Wilder, cinematographer John F. Seitz, and visual effects supervisor Farciot Edouart have more than 50 Academy Award nominations (and 17 wins) among them.

[23] A few examples include Tay Garnett's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), which like *Double Indemnity* is based on a James Cain novel and involves murder in an automobile; Robert Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly*, which begins with detective Mike Hammer (Ralph Meeker) in an automobile careening down a rear-projected dark highway and ends with him cowering in the ocean from a rear-projected nuclear explosion; and Anthony Mann's *Side Street* (1950), which features a number of automobile chase scenes through the narrow streets of Manhattan, with rear projection plates accentuating the social and physical claustrophobia of the urban space.

will continue to examine rear projection as I turn to other noir titles in which the automobile figures more prominently.

Double Indemnity

The opening sequence of Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944) finds Walter Neff, a salesman for the Pacific All Risk Insurance Company, arriving at his office late at night and sitting down at his desk to dictate a confession (of murder and insurance fraud) that will provide the narrative framework for the film. The first image that we see, after the opening credits roll, is of a Los Angeles street at night. The center of the frame is cluttered with the trappings of modern technology: trolley tracks climb the hill in the center of the screen, the sky between the buildings on either side of the street is webbed with trolley wires, and the street is lined on each side with pairs of electric lights up to the crest of the hill and beyond. In the foreground, near the bottom of the frame, a welder works in the middle of the street, flares beside him to alert drivers to his presence, the light from his torch illuminating a traffic barrier that reads "Los Angeles Railway Corp. Maintenance Dept." As the welder's torch flickers, it becomes clear that one pair of lights at the crest of the hill is actually the headlights of an automobile, moving erratically down the street, seemingly headed right for the welder, until another worker steps out in the street and waves the driver to the side with a flashlight. (See Figure 5.)

The juxtaposition of automobile and the railroad represented visually in this first scene continues throughout the film. Neff and Phyllis Dietrichson, with whom he conspires to kill her husband, use driving metaphors to flirt at their first meeting. When she tells him her name, he says he likes it, but would "have to drive it around the block a couple of times" to be sure; she accuses him of speeding with this forward language, and

he suggests that she "get down off (her) motorcycle and give (him) a ticket." James A. Paris marvels at the way Wilder and Chandler "tightrope walk around the Breen Office" (17) in this scene, with a racy exchange that "underscores the tawdriness" of their attraction to one another. As Paris notes, Neff is "properly hooked" by "a figure that radiates both sexuality and danger" (18). Paris is referring to Phyllis, but the automobile, too, is a figure that often radiates sexuality and danger, making it particularly useful for incorporating such racy banter into the script.

The prospect of murder, on the other hand, inspires rail metaphors: Neff and Dietrichson assure one another that they're in it "until the end of the line," while Neff's friend Keyes, the claims manager who is investigating the case, tells Neff that "the last stop is the cemetery." The central murder in the film occurs in an automobile—Neff hides in the backseat of the Dietrichsons' car and strangles Mr. Dietrichson on the way to the train station. But Neff and Phyllis plan to stage his death as an accidental fall from the train; this is important, Neff tells her, because the life insurance policy has a double indemnity clause which will double the payout for a railway accident. The specifics of their plan, though, reveals another advantage of staging the death on the railroad tracks. Neff plans to impersonate Mr. Dietrichson at the beginning of the railroad journey and then jump off the train after it pulls away from the station, so that the pair can lay the dead body on the tracks as though the man had fallen off the rear of the train. While it may be difficult to construct an alibi for a car accident, the surveillance structure of the train puts distance between Phyllis and her husband at the supposed time of his death.

In his analysis of *Double Indemnity*, Mark Osteen reads the juxtaposition of rail and automobile through the familiar lens of the automobile as a signifier of autonomy and

individuality: “If the train and trolley represent fate, the auto exemplifies the desire to flout history, destiny and law, signifying freedom from rules and the dream of forging a new self” (184). While true on a general level, and while the automobile as a vehicle for self-determination recurs both in film noir and other narratives that feature the automobile, this construction provides an incomplete picture. For one thing, while the flirtatious banter about speeding in metaphorical motor vehicles reveals in each character a desire to leap the tracks of their respective lives, to experience “freedom from rules and the dream of forging a new self” (Osteen 184), the representation of actual automobiles in the film undermines that idea, turning the automobile into an instrument of fate. The first scene where we actually see Neff in an automobile finds him driving away from the Dietrichson house after their initial meeting. Neff, fresh from flirting with Phyllis, has a faint smile on his face but otherwise stares straight ahead, not visibly engaged with the process of driving. As he drives we hear his voiceover confession resume: “It was a hot afternoon and I can still remember the smell of honeysuckle all along that street. How can I have known that murder can sometimes smell like honeysuckle?” The comment suggests that this automobile trip from the Dietrichson house back to the office seals his fate, putting him inextricably on a path to murder. (Waiting outside the Dietrichson house on the night of the murder, he comments that the honeysuckle smell was particularly strong that night.)

The automobile is more explicitly connected to fate at his apartment on the night that he agrees to help kill her husband. After she leaves his apartment he walks to his window and opens it, staring out into the rainy night while smoking a cigarette. We hear a car start—hers, presumably, because his head turns slightly to watch as we hear it drive

away. The voiceover returns: “That was it, Keyes. The machinery had started to move and nothing could stop it.” Coming as it does immediately after we hear the car start, Neff’s comment connects the machinery of the automobile with the machinery of fate. The illusory nature of agency against the overwhelming force of fate are frequent themes in film noir, and the automobile is frequently an instrument of that fate, not only in *Double Indemnity*, but (as we shall see later) in other films as well.

While its association with the modern machinery of fate casts the automobile in an ominous light, fate is not the only force that affects Neff through the automobile; the power of human connection also moves him from his course. Neff’s plan is to pitch accident insurance to Mr. Dietrichson with his wife and a witness present, knowing that Mr. Dietrichson will not purchase it. He will then claim to have later convinced Mr. Dietrichson to purchase the life insurance at his office; this will undermine what authorities would consider Phyllis’s motive by allowing Phyllis to claim that she knew nothing of the policy. The witness turns out to be Mr. Dietrichson’s daughter, Lola, from a previous marriage. When Neff leaves the Dietrichson home after the meeting is over, he is surprised to find Lola in his car, hoping for a ride downtown. Along the way she explains that her father and stepmother don’t approve of her boyfriend Nino, and while the ride doesn’t convince Neff to call off the murder, it does make him uneasy about the effect it will have on her, as we learn in another voiceover as he drives away: “She was a nice kid, and maybe [Nino] was a little better than he sounded. But right then it gave me a nasty feeling to be thinking about them at all. With that briefcase right behind my head that had her father’s signature in it. And what that signature meant: it meant he was a

dead pigeon." This is the first time Neff expresses any emotional reservation about the crime.

After the murder, Lola comes to his office distraught, having broken up with Nino and moved out of the Dietrichson house because she suspects her step-mother in her father's death. Moved, he tries to cheer her up by taking her to dinner and then on a Sunday drive to the beach. He has an ulterior motive for this, of course, since he wants to make sure she doesn't spread her suspicions about Phyllis; however, he also connects with Lola on a personal level, and as they ride in his car they share laughter. His connection with Lola becomes clear at the end of his confession, when, after eventually killing Phyllis and being mortally wounded himself, he reconciles Nino with Lola and then asks Keyes to be the one to break the news to her, "kinda gently, before it breaks wide open." His connection with Lola, which begins with and is later cemented in the space of his automobile, causes him to second guess his role in the crime and reconsider his final attempt to escape.[24]

As Dimendberg argues in his analysis of the film, the juxtaposition of automobile and rail transit in the opening scene also reflects a transition from an urban space invested in public transportation to one organized around the automobile. By 1944, when the movie was made, LA's public transportation was in decline as the city's residents increasingly turned to the automobile. This was not, as is sometimes alleged, so much a consequence of a conspiracy by automotive manufacturers as it was a result of inefficiency and corruption by the transit companies; the opening image, in which the rail company is both in need of repair and impeding other forms of mobility, encapsulates

[24] The connection between Lola and Neff is even stronger in James Cain's original novel, where he explicitly courts her and tries to disentangle himself from Phyllis (even plotting her murder) so that he might have the opportunity to be with Lola.

complaints that many in Los Angeles had about the trolley system. As Dimendberg argues, the primacy of the automobile in the film reveals noir's concerns with the move towards centrifugal space: "Though appearing early in the film noir cycle, *Double Indemnity* portends the growing sway of centrifugal space through the relative absence of the city, as well as the significance of the automobile as the modality through which the now-diffused metropolis is primarily encountered" (173). In addition to reinforcing the dispersion of the urban landscape, however, the automobile in *Double Indemnity* reveals a complex relationship between the automotive subject and the uncertainty of the modern urban landscape. It is not merely (as we saw in the chase sequence in *The Lady in the Lake*) that the modern landscape is devoid of landmarks or a true center; more sinisterly, traps and snares may emerge at any moment to delay, disrupt, or destroy the modern subject.

The opening sequence, with Neff's car speeding through Los Angeles at night on the way to the office, presents "the speed of automotive travel as the fundamental experience of passage through the city" (Dimendberg 173). However, this opening sequence also suggests that the landscape itself shifts quickly, as four separate shots of the automobile at the film's opening reveal: first, the aforementioned shot of the car heading towards the rail worker; second, as the car heads towards a green light, the light changes to red but the car speeds through it anyway; third, at another intersection the car narrowly avoids a collision with a pickup truck, which slams on its brakes and sends several boxes from its overstacked truck bed crashing to the ground; finally, the automobile pulls up to the front of Neff's office building. The automobile itself moves quickly, but the rapid cuts from one scene to the next, with Neff's speeding automobile

the only constant, also highlight the rapid shifts in scenery. The editing reflects the speed of both machine and landscape, with these four shots averaging just over 6 seconds each; the speed slows down once Neff gets out of the car, averaging more than 52 seconds per shot as Neff moves to his office and begins recording his confession. In a film that tends to linger on its subjects, with several long takes lasting more than a minute, the rapid rhythm of the opening automobile sequence stands out. That rhythm reasserts itself for automobile scenes throughout the film; there are a few shots inside the automobile which last a little bit longer, but for the most part in the film the automobile moves in and out of the frame quickly and the shots of the automobile move quickly from one to another, reflecting both the speed of the machine and the instability of the urban landscape through which it moves.

In addition to the rhythm, the composition of these shots and the transitions between them reinforce the idea of a landscape that is itself rapidly changing and difficult to grasp. The headlights of the car in the opening scene appear, at first, indistinguishable from the streetlights, which line the city street in pairs. (Twice what looks to be an additional set of headlights appears just at the crest of the hill, but never moves closer to the camera, reinforcing this confusion.) The first shot dissolves into the second, so that both shots are momentarily juxtaposed. (Once Neff gets out of the car, the dissolve is replaced, for the remainder of the opening sequence, by straight cuts.) As the first shot dissolves into the second, the rows of street lights from the second shot appear momentarily over the street and streetlights of the opening shot, each appearing as a potential set of headlights. The actual headlights of the car appear near the center of the frame, where they had been immediately before in the opening shot, even as the car is

still moving out of the frame in that opening shot, so that the car's headlights appear in two places at once. (See Figure 6.) The last things from the opening shot to disappear in the dissolve are the flares, which appear to linger momentarily in the road in the second shot and again threaten the automobile's progress. The third shot appears suddenly and finds Neff's car just at the edge of an intersection and headed directly for a collision with a delivery truck, as though the truck itself appeared in the street as suddenly as the shot itself, and as though the driver of the automobile does not notice the truck any sooner than does the viewer. The third shot dissolves into the fourth, again offering a momentary juxtaposition of streetlights and automobiles from two different spaces. As Osteen notes, "the speeding, out-of-control car in fact symbolizes [Neff], whose life has run amok" (183). However, the editing and composition suggest that the car is not the only thing that is out of control. The landscape through which it moves is similarly erratic: too cluttered, too chaotic, too rapidly changing to fully comprehend.

The background seen through the rear window of the Dietrichson's automobile on the night of the murder evokes the same chaotic and confusing urban streetscape seen in these opening scenes. As Neff hides on the floor of the backseat, Phyllis and Mr. Dietrichson sit in the front on the way to the train station. The sequence begins with a shot of both Phyllis and Mr. Dietrichson, with headlights from two or three cars visible between them through the rear window. The next shot is from the backseat, showing Neff hiding on the floor, with the back of the Dietrichson's heads and the upper half of the windshield visible. The low angle has the camera looking up at the streetlights that come towards the car, but since they are pairs of streetlights, similar to headlights, it appears as though the car is headed straight into traffic. Alternating close-ups of Phyllis and Mr.

Dietrichson show headlights in the background, though the exact number of cars is difficult to determine, with new lights emerging and disappearing as cars change lanes behind them. A brief long shot of the automobile moving towards the camera recalls the composition of the opening scene, and then the car turns off onto a side street where she will signal with the horn and Neff will strangle Mr. Dietrichson. Later, after they have put the body on the train tracks, we see them drive away together; but the camera views them only from the backseat with pairs of streetlights and pairs of headlights in front of them, so that we again have the illusion of heading into traffic (Figure 7).

The scene demonstrates not only the danger of the landscape, but also, finally, the danger of the automobile as well. On some level, the automobile appears to provide protection as a pocket of private space moving through this chaotic environment. Paul Mason Fitch rightly points out that this privacy is essential to the murder plot in that it provides, within the public area of the city street, "a hidden space, which allows the murder to be unobserved" (104). In contrast, when Neff tries to complete the cover-up by getting off the back of the moving train in order to establish that Mr. Dietrichson's death occurred there, he lacks the privacy to do so, since another passenger is also outside the back of the train. Equally important, however, is that the film demonstrates this "private" space of the automobile is itself fully compromised. It provides no protection for the husband, who gets in the passenger's seat without knowing that Neff is hiding behind the seat. Though a less dangerous example, we have already seen the privacy of the automobile breeched when Neff found Lola in his car after leaving the Dietrichson house. The privacy of the automobile is illusory, and the unseen dangers that have rendered the

urban landscape through which the automobile moves so perilous have potentially infiltrated the automobile itself as well.

Double Indemnity captures the dangerous nature of the American city, where fate compels men down paths of self-destruction, the landscape changes too quickly to keep one's footing solid, and where danger can appear suddenly at any time or can (as with the similarity of headlights and streetlights) appear indistinguishable from the more innocuous elements of the world around you. While *Double Indemnity* serves as an outstanding example of urban noir, there are several other automobile-oriented films noir that feature non-urban settings. I turn now to these rural noir which, like the urban examples we have discussed thus far, help to illuminate the changing nature of automobility. While early motorists celebrated the automobile as a potential escape from the city, these films demonstrate that widespread automobility makes such escape impossible. They highlight the automobile's role in extending the chaotic, dangerous, and rapidly-changing landscape seen in urban noir into once-isolated rural areas, and reiterate the role the automobile plays (along with other communications technology) in reshaping the public's relationship to space and time.

The Long Arm of Cultural Urbanization in *The Killers* and *Out of the Past*

The automobile is an important technology in the trend towards centrifugality, but not the only one. As I did in my discussion of the hardboiled detective novel in the previous chapter, Dimendberg invokes Foucault's "constellation of forces" (174)—speed, communication, and territory—to explain the concept of centrifugal space, which "must be understood in relation to its characteristic media technologies: radio and television. Early accounts of radio valorize the simultaneous transmission and reception of

information and extol the benefits that would accrue to rural areas through their cultural urbanization" (212). In the early decades of the twentieth century the automobile, too, was valorized as a technology that might bring about the cultural urbanization of rural areas. Just as the early automobile offered urban dwellers the opportunity to escape the metropolis and partake in the restorative properties of the countryside, it also allowed those in rural areas and small towns to partake of the cultural and economic benefit of the cities. One of the benefits of the automobile, boosters supposed, is that it would prevent brain drain in rural American communities by providing quick access to urban areas for the brightest rural youth, who would otherwise be tempted to abandon the farm for the seductions of the city.

Just as the automobile brings small towns and rural citizens in closer contact with the cultural and economic benefits of the city, however, it also brings them in closer contact with those dangers and drawbacks which are a central element and theme of film noir. The majority of films noir take place primarily or entirely in urban spaces, and when rural or small-town spaces appear, they seldom offer a sustainable or optimistic alternative to the noir city. Rather, the rural landscape of such films as *Detour,* with its harsh Arizona desert, or *They Live By Night,* with its Depression-era dusty prairies and barren fields, offer a naturalistic counterpart to the urban fatalism of film noir. Two films from the years shortly after World War II, however, do examine the effect of urban contact on life in small towns: *The Killers* (1946) and *Out of the Past* (1947).

The sequence following the opening credits of Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* (based on a short story by Ernest Hemingway) is among the most famous in film noir: two men in dark jackets walk into Henry's Diner in Brentwood, New Jersey. Their urban

style of dress and speech contrasts clearly with that of the small-town counterman George and his lone customer Nick Adams. Their small talk with George grows increasingly sinister until they finally reveal the purpose for their visit: they intend to kill Paul Lund, also known as "The Swede," although his real name is Ole Andreson. They tie Sam (the cook) and Nick Adams up in the kitchen, but when the Swede doesn't arrive at 6 pm, as he usually does, they release their prisoners and set off to find out where the Swede lives. Nick Adams, who works with Andreson at the service station, goes to warn him, but the Swede is resigned to his fate and refuses to move from his bed. The two killers climb the stairs of his boarding house, pause outside his door, and open fire as they step inside, killing him without resistance. This sequence is a rather faithful adaptation of Hemingway's story, which then ends with Nick Adams returning to the diner and ruminating about the Swede's acquiescence; the fact that he was a boxer and George's speculation that "he must have got mixed up in something in Chicago"[25] (222) is the full extent of the Swede's backstory. The balance of the film, on the other hand, expands the story, following insurance investigator Jim Reardon as he works first to find Andreson's life insurance beneficiary and then to solve the mystery of Andreson's death. A former boxer, Andreson got mixed up with a bad crowd in Philadelphia after a hand injury ended his fighting career. After a successful payroll robbery, his partners-in-crime double crossed him, but he tracked them down and stole the loot from them at gunpoint. He then met his girlfriend, Kitty, in Atlantic City; but she was also the girlfriend of Big Jim Colfax, the mastermind of the payroll robbery, and she runs back to Colfax with the money, leaving both Andreson and the other two partners in the robbery empty-handed.

[25] Hemingway's short story takes place in the Chicagoland village of Summit, rather than New Jersey.

In the first flashback of Jim Reardon's investigation, we learn from Nick Adams that Andreson had begun feeling sick the week before, shortly after a man (we will learn that he is Big Jim Colfax) pulled into the filling station in a black Cadillac. Andreson is working on another car, but Colfax spots him, and we see recognition first in Colfax's face and then in Andreson's as he looks up from his work. Andreson tries to walk away from the car and into the station, but Colfax calls him over to check the oil and then wash the windows. They stare at each other through the glass without speaking as he washes the windshield on the driver's side. As Colfax drives off, Andreson tells Nick he is feeling sick and leaves for the day. Andreson had lived in Brentwood for about a year, we learn, but could not hide in that small town from his big city past forever. The world is too connected and the urban reach is too long, particularly since he works at a filling station, which serves as a node in the network of urbanization and automobility. As we saw in *Double Indemnity,* the idea of fate is important in film noir, which often promotes the idea that, as noir scholar James Ursini puts it, "no matter how much you try to escape it, someone or something is pushing you toward your fate, like in *Oedipus*" (7:20). Here the automobile again functions as the instrument of fate, bringing the Swede back into the path of his past. More than simple fate for the individual, though, the automobile renders even quiet village life subject to the threats of the city.

A short sequence before the opening credits reinforces the connection between the automobile and the reach of urban danger. As with Reardon's investigation, this sequence is not in the original story, but rather was invented for the film. As the studio logo fades, the camera looks forward from the backseat of an automobile speeding down the highway at night (Figure 8). The driver and his passenger (the two killers from the

following scene) are visible only in stark silhouette; the road moves rapidly beneath the automobile's headlights, but only a small patch of that road is visible in the center of the screen, as though the driver is outdriving his headlights, heightening the sense of speed and danger. The car slows as it approaches a gentle curve, and the scene cuts to a view from in front of the car, so that only the road and roadside are visible as the headlights catch a town's welcome sign: "Brentwood New Jersey Drive Carefully." Then the credits begin, a long take against a background of a dark, still Brentwood street as the two shadowy figures walk across that street to a service station and then back across to the door of Henry's Diner, where Hemingway's story begins. This backstory, however brief, changes the complexion of the two killers—unlike in the story, where their intrusion into the diner brings the world into being, in the film we know that they *come* from somewhere, along a well-traveled road that connects Henry's Diner and the rest of Brentwood directly to their source. The police chief of the small town wants to stay in denial, and tells Jim Reardon that the crime doesn't really concern him: "What concerns us is protecting the lives and property of our citizens. This man Lund lived here, that's all. The killers came from out of town and they were here looking for Lund. They ain't gunning for anyone else in town." But while it's true that the killers themselves don't return, one of the Swede's partners in the payroll heist does (thinking he might find the missing money in the Swede's room), and winds up in a shootout with the local police. The police chief is naïve to think his town can stay insulated from the dangers of the outside world: Brentwood is on the map, so to speak, within reach of the city and its dangers.

Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* offers a yet stronger contrast between the city and the small town. It begins uncharacteristically for a film noir, with a montage of idyllic mountain beauty: a glimpse of a mountain lake nestled below majestic peaks; a long shot of another set of mountain peaks framed by the branches of an evergreen in the foreground; a few shots of a prairie with snowcaps in the background; and a wide shot from a rocky hillside overlooking an open valley which, with a faintly visible trail in the distance (and a tiny square of the same road in the corner of the screen) provide the first suggestion of human life. The montage is more suggestive of a western than a film noir, particularly the final shot of the sequence, which shows a rustic barbed-wire fence that stretches towards distant foothills; but as the credits fade the camera foils this impression by panning slightly to the right to reveal an Automobile Club of Southern California "direction and distance" highway sign placed in front of the fence. (See figure 9.) We are then unmistakably in the modern world as the scene cuts to a highway with a black sedan driving away from the camera toward the small town of Bridgeport.

The plot of *Out of the Past* is characteristically convoluted for film noir. Jeff Bailey runs a gas station in Bridgeport, California, a town that (the automobiles lined on Main Street notwithstanding) appears almost as rustic as the opening scenes: churches and Victorian houses are set stark against mountain backdrops, city streets are lined with dust and naked trees, and all the roads other than Main Street remain unpaved. As the movie opens, Joe Stephanos, a man from out of Jeff's past, arrives in town to see him, forcing him to confront his former life. On an automobile drive to Lake Tahoe, Jeff explains that past to his girlfriend Ann, and the film cuts to an extended flashback. He once worked as a private detective under another name and had been hired by a wealthy

gambler, Whit Sterling (Kirk Douglas), to find his girlfriend, Kathie (Jane Greer), who had shot Sterling and run away with $40,000. When Jeff finds Kathie in Acapulco he falls in love with her and they run away together, living quietly in San Francisco to avoid detection. Eventually Bailey's former partner finds them and tries to blackmail them, but Kathie kills him and then runs off. Jeff assumes a new last name, drifts to Bridgeport, and winds up running the gas station until Whit's henchman Stephanos, merely by chance, spots him pumping gas while passing through town. Back in the present, Kathie is once again living with Whit Sterling, who now expects Jeff's help dealing with a blackmailing attorney. Jeff suspects that he is being setup to take the fall for the lawyer's murder, and the balance of the film concerns his efforts to extricate himself from this new situation and return safely to Ann in Bridgeport.

The film's title, presumably, refers to the people and problems that return from out of his past to disrupt Jeff's peaceful life in Bridgeport. But the Western-inspired imagery of the opening credits and the idyll of Bridgeport suggest that "out of the past" is also "out of the pastoral," with Bridgeport representing a bucolic past incompatible with the encroachment of modern life. Just as the viewer is pulled out of the illusion of the past when the camera pans from the rustic fence to the Automobile Club's road sign, Jeff is pulled out of the past/pastoral illusion of Bridgeport and forced to return to the city, which ultimately leads to his destruction.

Throughout the film, the mise-en-scene surrounding Jeff reinforces this. When we first see him, he is stepping over a large piece of driftwood by a mountain lake, his fishing pole in hand. Ann is nearby, and they relax against a nearby tree until the world intrudes in the form of The Kid (Dickie Moore), a deaf mute who works at Jeff's garage.

Since we have already seen Stephanos questioning The Kid about Jeff's whereabouts, we know that he has come to inform Jeff about the mysterious visitor, and so Jeff is pulled from this moment of tranquility. He soon finds himself back in the city, having been dispatched to San Francisco by Whit to recover incriminating evidence from the blackmailing lawyer. In San Francisco the mise-en-scene highlights the contrast with Bridgeport, featuring neon lights, heavy traffic, and imposing structures of modernist architecture. Jeff meets with the lawyer on the lawyer's back patio, near twilight, with the flickering lights and a steady stream of headlights crossing the Bay Bridge in the background. Aside from these background images, the scenes in San Francisco aren't really shot in San Francisco and the locations mentioned are made up for the film, notes Nathaniel Rich, but even so "this dummy San Francisco coheres into a labyrinth out of which Jeff, despite his smooth talk and clever stealth, cannot escape" (34). He tries to escape, returning repeatedly to the idyllic nature around Bridgeport—camping at a mountain stream while avoiding Whit's henchmen and meeting stealthily with Ann while wanted for the lawyer's murder—but each time he is pulled back out.

The automobile figures prominently in the tension between his past and present: like Andreson in *The Killers*, Jeff is discovered because his job makes him a node in the network of automobility, he stages the revelation of his past life in an automobile ride with Ann, and his former partner tracked Kathie and him down to blackmail them by tailing first his car and then hers. His death, too, comes behind the wheel—after she kills Whit, Kathie tells Jeff (already wanted for the lawyer's murder) that she will also frame him for his partner's and Whit's death unless he runs away with her. He agrees, but secretly calls to alert the authorities, who then set up a roadblock on the highway. When

she sees that he has double crossed her, she shoots him and then fires at the police; they unload their machine guns on the car, which careens into the blockade, killing them both.

The dangers and snares of the city are a frequent theme in film noir, and *Out of the Past* is hardly alone in depicting the modern city as a spirit-crushing, life-destroying labyrinth; nor is the film alone in its attention to rural life. Noir and pastoral don't often go together, though, and *Out of the Past* is unusual in its lush depiction of a peaceful and beautiful rural landscape. The contrast between the pastoral and the urban accentuates the typical noir treatment of urban space as dangerous and destructive, and the role that the automobile plays in collapsing Jeff's two different worlds highlights the formative role the automobile plays in the encroachment of the urban on the disappearing past and pastoral that Bridgeport represents. The problem here is not that the machine is spoiling the garden; rather, the machine that once provided escape to the garden now makes such escape impossible. In both *The Killers* and *Out of the Past,* the opening-sequence appearance of the automobile in a small town signals the extended reach of the city and its dangers, pulling characters back into urban pasts each thought he had left behind.

In both of these films, the automobile is once again an instrument of fate, connecting Andreson in *The Killers* and Jeff in *Out of the Past* with their past lives. Rather than providing the opportunity to chart paths of their own, the automobile in this sense plays an important role in forcing each character back onto roads he thought he had left behind. The automobile is an instrument of fate not only for the individual characters, but also for their communities—as *Double Indemnity* presents the automobile as part of a modern machinery of fate that can ensnare the city-dweller, these two films suggest that

the automobile extends that machinery outward into small towns and countryside, as part of the process of cultural urbanization.

Detour

Perhaps the most auto-centric title in the classic film noir cycle is Edgar Ulmer's *Detour* (1945), starring Tom Neal and Ann Savage and based on the 1939 novel by Martin Goldsmith (who also wrote the screenplay). *Detour* is less concerned with urban spaces than many films noir, and is set primarily on the road between Phoenix and Los Angeles. Still, technologies of speed and communication (specifically the automobile and the telephone) are among the film's foremost concerns, combining to distort space, time, and individual identity. The film presents the automobile and the telephone as parallel technologies; each serves to disrupt the protagonist's (and the audience's) relationship to space and time. The force of this combination of speed and communication even takes his very self-identity beyond his own control.

The film centers on Al Roberts, whom we see in the opening scenes hitchhiking through the desert, catching a ride through Reno, Nevada, and then drinking coffee on a stool at the Nevada Diner. He becomes enraged when another diner plays a particular song, "I Can't Believe That You're in Love with Me," on the jukebox. After his outburst he sits back on his stool, the lighting on his face fades, and he tells his story. It begins in New York, where he played piano in a dive bar known as the Break O' Dawn. His girlfriend, Sue, was the singer at the bar, but left to pursue fame in Hollywood. When Al finds out that her rise to stardom has stalled and she is slinging hash in California, he decides to head west to rescue her. "Don't try to stop me," he tells her over the phone. "Just expect me ... Train, plane, bus, magic carpet. I'll be there if I have to crawl. Have to

travel by pogo stick." In Arizona he catches a ride with a gambler, Charles Haskell, Jr., who agrees to take Roberts all the way to Los Angeles.

While Roberts is driving, though, Haskell dies in the passenger's seat, and Roberts, feeling that the authorities would never believe his story and that he would wind up in the gas chamber for Haskell's murder, decides to hide the body and take Haskell's identity, at least until he can get "to some city where [he] could leave the car and be swallowed up." Before he gets to LA he picks up another hitchhiker, Vera, who had earlier caught a ride with Haskell, and so knows Roberts is not who he pretends to be; she threatens him with exposure if he won't take the car to LA to sell it to a dealer so that she can have the proceeds. When she finds out that Haskell's wealthy father (whom Haskell, a teenage runaway, hadn't seen in fifteen years) is on his death bed, she tries to make Roberts continue pretending to be Haskell in order to claim the inheritance. Roberts refuses, Vera threatens to call the police to turn him in, and Roberts winds up accidentally strangling her with the telephone cord. Roberts is forced to flee again, and that is how he winds up in the Nevada Diner, knowing that the days are numbered before his unavoidable arrest.

John Belton argues that film noir signals (and enacts) a transformation in the figure of the tramp from the "spirited, optimistic, and defiant" tramp of Charlie Chaplin, whose character draws on the "freedom-loving American hobo of the turn of the century" to a more hard-boiled figure who is a resentful and self-destructive outsider. Roberts and Vera (whom Belton sees as a noir mutation of the romantic wanderers in *It Happened One Night*) certainly fit this bill. Their destruction reaches beyond the self, though: the man who gives Roberts a ride winds up dead, and Vera blackmails Roberts after he picks

her up. In the danger they pose to others, they anticipate the yet-more sinister turn the tramp will take in the 1970s, as psychotic villains in countless horror and suspense films. (The first such instance of this more sinister tramp appears in Ida Lupino's noir classic *The Hitch-Hiker* [1953].) Moreover, just as *The Killers* and *Out of the Past* demonstrate that the transportation network of the automobile makes the small town vulnerable to the dangers of the city, the threat posed by drifters such as Roberts and Vera suggests the vulnerability of the networks themselves.

Like several films noir (*They Live by Night, Double Indemnity, In a Lonely Place,* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, to name just a few) *Detour* opens with images of the automobile and/or the highway. The shot of the highway that passes underneath the opening credits of *Detour* is unique, however, in that the image is of the road and landscape receding, as though the camera were placed on the rear bumper looking back. The footage was almost certainly filmed to provide rear-projection backgrounds for the characters in automobiles later in the film, and the use of such footage in the opening credits has several interesting and contrasting effects. On the one hand, it establishes a sense of realism, as there are no edits and the camera does not rotate or tilt to follow the scenery; on the other hand, it highlights the film's artificiality when similar landscapes are used as obvious rear-projection backgrounds for the prop automobiles in the rest of the film. (Since most of the movie consists of a flashback narrated by Roberts, this attention to artificiality also calls his reliability into question.) The unexpected direction of the landscape—the fact that we see the scenery receding rather than approaching—is a bit unsettling at first, as it is not the natural view one is accustomed to (either in cinema or in an actual automobile). Even so, thematically the perspective fits perfectly with the

film: the view implies a lack of control (anybody watching scenery in that way is clearly not in the driver's seat) similar to that which the characters feel about their own lives, and the backwards gaze both mimics the flashback narrative structure as well as encapsulates Roberts obsession with his own past. (He repeatedly wonders how things might have turned out had he done this or that differently.)

The highway provides the film's primary motif, but another important motif, the telephone, reinforces the confusing nature of modern time and space. After Sue goes to Hollywood, Roberts continues playing piano in the Break O' Dawn, until one night a ten-dollar tip from a patron gives him the idea to call Sue and let her know he is coming west. At the pay phone he puts in his change and gives her number to the operator, and then we see a montage of telecommunication: a row of operators working in front of a busy switchboard; telephone wires in the countryside moving across the screen from right to left (meaning that the camera/viewer is moving left to right, rather than right to left, as one might expect of a message traveling east to west); then operators again, from a different angle, pulling and pushing wires in and out of a busy switchboard. The montage would seem to suggest the rapidity with which information moves across the country in the modern world, bringing Al's New York and Sue's Hollywood closer together through the power of communications technology. The next shot, however, is not of Sue in Hollywood but of Al back in New York, putting in the additional change necessary to connect the long distance call. What initially seemed to be a magical connection across the continent is instead only a loop, returning the viewer to the crowded phone booth where the scene began. After Roberts puts in the extra change, the call apparently connects, but we hear only Roberts's side of the conversation, repeating crucial

information from her side of the line ("You're workin' as a hash slinger?") in addition to his own input. Of course, it isn't unusual for films to only include the audio for one side of a phone conversation if we only see one side of the conversation on screen. In *Detour,* however, we do see a clip of Sue, sitting on a chair next to a lamp in, presumably, her California apartment, holding the phone while Al's voice continues on the other end. The brief clip is unsettling, disrupting our expectations and severing the expected link between sight and sound. The effect reinforces the impression of the loop at the beginning of the call, suggesting that the connection the telephone appears to provide is illusory.

The scenes of the automobile as Roberts crosses the country evoke the same looping structure that we see with the telephone, through the rear-projection backgrounds outside the windows of the automobile. These backgrounds tend to look the same, and in some cases are notably recycled from earlier points in the film. A curve that appears right after Roberts gets in Haskell's car, for instance, is rerun both shortly before Roberts reaches the California state line and immediately after he drives away from the border inspection point. (See Figure 10.) The technologies of communication and speed that structure modern society would appear to promise the opportunity to facilitate connection between individuals and to make geographic space more accessible; the closed circuit of the telephone wire and the looped footage used for the rear-projected backgrounds, however, suggest that these structures instead isolate and alienate: rather than providing a meaningful connection the telephone loops back upon itself, and rather than exploring new frontiers the automobile travels continuously in front of the same, pre-recorded landscape.

On his first night in Los Angeles, Roberts tries to call Sue again. He and Vera are staying in a small apartment, and Vera (who is holding him hostage with the knowledge of Haskell's death) warns Roberts that all the doors are locked and she has the key, so he needn't try to escape. When she goes into the bedroom and shuts the door, he picks up the telephone and carries it across the room to call Sue. He puts his suit jacket over the phone to muffle the sound of the rotary as he dials her number, casting quick glances at the bedroom door to make sure Vera does not emerge. When Sue answers the phone we see her again (in the same clothes and in front of the same background we saw her before), but this time we hear her as well, answering the phone with a "hello" and then repeating the word when nobody speaks on the other end of the line. Roberts (perhaps afraid that Vera will hear his end of the conversation and perhaps unwilling or unable to plausibly explain his situation to Sue) hangs up the phone without speaking. Once again, the telephone has failed to provide the connection it promises.

The telephone plays an even more sinister role in the climactic scene. Vera is now trying to convince Roberts to continue being Haskell long enough to collect the inheritance from Haskell's dying father. With Roberts protesting that the plan will never work, they play cards and drink to pass the time in their apartment until the next newspaper edition, so that they can learn whether the father has passed away. They argue until Roberts simply refuses to go through with the plan, and Vera responds by threatening to call the police, even going so far as to call information and ask for the number to the police department. Roberts wrestles the phone away (and, in doing so, appears to change the balance of power in their relationship), but then Vera distracts him, grabs the phone, and takes it into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her. He

threatens to break the phone cord, reaching down to the floor and yanking it away from the door. Unbeknownst to him, she has collapsed drunk on the bed, entangling herself in the phone cord in the process, and so as he tugs on the wire outside the door, he tightens the cord around her neck, strangling her. The power struggle over the telephone has ended violently. The telephone has failed to provide the connection Roberts desires with his girlfriend Sue, and in facilitating Vera's death it ultimately severs him from any remaining opportunity to connect either with her or with his own life.

Since the automobile is the place of Haskell's death and the telephone the instrument in Vera's, the two technologies are connected through the two incidents that impose detours on his quest to be with Sue. Haskell dies on a rainy night in Arizona, while Roberts is driving so that he can sleep. As he drives, he thinks about his reunion with Sue and their future, "which couldn't have been brighter if [he]'d embroidered it with neon lights." As he imagines Sue "shooting to the top," the camera, positioned behind him in the car, zooms in on the reflection of his eyes in the rearview mirror; his vision of her bright future—Sue is singing in a fancy dress, accompanied by the silhouettes of three musicians—appears first in the rear-view mirror and then fills the screen through an iris wipe. The transition effect reinforces that this is his mental image, a vision of the future contained in the larger flashback of the narrative frame. The image disappears with another similarly shaped iris effect that moves back to the rearview mirror, revealing his face again. As the montage loop with the telephone wires undermines our spatial expectations, this sequence plays with time, showing us a purported vision of the future through an object often presented as a metaphor of the past (figure 11). Back in the automobile it begins to rain, and Roberts asks Haskell if they

should stop to put the convertible top up. Unable to roust Haskell, Roberts pulls over and struggles to put the top up against the rain; his voiceover bemoans this as the moment that fate altered his course: “until then I’d done things my way, but from then on something stepped in and shunted me off to a different destination than the one I had picked for myself.” Putting the top up requires him to open the passenger door, and as he does Haskell’s body tumbles from the car, his head hitting a rock as he lands on the ground.

As Roberts makes clear in a voiceover explaining his predicament, the automobile is a key figure both in Haskell’s death and in the transformation of Roberts’s own identity. At this point we return briefly to the film’s temporal present at the Nevada Diner, and see his face as he sits at the counter; his words (“Go ahead, play your song”) seem to imagine the people in the diner as his audience, but his lips do not move as we hear the voiceover. (This disjunction—it is clearly internal sound even though it purports to address an external audience, again undermines his narrative credibility.) He explains that he could not go to the authorities because they would never believe his story; nor can he just leave Haskell’s body with the car because a gas station attendant and a waitress back along the road had seen him with Haskell and could identify him, and then he would have to explain why he left the body. His only option, he argues, was to hide the body. His justification for taking the car after stashing the body reiterates the connection between the automobile and Haskell’s death: “I couldn’t leave the car there with him in the gulley—that would be like erecting a tombstone.” He rationalizes taking Haskell’s wallet by explaining that he would need his driver’s license if he were stopped for something on the highway. His next concern is his visibility in the automobile and the juxtaposition of his road-worn appearance and the nice, new automobile: “My clothes.

The owner of such an expensive car would never be wearing them. Some cop might pull me in on suspicion." His machinations in concealing Haskell's body and death have the effect of eliminating his old identity as well: "I left nothing in the car to give me away as Roberts. If they found a dead man in the gulley now, it would be me." The association of the automobile with death in films noir is certainly common, as murders committed in, about, or using the automobile appear in a number of films (*Kiss Me Deadly*, *The Big Heat*, and *Out of the Past*, to name a few). But other films have also connected death in the automobile with the assumption of a new identity, most notably *Double Indemnity*, in which Walter Neff both kills his lover's husband and assumes his identity on the way to the train station. In *Detour* as in *Double Indemnity*, the automobile stages a violent transformation of the protagonist's identity.

Roberts is officially christened with his new identity by the authorities when he reaches the California state line sometime the next morning. The site is significant in light of the Great Depression still fresh in the minds of the film's contemporary audience. In 1936, Los Angeles Police Chief James Edgar Davis dispatched 136 LAPD officers to California's border to "blockade every railway and main highway entrance into the State (sic)" with "specific instructions … to turn back all railroad fare evaders, hitch-hikers, and all other persons who have no definite purpose for coming into the state" ("Police Take up Duty"). Though the "bum blockade," as it was known, did not last past 1936, ports of entry into California continued to figure as potential sites of exclusion. It was referenced obliquely in Woody Guthrie's song "Do-Re-Mi" and factors into the anxiety that Steinbeck's Joad family feels trying to cross into California in *The Grapes of*

Wrath.[26] When Roberts pulls up to the inspection station, one officer asks him if he is bringing in fruits or vegetables, while another asks for his license and registration. After reading Haskell's name on the license, the patrolman stares down at Roberts and asks, "Are you Charles Haskell, Jr.?" Roberts affirms and, with the other cop having checked the trunk for plants or livestock, they let him through. The same site that, a few years earlier, would have turned him away as indigent, now (with the evidence of the automobile and its paperwork) seals his new identity.

As with the two deaths that derail his plans, the automobile and the telephone are connected in the transformation they effect on Roberts's identity. The automobile has a direct effect on this transformation, as his possession of the vehicle and its proper registration is sufficient to establish him, in the eyes of the officers at the border and later the dealer he plans to sell the car to, as Charles Haskell, Jr. The telephone's effect on his identity is indirect, as a result of Vera's death. When he learns, in Bakersfield, that Vera's body has been discovered, he also reads that "police were looking for a Haskell in connection with his wife's murder." In her death, Vera becomes the person she was pretending to be in Los Angeles. Even as Roberts's identity as Haskell is solidified, however, the event also makes it impossible for him to continue to be Haskell, leaving him without any identity to claim: "I had to stay away from New York for all time, because Al Roberts was listed as dead and had to stay dead. And I could never go back to Hollywood. Someone might recognize me as Haskell." Roberts is now a man without safe identity or harbor, doomed to walk the highways waiting until fate (in the form of the automobile) lets the other shoe drop: "But one thing I don't have to wonder about. I

[26] The Joads, too, are concealing a death in their passage into California, as Granma Joad has died on the road between Needles and Daggett.

know. Someday a car will stop to pick me up that I never thumb. Yes, fate, or some mysterious force can put the finger on you or me, for no good reason at all." As he offers this final monologue, a highway patrol car pulls up alongside Roberts walking down the road. An officer steps out and ushers him into the backseat and the car pulls away, and the end credits appear above the now empty patch of road.

Although Roberts, as his final words indicate, tends to blame his circumstances on fate, his own choices and actions have clearly helped bring him to his current condition. Then, too, since there are some elements of the film—the artificiality of the rear-projection background contrasted with the apparent realism of the opening credits; the vision of Sue without hearing her side of the conversation in the initial telephone call; the internality of the monologue; and his own frequent acknowledgement that his tale is unlikely to be believed—that undermine his reliability as a narrator, one might suspect that his role in one or both deaths was more active than he wants his listener to believe. Whether Roberts is guilty only of poor decision making or something more sinister, the automobile and telephone, by forcing him to adopt and maintain a new identity and by playing a key role in the deaths of Haskell and Vera, figure prominently in his downward trajectory. The automobile offers the promise of swift passage to Hollywood as well as luxury and material wealth, but these turn out to be illusions. The automobile and telephone each promise to bring Roberts closer to Sue, but only disrupt his progress and distort his identity.

They Live By Night

Another film from the classic noir cycle that is heavily invested in the automobile is *They Live by Night* (1949). It was the directorial debut of Nicholas Ray, who would

later direct a handful of other noir titles (including the adaptation of *In a Lonely Place*) before finding his greatest success with *Rebel without a Cause.* Based on a depression-era novel by Edward Anderson, *They Live by Night* tells the story of Bowie, an escaped-convict-turned-bankrobber who falls in love with Keechie, the daughter of a man who helps hide Bowie and his fellow escapees. Bowie had been convicted of murder as a teenager, but the trial was a sham (though the film does not aggressively suggest he was innocent) and Bowie believes if he can hire a lawyer he can get his name cleared. To get money for a lawyer, though, he has to help fellow escapees T-Dub and Chicamaw rob a bank; unfortunately, as he and Chicamaw are celebrating the windfall from the robbery, Chicamaw shoots a police officer and Bowie is identified as an accomplice. His chance at redemption ruined, he and Keechie run off together hoping to escape both the law and his former accomplices, who expect his help in additional robberies.

The automobile figures into just about every turning point of Bowie's life that we see in the film. The movie's opening credits appear over an overhead shot of a jalopy containing the escaping inmates (and an unfortunate farmer, from whom they stole the car) speeding across an open field, then turning onto a rough dirt road, then a paved road. After the car blows a tire Bowie hurts his leg as they are running away, and his partners tell him to wait until they send a driver to pick him up; the driver turns out to be Keechie, and this is how they meet. They first begin to bond while she helps him fix a car that was damaged by her drunk-driving father. His job during the bank robbery is to drive the getaway car, and later it will be a car crash that prompts Chicamaw to shoot the police officer, thus closing off forever Bowie's path to clear his name. And so it goes: for just about every important thing that happens in what we see of Bowie's life, the automobile

is involved in one way or another. It brings Bowie and Keechie together even as it ultimately stages their alienation from mainstream society.

Two scenes in the film incorporate both communications technology and the automobile, and they mark the highs and lows of Bowie's career as a bank robber. The first scene is when they rob their first bank in Zelton, Texas. Bowie's job is to drive the getaway car, and the camera shares the front seat with Bowie as he speeds up to the bank, slowing down but not stopping as Chicamaw and T-dub open the door and jump in. The scene then dissolves to some time shortly after, with the car heading down the highway as an instrumental (and seemingly non-diegetic) version of the traditional folk song "Goin' Down the Road Feelin' Bad" begins to play. Given director Nicholas Ray's background in folk music—while working with the WPA in the 1930s, Ray knew numerous itinerant singers and developed a close relationship with noted music folklorist Alan Lomax, with whom he shared a house in 1937—the significance of the song is worth examining more closely. Though it predates the Depression by at least two decades, the song was popular among migrant workers in the 1930s, with Woody Guthrie's version being the most famous. (It was also featured in John Ford's adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* in a travel camp as a song that a typical migrant would know.) Though the lyrics of the song vary depending on the version, they generally reflect both an acknowledgement of bad times and an optimism that the road leads to somewhere better: "where the water tastes like wine," for instance, or "where the chilly winds don't blow." Though the version in the film is instrumental, the arrangement is upbeat, matching the smiling faces of the three bandits as T-dub counts the loot in the backseat. As the music continues, Bowie turns from the highway to an unpaved road and then a secluded country spot where they

have another car waiting. Chicamaw douses the first car with gasoline and lights it on fire. As the car goes up in flames it becomes clear that the music is actually diegetic, because the music becomes distorted and then dies with the car and its radio.

The three then drive off to celebrate their windfall, but their jubilation is short lived. That night Bowie drives Chicamaw to buy a convertible with his share of the loot, and then Chicamaw drives his new car back to the hideout, following Bowie. There is heavy traffic in both lanes, and as Chicamaw honks at him from behind urging him to go faster, Bowie tries to pass on the right, but a truck pulls out into the intersection and Bowie is knocked unconscious in the ensuing collision. Chicamaw hauls him into his new car, but a policeman arrives before they can get away. When the officer insists on arresting Bowie, Chicamaw shoots the officer and then takes Bowie back to Keechie's so he can recover. Keechie nurses Bowie back to health, but the automobile accident has ruined any chance that he has of hiring a lawyer, clearing his name, and living a straight life. He left his gun (with his fingerprints on it) at the scene of the accident, and so the police know his identity and have connected him with the Zelton robbery. As a result, he has no choice but to live on the run; Keechie, tired of living with her drunken father, decides to run with him. Coming as it does, then, after the high point of Bowie's criminal career, the death of the upbeat folk song foreshadows the failure of Bowie's attempt to clear his name. The fact that the music came from the car radio intensifies that impression, since the source of the song was not initially clear—the car's explosion makes the song real in the world of the film, just as his association with the Zelton bank robbery makes real (and irredeemable) his status as a criminal.

The second scene with the automobile radio comes immediately after the second bank robbery. Bowie and Keechie have been living together in a cabin park, but their marital bliss ends when Chicamaw tracks them down and insists that Bowie pull another bank job. Keechie is against it, but Bowie agrees to help—partly because he feels obligated to help Chicamaw and T-dub, who helped him escape prison, and partly because T-dub roughs him up when he talks about leaving the game. We don't see anything of the second robbery, however, skipping from T-dub slapping Bowie to Bowie driving the getaway car. It is night, and the camera is in the backseat looking forward at Bowie and Chicamaw in the front seat and the road ahead of them through the windshield. There is a tunnel approaching. As Chicamaw casts anxious glances at Bowie, a news bulletin on the car radio explains that "the luck of the Zelton bandits began running out today when they attempted one of the most daring robberies in the history of the southwest." But before the report finishes, the car enters the tunnel, cutting off the reception. When reception resumes on the other side, we learn that T-dub has been shot. The scene demonstrates the integration of communication and the automobile; the audience, having missed the robbery entirely, is completely reliant on the radio report for plot information, and so it encourages us to listen as attentively as do the anxious robbers themselves. The scene also calls attention to the landscape, since the tunnel interferes with the radio broadcast. The tunnel symbolizes Bowie's transition to yet another phase of his life, in that the botched robbery will ultimately make it impossible for Keechie and him to stay at their secluded hideaway. This transition is underscored when Chicamaw (jealous that the news report has referred to Bowie as the gang's leader), tries to strike him with a tire iron, and so Bowie, his gun drawn to defend himself, kicks him out of the

car. As Bowie drives away, the rear-view mirror shows Chicamaw standing in the center of the street, looking after the car defiantly, until Bowie reaches up and flips the mirror and Chicamaw disappears, a clean break from the life that was. Keechie and Bowie will spend the rest of the movie on the run.

The relationship between Bowie and Keechie revolves around the automobile from their first meeting, when Keechie comes back to the empty field to pick the injured Bowie up and take him to the hideout. She is initially wary of Bowie, knowing his criminal past and not trusting his fellow inmates (one of whom, Chicamaw, is her uncle). At her father's garage, where the gang is hiding out, Keechie remains cool to Bowie, resisting his attempts to engage in conversation; still, when she hears a car coming down their country road, she pulls him into the house, knowing the car is "highway patrol, this time every night." After the close call, they begin to talk, but their moment is interrupted by a car crash: her father, driving drunk, has arrived home with T-Dub's sister-in-law Maddie, who will set them up with a car and a place to live in exchange for money to help her husband get paroled from prison. Bowie is the mechanic of the group, so it is up to him to fix the car, but Keechie helps, and it is in fixing the automobile that they really begin to bond; they discuss their respective pasts and he explains the circumstances of his crime and his hope for acquittal. That they bond while fixing the automobile is significant: the car is both symbol and consequence of the broken nature of her home life, having been damaged by Keechie's drunken father. The process of repairing the car, in bringing her closer to Bowie, will eventually provide the opportunity to escape that home life. Alas, while they are able to fix the automobile, neither of their lives will be so simple to repair.

Bowie is shaken up after the car accident and the brush with the police officer, and wakes up at Keechie's place, paranoid that the police are after him. He hears a distant sound and asks Keechie if it is the highway patrol, but she assures him it is only the wind through the telephone wires. Still, the police actually are after him, having recovered his fingerprints from the gun in the car where the officer was murdered. With no hope of hiring a lawyer to clear his name, he decides to take his share of the bank loot and run, and Keechie agrees to run with him, so they leave together on the bus. At a stopover in Fairfield they see a wedding chapel across the street, specializing in quick marriages without questions, and on a whim they decide to get married. The minister also offers to fix them up with a car (for a finder's fee), and so their quick marriage comes complete with a brand new automobile, which, in the post-war era, is fast becoming an essential symbol of domestic bliss and financial success. The next several scenes show Bowie and Keechie in the automobile, laughing together, sharing food and drink, and discussing their mutual inexperience in the ways of love. ("We'll learn together," she says after he confesses that he, like her, doesn't know much about kissing.)

For two people whose home lives were never pleasant, the automobile has become a suitable stand-in for domestic space. Once they find an actual home to live in, though, Chicamaw tracks them down to lure Bowie into the fateful bank robbery. Keechie, who is now pregnant, is angry at Bowie for agreeing to rob another bank in the first place, and when he returns they have a heated argument. But before they can reconcile they have to flee the cabin, because a repairman has uncovered their identity. They reconcile, then, in the car and on the road; but where this same automobile once represented their newlywed bliss, it now encapsulates their dwindling options as external

pressures close in on them. The convertible top was always open in their first trip immediately after getting married, but as they drive away from their cabin home the top is raised, enclosing them, and it will remain raised in most of the driving scenes that remain. The rear-projected scenery as they drive away is filled with trees growing tight around the road, enhancing the feeling of enclosure. (See Figure 12.) Their anxiety is most evident when they are not moving, as in a scene where the car is stopped at a railroad crossing. While the train rumbles past in front of them, they cast worried glances back behind them, anxious about what might be on their trail; when the train passes, Keechie pulls forward immediately, seemingly almost colliding with the train's caboose as she crosses the tracks and into the anonymity of the city traffic ahead.

Eventually, though, Keechie becomes ill, and life on the road becomes difficult. Driving up to a detour one night, Bowie worries that it might be a road-block, and decides to ignore the detour sign; and so the rear-projected scenery shows us the literal end of the road for Bowie and Keechie, as he finds himself driving through a patch of land where the road is not yet built. The literal end of the road finds its metaphorical counterpart in the Prairie Plaza Motel, where a desperate Bowie hopes he can get rest and medical attention for Keechie. As before, however, getting off the road does not help their cause. Maddie, who helped with the getaway car in the first bank robbery, runs the hotel. Bowie thinks she might help them, and plans to leave Keechie at the hotel, figuring that she and the baby will have a better chance without him and that he can send for them later. But Maddie informs on them to the authorities in exchange for her husband's freedom, and Bowie is shot by police when he stops by the cabin to leave his farewell

letter to Keechie. She hears the shots and runs to his side, finds the letter on his dead body, and reads it aloud before the closing credits appear.

Based on a novel published in 1937, purchased by RKO studios in 1941, and finally reaching the big screen in 1949, *They Live by Night* more closely reflects the tone of the Depression than the postwar boom. From her unstable home under the thumb of her drunken father and his criminal associates to the rural cabin where they set up house until their past catches up with them to the final hotel where her lover is gunned down, Keechie moves from one untenable home to another. While the promise of mobile domestic bliss in the automobile is ultimately unfulfilled, being off the road provides no stable alternative; unlike the dead-end destinations of Keechie's father's garage or the Prairie Plaza Motel, the road provides Keechie and Bowie their only fleeting opportunity for connection and happiness.

Conclusion

Film noir, like the hardboiled detective novel, developed at a time when the average American's relationship with space was changing rapidly as a result of, among other things, technological advancement, increasing automobility, and mass urbanization. A comprehensive study of the classic film noir cycle would require much more space than available here, so the films that I have examined in this chapter are necessarily but a sample of the category; still, they provide a sense of the role that the automobile plays in the space of film noir.

Given the generally grim perspective of film noir, one would expect the assessment of the possible effects of the automobile to be similarly bleak, but these films demonstrate considerable ambivalence toward the automobile. The automobile

contributes to the unstable and centrifugal nature of modern urban space, but is also the only effective tool for navigating it. *Detour* presents the automobile, along with the telephone, as disruptive to time and space and preventing human connection. But other films suggest the automobile opens new spaces and opportunities for human connection, abeit a connection that is, in keeping with the character of the age, transient in nature. These films are fairly consistent, however, in rejecting the association of the automobile with the individual will; in keeping with a strong undercurrent of fatalism running throughout film noir, the automobile is frequently an instrument of fate.

The classic film noir cycle began to fade in the 1950s in the face of several new developments in the movie industry. Competition from television hurt the entire industry, and so naturally had an effect on the production of film noir. Color film became easier and less expensive following Eastman Kodak's introduction of color film in 1952, and so studios increasingly moved away from the black and white film so strongly associated with the noir aesthetic. Finally, since most films noir were B movies, the breakup of the studio system in the 1950s meant the dissolution of an infrastructure that had been crucial to the genre's development.

The 1950s also brought changes to automobile culture. The most obvious and important was the introduction of the interstate highway system, beginning in the late 1950s. In making long distance travel easier and faster, the interstates would again rework the American relationship with space. The interstates brought a new transformation to the American cityscape, dividing cities, directly consuming large swaths of urban space, and indirectly destroying more urban space by contributing to suburban sprawl and white flight from city centers. American urban spaces and urban

problems in the 1960s were of a different character from the asynchronous 1940s cities of film noir. (It is perhaps telling that *Touch of Evil*, the film many consider to be the last classic film noir, ostensibly takes place in an [unnamed] city on the border between the United States and Mexico, but aside from the film's famous opening tracking shot includes very little in the way of urban iconography.)

As a new transportation infrastructure began to transform American automobile culture, the years after World War II also saw important developments in how communication technology connected with the automobile. Though the two-way radio (developed in the 1930s and becoming widespread among police departments in the 1940s) made the automobile a fully communicative space, able both to receive messages from the outside world (through radio) and to transmit them, that capability (after a brief period of experimentation by commercial interests in the early 1930s) was restricted to police departments until after World War II. Developments such as the Citizens' Band radio (first introduced in 1947, though not widely popular until the 1960s and 1970s) and the (relatively) portable tape recorders in the years after World War II gave drivers the opportunity to communicate from their automobiles. In the following chapter, I will examine how writers and artists employed these technologies to protest forms of political violence and cultural repression.

Figures

Figure 2 – *Looped Footage:* Marlowe's first glance to his mirror (left) and his second glance each use the same looped footage; the only difference is the framing.

Figure 3 – Three Marlowes: Philip Marlowe appears three times in this image; the reflection in the windshield, like the startling reflection of Moose Malloy in the film's opening sequence, appears and disappears depending on the lighting.

Figure 4 – Lighting: The cast shadow from the steering on Marlowe's face suggests that the light source inside the car is the dashboard lights; however, the high-key lighting inside the car is incongruous with the dark night in the rear-projection image.

Figure 5 – Opening Image of *Double Indemnity*: The street is lined with pairs of lights that resemble headlights, but the pair of lights dotting the I in "WILDER" are the actual headlights of Neff's automobile.

Figure 6 – Multiple Headlights: The transition from the opening shot to the second shot of *Double Indemnity* heightens the sense of chaos, superimposing two sets of signs and streetlights. Neff's car is visible twice—the body of the car moves out of the frame on the right in the opening shot even as his headlights (in the center of the second shot) again appear to threaten the transit workers.

Figure 7 – Driving Into Traffic: Neff and Dietrichson drive away after the murder.

Figure 8 – The opening image of *The Killers*

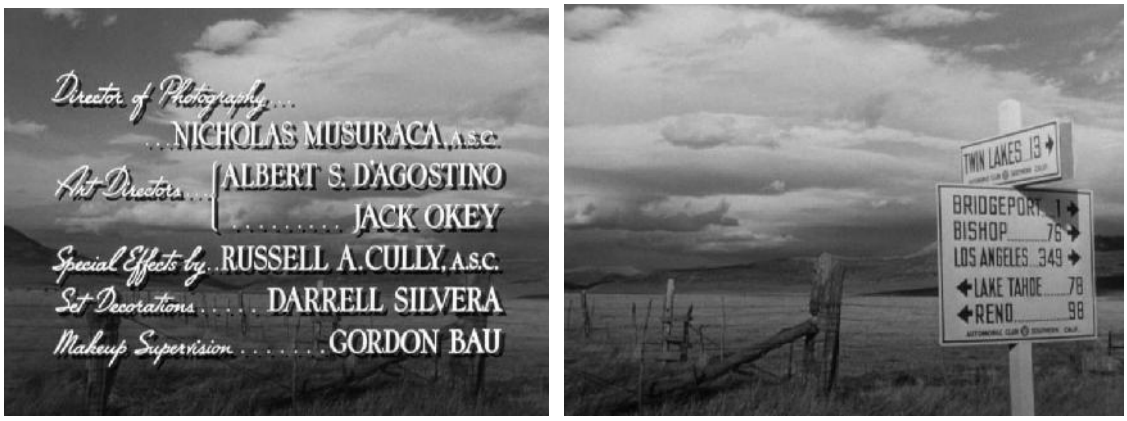

Figure 9 – *Out of the Past*: The final shot in the opening credits montage is of a rustic fence stretching to the horizon (left); then, as the credits fade, the camera pans to reveal the modern road sign (right).

Figure 10 – Repeating Background: The rear projection backgrounds in *Detour* occasionally repeat, as in this curve, which appears as the background for at least three scenes.

Figure 11 – Rear-View Future: Roberts's vision of the future replaces his eyes in the rear-view mirror before taking over the rest of the frame.

Figure 12 – Enclosure: Bowie and Keechie with the top down and in open space after their wedding (left) and with the top up and the world closing in while on the run (right).

Chapter Four: Communicating from the Automobile

In September, 1935, Henry Ford made a telephone call to an executive in Buenos Aires, Argentina, which would not have been remarkable had he not been riding in an automobile around Schenectady, New York, at the time. The car was a General Electric test car for a two-way police radio system, and the handset was installed in the car's instrument panel. Ford's call went out from the car over the radio to a telephone operator who then patched the call into the telephone network, allowing him to communicate from a moving car with a business associate more than 5000 miles away. Ford reportedly saw great commercial and business potential in the technology and its ability to help businessmen stay connected at all times, transforming the automobile into a mobile office.

Given the novelty of the automobile phone and Ford's fame as an inventor and businessman, his experimental phone call received a fair amount of attention from the press, including multiple articles in the *New York Times* ("Telephones in Autos," "Henry Ford Tests"). Newspaper humorist Harry Irving Phillips responded to the event in his column "The Once Over" (syndicated in several papers including the *Washington Post*) by offering projections that apparently struck him as absurd at the time but now seem prescient: "We may even be choosing phones by their color and insisting that an automobile have a gadget on the dash so we can dial where we're going." Phillips also voices concerns that would be common 60-70 years later, once the car phone had finally became commonplace: he complains that the assault of noise and information (adding the radio and the telephone to the backseat driver) would take the pleasure out of the pleasure drive, for instance, and that the roads would be more dangerous when "all the drivers are

busy on the telephone while going around blind corners." By 2001, when New York became the first state to ban using handheld phones while driving, Phillips's concerns had clearly come to pass. More than six decades after Ford's phone call, the cellular revolution finally made the automobile telephone part of everyday life.

For those sixty years, however, two-way communication from the automobile was largely restricted to state institutions (such as police departments and emergency responders) and a tiny fraction of the general public. That arrangement undermined the autonomy of the automobile, subjecting drivers and passengers to content programmed by political and commercial interests outside their control and potentially hostile to their own interests, as Ralph Ellison's short story "Cadillac Flambé" (1973) illustrates. Set in the 1950s, the story is about LeeWillie Minifees, a black musician who has been successful enough in his trade to purchase a top-of-the-line white Cadillac convertible. As the story opens, he drives the car onto the lawn of a United States senator's estate; as a crowd (including the unnamed white narrator) gathers to watch, he proceeds to drench the car with gasoline and then, from a safe distance, fire an improvised arrow tipped with a burning tennis ball onto the car's convertible cloth top, setting the automobile ablaze. The crowd is outraged, and the last half of the story recounts LeeWillie's explanation for his actions until the fire and police departments arrive and he is hauled away.

This "weird conflagration," it turns out, was prompted by a radio broadcast that Minifees heard while driving home to Harlem from a series of gigs in Chattanooga. He made the "sad mistake" of turning on the radio, "just hoping to hear some Dinah, or Duke, or Hawk so that I could study their phrasing and improve my style and enjoy myself" (447). Instead he hears a speech by the race-baiting Senator Sunraider, who

"WAS TRYING TO GET THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT TO MESS WITH MY CADILLAC! AND WHAT'S MORE, HE WAS CALLING MY CADDY A 'COON CAGE'" (447; emphasis in original). The senator had, in the course of an appropriations debate, made what the narrator dismisses as "a joke"—that the Cadillac has been ruined by its popularity among African Americans: "We have reached a sad state of affairs, gentlemen, wherein this fine product of American skill and initiative has become so common in Harlem that much of its initial value has been sorely compromised. Indeed, I am led to suggest, and quite seriously, that legislation be drawn up to rename it the 'Coon Cage Eight'" (452). The senator continues, arguing that the presence of the Cadillac in "the nation's Harlems" also disproves African Americans' claims of discrimination.

This intrusion completely ruins Minifees's mood and causes him to reconsider the value of the car itself: "… if a man like that feels the way he's talking and can say it right out over the radio and the T.V., and from the place where he's saying it—there's got to be something drastically wrong with you for even wanting one …. The man's made it mean something different" (448). In turn, Minifees decides to sacrifice the car as his only means of speaking back to this powerful voice in the nation's seat of power. (The senator is well known, the narrator says, as "a master of the new political technology, who ignores no medium and wastes no opportunity for keeping his image ever in the public's eye" [443]). Whatever the value of the car may be, then, however free and in control it might make Minifees feel, it cannot stand up to a system that delivers the racist, exclusionary rhetoric of Senator Sunraider directly to the car itself. As we will see, Allen Ginsberg and Hunter S. Thompson make similar observations about the emotional impact

of propaganda through the automobile radio in "Wichita Vortex Sutra" and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, respectively. (Both are discussed later in this chapter.)

While police agencies used the two-way radio to establish larger and more powerful surveillance networks, the motoring public remained restricted to the receiving end of one-way communication. The history of automobile telephony (which predates Ford's famous phone call and even the Model T itself) and similar alternatives such as the CB radio (which became popular, at least in part, by its use as a tool for resisting and evading those surveillance networks) testify to a public desire to speak back to the world through their automobiles. The texts that I examine in this chapter testify to the same desire. Without access to the secure, private, two-way communications technology of the police, creative minds improvised ways to use communications technology to communicate with the world. In doing so, they develop new artistic forms, craft insightful analyses of the role communications technology and the automobile play in expanding state power, and respond to American militarism and authoritarianism.

A Brief History of Automobile Telephony

The history of the automobile telephone is almost as old as the automobile itself. A 1906 issue of the telephone industry journal *Telephony* carries the following notice: "The latest addition to C. F. Steele's auto equipment is a road telephone which is carried in the machine on trips through the country, says the Alpena, Michigan, News. To the instrument is attached wires which may be connected with a telephone line in any part of the country and direct and immediate communication may be had" ("The Automobile Telephone" 277). There is no evidence that Steele's road telephone was a big seller, but it was not the only effort to bring road and wire together. By 1911, the Automobile

Emergency Service Company and Bell's Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company had established a series of roadside access points where members could connect their automobile to the telephone network. Subscribers could "carry small portable telephone outfits of light weight in their cars, and stations where they can 'plug in' are located two miles apart on the principal motor highways" ("Portable Telephones" 602). The container for the connecting apparatus was shaped like a bell, locked so that only subscribers could access it, and attached to "[telephone] poles beside the road, at a convenient height, so that a driver who wants to call up central can drive up and telephone while seated in his car" (602). (See Figure 13.) The system was conceived primarily to connect motorists to garage services in case of breakdowns or other emergencies, but calls could be placed from the phones to any number, "so that the motorist is always in touch with home or business" (602). Similar systems of roadside telephones were developed elsewhere, though in most the entire telephone apparatus was locked in the roadside box so that subscribers need not carry a portable telephone inside their car.

The motorcar also proved beneficial to the telephone companies. *Telephony* carried frequent testimonials from telephone company operators about the utility of the automobile, allowing them to make repairs more quickly than they could with horse and wagon and to provide routine maintenance and inspection of far-flung rural lines. The connection between telephone maintenance and the automobile is memorialized most notably in Jimmy Webb's "Wichita Lineman," made famous by Glenn Campbell. The telephone lineman who narrates the song remarks that the sounds of his work remind him of his lover: "I hear you singing in the wire; I can hear you through the whine." The

combination of the highway (the lineman "drives the main road") and the telephone both highlights his loneliness and suggests the illusion of connection with an absent lover.

Experiments with combining the automobile and wireless telegraphy also began quite early, well before the proliferation of broadcast radio stations. A 1906 book described an apparatus designed (though not apparently ever produced) by radio pioneer Guglielmo Marconi for installing a wireless system in an automobile; the design included a cylinder attached to the roof and a "strip of metallic netting" that would be dragged behind the automobile to serve as a ground (Mazzotto 239). Impractical though that design may sound, experiments with automobile wireless systems continued. In 1912, E.C. Hanson successfully received a wireless transmission from Long Beach in an automobile parked 35 miles away on Lookout Mountain, prompting *Automobile Journal* to proclaim "the success was such as to indicate that in the near future any motor car owner may carry such equipment in his machine if he so desires" ("R-C-H and Wireless Telephony" 94). While not as inconvenient as the imagined Marconi contraption, it is hard to imagine the device catching on with the general public, given the unwieldy nature of the apparatus (Figure 14). Still, by 1920, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that members of the American Radio Relay League had successfully sent and received wireless telephone messages to and from a car in motion. "The wireless telephone," the reporter predicts, "will be the last word in luxury for automobile tourists" ("Wireless Telephone for Autos Perfected").

Following World War II, telephone companies began in earnest the work of building a network for mobile phone usage. In late 1945, the FCC had approved experimental installations in several large cities, and AT&T planned to provide service

along major highways connecting Chicago to St. Louis, New York to Albany and Buffalo, and New York to Boston ("Motorists to Call"). The first working system appeared in St. Louis in June 1946, and highway service debuted on Route 66 between Chicago and St. Louis several months later. When service was opened in 1947 on the highway between Boston and Washington (the third major highway to offer service), AT&T predicted it was but one more step in what was to become a "nation-wide network serving the major highways of America" ("Auto Telephone Service"). The late 1940s saw other cities experimenting with such systems; by 1949 the Bell System had automobile telephone networks operating in 131 cities, and even more cities and towns may have been served by independent telephone operators ("Auto Telephones Catch on Fast").

Whether in the city or on the road, the system worked the same way: radio receiving stations were placed strategically around a metropolitan area or along an intercity route, each with a range of 25-35 miles. Motorists placed calls with their radiotelephone to the nearest receiving station, where the operator would patch them into the telephone network. Each unit had a unique phone number, and incoming calls were patched from the phone network to the radiotelephone. The system was not without complications. Since scores of phones were assigned the same frequencies (the number of frequencies available for the service being very limited), the automobile phone network functioned similarly to the party lines that were still common at the time; although incoming calls would ring only the specified phone (unlike party lines, where all users could hear the ring), any subscriber within range could hear the telephone conversation of any other subscriber on the same frequency if they picked up their own phone during the

conversation. According to a 1949 article in the *Chicago Tribune*, which with 19 units was Chicago's largest subscriber to mobile phone service, this caused some consternation among newspapers because it allowed competing newspapers to listen to each other's reporters ("Chicago Leads World").

In spite of these limitations, radiophones were useful for medical professionals; newspapers; utility companies, taxis, and other companies with large fleets of vehicles; and private security firms, among others ("Portable Talk"). Not surprisingly, less legitimate businessmen found uses for the mobile phone as well. Dallas gangster Hollis Green was an early adopter, and upon being pulled over by police would use it immediately to summon his attorney who, according to a news report following the gangster's death, "would meet him at the jail, often being there before Green and officers arrived" with a writ for his release ("Dallas Beset"). Automobile telephones also made it possible for gamblers to distribute information such as race results more efficiently, and a Chicago syndicate used the automobile telephone to warn conspirators and customers about raids on illegal gambling establishments ("Slot Gangster").

In spite of the desire, almost as old as the automobile itself, to integrate automobility with telephony; in spite of the enthusiasm for various wireless technologies from the 1910s through Henry Ford's 1935 phone call to South America; and in spite of the enthusiasm for an actual working system of automobile telephony in the late 1940s, the technology did not take off in the 1950s, and it would be decades before the car phone became an everyday object. In Chapter 1 I examined the long development of the automobile in the century before its apparently sudden takeover of American culture in the wake of the Model T through the lens of Bryan Winston's "'law' of the suppression

of radical potential," which seeks to explain the common delay between the invention of new and potentially transformative technologies and their diffusion.[27] As I explained, Winston's argument is not a conspiratorial one; rather, the introduction of new technologies is mediated by powerful institutions (government, social, and economic) with a stake in protecting and advancing their interests in the face of this new technology. As these forces negotiate the most favorable transition from old to new technologies, the introduction of those technologies which have the potential to significantly reshape society are necessarily delayed. The process "works in the broadest possible way to ensure the survival, however battered, of family, home and workplace, church, president and queen, and above all, it preserves the great corporation as the primary institution of our society" (*Misunderstanding Media* 25).

Just as issues surrounding the Selden Patent functioned as a "Braudelian Brake" on the expansion of the automobile, the scarce resource of the electromagnetic spectrum prevented the rapid expansion of the automobile telephone. After Ford's phone call in 1935 and several other publicized automobile phone calls involving public figures such as New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia there was naturally interest in such service, yet the FCC refused to provide space on the spectrum, declaring that such service "would be a private convenience" rather than serving the public interest ("The FCC Vetoes"). When the FCC finally allowed portions of the spectrum for automobile telephony following World War II, it was on an extremely limited basis, and from the beginning telephone companies were clamoring for more space. The amount of space permitted varied depending on the area—Washington, D.C. started with one channel in 1946 and had expanded to three in 1948. Chicago, with one of the oldest and largest systems in the

[27] See Chapter 1, pages 15-19.

world, had seven channels in 1949, and “still the company [was] unable to keep up with demand” (“Chicago Leads World”). Nationwide, the Bell system was providing service to more than 4000 vehicles by 1948, but had more than twice as many orders that it could not fill, “largely because [Bell] hasn’t been able to get enough radio channels allocated” (Don Wharton 74).

One should not conclude that the FCC’s refusal to release more of the spectrum is a simple case of government regulation interfering with commercial technological development. Indeed, the concept of cellular telephony, though not operational until the 1970s, actually originated in AT&T’s Bell Laboratories in 1947 as a way of solving interference problems limiting the number of users on any given frequency within a small geographic area. Bell did not commit to developing the concept, however, and so the scarce resource of the electromagnetic spectrum continued to restrict the spread of the automobile phone.

While access to automobile telephones remained limited, the development of the Citizen’s Band provided an alternative. “Want a telephone in your car?” the subhead of a 1966 *Popular Science* article about the CB radio asks; “Here’s the lowdown on the next-best thing” (Benrey 134). The Citizen’s Band was announced near the end of World War II and debuted in 1947 to allow the public to participate in the radio spectrum and to improve communication in rural areas especially. Although ostensibly open to any citizen who wanted to try their hand at radio, the expense and the knowledge necessary to meet the technical requirements for CB radios limited their use. Then, in 1958, the FCC opened the Citizens Band for personal and commercial communication by reducing licensing requirements and opening a new range of the spectrum for Class D CB radios,

which were less expensive and easier to operate. The result was a wave of new CB users: while they had granted fewer than 26,000 licenses through 1957, by 1961 the FCC was processing about 10,000 every month (Loehwing 14).

While one cannot assume that all of these new CB operators had radio equipment in their cars, a sizable share of them likely did, and newspapers and magazines ran several articles touting the mobile uses of the CB radio. The steep spike in demand for such equipment suggests a desire for mobile communications that was not being met by the limited automobile telephone service. With the two-way capabilities of the CB radio, the nature of the automobile as a communicative space was significantly changed; no longer merely passive recipients of information in their own vehicles, motorists could now use their automobile to communicate with others. The phenomenon grew even larger in the 1970s, when its use by truckers to construct a counter-surveillance network resisting enforcement of the new 55-mile-per-hour speed limit hit a nerve with the general public, and in January, 1976, the FCC received more than 540,000 applications ("The Bodacious New World"). The popularity of the CB waned in the 1980s, just as the cellular network (conceived at Bell Labs in 1947) began to spread. After several years of non-commercial trials, the FCC authorized the license for the first commercial cellular service in 1983; by 1987 there were more than one millions subscribers in the United States and use grew steeply from there. Some six decades after Henry Ford's experimental automobile phone call in 1935, the integration of telephone and automobile had, by the end of the century, become an everyday reality.

Automobile Customization and New Journalism

The people and groups studied in two of Tom Wolfe's early "new journalism" pieces—a 1963 *Esquire* article on automobile customizers and the non-fiction novel *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968)—reveal a strong desire to harness the communicative power of the automobile (or, in the case of the Merry Pranksters in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, the autobus) for creative purposes. Rather than simply accepting the limitations of the automobile's receptive role in the communication network, they redesign the vehicle itself, changing its colors, its shape, and its wiring. Essentially, they recreate the automobile, transforming it into a means of communication in its own right and exploring new possibilities for artistic expression in the process.

Published in *Esquire* in 1963, "There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy Kolored (THPHHH- HHH!) Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby (rahghhhh!) around the Bend (BRUM- MMMM . . .)." was Wolfe's first magazine article and marked the birth of what he would call "new journalism."[28] The article profiles George Barris and Ed Roth, two important figures in Southern California's custom car culture, where hobbyists and professionals would reshape the automobile to conform to their own aesthetics—streamlined body styles, curvilinear accents, bright colors, and asymmetric features—which diverged from what Wolfe calls the "Mondrian"[29] style of Detroit automotive design. More than simply a profile, though, Wolfe's article explores the origins and implications of this particular creative form, comparing Barris's and Roth's process and

[28] When Wolfe published his first collection of essays in 1965, the article, along with the book itself, bore the abbreviated title "The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby." The page numbers indicated here refer to that volume.

[29] The term refers to artist Piet Mondrian, whose most famous work was grid based, with primary colors contained by horizontal and vertical black lines. His influence can be seen in post-war fashion; interior design; even, Wolfe observes, typography and magazine design.

product to the work of classical sculptors, painters, and architects throughout history, both within the western tradition and mysteriously outside of it: “They’re Easter Islanders. Suddenly you come upon the astonishing objects, and then you have to figure out how they got there and why they’re there” (83). Wolfe’s article attempts to account for this mysterious and influential culture by situating them within conventional art history. He refers to the auto body shop where Barris does his work as his studio, “though [Barris] would never think of calling it that, he calls it Kustom City” (80); and while it “looks like any other body shop at first … pretty soon you realize you’re in a *gallery*” (81; emphasis in original). Barris and Roth have all the trappings of the artistic life, from an early phase as a starving artist, doing their creative work on the side while working in more conventional body shops to make ends meet, to their status now, in the great Renaissance tradition, of employing younger customizers “like apprentices coming to the feet of the master” (92).

The peculiar art form of the customized car is a consequence of the youth culture’s devotion to form and access to disposable income. “Practically every style recorded in art history,” Wolfe argues in the introduction to his first collection of essays, “is the result of the same thing—a lot of attention to form, plus the money to make monuments to it” (“Introduction” xiv). The youth Wolfe finds at a “Teen Fair” in Burbank, California are “absolutely maniacal about form” (77); and, in the midst of the post-war economic boom, these teenagers also have (unlike youth before them) access to money. The combination does not *automatically* produce good art, Wolfe observes, either in classical periods or in the present, where “most of the artifacts that these kids’ money-plus-form produce are of a pretty ghastly order” (77). However ghastly some of these

artifacts might be, the youth in question devoted most of their energies to their automobiles, and it is, for Wolfe, in the automobile that the youth culture's combination of form and finance offers its finest and most important expression. Looking at the cars in Barris's shop, Wolfe marvels that "half of them will never touch the ground. They're put on trucks and trailers and carted all over the country to be exhibited at hot rod shows. They'll run, if it comes to that—they're full of big, powerful, hopped-up chrome-plated motors, because all that speed and power, and all that lovely apparatus, has tremendous emotional meaning to everybody in customizing. But it's like one of those Picasso or Miró rugs. You don't walk on the damn things. You hang them on the wall. It's the same thing with Barris' cars. In effect, they're sculpture" (81-82). In reforming the automobile to reflect their own aesthetic sensibilities, the best of the customizers are not simply finding creative expression through the automobile, but rather transforming it from consumer product to a pure objet d'art.

To the extent that such cars are works of art, they are works of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. In fact, many of the top customizers' designs were copied for toys and models, prompting Wolfe to observe that top names such as Barris and Roth "began to make a lot of money in the same thing Picasso has made a lot of money in: reproductions" (92). Though Wolfe does not go into such detail, these cars were reproduced in other ways as well. For instance, Barris made Elvis Presley's "Gold Car,"—a modified Cadillac Fleetwood with numerous gold-plated accessories, including a phone. The car would become an attraction in its own right, and RCA sent the car out on tour (in both the United States and Australia) to raise money for charity, promoting the event with souvenirs including a postcard picturing the car (Grushkin 77). Other cars

become important props in television and film—Barris worked on the Batmobile for the original television series, the Munster Coach from the TV show *The Munsters*, and the Clampett's jalopy in *The Beverly Hillbillies*, among other conceptual customizations.[30] Several other cars to which he made more moderate modifications also wound up in TV, film, and even music, with a 1932 Ford modified at the Barris shop appearing on the cover of the Beach Boys album *Little Deuce Coupe*.

Although the modifications he discusses in "The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby" do not directly involve communications technology, I submit that it is not mere coincidence that Wolfe's initial foray into the style he would eventually call "new journalism" explored the automobile and automobile culture. Just as Edith Wharton uses the automobile to articulate new relationships with travel and art in *A-Motor-flight Through France*, Wolfe uses automobile culture to articulate a new understanding of what constitutes art in the contemporary world and then leverages his meditation on the artistry of customizers who are "not building cars, [but] creating forms" (81)—to create a new form of his own. In the opening chapter, I argued that the subjectivity of the automobile (in contrast with "all the compulsions and contacts of the railway" [Wharton 1]) informed the new style of travel writing adopted by Wharton in *Motor-Flight* and Theodore Dreiser in *A Hoosier Holiday.* Subjectivity, too, informs Wolfe's innovation—one of the hallmarks of new journalism is the overt subjectivity of the reporter, rejecting the illusion of objectivity traditionally employed in conventional journalism.

[30] Barris is far from the only customizer to have found work in Hollywood films and television. The customization of automobiles has become an important (though relatively unstudied) component art and craft in the process of filmmaking, ranging from minor alterations in sound and appearance to the elaborate conceptual cars often found in superhero franchises and futuristic films.

In the introduction to his first essay collection, Wolfe explains that *Esquire* had sent him to California to cover the custom car culture, but he found himself unable to craft the article. Finally, with a deadline looming, his editor told him to type up his notes and send them to the office, where another writer would use them to draft the piece. So he started a memo with "Dear Byron" (Dobell, the editor) and "just started typing away, starting right with the first time I saw any custom cars in California. I just started recording it all, and inside of a couple of hours, typing along like a madman, I could tell that something was beginning to happen" (xiv). By the next morning the memo was 49 pages long. Rather than having a new writer draft the article from these notes, Dobell chose to print the entire thing (other than the "Dear Byron"). Wolfe's writing process here was organized not around destination or narrative structure, but rather his own subjective journey through the world of custom cars. The prose in the piece reflects this, as in the detour that moves the article's focus from Barris to Roth: "I've mentioned Ed Roth several times in the course of this without really telling you about him. And I want to …" (96). And so he does, devoting most of what's left of the article to profiling Roth. Wolfe's process in writing "The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby" is similar to the process behind perhaps the most famous road narrative in American literature, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* which was, according to legend, written in a series of Benzedrine-fueled overnight writing frenzies in a mere three weeks.

The opening chapter of *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test,* Wolfe's first book-length work, reinforces the connection between the automobile and Wolfe's style. The book opens in motion, with Wolfe riding in the open back of a pick-up truck with a small group of Ken Kesey's circle of friends. They are on their way to the Haight-Ashbury

warehouse where Kesey (who had been arrested for marijuana possession, then fled to Mexico, then been arrested shortly after returning to the States) would hold court after being released on bail. In this, the first of three sections in the opening chapter, Wolfe sets the scene with a style more literary than journalistic, introducing a few characters and contrasting their unorthodox appearance and their Day-Glo painted vehicle with his own east-coast dandyism. In the second section Wolfe shifts back in time and down in tone, offering a fairly straightforward account of his first meeting with Kesey, in a visiting room at the San Mateo County Jail. Wolfe had come to San Francisco hoping to write a story about a promising-novelist-turned-fugitive, but their brief chat through the glass on the prison phone affords neither the time nor the opportunity to delve into that story. In the third section he returns to the style of the opening section and connects the two time frames, explaining how he spent his time investigating the Haight-Ashbury scene until Kesey (to Wolfe's surprise) was granted bail. The automobile marks his final immersion into the story: "So I rented a car and started making the rounds in San Francisco. Somehow my strongest memories of San Francisco are of me in a terrific rented sedan roaring up hills or down hills, sliding on and off the cable-car tracks. Slipping and sliding down to North Beach, the fabled North Beach, the old fatherland bohemia of the West Coast, always full of Big Daddy So-and-so and Costee Plusee and long-haired little Wasp and Jewish buds balling spade cats—and now North Beach was dying" (9). As the vehicle for his excursion into current and former Bohemian hotspots, the automobile also confirms his subjectivity in the narrative and facilitates his passage into his new journalism style, which, like the car he drives, slips and slides across the tracks of journalistic expectations.

In the closing passage of the chapter Wolfe sees Neal Cassady for the first time, again revealing the connection between automobility and style. Cassady links Wolfe's text with Kerouac's: as the latter's friend, traveling companion, and favored driver, Cassady inspired the character Dean Moriarty in *On the Road.* Knowing Cassady only through Kerouac's work, Wolfe is excited to meet him in person, and is intrigued by the man who never stops talking: "Cassady is a monologuist, only he doesn't seem to care whether anyone is listening. He just goes off on the monologue, by himself if necessary, although anyone is welcome aboard. He will answer all questions, although not exactly in that order, because we can't stop here, next rest area 40 miles, you understand, spinning off memories, metaphors, literary, Oriental, hip allusions, all punctuated by the unlikely expression, 'you understand—'" (15). Wolfe's writing style is not quite as loose as Cassady's monologuing, but each presents events "not exactly in that order." Their respective narratives are each powered by the energy of the subjective narrator/driver, as suggested by the highway metaphor Wolfe uses to explain Cassady's style.

As the automobile informs Wolfe's New Journalism style and, by extension, the development of the nonfiction novel, the subjects of his inquiry in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* also draw on the automobile—or, more precisely, the autobus—for inspiration. Several chapters in the first half of the book follow the Merry Pranksters famous 1964 road trip from California to New York City to celebrate the release of Kesey's second novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion*. Their vehicle was a 1939 International Harvester school bus (dubbed "Furthur") that had already been modified by its previous owner into a motorhome, with bunks, a refrigerator, a sink and "a lot of other nice features for living on the road" (68). The Pranksters made further modifications, painting it "a frenzy of

primary colors, yellows, oranges, blues, reds" accented by "manic mandalas" (68) and putting a hole in the roof through which they could reach a newly-constructed turret where they could ride and play music in the open air. These modifications reflect their dissatisfaction with the vehicle's outside appearance and the limitations and restrictions of its structure and frame. The most unusual and extensive modifications, however, show dissatisfaction with its communication technology:

> Sandy went to work on the wiring and rigged up a system with which they could broadcast, with tapes or over microphones, and it would blast outside over powerful speakers on top of the bus. There were also microphones outside that would pick up sounds along the road and broadcast them inside the bus. There was also a sound system inside the bus so you could broadcast to one another over the roar of the engine and the road. You could also broadcast over a tape mechanism so that you said something, then heard your own voice a second later in variable lag and could rap off of that if you wanted to. Or you could put on earphones and rap simultaneously over sounds from outside, coming in one ear, and sounds from inside, your own sounds, coming in the other ear. There was going to be no goddamn sound on that whole trip, outside the bus, inside the bus, or inside your own freaking larynx, that you couldn't tune in on and rap off of (68).

The Pranksters were not content to simply be broadcast *to*, and modify the Furthur bus such that they, too, can broadcast a myriad of sounds to the outside world—their own voices, live or recorded music, even the sound of the world itself. The system of

microphones outside the bus can also be read as a reaction to being a passive object of broadcast sound; refusing to limit their reception choices to those provided by commerce and approved by the FCC, the Pranksters arranged to tune in to the environmental sounds of nature, highway travel, city traffic, and so on: “all the clacking and ringing and the mumbling by the toll-station attendant and the brakes squeaking and the gears shifting, all the sounds of the true America that are screened out everywhere else” (85). Rejecting the notion that their own experience should be filtered by such screens, then, the rewiring of the vehicle’s electronic system is essential in their desire to experience an authentic America on their cross-country trip.

For the Merry Pranksters, this creation of a hyper-communicative automotive space is creative, philosophical, and political. Among the electronic equipment included in the rewired bus are 16mm cameras and crystal-synch tape recorders. They wound up with about 45 hours of footage from the trip, with the goal of turning that footage into a film both commercial and artistic: “the world’s first acid film, taken under conditions of total spontaneity barreling through the heartlands of America, recording all *now,* in the moment” (136; emphasis in original). For Kesey, who no longer cares to pursue his writing career (“I’d rather be a lighting rod than a seismograph,” he tells Wolfe [8]), both the film and the trip itself (as extended performance art—”We’re show people,” Kesey tells a police officer who pulls the bus over on a test run up to Oregon [70]) are an opportunity to express his creative faculties through new means, perhaps even creating a new artistic form—the spontaneous/acid film—in the process. The heavily-modified International Harvester, which was setting, prop, and staging area in the making of “The Movie,” also literally powered the filmmaking process: “Since the Pranksters were

running the recorder off the bus generator, which would pulse according to how fast they were driving," the audio would record at a variable speed determined by the vehicle itself, often throwing it out of sync with the film (Eagan).

The choice of film as an art form has an important philosophical component, as it connects with a theory Kesey has proffered about various lags that keep individuals from living in the present and therefore keep them from controlling their own lives. These lags include social and historical lags that keep people trapped in outdated modes of living and perceiving, and psychological lags which keep people from responding honestly to their emotions "because of training, education, the way you were brought up, blocks, hangups, and stuff like that" (*Electric Kool-Aid* 145). But while social and historical lags can be overcome with theory and intellectual study, there is a more basic lag in how one perceives the world, "the lag between the time your senses receive something and you are able to react" (144). As a consequence of that sensory lag, what we perceive as the present is actually the past, and we are "all doomed to spend our lives watching a *movie* of our lives—we are always acting on what has just finished happening … We think we're in the present but we aren't" (144). Of course, if we're watching a movie of our own lives, then we are all simultaneously separate (since each watching a different movie) and interconnected (since we play parts in other people's movies and they in ours). Even as one works to get closer to the "now" of one's own movie, one runs the risk of getting dragged into someone else's movie (their hang-ups, expectations, lags, etc.). Instead, the Pranksters cross-country trip in their psychedelic bus becomes an effort to get the rest of the country into, both literally and figuratively, *their* movie. This effort has political connotations as well. That is because the lag must be overcome in order to live

freely and creatively in the Now; for the Pranksters, LSD is one way to get closer to the Now, as are the spontaneity and sensory assault that they bring on tour in Furthur, with the idea that their performance might help jolt the people they encounter out of their mundane and preconceived perceptions.

The automobile, then, features prominently in these two seminal Wolfe texts, most clearly in content but also in form. The people Wolfe profiles reshape and reform the vehicles that the market delivers to match their aesthetic sensibilities and to advance their own creative, philosophical, and political endeavors. For the Pranksters, especially, that entails an overhaul of the vehicle's communication capabilities. They transform their autobus into a hypercommunicative space, rejecting the motorists normal role as broadcast audience and instead both exercising greater control over the sounds and information coming into the bus and devising ways to communicate to the world outside the automobile. In his prose about the customizers and the Pranksters, Wolfe too reworks his received journalistic tradition into a New Journalism that more accurately captures the contours of a society in transition.

Allen Ginsberg and Auto Poesy

Allen Ginsberg employs the communicative automobile to critique American military intervention in Southeast Asia in his 1966 poem "Wichita Vortex Sutra" ("WVS"). The poem was written in the automobile; more specifically, it was composed on a tape recorder (purchased with Bob Dylan's patronage) in a Volkswagen van on the roads between Wichita, Kansas, and Lincoln, Nebraska. Ginsberg was involved in a censorship dispute involving a Wichita establishment, The Beanery, which police had shut down for the sale of "obscene" materials, including Ginsberg's *Howl* (1955). While

Peter Orlovsky drove, Ginsberg recorded his thoughts along with such found language as newspaper headlines, snippets of radio broadcasts, road signs, and so forth. Ginsberg unveiled the resulting poem with a public reading at The Vortex, the establishment which succeeded The Beanery.

In addition to its prominence in the Ginsberg canon—it is his most famous poem from the 1960s and probably the second most anthologized in his oeuvre behind "Howl"—the poem is also significant in Ginsberg's transition from Beat provocateur to Hippie icon and in the evolution of his poetic philosophy. Two historical contexts are important in shaping "WVS." The first, made explicit in the content of the poem, is the escalation of the Vietnam War—after almost ten years in an (officially) advisory role, the first U.S. combat troops had been sent to Vietnam the previous March. This escalation was very much in the news in February 1966, when Ginsberg writes "WVS": on January 31, LBJ ordered that bombing of North Vietnam resume after a 37-day pause, and in February the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held televised hearings about American policy in Vietnam. Ginsberg includes headlines and radio reports about this testimony in the found language of the poem. The second context is more personal, involving Ginsberg's reaction to a crisis of authorial intent prompted by his old Beat compatriot William S. Burroughs's "cut-up" method of composition. The method, which suggests authorial irrelevance, was shocking to Ginsberg, whose Whitmanian poetic persona had always relied heavily on the sense of poet as mystic seer. In "WVS," Ginsberg addresses that challenge through his compositional technique of "auto poesy,"[31] a creative process that explicitly combines the automobile and communication

[31] The term is Ginsberg's; an early/alternate title for "Wichita Vortex Sutra" was "Auto Poesy to Nebraska." Ginsberg also used the term in the title to a later poem: "Auto Poesy: on the Lam from Bloomington."

technology. In Ginsberg's capable hands, this combination both reasserts an individual and artistic authority and provides a powerful critique of American militarism.

The cultural conflict over the Vietnam War that informs the poem's political context is well known, but additional information about the personal context may be useful here. Ginsberg left the United States to travel abroad in March 1961 and would not return until July 1963. The longest and most significant stretch of time—more than a year—was spent in India, where he befriended poets and politicians and explored Eastern religion. But before reaching India, Ginsberg visited Burroughs in Tangier and participated with Burroughs in his "cut-up" method of composition: he would cut words and lines of text from printed works (newspapers, magazines, and books) and rearrange them into collages of words in random order. Taking an article on the Cannes film festival that was "OK but boring all about Sal Mineo," Ginsberg explained in a letter to Orlovsky, and employing a process of "half cut up half mental reweaving," one could produce poetic sentences such as "Emptiness haunted by Jack Kennedy. Talking about windowsills of cold Sal Mineo Liberace secrecy …" (*Letters* 248). Ginsberg had helped Burroughs revise the non-linear *Naked Lunch* (1959), so he was familiar with the disconnected nature of Burroughs's compositional method; but here Burroughs was taking things a step further, creating texts not from a disorder of his "own" words but by reassembling words of other texts into new works. The process was an assault on authorship itself, rendering authorial input and intent all but irrelevant. "For Ginsberg," Amy Hungerford argues, "the evacuation of authorial control and intention was devastating. After all, his major poems to that point had been based on a powerful prophetic speaker who spoke an intelligible, if unorthodox, truth to a suffering nation"

(274). According to biographer Barry Miles, Ginsberg was so shaken by the experience that he could not write original poetry for several months.

In form and content, "WVS" is a road narrative, starting from a small town about an hour north of Wichita and continuing north into Nebraska, pausing to make mention of various towns and landmarks, before returning "home … to the Hotel Eaton" (410), a once-grand hotel on Wichita's skid row, a block away from The Beanery/Vortex, and the site of one of Carry Nation's[32] early raids. An essential component of the automobile narrative, as we saw in the early automotive texts of Wharton, Dreiser, and Lewis, is the description of the passing landscape. Generally speaking, this component is tied to the American road narrative's deep investment in the pastoral, valuing the road and rural America as an escape from the trappings of the city and civilization. Ginsberg's close friend Jack Kerouac produced one of the most prominent texts in this vein with *On the Road*; but the tradition extends back through Ginsberg's own idol Whitman to Twain, whose descriptions of the passing landscape while floating the river in *Huckleberry Finn* are echoed by Kerouac's imagery while drifting along the open road. This pastoral idealization is not merely literary, but has shaped the construction of roads themselves. Indeed, the appeal to this pastoral ideal was a guiding factor in the National Park Service's development of the rural parkway system. The atmosphere of these parkways included a combination of natural scenery and contrived, allegedly vernacular architecture with the goal of creating the illusion of a natural and unspoiled pastoral ideal (Davis 239).[33]

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[32] Her first name is spelled Carrie in some sources and Carry in others; I have used the latter to match Ginsberg's use in WVS.
[33] For more on the parkway mode of highway development, see pages 257-8.

In keeping with this tradition, Ginsberg sprinkles bucolic descriptions of the passing landscape throughout "WVS." Numerous passages evoke the beauty of the land, conjuring images that might be found in the Romantic poets with whom Ginsberg aligns himself: "A black horse bends its head to the stubble / beside the silver stream winding thru the woods / by an antique barn outside Beatrice" (399). Nodding to the tradition of early automotive texts, which also often explicitly included reviews of the roads the authors travel, Ginsberg includes descriptions of his route in his pastoral scenes, as with a highway that is "straight / dipping downward through low hills / rising narrow on the far horizon / black cows browse in caked fields / ponds in the hollows lie frozen / quietness" (403) or the road that passes "thru Hickman's rolling earth hills / icy winter / gray sky bare trees lining the road / South to Wichita" (398).

Even as Ginsberg observes these pastoral scenes, he also reads aggressively against the text, refusing to accept or reproduce this pastoral myth without interrogation. This is clear in the poem's opening lines, which describe the small town of McPherson, Kansas: "Turn right next corner / *The Biggest Little Town in Kansas* / *MacPherson* [sic]" (394). The text of the second and third lines is italicized in the original, as though taken directly from a road sign welcoming visitors to town, or perhaps from a slogan painted on the local water tower. But the Norman Rockwell feel of the slogan and the pastoral imagery that follows is quickly undermined:

Red sun setting flat plains west streaked

with gauzy veils, chimney mist spread

around christmas-tree bulbed refineries—aluminum

white tanks squat beneath

winking signal towers' bright plane-lights,

orange gas flares

beneath pillows of smoke, flames in machinery—

transparent towers at dusk (394)

The "gauzy veils" of the setting sun and "chimney mist" evoke pleasant images consistent with the familiar idea of rural or small-town life, but the industrial imagery intrudes immediately, first with the ambivalent "christmas-tree-bulbed refineries" and then the more sinister, militaristic imagery of tanks, planes, and flares. As the poem progresses, the landscape becomes increasingly imbricated with the language and machinery of the war. Ginsberg associates driving through those rolling icy hills outside Hickman with a radio broadcast of *Face the Nation* that features an "Aiken republican" outlining the numbers of enemy soldiers. The quiet tableau with the black horse and the antique barn leads him eventually to wonder: "Has anyone looked in the eyes of the dead?" (400) followed by a rather different image: "U.S. Army recruiting services sign *Careers with a Future* / is anyone living to look for future forgiveness?" Whatever may be its beauty, the peace of the landscape cannot be separated from the mechanism of war.

As with earlier automotive narratives, the railroad also plays an important role in "WVS." It appears first in the third stanza, when Ginsberg invokes Whitman: "Blue eyed children dance and hold thy Hand O aged Walt / who came from Lawrence to Topeka to envision / Iron interlaced upon the city plain— / Telegraph wires strung from city to city O Melville!" (394). The line evokes Whitman's "Salut Au Monde" (1856), from *Leaves of Grass*:

I see the tracks of the railroads of the earth,

> I see them in Great Britain, I see them in Europe,
>
> I see them in Asia and in Africa.
>
>
> I see the electric telegraphs of the earth,
>
> I see the filaments of the news of the wars, deaths, losses, gains, passions of my race (115)

In discussing this Whitman poem, Donald D. Kummings rightly connects this passage with an "imperialist vision": "The truly innovative quality of these lines derives not from the mention of the railroad, telegraph, and news media, but from their globalized *presentation* …. Whitman envisions these railroads as a network across and around the earth, in analogy to the telegraph" (157). But while Whitman celebrates such networks for bringing distant parts of the world in closer communion, Ginsberg highlights the role of the rails in the war machine. He notes "a line of boxcars far east as the eye can see / carrying battle goods to cross the Rockies" (403). The "great American train / moves on carrying its cushioned load of metal doom," (404) and northern Kansas is the "land which gave right of way / to the massing of metal meant for explosion / in Indochina" (404). The railroad does not connect the people of Kansas with southeast Asia by bringing them in closer contact, but rather by transporting through its plains warheads that will eventually be dropped on those distant villages.

The telegraph wires, too, are problematic, in that they are part of the communications network that promotes and perpetuates American militarism. The poet is bombarded by news of the war—by radio reports and television coverage and newspaper headlines. Even the automobile provides no escape, with war coverage and justifications

transmitted directly into the automobile, interrupting the tranquility of the passing countryside, as when driving at night near the Nebraska border:

> Peking Radio surveyed by Luden's Coughdrops
>
> Attacks on the Russians and the Japanese
>
> Big Dipper leaning above the Nebraska border,
>
> handle down to the blackened plains,
>
> telephone-pole ghosts crossed
>
> by roadside, dim headlights— (396)

The communication networks, like the railroads, are implicated in the march towards war. Rather than bringing the people of the world together, the railroad and telegraph lines that Whitman envisioned stretching across the world have, a century later, become essential machinery in the militaristic support of global capital.

The long reach of these communication networks—the fact that they reach even into his automobile as it carries him through the Kansas and Nebraska plains—carries a criticism of the configuration of the automobile, in that it renders its occupants passive recipients of this communication. The poet is subject to this constant, overwhelming barrage of the language of war, able only to receive such news and unable to speak back. That this arrangement is conducive to the abuse of power and hostile to the artistry of poet is suggested early in the poem, with the poet remembering "Police dumbfounded leaning on / their radiocar hoods / While Poets chant to Allah in the roadhouse Showboat!" (394). The passage may allude to an incident shortly after the Vortex opened, when Ginsberg, Charles Plymell (who was from Kansas and had lived in Wichita before moving to San Francisco) and others held a reading. According to Tracy Seeley, the event

drew police attention, and "young officers, not sure if they should arrest the poets, confiscated a manuscript and read it over the radio to their superiors" (77-78). Clearer heads prevailed, apparently, and the show continued, but the incident, like the lines in the poem, demonstrates that automotive communication technology, as it stood at the time, was designed for the state rather than the people, and could be employed as an oppressive tool of police power.

In between the descriptions of pastoral scenes, Ginsberg meditates on the language used—by journalists, by political figures on radio and television, in newspaper headlines, and so on—to discuss and argue the war effort. They are "Sorcerer's Apprentices who lost control / of the simplest broomstick in the world: / Language" (401). Finally, the countryside's complicity with the language and machinery of war and apathy towards its human cost ("Has anyone looked in the eyes of the wounded?") takes on supernatural implications. "Is this the land that started war on China?" Ginsberg asks. "This be the soil that thought Cold War for decades?" (403). Searching for an answer, Ginsberg latches on to Carry Nation, the temperance activist known for chopping up saloons with an axe. Nation, like several talented Kansas poets Ginsberg admired,[34] began her career in Wichita before spreading her word elsewhere. Her intolerance towards the "obscenity" of alcohol is echoed by the intolerance of city officials towards the Beanery, towards poetry, towards artistic expression generally. The poem nears its end as Ginsberg "calmly returned / to Hotel Eaton," just a block away from the Beanery. "Carry Nation began the war on Vietnam here," Ginsberg continues, "Here fifty years

[34] Speaking at the University of Kansas in between visits to Wichita, Ginsberg referred to Wichita and Kansas as both an Eden and a wasteland. It was an Eden because it produced a number of artists Ginsberg admired, including Michael McClure (who is specifically mentioned in WVS [406]), Stan Brakhage, and Bruce Conner. (The latter two are now better-known for their work in experimental film than poetry.) It was a wasteland because it forced these talented voices to seek expression elsewhere (Scharnhorst 374-5).

ago, by her violence / began a vortex of hatred that defoliated the Mekong Delta" (410). Ginsberg is not literally blaming Carry Nation specifically for the Vietnam War. As Justin Quinn points out, to treat Ginsberg's argument as one of logical historical causality is a mistake (201). Rather, Nation is akin to the proverbial butterfly flapping its wings, and Ginsberg is merely drawing parallels between her violence, the violence towards the word and artistic expression in current Wichita, and the apathy towards real violence in unseen corners of the world.

Though Ginsberg is not making a historical argument, this construction is consistent with his approach to the supernatural power of language. In preparation for the potentially violent counter-demonstrations at the 1968 Democratic Convention, for instance, he argued that the positive vibrations of a small group of people chanting "Om" could offset violence (Hungerford 271). Hungerford explains further: "In the yogic tradition, from which the majority of Ginsberg's notions about sound and breathing come, vibrations produced in the body can transform the consciousness directly, bypassing the intellect" (279). In "Wichita Vortex Sutra," Ginsberg explores the negative implications of this power, with the vibrations from the thoughts and language of the Kansas landscape resulting in the grotesque transformation of the consciousness of a nation.

Ginsberg responds to this threat by harnessing the power of language—his own and that he finds along the way—for his own purposes. The turning point of the poem comes in Waterville, Kansas, immediately after Ginsberg has commented on the line of railroad cars carrying warheads for Indochina. He refers to its movement through the Kansas plain as "the awesome poem writ by the train" (404); if the militarism woven

through the American landscape is a poem, then Ginsberg is uniquely positioned to counter it with his own poetic power. In doing so, he employs the found language of the highway, the radio, and so on, thus answering the challenge of Burroughs's collage cut-up method with a collage that both rearranges language and retains the poet's authority; he also combines the automobile and electronic communication, thus subverting the police / military industrial complex's stranglehold on transportation and communication and asserting an individual authority to counter the rigid, impersonal lines of track and wire crisscrossing the countryside. The poet finds his focus immediately after the poem "writ by the train" ends, while he is "Passing thru Waterville / Electronic machinery in the bus humming prophecy" (404). Here he has the realization that drives him "On to Wichita to prophesy!":

> That the rest of earth is unseen,
>
> Unknown except thru
>
> language
>
> airprint
>
> magic images
>
> or prophecy of the secret
>
> heart the same
>
> in Waterville as Saigon one human form:
>
> When a woman's heart bursts in Waterville
>
> a woman screams equal in Hanoi—
>
> On to Wichita to prophesy! O frightful Bard! (404)

Here Ginsberg reaffirms prophecy, as perhaps the only weapon he can wield against the black magic language employed by the forces of war. Interestingly, as Ginsberg rediscovers his sense of authorial power, the poem finds its sense of direction. From Waterville south to Junction City, Abilene, and Burns, this last third takes a direct path to Wichita. There, the poem's locations become even more concrete, with Ginsberg recording the intersections and streets he takes "to the center of the vortex" (410). The poem's clarified sense of geography parallels the poet's clarified purpose. Having bounced around Kansas and Nebraska, caught in the vortex of language and landscape, the reclamation of language allows him finally to drive to the center of the vortex.

Just as the corrupted thoughts of the Kansas landscape have, over the course of a century, infected the nation and brought war in Southeast Asia, Ginsberg, "Now, speeding along the empty plain" (406), believes he can harness the power of positive American thought:

> A lone man talking to myself, no house in the brown vastness to hear
>
> imaging the throng of Selves
>
> that make this nation one body of Prophecy
>
> languaged by Declaration as
>
> Happiness!
>
> I call all Powers of imagination
>
> To my side in this auto to make Prophecy (406)

The language of affirmative values, such as the pursuit of happiness, must be used to counter the hate and anger of the vortex. Ginsberg turns then to an even stronger

declaration: “I lift my voice aloud, / make Mantra of American language now, / I here declare the end of the War!” (407).

On the one hand, this declaration that the war is over might be easily dismissed as delusional. But Ginsberg’s claim is not literal, nor is he unaware that this declaration had no immediate material effect on the war in Vietnam. When more newspaper stories about Vietnam deaths appear after his declaration, Ginsberg’s rhetorical insistence that “The war was over several hours ago!” (409) seems fully self-aware and touched with irony. The poem itself is not meant to end the war, nor to create an imaginary world in which the war is over. Rather, as Tony Trigilio points out, the poem is meant to “reawaken the creative potential of human desire, to remind readers that ‘ecstatic language’ might be produced from human suffering” (190). In the context of Ginsberg’s own crisis of faith regarding the poetic authority, it reassures the poet as well.

As with “Howl,” “WVS” debuted in public well before it debuted in print, and his reclamation of the power of language was even more pronounced in the transformative context of oral performance. Cary Nelson explains: “Hearing Ginsberg read ‘Wichita Vortex Sutra’ during the war was exhilarating. In a large audience the declaration of the war’s end was collectively purgative” (15). Then, too, Ginsberg’s readings of the poem were sometimes recorded, recombining the poem with the electronic technology that helped create it and maintaining its relevance in later years. A 1994 recording of Ginsberg reading the poem was released on CD after his death in 2004, when a new war occupied the attention of the American public, extending the oral power of the poem beyond even the physical life of the poet.

A more famous performance came as a result of Ginsberg's collaboration with composer Philip Glass. In 1988, Glass was preparing to perform at a benefit for the Viet Nam Veteran Theater and asked Ginsberg to collaborate. The poet suggested "WVS," Glass composed a piano accompaniment, and the successful collaboration encouraged the pair to develop an evening-length music-theater work. The resulting performance, *Hydrogen Jukebox* (which was released on CD in 1993), was predicated on the same power of language that "WVS" asserts: "Ultimately, the motif of Hydrogen Jukebox, the underpinning, the secret message, secret activity, is to relieve human suffering by communicating some kind of enlightened awareness" (Ginsberg, "Liner Notes"). In "WVS," Ginsberg's enlightened awareness seeks to counter the destructive effects of spoken, electronic, and written language in the buildup to war. Through his auto poesy, Ginsberg combines transportation and electronic communication to craft a language collage that reasserts his power as a poet and stands against a war machine that draws its power, the poem suggests, from its power over language, including its monopoly over the combination of those technologies.

Fear, Loathing and Mobile Communications

Hunter S. Thompson's early work bears some similarities with Wolfe's new journalism and Ginsberg's auto poesy. Like Wolfe, Thompson's early innovations in the nonfiction novel are deeply involved with the automobile and related technologies and cultures. His breakout article was "The Motorcycle Gangs: Losers and Outsiders," a 1965 article in *The Nation* examining the subculture of the outlaw biker; the article, in turn, became the basis for his first book, *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* (1966). The automobile also figures prominently in Thompson's second book, *Fear and Loathing*

in Las Vegas (1971). It is, at root, a road narrative, as suggested by its subtitle: "a savage journey into the heart of the American dream." The news story (Thompson is, after all, a journalist) that nominally inspires the book is a famous off-road race, and Thompson deploys his two rented automobiles—the Great Red Shark and the White Whale—as extended metaphors. Like Ginsberg, too, Thompson directly and explicitly combines automotive and communication technology. The tape recorder was a central tool in Thompson's gonzo journalism, and he explicitly mentions it several times in *Hell's Angels,* as when, during a rowdy July 4th rally at Bass Lake in California, he locks himself in his car to record his thoughts on tape. In *Fear and Loathing,* too, recording equipment is important, and one entire chapter purports to be direct transcriptions of tape recorded while driving around Las Vegas and inserted verbatim by the editor at a "point in the chronology [where Thompson's alter ego] Dr. Duke appears to have broken down completely" and his written manuscript is no longer comprehensible (161).

Thompson's approach to the language he captures on tape differs greatly from Ginsberg's, however. Ginsberg is explicitly concerned with the power and politics of language, and specifically seeks to articulate and employ a supernatural power of language. Thompson, on the other hand, was critical of a reliance on transcendence in response to political oppression; though he considered Ginsberg an important friend and literary ally, Thompson ridiculed this approach as "Ginsberg, far gone in the Om" (*Fear* 65). Thompson's most famous works, *Hell's Angels* and *Fear and Loathing,* are centrally concerned with the constitution, exercise, and excesses of power, both within the system and outside it. Sensing a social order in transition and perceiving in new manifestations

of state power a threat to both the liberty and security of the populace, Thompson seeks to articulate changing forms of state power and to formulate an effective response.

A recurring element in Thompson's study of outlaw motorcycle clubs (OMCs) involves the radio-communication networks that law enforcement has established to monitor and manipulate the movement of the motorcyclists (and, by extension, other motorists as well). It becomes most explicit in preparation for the July 4th, 1965, rally at Bass Lake, which occupies a central place in the narrative. This was not the only time the police mobile communications network was a useful tool against the OMCs. It had become a routine tactic to suppress OMC activity: Thompson quotes a *Los Angeles Times* article in which a police sergeant explains how a network of police checkpoints combined with warrant checks by radio had drastically reduced the number of motorcycle club members entering or residing in the community (41). The Bass Lake rally, however, is particularly instructive in that recent publicity about OMCs made the rally a state of potential emergency. The authorities responded to the potential for chaos by coordinating surveillance networks across Northern California.

Outlaw clubs had received considerable publicity in the months leading up to that summer, most of it stemming from a notorious Labor Day rally in Monterey the year before, where rape accusations made the Hells Angels[35] a front-page story. (Four members were arrested, but charges were dismissed at the district attorney's request.) Sensational stories about other recent OMC "invasions" of small towns appeared in newspapers such as the *New York Times* and in magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek*, usually with a headline that alluded to *The Wild One*, a 1953 movie starring Marlon

[35] Although many news and other accounts (including Thompson's book) refer to the group as the Hell's Angels, the official name for the OMC is "Hells Angels," with no apostrophe. Accordingly, the text that follows uses the apostrophe only to refer to Thompson's book, except when quoting Thompson directly.

Brando as the leader of a biker gang that takes over a small town.[36] California's Attorney General, Thomas Lynch, investigated the OMCs and released a 15-page report which "read like a plot synopsis of Mickey Spillane's worst dreams" (*Hell's Angels* 22). The report spawned a flurry of additional news stories, which tended to focus on the most salient details. Thompson's own article in *The Nation* is an exception: he breaks down the details of the report to find a relatively small number of specific criminal incidents and argues that the number of actual Hells Angels is much smaller than the 463 mentioned in Lynch's report; he also outlines the mainstream media coverage's exaggerations and omissions. In the book-length version, he elaborates more fully on the media's role, arguing that several Hells Angels chapters were on the verge of extinction until the sensational coverage revived interest in the club.

Unsurprisingly, the sensational publicity heightened public concern. The Angels and other OMCs traditionally marked holidays with large "runs" that would bring various chapters together to camp and party at a given campground. The location for these runs were kept secret, to the extent possible, in order to avoid interference and harassment from the police, and so as the July 4th weekend approached, officials in small towns across the state worried that their community might be next. Several localities developed plans to prevent bikers from entering or to mitigate whatever damage they may cause. The state police, meanwhile, sought to assist local authorities by monitoring and anticipating motorcyclists' movement: "The California Highway Patrol had announced the existence of a new and elaborate tracking network, a radio communications system designed to pinpoint any gathering of motorcycle outlaws and broadcast their movements

[36] The film itself was inspired by the so-called Hollister Riot, a 1947 rally sponsored by the American Motorcycle Association that grew out of control. The incident received national attention as a result of a sensational—and staged—photograph in *Life* magazine.

to police all over the state so that no community would be taken by surprise" (103). Word of the Bass Lake location leaked out as the holiday weekend began, and ensuing radio broadcasts informed holiday travelers of the outlaws' likely destination. Even had the location not leaked out, though, the surveillance network would have revealed it. At a later run, Hells Angel leader Sonny Barger kept the location of a run to himself even until the run was underway, but it did not matter: "police were able to track the outlaws by radioing ahead from one point to another. Radio tracking is only a device to give the cops an edge, a sense of confidence and control" (150). This use of radio communication creates a surveillance network that becomes difficult or impossible to avoid, helping police to know where the bikers are at any given time and to anticipate their future movements.

Beyond the noteworthy fact of the simple existence of this mobile communication network, Thompson's analysis reveals other important implications. For one thing, while the Hells Angels don't have access to a mobile communication network to counter or evade such surveillance, Thompson himself reflexively uses electronic communication as a defense against such power. While trying to find the location of the Bass Lake rally on his own, hoping to cover the story, Thompson encounters a pair of stray Hells Angels who arrived early and came up against a road block that local authorities established to control access to the community. Since, legally, they could not prevent bikers from entering the community if they were not committing a crime, authorities drafted a long and confusing legal injunction designed to intimidate the bikers into behaving and to give police the authority to act quickly and forcefully against any minor infraction. Unable to make sense of the document, the pair asked Thompson to read it and explain it to them;

he, too, was unable to make sense of it (as was, he claims, an attorney to whom he later showed it). While they were huddled over the paper, a highway patrol cruiser arrived with an open show of force: "The two cops just sat there and stared at us, a shotgun mounted in front of them on the dashboard. A high-pitched dispatcher's voice crackled urgently from their radio, telling of various Hell's Angels movements …. I made a point of talking to my tape recorder, hoping the sight of it would keep them from shooting all three of us if the radio suddenly ordered them to 'take appropriate action'" (126-127). Faced with a show of police power, Thompson turns almost instinctively to his own communication technology as a shield against the potential abuse of police power.

This was not the only time Thompson relied on his tape recorder in such a manner—at Kesey's famous party for the Hells Angels (an event chronicled, with the help of Thompson's own tapes,[37] in Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*), Thompson was almost arrested when he and Ginsberg left to get more alcohol. Concern among locals about the Hells Angels, Thompson explains in a 1965 letter to an editor at *Playboy*, prompted a "swarm" of police cars to set up outside Kesey's house, where they "stopped everybody either coming or going and went over the cars for possible violations. My tail-light lenses were cracked, so they cited me, and would have taken both me and Allen Ginsberg to jail, I think, if I hadn't been sporting a tape recorder" (*The Proud Highway* 536). Just as bystanders in the twenty-first century may prevent and/or document police brutality with cell phone video cameras, Thompson saw his own electronic

[37] "Hunter Thompson made available to me several tapes he had made while working on his book, *Hell's Angels*, and parts of the book itself dealing with the Pranksters and the Angels were also helpful," Wolfe writes in his acknowledgements (416).

communication equipment as protection against the excesses of a militarized[38] police force.

The potential mayhem of an outlaw motorcycle rally grounds this use of the mobile communication network in a state of (potential) emergency. This was not the only emergency tactic prompted by the Angels' activities. At a 1957 run to Angels Camp, California, a large group of outlaws, most under the influence of alcohol, drove to the nearby American Motorcycle Association camp to extend the party. Along the way, though, the lead riders crashed into a group of cyclists beside the road, killing two of the outlaws, drawing a large crowd and the police force, and prompting a series of fights that spread throughout the town and lasted for several hours—"not a full-scale riot, but a series of clashes that kept local police racing from one spot to another" (164). As we saw in chapter three, small-town noir films such as *The Killers* and *Out of the Past* gave voice to public concern that enhanced networks of automobility would transport urban problems to the pastoral environs of rural America.[39] The 1957 run to Angels Camp provided a concrete example; the list of casualties, Thompson writes, included "the final demise of the old notion that rural communities are geographically insulated from 'city trouble'" (164). Authorities responded by developing new measures to deal with emergency situations: "Angels Camp was a major goad to the development of the mutual-assistance concept, a police version of mobile warfare, which meant that any town or hamlet in California, no matter how isolated, could summon help from nearby police jurisdictions in case of emergency. There is no official list of these emergencies, but if there were, any rumor of a Hell's Angels visitation would be right at the top" (164).

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[38] In his letter, Thompson refers to the police as "gendarmes," alluding to the royal cavalry of Medieval France

[39] See pages 146-159

The specter of the Hells Angels, part fact but primarily, Thompson argues, media creation, thus inspires the expansion of police communication networks and the development of new emergency procedures.

That in itself is significant, but perhaps more important is the realization that authorities will not restrict such tactics to widely-reviled public enemies like outlaw bikers. Discussing a tactic of aggressive traffic stops and warrant checks, Thompson notes that the "tactic quickly became popular with police in other parts of the state and in situations having nothing to do with the Hell's Angels. It is an especially effective means of crowd control and by the middle of 1966 was standard procedure for dealing with peace marchers in Berkely. Police began seizing people at random and running radio checks on their driving records. … [I]f the person being detained had even one unpaid traffic or parking citation he would be 'taken off the street'—a police euphemism meaning 'put in jail'" (41n). Although prompted by the threat of violence from the OMCs, such police tactics spread quickly to use against even those citizens who did not aggressively cultivate a reputation for violence and disruption, such as the Berkeley peace protesters, who posed a different sort of threat to the social order.

Thompson then, identifies an extension of emergency tactics dealing with invading forces in a state of siege—and news reports about various towns preparing for the possibility of hosting the 1966 July 4th rally frequently used language such as "braced for invasion"—to dealing with the general public. This is consistent with the general trend, as Giorgio Agamben has observed, of Western governments after World War II. Agamben describes the state of exception, when in the face of a threat so severe that the continued existence of the social order is in peril, the law is suspended so that it might be

preserved. This is not a new phenomenon in itself, and governments have long suspended various legal protections for citizens during states of siege, as with Lincoln's suspension of habeas corpus at the start of the U.S. Civil War. But while such acts are traditionally temporary, Agamben argues that following World War II the state of exception has increasingly become the governing paradigm. Among other things, the declaration of "war" not against identifiable hostile forces but against concepts (the war on crime, the war on drugs, the war on terror) has created an atmosphere of constant siege, in which these nebulous enemies present such a severe threat to the social order, authorities argue, that various constitutional protections must be suspended in order to preserve them.

The state of California didn't officially declare war on the OMCs, but the language of towns and highways under siege are rhetorically similar. Thompson quotes a newspaper story in which a San Francisco policeman tells a reporter "We're going to get these guys. It's war." Asked to clarify whether he meant all motorcyclists, the officer responded "The innocent will have to suffer along with the guilty" (38). Thompson also recounts his own experience of apparent harassment as a motorcyclist, having recently purchased a factory bike. Though he had driven cars for 12 years with only two moving violations, and though the Birmingham Small Arms Company (BSA) bike looked nothing like an outlaw Harley and his "tan sheepherder's jacket [was] the last thing a Hell's Angel might wear" (37), in his first three weeks as a motorcyclist Thompson "was arrested three times and accumulated enough points to lose my California driver's license" (37). Thompson also speculates on the national appeal of such a state of emergency, suggesting that Barry Goldwater might have won in 1964 if, instead of focusing on the issue of "crime on the streets" (which Democrats decried as coded

racism) he had seized the issue of "motorized crime"—"an army of vicious, doped-up Caucasian hoodlums … so highly mobile with their awesome machines that huge numbers of them might appear almost anywhere, at any time, to sack and destroy a community" (36). At both the level of personal experience and the potential to transform a national culture, Thompson's text is clearly sensitive to the shift of powers grounded in a perceived emergency—the constitutionally questionable methods of "random" stops and warrant checks used against outlaw bikers—to those exercised routinely against "the innocent … along with the guilty." Such concerns become yet clearer in Thompson's second and most famous book, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

The book tells the story of two weeks Thompson and Chicano attorney Oscar Zeta Acosta (known in the book as Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo, respectively) spent in Las Vegas in March 1971, first to cover the Mint 400 off-road race for *Sports Illustrated* and then to cover a national law enforcement conference on "Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs" for *Rolling Stone*. While there, they consume copious amounts of alcohol and illegal drugs, run up enormous hotel bills they have neither the means nor the inclination to pay, and manage to instill fear in the hearts of hotel workers, tourists, and law enforcement conferees. It is for this commitment to excess that the novel is often remembered, providing either a eulogy for the optimism and potential of the 1960s counterculture or final proof of the morally bankrupt nature of the same, depending on one's politics.

More than simply a superficial drug-fueled frenzy, though, the novel offers an analysis of and response to the expanding paradigm of the state of exception. Where in *Hell's Angels* Thompson observes this tendency in passing, in *Fear and Loathing* the

author is deeply invested in understanding this new paradigm and what it means for those who are subject to it. The project itself is rooted in a state of exception: when Thompson was offered the chance to cover the Mint 400, he was in Los Angeles investigating the death of Ruben Salazar and its effect on the local Mexican-American community. Salazar died at the hands of the Los Angeles Police Department in the aftermath of the Chicano Moratorium rally against the Vietnam War on August 29, 1970. As the news director for the Spanish-language TV station KMEX, he had offered sympathetic coverage to Chicano activists (including Acosta) protesting mistreatment by the LAPD and the Superior Court of Los Angeles County. The Chicano Moratorium rally was large and began peacefully, but skirmishes between the large crowd and the LAPD eventually escalated. Salazar was relaxing at a nearby bar when he was shot in the head with a wall-piercing teargas canister (a type normally used only for firing into a barricade). Many believed that Salazar had been targeted and killed deliberately, and tension increased between the Mexican-American community and the LAPD.

Thompson, who came to Los Angeles to investigate the story at Acosta's request, became increasingly concerned at the troubling implications of the story: "If this was true, it meant the ante was being upped drastically. When cops declare open season on journalists, that will be a very ugly day—and not just for journalists" ("Strange Rumblings" 228). Thompson's investigation finds a police response increasingly anchored in a state of exception, with crackdowns on Chicano activists, harassment of Hispanic residents, and extensive helicopter surveillance of Mexican-American communities justified by the supposed threat the Chicano movement posed to the social order.

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life,* Agamben expands his analysis of modern sovereignty to the Roman figure of the Homo Sacer, a person who has been banned from the protection of the law. The homo sacer could be killed with impunity but was unfit for sacrifice; he was abandoned to nature. The concepts of the homo sacer and the state of exception are entwined: the homo sacer, essentially, opens up a state of exception, since he exists both in law (in that his status is legally defined) and outside of it (since he has been abandoned to nature); at the same time, as the state of exception becomes a paradigm for government, all citizens are, essentially, homo sacer. In early 1971, both Thompson and Acosta felt the pressure of being homo sacer. Acosta believed that if police had targeted Salazar, then he might be next; he had, after all, successfully defended several Chicano protestors arrested in various incidents over the years and was then in the process subpoenaing every single judge on the Superior Court in an attempt to prove that the grand jury process was systematically unfair.[40] As Thompson pointed out in his "The Banshee Screams for Buffalo Meat" (1977), published in *Rolling Stone* after Acosta went missing and was presumed dead, Acosta had reason to fear: "When you get into bear baiting on that level, paranoia is just another word for ignorance. … They really *are* out to get you" (497; emphasis and ellipses in original). Thompson had similar concern for his own safety, as he explains in the opening paragraph of the jacket copy for the book: "after a week or so on the story I was a ball of nerves & sleepless paranoia (figuring that *I* might be next)…and I needed some excuse to *get away* from the angry

[40] Acosta offers a fictionalized account of his investigation into the grand jury system (part of his defense of the "Biltmore Six" who were arrested for allegedly trying to burn down the Biltmore Hotel during a speech by then-governor Ronald Reagan) and the "rollercoaster of paranoia and tedium" (209) that followed the Salazar killing in *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973). He decided not to include his account of the trip to Las Vegas, he told Thompson in a letter, because "you wouldn't understand it and ... others might accuse me of using your book as my notes, etc" (*Uncollected Works* 105).

vortex of that story & try to make sense of it without people shaking butcher knives in my face all the time" ("Jacket Copy" 207). The realization that the law was a threat to their existence rather than a safeguard creates such an intense emotional pressure that it is no longer possible to function in Los Angeles.

The impetus for the trip roots the resulting novel in a state of exception, and throughout *Fear and Loathing* Thompson establishes Las Vegas as a state of exception par excellence. By the second half of the novel, this particular and local state of exception has evolved into one that is universal and paradigmatic—the drug war. Posing as LA narcotics officers, Duke and Dr. Gonzo regale a terrified southern DA with the drastic (and obviously extralegal) measures they must take to fight the drug problem in California: they use trained Dobermans to capture drug users and then "cut their goddamn heads off" (149). The DA is shocked but understanding, since the threat posed by the drug culture is perceived as so great that it prompts a state of exception, where the law (and its protections against illegal search and seizure, forfeiture of assets, and decapitation) must be suspended in order that the law may be preserved.

Much of Thompson's response to the expansion of the state of exception and the threat of becoming homo sacer involves drugs. "He who makes a beast of himself," he quotes Dr. (Samuel) Johnson in the epigraph, "gets rid of the pain of being a man." Duke and Dr. Gonzo make beasts of themselves by ingesting prodigious quantities of drugs ranging from marijuana and alcohol to pure adrenochrome. In making beasts of themselves, they enact the sovereign ban—the abandonment to nature that is at the heart of the homo sacer—on their own terms. They were so well-stocked for that project that, as the narrator explains in the opening chapter, "the trunk of the car looked like a mobile

police narcotics lab" (4). The description establishes the pair as a parodic counterpoint to the legal system and structure behind the state of exception. Specifically, in this case, they are a counterpoint to that part of the state engaged in mobilized surveillance and operating in the permanent state of exception that is the drug war. Thompson continues this parodic critique of the legal system throughout the novel, particularly through Dr. Gonzo, who repeatedly prefaces his advice to Duke with an appeal to his authority as an officer of the court: "As your attorney, I advise you to …" ("drive at top speed," "tell me where you put the goddamn mescaline," or "take a hit out of that little brown bag in my shaving kit" for example).

Drugs, though, are not their only response; as Thompson does in *Hell's Angels*, Raoul Duke relies on electronic communication equipment. Indeed, acquiring electronic equipment is one of three essential tasks (the others being securing a convertible and collecting as many drugs as possible) the pair feel they must complete before leaving for Vegas the next morning. One use for the tape recorder is to play music. True, the convertible they've rented has a radio, but Duke and Dr. Gonzo are not satisfied to let outside forces program their music for them. Often they play both the radio and recorded music at the same time, even though their selection of music is limited: the Rolling Stones song "Sympathy for the Devil" "was the only tape we had, so we played it constantly, over and over, as a kind of demented counterpoint to the radio" (4-5). A "demented counterpoint" to the radio is necessary because the radio may broadcast what amounts to propaganda. Like Ginsberg in "Wichita Vortex Sutra," Thompson's manuscript directly reproduces found items such as headlines, news stories, and in one case, a radio broadcast. On their first night in Las Vegas, Duke is driving around town,

enjoying the sunset and the "cool desert wind." "Ah yes," he muses, "This is what it's all about. Total control now" (29). But his mood is shattered by the radio: "Good God! What is this terrible music?" The song in question, it turns out, is "The Battle Hymn of Lt. Calley," by an Alabama disc jockey named Terry Nelson; the song celebrates William Calley, who was convicted in March 1971 for his role in the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam. Thompson reproduces the lyrics, in which Calley imagines reaching his "final campground in that land beyond the sun" and defends his and his company's actions to "the Great Commander" (29). The song completely shatters Duke's mood, "plunging [him] into a sub-human funk" (32) and justifies their decision to bring their own music as a counterpoint to the external manipulation of the radio.

The tape recorder is also a journalistic tool by which Thompson can record his own thoughts and establish a "permanent record" (9) of the trip. His specific demands for the equipment recall the fact that Thompson himself has used the tape recorder as a defense mechanism: "Now we need a sound store with the finest equipment. Nothing dinky. We want one of those new Belgian Heliowatts with a voice-activated shotgun mike, for picking up conversations in oncoming cars" (12). His request reveals two things. First, the combination of electronic equipment and the automobile renders even presumably private communication public, anticipating privacy concerns that have become more pronounced in the age of the fully-communicative automobile (an issue I will explore more fully in chapter six). Second, the language used to describe the equipment suggests an escalation consistent with the isolated states of emergency Thompson discusses in *Hell's Angels* and the paradigmatic state of exception he examines in *Fear and Loathing.* Where in *Hell's Angels* he "made a point of talking into

[his] tape recorder" (127), in *Fear and Loathing* the recorder is weaponized with a "shotgun" mike (a "black, bazooka-looking instrument" [29]) and is meant to be used for self defense as well as for reconnaissance.

In spite of such possibilities, the tape recorder is used primarily as a compositional tool. Duke never gets the opportunity to aim his shotgun mike at oncoming cars and never has cause to use it as a defense against police brutality; he does, however, mention using the tape recorder to record his thoughts and compose the first draft of what will eventually become *Fear and Loathing.* Two chapters are particularly notable in this regard. The first is the final chapter of Part One, which begins with its chronological end, finding Duke "hunkered down with [his] tape machine in a 'beer bar'" in Baker, California (90); he then narrates (as though directly to the tape recorder) the story of "two very bad emotional experiences—one with the California Highway Patrol and one with a phantom hitchhiker" (89). He has been in the process of fleeing Las Vegas for Los Angeles; Dr. Gonzo had flown out the day before, leaving him alone to deal with the massive hotel bill and any other lingering legal problems. With no means to pay, and fearing that he had pressed his legal luck to its limit in Vegas, he decides to make the precarious run back to Los Angeles in his conspicuous, fire-apple red convertible. Alas, his escape is cut off by a highway patrolman, who lets him off with a warning on the condition that he stop to sleep at a nearby rest area. As he pulls into Baker, knowing the cop is waiting on the far outskirts of town to see if he'll "make a run for L.A." (93) he sees (or at least thinks he sees) a hitchhiker whom he and Dr. Gonzo had picked up and inadvertently terrified on their way to Las Vegas in the first place. He can't stay in Baker, for fear the hitchhiker might alert the authorities, and he can't escape to Los Angeles

because, with the highway patrolmen waiting for him, the border is effectively sealed. He has no choice but to return to Las Vegas: one can be removed from the law's protection by the state of exception, but leaving the system on one's own terms is far more difficult.

While the Baker chapter is presented (and reads) as though narrated into his tape recorder, Chapter 9 of Part Two is ostensibly transcribed directly from the tape itself. The chapter takes place on the night before Dr. Gonzo is set to leave Las Vegas again, as he and Duke are driving around the city. The real heart of the story they are covering, Duke insists from the beginning, has been the search for the American Dream, and they had now decided, according to the editor's note introducing the chapter, "that the American Dream would have to be sought out somewhere far beyond the dreary confines of the District Attorneys' Conference on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs" (161). As the recording opens, they are "somewhere on the Northeast outskirts of Las Vegas—zooming along Paradise Road in the White Whale" (161). The "White Whale" is Duke's nickname for the Cadillac Coupe De Ville he rents in Part Two, replacing the "Red Shark" that they drive at the beginning of the book. The Whale "was a wonderful machine: Ten grand worth of gimmicks and special effects …. The dashboard was full of esoteric lights & dials & meters that I would never understand" (104). The invocation of Melville's *Moby-Dick* and its ultimate object of obsession equates the American Dream/Obsession (as does the Las Vegas setting) with a desire for wealth and flash, even when that flash amounts only to gimmicks, special effects, and esoteric bells and whistles.[41]

[41] Like Ishmael with Queequeg, Thompson gives his alter-ego Duke a Polynesian partner by changing the ethnicity of his Chicano friend Oscar Zeta Acosta to the "Samoan Attorney" Dr. Gonzo. Terry Gilliam's film adaptation of the novel (1998) offers additional *Moby-Dick* references. For instance, Duke refers to himself as Ahab while holding a curtain rod like a harpoon, and at one point has the novel's opening line "Call Me Ishmael" scrawled on a wading boot he wears on his right leg.

Needing coffee and a bite to eat, the pair drive up to a taco stand, and while ordering from the waitress (apparently at a drive-through window, since they have not yet gone inside) Dr. Gonzo mentions that they are searching for the American Dream. There is some confusion, as the waitress thinks they are asking about a specific place, and asks Lou (the cook) if he knows where it is. After some discussion, Lou concludes that they're looking for "the old Psychiatrist's Club," a "discotheque place" which has since been sold and renamed. The place has degenerated, Lou insists—it's a haven for drug users and pushers and "twenty-four-hour-a-day violence" (166). After some confusion about where the place is actually located, Duke and Dr. Gonzo decide to go inside to wait while the waitress calls around to find out exactly where it is. Here the chapter ends—the next sequence of tape, the editor explains, was "impossible to transcribe due to some viscous liquid encrusted behind the heads" (168). Still, from the garbled sounds on the tape they ascertain that Duke and Dr. Gonzo found the site of the Psychiatrist's Club/American Dream. All that remained was "a huge slab of cracked, scorched concrete in a vacant lot full of tall weeds. The owner of a gas station across the road said the place had 'burned down about three years ago'"(168). The book takes place in 1971, placing the demise of the American Dream about 1968, the year Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated and Richard Nixon was elected to the White House. Thompson records this discovery not only figuratively, as a reporter, but literally, offering the transcripts of a tape recorded while driving around Las Vegas as evidence.

The intersection of electronic communication and the automobile is important in Thompson's early work, both as a diagnostic tool and as a means of self-defense. In *Hell's Angels,* he identifies a normalization of police powers and tactics, including

mobile surveillance networks made possible by the two-way radio, that were initially prompted by emergency situations; this same normalization of emergency powers then inspires *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas.* While Thompson does not have easy access to the same electronic equipment that makes these mobile surveillance networks possible, he does rely on his tape recorder as a deterrent against police brutality.

Thompson's primary response to the political problems he outlines does not involve the combination of electronic communication and the automobile in quite as direct a way as Ginsberg's auto-poesy; whereas Ginsberg responds to the perceived abuse of language by speaking and recording a potentially powerful language of his own, Thompson chooses action over words. "Every now and then," Duke says of his initial decision to take the trip to Las Vegas, "when your life gets complicated and the weasels start closing in, the only real cure is to load up on heinous chemicals and then drive like a bastard from Hollywood to Las Vegas" (12). Thompson counters excess force from the state with excess of his own, and reacts to the abandonment to nature embodied in the homo sacer and the state of exception by turning himself into a beast and bringing nature to the heart of Las Vegas. The automobile is clearly important to that project—as the anthropomorphic nicknames he gives his two rental cars, the Red Shark and the White Whale suggest—and combining the car with the tape recorder makes it possible to tell the tale, even when (as in the chapter about the American Dream/Psychiatrist's Club) such excesses render communication through other means impossible.

Conclusion

The state, generally speaking, had a monopoly on two-way automobile communications from the development of the two-way radio in the 1920s until the 1970s,

when the CB and then the cell phone gave the public the opportunity to communicate directly with the outside world from the automobile. The various attempts to integrate the automobile and the telephone, which began even before World War I, demonstrate a desire for such mobile communication, and the works of Ralph Ellison, Allen Ginsberg, and Hunter S. Thompson illustrate that the nature of the automobile as only a one-way receiver of communication left its occupants subject to corporate and state propaganda with only limited means of response. Still, in the absence of such technology, many creative people improvised. In some cases, as in the customizers and Pranksters that Tom Wolfe reports on, this involved remaking the automobile into something capable of communicating, for purposes that were artistic as well as political. For writers such as Ginsberg and Thompson, it was not a matter of remaking the automobile so much as improvising with communications equipment already on hand. The combination of automobile and tape recorder was central to Ginsberg's and Thompson's creative process. Beyond offering a new means of composition, the combination of automobile and communication technology was transformative. In Wolfe's and Thompson's hands, the combination gives rise to a new understanding of journalism and for Ginsberg it transforms the creative process and fosters new creative forms. This combination of communication and transportation gives voice to cultural and political critique, whether the disruption of conformist consumerism enacted by Kesey's Merry Pranksters or the supernatural counterattack to American military intervention that Ginsberg offers. Thompson, in particular, is concerned with a development directly related to the automobile itself, since the expansion of state power that inspires his fear and loathing is itself a product of the reintegration of transportation and communication.

Figures

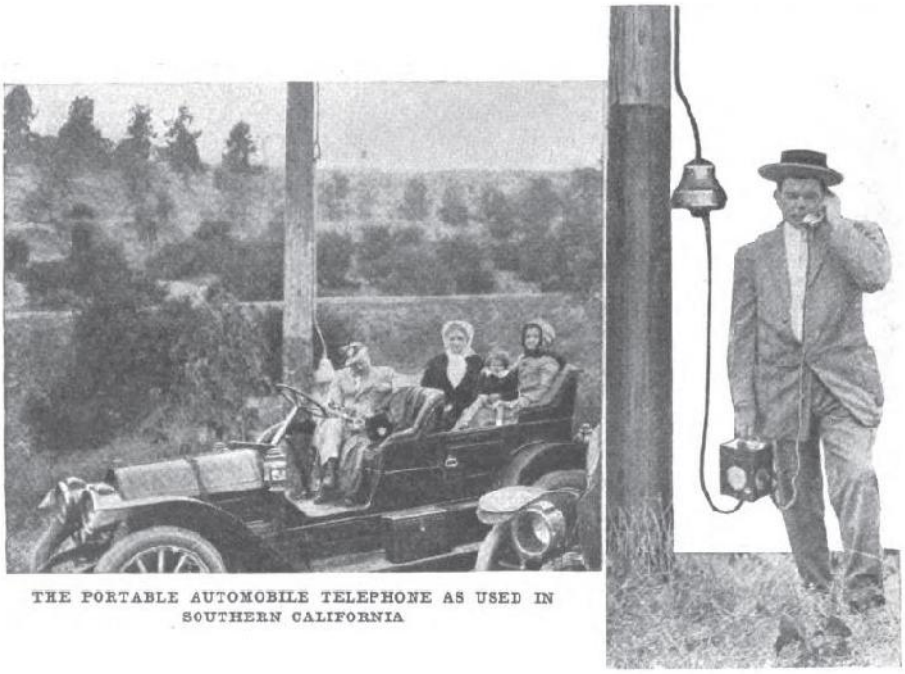
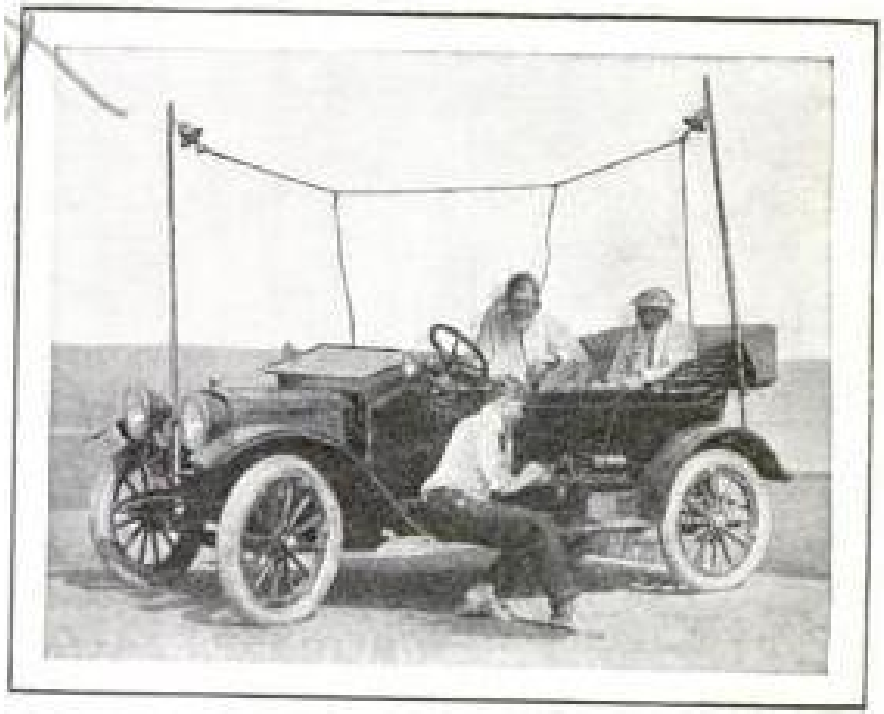


Figure 13 – Portable Telephones: An early example of the automobile telephone, as depicted in *Popular Electricity* (“Portable Telephones” 602).



Los Angeles Automobilists Experimenting with Wireless Telephony from Automobile

Figure 14 – Automobile Telegraph: E.C. Hanson's automobile wireless receiving system, as pictured in *Popular Mechanics* ("Automobile Equipped" 205).

Chapter Five: "Solitary Bartlebies": Resistance to the Superhighway in Kerouac and Didion

A 1958 episode of Walt Disney's *Disneyland* television program, titled "Magic Highway, U.S.A.," offered viewers a look at the past, present, and future of American transportation. With animation and film footage, Disney narrated a history of pre-automobile travel from European settlement through the railroad, followed by a live action history of the automobile, which Disney said "created a highly-industrialized America of abundance, and made us the most mobile people in the world," but also "overloaded our highways." Enter a highway and traffic engineer to narrate an overview of the newly-authorized Interstate Highway System, with new techniques for design and construction that would make nationwide traffic (and therefore commerce) more efficient. The highlight of the episode, however, was a nine-minute animated segment about "what tomorrow's motorist might expect in the years to come."

The cartoon showed great advances in highways and cars alike. A central command system moved consumer goods along "heavy duty freightways" combining "railroad volume with highway flexibility." Highways were aware of traffic and weather conditions, automatically illuminating at night and heating up in bad weather to keep the road free of rain, snow, and ice. Vehicles contained "a teletype panel show[ing] up-to-the-minute traffic bulletins," and in bad weather "the windshield becomes a radar screen, showing the outline of objects ahead." Cars could also be controlled automatically, leaving men free to conduct "business conferences by television" and families free to relax in a vehicle that contained "every convenience of home." Both the highways and

vehicles of the future would be smarter, making the process of driving safer, more enjoyable, and more efficient.

The animated sequence is typical of the technological optimism with which Americans imagined the future of automobility in the years shortly before and after World War II. As politicians, social critics, engineers and futurists grappled with the prospect of overhauling the nation's infrastructure to meet the demands of the automobile, they envisioned highways that were both super (offering six, eight, or more lanes of smooth, straight, and relatively flat concrete in each direction and covering thousands of miles of American real estate) and magical, interacting directly with the automobile through communications technology to provide drivers with essential information or even to facilitate the external control of the automobile through radio waves or electromagnetic fields.

In practice, the super was realized much more quickly than the magic. Grade-separated highways built by state authorities began to appear before World War II. After the war, state governments continued to build superhighways and the federal government worked towards a federal road network, which was finally realized with the approval of the Interstate Highway System in 1956. That approval organized American automobility as a coherent and comprehensive system for the first time, and this development is a crucial link in the re-integration of communication and transportation. With the development of the magic highway, which I outline further in the following chapter, the transportation and communication networks are joined, a process that would be much more difficult without a mature transportation network in place. These superhighways were expected to reduce congestion in urban areas, make traffic safer for motorists and

pedestrians, and make it easier and cheaper to move agriculture and other goods regionally and nationally. Some critics, such as Lewis Mumford and Benton MacKaye, expressed a desire to keep residential areas largely free of automobiles, to consider the preservation of natural beauty and the aesthetic pleasure of the motorist, and to preserve the regional integrity of independent areas of the country; for most, however, the prevailing concern was efficiency and productivity: the more efficiently highways could carry people and goods into, out of, around, and between urban centers, the better.

Even as the modern grade-separated, divided highways took root in cityscape and countryside alike, several works appeared in the 1950s and 1960s that took place instead on less-traveled pre-modern highways, from novels by Steinbeck (*The Wayward Bus*, *Travels with Charley*) and Nabokov (*Lolita*) to scores of popular songs to the television show *Route 66.* Not all road texts favor earlier modes of travel: beginning with Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), set primarily in an old motel that is almost always vacant since the construction of a new highway moved traffic further away, there is an entire subgenre of horror films detailing the dangers of straying too far from the modern road. Most road texts, however, valorize the road rather than the superhighway. Often this rejection of the superhighway contains a critique of a lifestyle so governed by efficiency, as in the case of William Least-Heat Moon in *Blue Highways* (1982) and of Robert Pirsig in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), who takes the back roads because they offer a sense of "the hereness and nowness of things" (5) that is lost in the city and the superhighway. For others, such as Steinbeck, who takes to the road in *Travels with Charley* (1962) in order to get back in touch with his country, the back roads provide

access to a more authentic America that is disappearing in the face of standardizing influences, of which the superhighway is prominent.

Understanding the ethic of productivity that undergirds the superhighway can help us more clearly analyze the road narratives that have been produced in literature, film, and music in the years since the emergence of the modern superhighway. In this chapter, I examine two novels—Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays* (1970)—which rely particularly heavily on the contrast between road and superhighway. I begin by sketching more clearly the superhighway's emphasis on productivity at the expense of the human scale and the natural environment, using a cultural text that was particularly important in the development of the modern highway system: The Futurama exhibit at the 1939 World's Fair. I then turn to *On the Road*, arguing that the novel is not, as generally believed, a celebration of American individualism or frontier myth; rather, Kerouac's depiction of a pre-superhighway automobility seeks to create new forms of community, celebrates an appreciation of the natural world separate from the frontier myth's reliance on the wilderness and conquest, and enhances Kerouac's critique of postwar consumerism and conformity. Finally, I examine *Play It As It Lays*, arguing that the image of the freeway in the novel stands in for the patriarchal system of production that oppresses the novel's main character, Maria, but also facilitates her resistance to that system.

Superhighways: Planning, Productivity, and Control

In 1939, *Life* magazine carried an article about the Futurama exhibit at the World's Fair in New York. By far the fair's most popular attraction, the exhibit offered a vision of what America might look like in the not-so-distant future of 1960. Visitors

(28,000 per day) were carried over an expansive diorama of the United States, complete with cities, towns, and farms of the future as well as trees, lakes, rivers and mountains. The centerpiece of the exhibit was the superhighway that stretched across the continent, replete with thousands of moving futuristic cars. The highway system was not only massive (consisting of seven lanes in each direction and covering thousands of miles of American real estate) but also magic, with cars controlled not by drivers but instead guided by radio beams. Cars automatically merged from feeder lanes onto the highway and then switched from slow 50-mph outside lanes to faster (75- or 100-mph) inside lanes based on the driver's preference. Speed and spacing were governed by control towers which "can stop and start all traffic by radio" ("Life goes to Futurama," 81) placed periodically along the highway.

Inspired by the exhibit's success, designer Norman Bel Geddes expanded on his plans for a system of superhighways in the book *Magic Motorways* (1940). Here Bel Geddes argues that, with the nation having moved from horse and buggy to the automobile in the first 40 years of the century, the next transportation revolution would be in the roads themselves. Designing routes and roads for the automobile would require extensive and careful planning, a word which he acknowledges "many people have a fear of" as "something that implie[s] restriction of the individual" (271). For Bel Geddes, though, planning is essential not only to construct a superhighway but also for the good of the individual: "intelligent planning is the only means by which the individual can fully develop his potentialities and opportunities" (271). In its report on Futurama, *Life* suggests that this plan for the future has accomplished just that: "On every front America in 1960 knows more about unleashing the best energies of its citizens" (81). The

sentiment captures a central tenet of Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power: individuals are its subjects, and productive citizens its product. Bel Geddes's argument about planning does not deny that it may restrict the individual will, but he offers an increased efficiency and productivity as compensation.

While it promises to produce a more efficient populace, such planning requires a more streamlined process than representative democracy might sometimes allow. Bel Geddes identifies rampant graft and corruption in state and local highway departments as barriers to effective highway construction. More problematic for Bel Geddes, though, is that highway planning is subject to political debate in the first place. As far back as the Cumberland Road (the federal government's first foray into road-building) political influence has diverted highways from "where [they] may be of most service" and instead connected politically important communities; this political influence is, in Bel Geddes's estimation, "possibly even more ruinous than the outright theft of highway funds" (169). *Life*'s report imagined a solution, in that citizens would simply start to lose interest in politics: "The people of 1939 are still very much alive, pitting their old prejudices and fears against the new world. Politics and emotion still slow progress. But these obstructions are treated with dwindling patience in 1960. America's appetite has been whetted by its widening realization of what sober, courageous planning can do" (81). Representative politics and planning are incompatible, the story suggests, and only the latter is capable of facilitating progress. It is also worth noting that the specific notion of progress is rather skewed: "Cures for cancer and infantile paralysis have extended man's life span," the author continues, "and his wife's skin is still perfect at the age of 75" (81).

Perhaps the "politics and emotion" which still slow progress include the notion that women should be valued for more than healthy skin.

Certainly Bel Geddes is right both in that the appropriation of road funds often involved corruption and that political considerations influenced highway planning and routes. As Bunny, the idealistic young son of oil magnate James Arnold Ross in Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* (1927) learns, "grease is cheaper than steel" (54), and so a businessman must "let people have a share of your profits, so they would become part of your 'organization,' and do quickly whatever you said" (54). Businessmen with deep pockets could expect a more receptive audience among county officials, and funds appropriated from state and federal sources were subject to waste and fraud. Even today, the plotting of roads and the distribution of highway funds depend on political battles, some of which may not represent the best interests of the public. Alaska's infamous "Bridge to Nowhere," which became a political issue in the 2008 presidential election, is but one high-profile recent example, and highway funds are fertile ground for the much-maligned tactics of earmarks and pork barrel spending. Even so, a project as complicated as highway planning is bound to pit multiple interests against each other, and in spite of Bel Geddes's optimism in a permanent central authority "as independent of factional politics as the Army and Navy" (281), it is unlikely that all transportation problems will offer a single solution indisputably superior to all others. Clearly, the choices made between compelling alternatives in a project as large as a national highway system will have a profound and even transformative effect on the populace—even such that it brings "an enormous influence … to bear on the manners and morals of the nation" (283); given that, the speculation that the public will have "dwindling patience" with such

"obstructions" to progress as politics seems a hollow justification for eliminating the public's voice in the planning process.

Then, too, a powerful and independent central planner guarantees neither controversy-free results nor unbiased attention to the public interest. Perhaps more than any other man, New York City's Robert Moses, whom Bel Geddes identifies as one of the visionaries who "realized what had to be done" in creating a new type of highway system for the automobile (36-37), embodies the powerful and independent central authority over highway development that Bel Geddes desires. Holder of a series of powerful positions in both New York state and New York City government from the 1920s through the 1960s, Moses wielded tremendous influence, both in the discipline of urban planning and upon the physical landscape of New York City as it developed over the twentieth century. Wielding the power to develop projects and raise funds independently of either public oversight or local control, Moses acted decisively to realize his vision for large-scale public works. With respect to the tension between central planning and democracy that appears in *Magic Motorways* and in *Life's* report on Futurama, Moses, too, came down on the side of central planning. "Democracy had not solved the problem of building large-scale urban public works," writes Robert Caro in *The Power Broker* (1974), his Pulitzer-Prize-winning biography of Moses, "so Moses solved it by ignoring democracy" (848). The obstruction of politics to progress in New York City after World War II was overcome by the centralization of planning authority in Moses' office.

While Moses' fingerprints are all over the city's skyline, street grid, and waterfront, his legacy remains vexed. In addition to the miles of highway for which he is

most famous (and controversial), he greatly expanded the area of the city's and Long Island's parks, built several major bridges facilitating mobility and development between boroughs and with New Jersey, and built several neighborhood playgrounds in addition to eleven gigantic, state-of-the-art neighborhood swimming pools. On the other hand, his commitment to automobile-centric development at the expense of public transit has been seen as a contributing factor to a variety of late-twentieth-century urban ills including the destruction of the inner cities, urban sprawl, increased pollution, and gridlock. The general assessment of his work is that it favored automobiles over people and favored business interests over public interests and recreation. His projects also drew charges of hostility to the poor, the working class, and minorities. City highways disproportionately took their right-of-way from working class neighborhoods, wreaking havoc on the communities and displacing hundreds of thousands of residents. Then, too, the attention to development for automobile users at the expense of (and sometimes with hostility towards) the development of mass transit had disproportionate consequences for those who relied on public transit as an economic necessity.

Recent years have seen attempts to revise Moses' reputation, with the difficulty of passing large-scale projects in the face of regulations and public input causing some to yearn for another autocratic master planner. Even so, the suggestion "that Moses was highhanded, racist, and contemptuous of the poor draws no argument from even the most ardent revisionists" (Powell). In a 2007 collection of essays that works towards a more generous assessment of Moses' legacy than generally afforded him in the wake of Caro's landmark biography, for instance, Martha Biondi points out that Moses was a proud opponent of civil rights legislation and argues that "Caro's view that Moses intended to

discourage nonwhite attendance, although based on anecdotal evidence, gains credence from the very well-documented history of racial discrimination and exclusion that surrounded so many of Moses's undertakings" (121). Whether or not one approves of the network of highways that Moses produced, that legacy of discrimination and exclusion condemns Bel Geddes's and *Life*'s cavalier dismissal of politics and the public will.

Moses also oversaw the construction of numerous public housing projects, easing the displacement caused by road construction and slum clearance. All of those projects were (like those in other cities during the era) tower-based. Grand in scale and bland in appearance, these towers were built on large plots of land, with coverage (the percentage of the site occupied by buildings) under 20 percent, but with little thought to the relationship between sites and buildings, leaving such towers "floating randomly in a sea of green … [lacking] any connection to the surrounding environment" (Plunz 268). Since little thought was given to the area surrounding the towers, "the social characteristics of the parks within the tower projects were far different from those of the tenement streets they replaced, and they contributed to a myriad of problems" (Plunz 270). The isolation of such housing was "functionally complete to the extent that even commercial space was eliminated from the projects" (Plunz 268). (This was in contrast to prewar housing projects, which included stores as well as living space.) Rather than relieving the problems of dislocation, then, the housing projects compounded the isolation that resulted from an automobile-centric development with insufficient attention to the human scale.

In offering Moses as an example of the strong and independent planning authority that Bel Geddes argues for, I do not mean to suggest that their visions were the same. In fact, their visions of ideal transportation systems differed widely, further undermining the

notion that a central planning authority would naturally find the one ideal solution to any transportation problem. While Moses worked for years to develop an extensive system of highways in and around the nation's largest metropolitan area, Bel Geddes envisioned superhighways that would approach within 50 miles of every city with more than 100,000 people but never actually enter them, instead connecting with city centers through feeder roads. (Bel Geddes did see the need for express highways within cities, but these were separate from the superhighway network that was Futurama's centerpeice.) For his part, Moses did not share Bel Geddes's belief in the importance of national highways, reportedly referring to the transcontinental highway system presented at Futurama as "bunk" ("Super-Highways"). While their respective visions differed, though, they did agree, as Paul Mason Fotsch puts it, "that urban chaos could best be overcome through the effective designs of engineers, without the intervention of politicians" (70).

These are two very important voices in the growth of American transportation: through Futurama, which was experienced directly by almost one in five Americans and experienced vicariously by others through news reports and through the exhibit's continuing influence on designers and futurists, Bel Geddes was more responsible than most for how Americans imagined the future; Moses, with his unparalleled role in reshaping the country's largest and most famous cityscape, was more responsible than most for how Americans would actually experience that future. The fact that these two prominent authorities disagree on such issues as the desirability of urban highways and the importance of a national highway system attests to the improbability of planning ever being so simple as a matter of independent experts conceiving an empirically-superior solution to transportation challenges or objectively determining the public's best interest.

Indeed, as Moses' legacy demonstrates (and as the evolution of other urban spaces in the decades after World War II corroborates), the determination of the public interest is likely to be less sensitive to the interests of working class and minority communities and likely to value the influence of capital over the experience of people. Freeing that authority from political inconveniences such as government oversight and regulation or public comment, as with Moses in New York City, exacerbates these problems.

This disavowal of working class people and minorities finds expression elsewhere in the same World's Fair that introduced Bel Geddes's vision to the world (a fair overseen in part by Moses, as New York City Parks Commissioner). Before their visit to Futurama, the family in E. L. Doctorow's *World's Fair* (1985) visits the Time Capsule exhibit in the Westinghouse Pavilion. Buried in the "Immortal Well" with the intent to be opened 5000 years in the future (because, the thinking went, recorded history had begun 5000 years in the past) the time capsule "had been devised to show people in the year 6939 what we had accomplished and what about our lives we thought meaningful," explains Edgar, the novel's primary narrator, who is a child at the time of the fair (283). Edgar's father, Dave, who "could be critical of something and enjoy it at the same time" (284) is skeptical of the contents: "He asked my brother and me why we thought there was nothing in the capsule about the great immigrations that had brought Jewish and Italian and Irish people to America or nothing to represent the point of view of the workingman. 'There is no hint from the stuff they included that America has a serious intellectual life, or Indians on reservations or Negroes who suffer from race prejudice. Why is that?'" (284). Given the time capsule's vision of the present, which ignores several of the nation's constituent populations, it is small wonder that the assessment of

the public interest by powerful planning authorities would repeatedly ignore or undervalue those same demographic groups.

Dave's critical eye remains open when the family visits Futurama, though he understands that Edgar (who has already seen the fair without his family and has been excited to show his family) has "a proprietary interest in the occasion" and so "was very gentle and said many things to show his appreciation and delight" (285). Still, the father notes, "when the time comes, General Motors isn't going to build the highways, the federal government is. With money from us taxpayers" The Futurama exhibit, Dave concludes, is the automobile industry's way of "telling us what they expect from us: we must build them the highways so they can sell us the cars" (285). "That may be so," his mother, Rose, tells Edgar privately a moment later, "but it would be very nice to own a car" (285). The two parents' reactions capture the sophisticated nature of Futurama as a marketing tool, in that it is not selling automobiles per se, but rather the possibilities of automobile culture. It was unnecessary, in 1939, to sell the public on the idea of the automobile itself, since automobile ownership had been growing steadily for the last several decades. Rose's desire for a car is not dependent on the Futurama exhibit; she expresses a simple wish for "a car," not a specific desire for the exhibit's futuristic automobile, with its radio control and streamlined teardrop shape. With the public's appetite for the automobile secure, GM's Futurama exhibit instead focuses on selling a vision of a future automobile culture that includes both continued advances in the automobile itself and massive public investment (financial and otherwise) in reshaping society to meet the needs of the automobile and the automobile traveler.

As insightful as the father's comment is, however, Edgar's initial reaction is equally revealing. As mentioned, the visit with the family was Edgar's second trip to the fair; the first was with the family of a classmate. Futurama is the exhibit Edgar is most excited to see, and even after waiting in line for an hour (lines at the exhibit were famously long) he is mesmerized once he gets inside:

> "No matter what I had heard about the Futurama, nothing compared with seeing it for myself: all the small moving parts, all the lights and shadows, the animation, as if I were looking at the largest most complicated toy ever made! In fact this is what I realized and that no one had mentioned to me. It was a toy that any child in the world would want to own. You could play with it forever. The little cars made me think of my toy cars when I was small, the ones I held between my thumb and forefinger, the little coupes and sedans of gunmetal whose wheels spun on axles no thicker than a needle as I drove them along the colored tracks of my plaid carriage blanket. The buildings were models, it was a model world" (253).

Edgar's reaction captures many facets of the exhibit and its impact. His emphasis on "all the lights and shadows, the animation" highlights the exhibit's artificiality by calling attention to its cinematic aspects. (Bel Geddes began his career as a set designer for stage and screen, including for Cecil B. DeMille.) The final sentence captures the ambivalence in the word "model," as both exemplar and imitation. On the one hand, it is "a model world" in the sense that Bel Geddes and GM offer it as an example for the future world to build from and towards. On the other hand it is "a model world" in that it is an imitation or a recreation—and, the reference to childhood toys suggests, a relatively cheap imitation at that. More importantly, the realization that the Futurama is, at heart, "the

largest most complicated toy ever made … a toy that any child in the world would want to own" associates the exhibit with the possibility of control. The Futurama is a world that invites the fantasy of control, certainly for its creator but also for visitors. For an audience having endured a decade of financial insecurity during the Great Depression and now facing geopolitical insecurity with the outbreak of war in Europe, this fantasy would be particularly appealing.

This fantasy of control is woven into the fabric of the Futurama itself. Controlled by radio waves rather than human drivers, the cars are but the most visible manifestation of that desire for control. There are firm restrictions on what businesses can be built where, the "location and appearance" of retail establishments, construction materials and design of buildings, the placement of skyscrapers (one every ten blocks), the "seven different heights" (240) to which buildings can be built, and so on. Such regulations were evident only in the appearance of Futurama, but are spelled out in more detail in *Magic Motorways.* At its heart, the system of central planning that Bel Geddes espouses is a system of control, as Edgar again intuits when he first views the Futurama: "Cars were regulated by radio control, the drivers didn't even do the driving! This miniature world demonstrated how everything was planned, people lived in these modern streamlined curvilinear buildings, each of them accommodating the population of a small town and holding all the things … that they might need" (252). Edgar does not explicitly connect the intricate planning to the function of control, but the juxtaposition of the radio-controlled automobiles with the planned communities suggests continuity between the surface element of the externally-controlled cars and the underlying structure of the carefully planned miniature world.

Bel Geddes designed this model future not to control behavior by means of punishment; in fact, he ridicules contemporary traffic control methods which punish drivers for going too fast or for violating specific ordinances. He sees this as ineffective and, worse, inefficient—both in the sense that it makes inefficient use of government resources and in the sense that it ultimately reduces the efficiency of the automobile. Instead, his vision is to control behavior by limiting the range of possible behaviors, making alternatives inconvenient or impossible. Simple traffic regulations will never eliminate such problems as congestion or speeding through town: "If the principle is to be established that fast traffic should not go through a town, this must be made physically impossible" (195). Barring that, certain behaviors can be controlled by making them so inconvenient that drivers police themselves, as with certain planned communities where "through traffic in residential sections is discouraged by the discontinuous pattern of local streets" (196). Bel Geddes's notion of planning is consistent with disciplinary power in that it is productive; that is to say, behavior is controlled not (or, at least, not primarily) by punishing that which deviates, but rather by producing the desired behavior by design.

More to the point, like disciplinary structures more generally, the master plan is designed to produce efficient and productive subjects and to make efficient use of resources (including biopower). Traffic congestion is presented as a business issue rather than a quality-of-life issue, costing companies "as high as $1,000,000 a day in New York City alone" (180). In addition to moving traffic more efficiently, an well-designed highway system would specifically reduce traffic that is not economically productive: "The idea expressed in all progressive town-traffic planning is this: Of all the vehicles on the road, only those shall enter the community which actually have business there" (197).

In the Futurama, to paraphrase Calvin Coolidge, The business of American highways is business.

Even the land itself would be made more efficient by the superhighway. Moving produce more efficiently would allow farmers to grow for a national market rather than a regional one, freeing them from the restrictions of planning their crops to meet regional needs: “A day may come, indeed, when each piece of land is used only for those crops for which its soil is particularly well suited” (290). Moreover, the wider distribution radiuses would make more land useful: “Land that today is practically untouched farm country, remote from centers like New York and Chicago, would be opened up and used specifically to serve those cities, bringing in new domestic products to the cities” (208). Other land now dormant and undeveloped would be made productive by the superhighway system: “Road development so far has followed population and commercial development, not led it. Roads have left vast tracts of farmland relatively inaccessible. By avoiding difficult mountain terrain, roads have left unopened regions that contain great resources” (289). In the Futurama exhibit, mountainsides and valley floors heretofore left wild are made productive, with grazing slopes and terraced farms. Businesses, then, will be able to make more efficient use of their resources (including their human resources since, as we have seen earlier, the plan will be designed to help all future residents maximize their productive potential).

Bel Geddes was not, of course, the first person to propose a superhighway system. Benton MacKaye and Lewis Mumford offered “Townless Highways for the Motorist: A Proposal for the Automobile Age” in *Harper’s* in 1931, for instance; their vision of townless highways and highwayless towns clearly influenced Futurama. A 1938 *Popular*

Science Monthly article about a superhighway system proposed by Senator Robert J. Bulkley imagined triple-decker highways (one level for leisure driving, one for buses, and one for trains) in which electromagnetic pulses from cables below the road controlled the vehicles and the highways "light up of their own accord" at night when they sense vehicles present (Murtfeldt 27). Still, its status as the most visited and most popular (almost 50 percent of fairgoers picked Futurama as the exhibit they would most like to visit again [Doordan 104-5]) exhibit at the New York World's Fair afforded Futurama a higher profile and stronger influence than most. The ride through Futurama ended with a particular model intersection; visitors were then given an "I have seen the future" button and ushered out the door into a life-size version of "precisely the corner you had just seen, the future was right where you were standing and what was small had become big, the scale had enlarged and you were no longer looking down at it, but standing in it, on this corner of the future, right here in the World's Fair!" (Doctorow 253). The Depression-worn public of 1939 and 1940 was ready to emerge into that future. They carried such a vision through the intervening years of World War II, which in expanding the presence and promise of industry and technology in American life made building such a future seem all the more possible. As the war came to an end, the move towards a motorized society was accelerated by the pent-up demand for automobiles (the use of which had been limited by gasoline rationing and the production of which had been limited by the conversion of factories to military production) and the redirection of industrial energies and raw materials from military to consumer purposes.

Not all elements of the future developed at the same pace, however. The motorways themselves, though not on quite the grand scale Bel Geddes envisioned, were

already under construction by the late 1950s, authorized by the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. The magic—that is to say, the automated automobile, subject not to the control of an individual driver but rather a larger autonomous system—was not so quick to develop. Even without the magic, these superhighways are not divorced from issues of control. The interstate highway system was the largest public works project in history, and federal highway funds remain an important contribution to the budgets of individual states, who are responsible for overseeing the construction (within guidelines) of federal highways inside their borders; consequently, the distribution of federal highway funds has been used to exert control over various laws and policies in individual states. Sometimes these policies relate directly to transportation, as when 1974's Emergency Highway Energy Conservation Act imposed a national speed limit of 55 mph by withholding funds for road repair from states that refused to comply. Other policies have been less directly related to transportation, as with 1984's National Minimum Drinking Age Act, which authorized the Department of Transportation Secretary to withhold a percentage of highway funds from states that did not enforce a minimum drinking age of 21. More recently, highway funds have been used to leverage control over state ethics laws—though not, as one might expect, to strengthen them. In 2004, the Federal Highway Administration threatened to withhold funds from New Jersey because a state executive order targeting "pay-to-play" corruption limited the amount of money that government contractors could contribute to state candidates.

Like the superhighways of Futurama, the interstate highway system was designed for efficiency, with little regard to the passing landscape. This was in keeping with Bel Geddes's vision, which included (in the interest of keeping routes as direct as possible)

bridges across Lake Michigan and the Great Salt Lake and which somehow (with cuts, fills, and long ramps) passed over the Rocky Mountains with "a slight but barely perceptible upgrade" (156) and "curves so gentle that they have no more effect on driving than a straightaway" (159).[42] This was, however, a significant break from the prevailing ethic of federal roads prior to World War II, which emphasized landscape architecture and creating a harmonious relationship between road and surroundings.

The traditional approach to parkways, as exemplified by the nation's first National Parkway, the Blue Ridge Parkway, emphasized driving for pleasure and scenic beauty. It would be a mistake to equate scenic with natural, since parkways were very much a managed environment. Design elements from signage to park buildings to the split-rail fences encouraged on visible farmland were intended to give a cohesive impression of Appalachian culture. Though not on the scale of the massive displacement that accompanied urban highway construction in later decades, the parkway, too, dislocated established residents: houses and other structures that were inconsistent with the desired impression were dismantled and their occupants relocated (Wilson 36). It was, in the words of designer Stan Abbott, "a museum of managed American countryside"; like most museums it offered a specific cultural perspective, reinforcing, for example, a myth of the isolated Appalachian hill people untouched by the modernization of the twentieth century, retaining, in this first American wilderness, frontier lifestyles decades after the frontier had closed. There were exhibits and guidebooks along the parkway to propagate this myth, and the landscape was designed to confirm it: "The Park Service

[42] In addition to the improbability of plotting a path to traverse the Rockies with barely noticeable curves or grades, Bel Geddes's geography is off here; Salt Lake City lies between the Rockies to the east and the Great Salt Lake to the west, but he describes travelers passing from Colorado into Salt Lake City and then moving across the lake as the foothills of the Rockies appear.

deliberately removed or camouflaged inconvenient conflicting evidence that history had indeed touched people's lives in the mountains. At the Mabry Mill, for example, in the 1950s, when park officials tore down the owner's 1914 frame house (a structure quite typical of mountain farmsteads by that time), they replaced it with a log cabin trucked in from another county" (Whisnant 255). Incorporated in the ethic of the parkway, then, is the othering of the local population, expressed in the desire to render the local people as exotic and projecting upon the Appalachian hills a national longing for a pioneer past.

Most prewar parkways were not designed with the care or resources of the Blue Ridge Parkway, which was overseen by the National Park Service and took more than 50 years to complete; still, a prevailing ethic of road building which valued landscape architecture gave way in the 1940s to an approach favoring efficiency and engineering. The first modern superhighway, the Pennsylvania Turnpike, opened in October 1940 (the same month, coincidentally, that the Futurama exhibit closed) and became a tourist attraction in its own right not for the beauty of the landscape (landscape architects were generally critical of the design) but rather because the smooth surface, long straightaways, and seven tunnels through the Alleghenies made it a motor route like no other. The year before the turnpike opened, the Bureau of Public Roads issued a report to Congress about the feasibility of federal road building. The role of landscape architecture was greatly reduced in favor of attention to engineering concerns, with an emphasis on efficiency and productivity. The recommendations of the report, along with models like the Pennsylvania Turnpike, would provide the foundation for the development of the Interstate Highway System in the 1950s and beyond.

While the interstate certainly brought the advantage of faster travel across the nation, more efficient distribution of goods, safer driving, and the creation (directly and indirectly) of countless jobs, there were negative consequences as well, including the disruption to urban cores and increased suburban sprawl, with the attendant social and environmental problems. Beyond that, it also changed the way Americans thought about the highway; with the rise of the superhighway, the open road gives way to the limited-access highway as the central metaphor of American automobility. Several American authors, in the years after World War II, wrote automobile narratives that grapple with these changes. Even as they celebrate the speed of highway driving, they evoke nostalgia for earlier forms of automobility, such as those espoused (as we saw in Chapter 1) by Wharton, Dreiser, and Lewis, and they resist the emphasis on productivity and efficiency that the Futurama celebrated.

On the Road

Of the many texts about the open road that have appeared since World War II, few can match the influence or stature of Jack Kerouac's novel about the travels of Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty. Written in 1951 about events that took place in the late 1940s, the novel was not published until 1957, the year after ground was broken on the Interstate Highway System. *On the Road,* then, celebrates the open road and the freedom of America's roads at the same moment when, historically, those roads were becoming back roads. Like all of Kerouac's works, the novel is heavily autobiographical, with narrator Sal Paradise standing in for Kerouac and other characters representing Beat compatriots such as Neal Cassady (Dean Moriarty), Allen Ginsberg (Carlo Marx), and William Burroughs (Old Bull Lee). The novel's central relationship is between Sal and

Dean, with the older Sal serving as a mentor of sorts to Dean, who wants to be a writer and admires Sal's knowledge and intellect. Dean, in turn, provides a manic, youthful energy and the possibility of spiritual transformation and rebirth through movement, as the novel's opening lines suggest: "I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up. I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won't bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserably weary split-up and my feeling that everything was dead. With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road" (1). The attraction to Dean—emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and physical—drives Sal's adventures back and forth across the country; he travels sometimes with Dean, sometimes in search of him, and sometimes in flight from the havoc that Dean's magnetic energy inevitably creates.

As Jason Haslam points out, texts of the beat movement in general, and by Kerouac in particular, have "long been a space of cultural and political contestation" (444), producing contradictory readings regarding their political interests and implications. While, on the one hand, Kerouac and the beats have been recognized for their critique of the conformity and consumerism associated with post-war American culture, recent critics have also pointed out that these texts at times reproduce oppressive attitudes towards women and minorities, while at other times they may simply replace conventional stereotypes with cultural appropriation and a romantic idealization of minority communities that reifies their cultural status as "other."[43] In addition to these

[43] Brendon Nichols, for example, argues that Kerouac's oeuvre attempts to construct an American identity, and that this attempt is grounded in a "racial desire [that] has Oedipal dimensions" (524). Jon Panish's reading of *The Subterraneans* finds in that book (the story of Kerouac's affair with an African-American woman) and elsewhere that his "romanticized depictions of and references to African Americans (as well as other racial minorities—American Indians and Mexican-Americans) betray his essential lack of understanding of African American culture and the African American social experience" (107). Sometimes critics afford a self-awareness to Kerouac and other beat writers in this regard, as with Jonathan Paul

blind spots, Manuel Luis Martinez has criticized the Beats in general for a regressive valorization of nineteenth century ideals: "The legacy that these writers actually reproduce closely resembles nineteenth-century concepts about individualism, American exceptionalism, and manifest destiny. This is readily discernible in the valorization of physical movement and in the fashioning of a cult of decadent individualism" (16). *On the Road*, which is nothing if not a celebration of movement, would appear to fit that bill, and there is certainly, in Sal's criss-crossing the United States and eventually dipping down into Mexico, an attempt to negotiate a post-frontier America. Then too, critics have long associated *On the Road* with a celebration of individualism. Thomas Newhouse calls the novel a "paean to individualism" (163), while Harry Russell Huebel labels that individualism "all-consuming" (29). More recently, Andrew Madigan identifies in Kerouac's prose a celebration of a nineteenth-century individualistic heroism, and refers to Kerouac's work (among others) as New Rugged Individualism.

This tendency to treat *On the Road* as a celebration of American individualism is consistent with (and perhaps, in part, a product of) the tendency to associate the automobile itself with individualism and to find the rise of automobile culture coincident with a focus on the individual at the expense of community. Even on its surface, however, this association elides some important details about Kerouac and *On the Road*, such as the fact that the author himself never had a driver's license; while that didn't stop him from actually driving (as his alter-ego occasionally does in the course of the novel), Sal Paradise doesn't own an automobile and relies on friends' cars, ride-shares from

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Eburne, who argues that both Burroughs's and Kerouac's attempts to "evacuate[e] a bankrupt subject position by identifying with the 'otherness; of the American cultural margins ends up, as Burroughs and Kerouac realize with increasing distress, implicating themselves in the same process of normativity and containment that they attempt to leave behind" (54).

travel bureaus, and (primarily) hitch-hiking to get where he needs to go. Beyond such surface details, reading the novel as a celebration of the power and freedom of the individual obscures the novel's interest in community and, specifically, the use of the automobile as a tool to create and strengthen relationships between individuals and fashion new forms of community. Reading *On the Road* instead through the lens of earlier forms of automobility facing obsolescence in the age of the superhighway reveals a more forceful critique of postwar consumer culture, rejecting (rather than reinforcing) frontier myth and rugged individualism.

This critique is illuminated by the novel's rejection of the ethic of the superhighway, instead seeking to recover the transformative potential of an earlier stage of automobility. The delight Kerouac takes in nature and in the road as a tool to access it is distinct from the superhighway ethic, which generally viewed nature as an obstacle to be overcome or as a resource that roads could help to exploit. The focus on community, interpersonal relationships, and personal networks resists the utilitarian structure of the superhighway, belies the frequent associations of his novel as a celebration of the individual, and challenges the frequent assumption that the automobile is inherently alienating. Perhaps most importantly, the novel rejects the superhighway's prevailing ethic of productivity.

With its celebration of speed and movement, the novel might initially be seen to reinforce the values of the superhighway. As Renée Bryzik rightly notes, because "New York and Denver [two cities the novel visits repeatedly] are far apart, Sal's ultimate travel goal is speed" (668), and this "destination-driven egotism" (666) may justly be associated with the interstate highway system. However, while Sal frequently desires

speed in the moment, the novel itself celebrates the gap between his desire and the reality of his travel across the country, which is often (since he usually has no automobile and must hitchhike) more slow and laborious than he would like. While Sal, as a character and in the moment, frequently finds those moments of immobility frustrating, Sal as a narrator (with the temporal distance that the narrative structure imposes) finds them interesting and rewarding in their own right.

Sal's first attempt to take to the road, in the novel's second chapter, reveals the foolhardy nature of his emphasis on speed, and explicitly rejects the superhighway model of travel. Having heard from a friend, Remi Boencouer, that there may be work on an ocean liner out of San Francisco, Sal decides to head west. This will be his first trip west, and he concocts grand notions of both a frontier experience and of traveling by a single, great highway carrying him almost all the way across the continent: "I'd been poring over maps of the United States in Paterson for months, even reading books about the pioneers and savoring names like Platte and Cimarron and so on, and on the roadmap was one long red line called Route 6 that led from the tip of Cape Cod clear to Ely, Nevada, and there dipped down to Los Angeles. I'll just stay on 6 all the way to Ely, I said to myself and confidently started" (10). On the surface this would appear to reinforce the connection critics have drawn between the novel (and the automobile) and the notion of frontier conquest, as well as to suggest the appeal of Bel Geddes's dream of straight-shooting superhighways crossing the nation. But the trip ends in disaster. Sal makes his way by subway, trolley, and hitchhiking to Bear Mountain Bridge, 40 miles north of New York City, where "Route 6 came over the river, wound around a traffic circle, and disappeared into the wilderness" (10); once there, however, he finds bad weather and no

traffic from which to hitch a ride. In heavy rain and without shelter, he begins "crying and swearing and socking myself on the head for being such a damn fool" (10). Eventually he finds an empty filling station and takes cover under the eaves, and when a man and two women stop to study a map, they offer to take him up to Newburgh, where he catches a ride back to New York and starts over. The experience makes him rethink the strategy of a single route speeding him across the country: "It was my dream that screwed up, the stupid hearthside idea that it would be wonderful to follow one great red line across America instead of trying various roads and routes" (11). This first abortive trip west, then, forces Sal to rethink his ethic of travel, rejecting both the single superhighway approach that initially appealed to him (and which was in the process of changing the way Americans moved about the country) as well as its associations with relentless westward movement and expansion. He still wants to go west, to be sure, but now sees the destination as less important than the experience itself, the "trying" of "various roads and routes."

Over the course of the novel, this trying of various roads and routes affords for Sal Paradise, as it does for Wharton, Dreisser, and Lewis, access to a relationship with self, others, and the landscape that is lost in the move towards smart roads and superhighways. Bryzik, who uses *On the Road* to provide a point of comparison for William Least Heat-Moon's *Blue Highways*, is right that Kerouac's novel tends to privilege people over places, and that Heat-Moon's travelogue is much more sensitive to place than *On the Road.* But few writers can match the investment in place found in Heat-Moon (who followed *Blue Highways* with *PrairyErth*, a deep mapping of Chase County, Kansas), and Kerouac's novel is more connected to the landscape than it might

first appear. Like the early automobile travelogues, *On the Road* includes descriptions of the passing landscape, which fascinates, amazes, and energizes him. Viewing the "great trees in the distance that snaked with the riverbed and the great verdant fields around it," he "almost agrees" with the assessment of his driver, who claims "the valley of the Platte was as great as the Nile Valley of Egypt" (17). On some occasions the beauty is such that his words falter and (in a style characteristic of the novel's breathless descriptions) he resorts to abstract concepts or vague literary allusions, as in "a grapy dusk, a purple dusk over tangerine groves and long melon fields" in California's Central Valley, with "the sun the color of pressed grapes, slashed with burgundy red, the fields the color of love and Spanish mysteries" (80-81). For Sal Paradise, as for early motorists, the availability of natural vistas is one of the pleasures of the automobile.

Beyond mere description, Kerouac uses the unique features of an individual landscape to access some of the novel's deeper concerns, as when they cross the desert towards Salt Lake City from the west: "… at dusk we were in the Salt Lake flats with the lights of Salt Lake City infinitesimally glimmering almost a hundred miles across the mirage of the flats, twice showing, above and below the curve of the earth, one clear, one dim. I told Dean that the thing that bound us all together in this world was invisible, and to prove it pointed to long lines of telephone poles that curved off out of sight over the bend of a hundred miles of salt" (211). The twin images of the distant cityscape—one real and knowable, the other illusory and inaccessible, speak to the aforementioned tension between expectations and reality as well as to the difficulties of interpersonal relationships: Dean and Sal's struggle to know one another is complicated by each one's ideas of the other, with neither, ultimately, able to communicate their own or access the

other's full sense of self. On more than one occasion, Sal follows his descriptions of the landscape with great gasps of air, as if to commune directly with the natural landscape and merge it with his physical being. Driving from New York to New Orleans in January, 1949, for example, Dean and Sal have to trade places so that Sal, who has been driving, can rest: "We got out of the car for air and suddenly both of us were stoned with joy to realize that in the darkness all around us was fragrant green grass and the smell of fresh manure and warm waters. 'We're in the South! We've left the winter!'" (139). The natural world, and its absorption into their being, is enough to impose an altered state of consciousness; more than that, it offers insight into their own lives, as the winter they have left behind in New York City is both literal and metaphoric, referring to a period of dwindling funds, limited prospects, and monotony.

At the same time, the natural world is not always so legible, and the prospect of immersion can become terrifying, as when they get lost on a Louisiana swamp road: "We were surrounded by a great forest of viny trees in which we could almost hear the slither of a million copperheads. The only thing we could see was the red ampere button on the Hudson dashboard…. We wanted to get out of this mansion of the snake, this mireful drooping dark, and zoom on back to familiar American ground and cowtowns. There was a smell of oil and dead water in the air. This was a manuscript of the night we couldn't read" (157). Here the automobile has brought them too far into the natural world, with the single dashboard light providing their only remaining connection to civilization and (in the midst of complete darkness) the only evidence they have of a visible physical reality.

Like the explorer with whom their automobile shares a name[44], who during a search for a Northwest Passage was unseated by a mutiny, set adrift in a small vessel and never seen again, Sal and Dean are in danger of venturing (via the automobile) too far into nature. The mysterious landscape speaks to a cultural heritage and a spiritual component as well, evoking the mythical Mississippi crossroads where, legend has it, Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil in exchange for his guitar prowess. They have ventured so deeply into the recesses of the natural world as to approach something supernatural. Though they seem, momentarily, to be completely lost in this mysterious preternatural world, they take "a chance on one of the dirt roads" and are soon "crossing the evil old Sabine River that is responsible for all these swamps" (157-8). The automobile that has brought them to the darkest and most foreboding recesses of nature also delivers them safely from it.

Sal's interaction with nature includes a self-conscious desire for a frontier wilderness, but his experience on the road forces him to revise his understanding of American frontier geography. He refers to the final night of his return to New York City after his first trip out West as "the night of the Ghost of the Susquehanna" (104). The ghost in question is a well-traveled "semi-respectable walking hobo of some kind" whom Sal meets outside Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The spectral nickname evokes a moment of depersonalization, "the strangest moment of all," from early on his journey westward, when he is "halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of [his] youth and the West of [his] future": "I was far away from home, haunted and tired with travel, in a cheap hotel room I'd never seen … and really didn't know who I was for about fifteen strange seconds. I wasn't scared; I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my

[44] The Hudson Motor Car Company was not actually named after Henry Hudson, as commonly believed, but rather after J. L. Hudson, who ran a department store in Detroit and provided initial financing for the automobile company.

whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost" (15). Now, at the end of his journey, Sal meets a traveler who has been so long on the road that this "strangest moment of all" has taken on permanence, rendering him a ghost. Together they walk "seven miles along the mournful Susquehanna. It is a terrifying river. It has bushy cliffs on both sides that lean like hairy ghosts over the unknown waters. Inky night covers all. Sometimes from the railyards across the river rises a great red locomotive flare that illuminates the horrid cliffs" (104). The experience forces him to rethink his understanding of American frontier geography:

> I thought all the wilderness of America was in the West till the Ghost of the Susquehanna showed me different. No, there is a wilderness in the East; it's the same wilderness Ben Franklin plodded in the oxcart days when he was postmaster, the same as it was when George Washington was a wildbuck Indian-fighter, when Daniel Boone told stories by Pennsylvania lamps and promised to find the Gap, when Bradford built his road and men whooped her up in log cabins. There were not great Arizona spaces for the little man, just the bushy wilderness of eastern Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, the backroads, the black-tar roads that curve among the mournful rivers like Susquehanna, Monongahela, old Potomac and Monocacy (105-106).

Sal had been lured to "the West of [his] future" by the promise of a frontier, only to find now that wilderness persists here in "the East of [his] youth." Rooted in the nation's founding and initial Westward expansion, this wilderness was at once both revealed and revoked by the blazing of new trails, such as the Wilderness Road through the Cumberland Gap; now, though, it is revealed not by the engineering of new roads but by

the return to those roads of the past, the "backroads, the black-tar roads that curve among the mournful rivers." Sal's eastern wilderness is not pure wilderness in the sense of nature unspoiled by development; that the backroads curve not along the rivers but *among* them (as though integral) suggests that this wilderness is able to absorb some semblance of human development rather than being absorbed by it. Still, this wilderness retains its power to move, to terrify, to force Sal to confront the sublime: "This experience thoroughly shattered me," Kerouac writes in the original draft of the novel; "that night in Harrisburg bore me the punishment of the damned" (*Original Scroll* 210). In moderation, encroaching modern technology heightens the emotional impact of the wilderness itself, as in the occasional "locomotive flare that illuminates the horrid cliffs."

It is conventional for road narratives (and other excursions into the wilderness) to end with a homecoming in which the protagonist, now changed by his experience away from the city, returns to view his civilization through a new critical lens. Sal Paradise's homecoming arrives with his sudden return to Times Square, where he is dropped off by a businessman who picked him up in the Pennsylvania wilderness: "I had traveled eight thousand miles around the American continent and I was back on Times Square; and right in the middle of a rush hour, too, seeing with my innocent road-eyes the absolute madness and fantastic hoorair of New York with its millions and millions hustling forever for a buck among themselves, the mad dream—grabbing, taking, giving, sighing, dying, just so they could be buried in those awful cemetery cities beyond Long Island City" (106-7). Like the wilderness, Times Square foregrounds the possibility of death, but one associated with monotony rather than sublimity. Where the shattering experience

of the wilderness and the road suggests an ego death and depersonalization, the death that powers the metropolitan center is ego-driven and dehumanizing.

The road also provides Sal with tools for creating interpersonal relationships and community. The most basic way the automobile serves this purpose is by helping Sal stay connected to friends after they have dispersed across the country. His movements in the novel are generally guided not by whimsy, but rather a desire to connect with specific individuals who have scattered from metropolitan New York, where the Beat community first coalesced while Kerouac and others were attending Columbia. The first destination on his first successful trip to the West is Denver, which appeals to Sal primarily because of Dean Moriarty, whose father had been "one of the most tottering bums of Larimer Street, and [who] had in fact been brought up generally on Larimer Street and thereabouts" (27). Dean is not the only person Sal knows in Denver, though; it is also the hometown for his friends Tim Gray and Chad King (from whom he had first heard of Dean). Several other people he knows, including Carlo Marx and his "old college writing buddy" (16) Roland Major had beaten Sal to Denver.[45] While in Denver, he also makes new friends, such as Babe and Ray Rawlins and Ed Dunkel. (Ed will reappear, with his wife Helen, as car-mates in a cross-country journey later in the book.)

The friends and acquaintances in Sal's life are young, mobile (in Dean's case, transient even), and have spread to several different corners of the country, but Sal stays

[45] Tim Gray is based on Denver architect Ed White, who also attended Columbia. White had an important effect on the novel's structure as well as its content. When Kerouac found himself frustrated with the conventional travelogue nature of *On the Road*, White suggested he "sketch in the streets like a painter but with words" (Kerouac, *Selected Letters* 356). Chad King is based on Denverite Hal Chase, who became friends with Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, and other Beat luminaries while attending Columbia. Roland Major is based on Allen Temko, who was an architecture critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle* for more than 30 years, winning the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 1990. He was notable for his opposition to urban superhighways such as the Embarcadero Freeway, a double-decker freeway that ran along the San Francisco waterfront until it was demolished after the 1989 earthquake.

connected to this network by taking to the road. When his community in Denver eventually splinters—King and Major have grown apart from Dean and Carlo, with Sal "smack in the middle of this interesting war" (37)—Sal begins again to yearn for new vistas, and so he heads further west to live with Remi Boencouer (Henri Cru, whom Kerouac had known since prep school) and his girlfriend outside of San Francisco. After his return to New York City, his next trip west is motivated by the desire to visit (accompanied by Dean and Ed Dunkel) Old Bull Lee in Algiers, Louisiana; from there they proceed West to San Francisco, where Sal plans to live once again, this time with Dean and company. He returns to Denver in 1949 with plans to settle down, but Denver cannot keep him because the sense of community there has dwindled: "Nobody was there—no Babe Rawlins, Ray Rawlins, Tim Gray, Betty Gray, Roland Major, Dean Moriarty, Carlo Marx, Ed Dunkel, Roy Johnson, Tommy Snark, nobody" (179). After a few weeks he sets off for San Francisco again. And so it goes with all of his time on the road, his journeys powered by a desire not for self-discovery or individual accomplishment, but rather for a sense of human connection.

Sal spends the novel moving between dispersed pockets of established friends in New York, Denver, San Francisco, and elsewhere, but these are not the only type of community he celebrates. Also valuable is the community of fellow travelers he meets while on the road. He meets a hitchhiker named Eddie, for instance, in Adel, Iowa. His initial appraisal of Eddie is not generous: he senses he is "running away from something in New York, the law most likely," and "would have bored me ordinarily, except that my senses were sharp for any kind of human excitement" (16). They catch a ride together to Stuart, Iowa, where they bond over a few beers in a local saloon, with Eddie "yell(ing)

joyously in my ear all the sordid dreams of his life" (16). After a sleepless night in Stuart, waiting in vain for a ride to materialize and unable to hop one of the freight trains passing through, they catch a bus for Omaha, with Sal paying Eddie's way, because "it was like having an old friend along, a smiling good-natured sort to goof along with" (17). One day together on the road has transformed Eddie from someone Sal would have normally have resisted knowing to something akin to an old friend.

Their time together on the road comes to an end in Shelton, Nebraska[46], a town that Eddie has hated, he explains to Sal, since passing through it on the train during the war. With everyone else sleeping, Eddie steps out onto the platform for a cigarette when the train stops "in the middle of nowhere and black as hell, and I look up and see that name Shelton written on the watertank. Bound for the Pacific, everybody snoring, every dumb sucker … Damn me, this Shelton! I hated this place ever since!" (19). Though Eddie does not explicitly say so, "the Pacific" presumably refers not to the coast but to the Pacific theater, with the train in question one of the thousands of trains that carried some six million servicemen and women through Nebraska on their way to or from the coasts and points beyond.[47] This helps to explain the intensity of his feeling towards Shelton; it is nothing to him, after all, other than a name in the darkness, but in that context carries the weight of the fear and anxiety of departing all that is known for a violent and uncertain future. Whatever mysterious and unspoken psychology underpins Eddie's antipathy for Shelton, by the time they part ways Sal has adopted his new

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[46] The original scroll places this scene in a town called Preston, one of several geographic mistakes in the original, quickly-written draft that was corrected for the published version. Though there is a Preston, Nebraska, it is south of Omaha and so makes no sense with the sequence that precedes it.

[47] The Nebraska city of North Platte, some 120 miles past Shelton, became famous for the North Platte Canteen, which greeted every single troop train between Christmas Day, 1941 and April 1, 1946, offering service people homemade food, reading material, postcards and stationary, and friendly conversation in their 10- to 15-minute layover in town.

friend's attitude as his own. After Eddie has caught a ride out of town, Sal stays behind "in our personal godawful Shelton" (21). The construction suggests not simply that Sal dislikes Shelton as Eddie does, but that the town affects each of them similarly, forming a personal bond between the two; it is not *Sal's* personal godawful Shelton, but one that unites them and which they share, even after Eddie is no longer there. Having waited several hours after Eddie caught his own ride out of town, Sal finally catches the attention of a motorist who offers to take him "a hundred miles up the line." "Grand, grand," Sal responds, "you saved my life" (21), confirming the role that the prospect of death plays in their shared experience of "(their) personal godawful Shelton."

Eddie resurfaces in Denver, calling some of the people Sal had mentioned to him until tracking Sal down. With Dean's help, Eddie and Sal find work together in Denver, but the hours are too long for Sal, who finds Denver too interesting to commit to such a schedule. Eddie does not figure prominently in the rest of Sal's time in Denver, but before leaving for San Francisco he visits Eddie's girlfriend's house to pick up a shirt that Eddie had borrowed on their last night together in Shelton. The day, like the night in Shelton, is rainy (he loaned the shirt to Eddie because Eddie's clothes were too worn to keep him warm in that weather): "Roy Johnson and I walked in the drizzle; I went to Eddie's girl's house to get back my wool plaid shirt, the shirt of Shelton, Nebraska. It was there, all tied up, the whole enormous sadness of a shirt" (59). Referring to the shirt as "the shirt of Shelton, Nebraska" infuses it with "(their) personal godawful Shelton" and the associations with the war, Eddie's hatred of the town, the uncertainty of the future and the prospect of death, and the strength of their relationship over those short few days they traveled together. The "sadness" of the shirt, which Eddie took with him

when he left Sal in Shelton, suggests he felt an important connection with his "road buddy," and it is further significant that he recovers this "enormous sadness of a shirt" on the same day that he again leaves friends (and Dean in particular) in Denver. The final phrase—"the whole enormous sadness of a shirt"—is characteristic of Kerouac's spontaneous prose (and similar to the ecstatic language one finds in Ginsberg): in striving for an unmediated narration he avoids dwelling on or precisely defining the significance of a given object or moment and instead defers to an imprecise abstraction like the "whole enormous sadness of a shirt." The unexpected description suggests a Proustian dimension to the object, but rather than unpack the string of involuntary memories contained therein, Kerouac leaves it for the reader. Even as his status as author positions him as the "driver" of the novel, Kerouac here declines to expound on the passing terrain, allowing passengers to contemplate the landscape on their own.

Shortly after separating from Eddie in Shelton, Sal finds a new outlet for human connection with "the greatest ride in [his] life" (22). It was a truck with a large, empty flatbed, driven by a pair of Minnesota farmers who were "picking up every single soul they found on that road" (22). When he runs up to the window to ask if there is room, their answer is simple: "Sure, hop on, 'sroom for everybody." Sal immediately finds a sense of community on the flat bed: he lurches when the truck begins moving before he is actually on the truck, but a rider grabs him, pulls him safely onboard, and offers him the refreshment of "a bottle of rotgut, the bottom of it," and he takes "a big swig in the wild, lyrical, drizzling air of Nebraska" (22). The good fortune of catching a ride in the open air with a large group of fellow vagabonds has excited his romantic sensibilities.

This ride turns out to be special for two reasons. First, it is a long ride: the drivers are brothers from Minnesota who bring farm equipment from Los Angeles to sell back home, and on their return to the coast give rides to anyone who wants one on their empty flatbed; Sal is momentarily tempted by the possibility of shooting all the way to the coast, and though he decides against it he is thrilled to have a single ride through to Cheyenne, where he will hitch south to Denver. More importantly, the flatbed offers Sal the best community that he finds in his time on the road. His fellow riders include those traveling for fun (a pair of high school football players from Columbus, Ohio), for money (a pair of North Dakota farmboys planning to find harvest work further west), for family reasons (Montana Slim, who is heading home to visit his father) and for life ("thirty-year old hobo" Mississippi Gene and a teenager on the run from the law, whom Gene looks after). The group bonds almost immediately, and when the drivers stop for food in North Platte, Sal and a few of the others buy some whiskey "to keep warm in the rushing cold air of night" (24). The flatbed has the atmosphere and camaraderie of a neighborhood bar—they pass the bottle around, swap stories, and Sal "yell[s] for joy" (25). As the truck begins to climb into the high plains the night gets colder, and the remaining riders huddle together under a tarpaulin and pass what is left of the bottle to keep warm in the cold Wyoming air, while Gene sings and Sal stares at the stars.

As much as Sal enjoys the experience and the companionship on the back of the flatbed, he knows that it is only a temporary community, and when the truck enters Cheyenne, where the sidewalks are crowded with locals and tourists celebrating Frontier Days,[48] Sal has to leave the best ride of his life. "It was sad to see them go, and I realized

[48] Sal refers to the festival as "Wild West Week," as does Kerouac in a postcard sent to his mother (*Selected Letters, 1940-1956* 110).

that I would never see any of them again, but that's the way it was …. And the truck left, threading its way through the crowds, and nobody paying attention to the strangeness of the kids inside the tarpaulin, staring at the town like babes from a coverlet. I watched it disappear into the night" (30-31). While temporary, though, the experience has a significant and lasting effect on Sal, as he later tries to explain to his friend Remi Boenceur when Remi mentions hopping off a train in North Platte: "I tried to tell him what North Platte meant to me, buying the whisky with the boys, and he slapped me on the back and said I was the funniest man in the world" (64). Temporary though it was, the camaraderie of North Platte and the flatbed through "the wild, lyrical, drizzling air of Nebraska" carries a significance that is incommunicable, even to his oldest friend.

Additionally, though the community of travelers on the flatbed is a temporary one, it reveals the potential for more sustained networks among those outside mainstream society. The hobo Mississippi Gene is central here. Sal takes to Gene quickly, and tries to help him and his "charge" by sharing his cigarettes and buying them each a pack when the truck stops at a soda fountain in Ogallala. Gene, too, proves a helpful sort, offering Sal a place to stay in Ogden, Utah, where Gene has connections, if Sal wants to keep traveling west. Ogden, Gene explains, serves as a crossroads for the dispossessed, "the place where most of the boys pass thru and always meet there; you're liable to see anybody there" (26). Something about Gene's demeanor makes Sal think about Big Slim Hazard,[49] a hobo from Louisiana whom Sal had known as a seaman some years before. On a whim, he asks Gene about him, and it turns out Gene knows him too. They compare notes and share stories of their mutual acquaintance, whom Sal had "been looking for,

[49] Big Slim Hazard is based on William Holmes Hubbard. Kerouac had been in a Navy psychiatric hospital with Hubbard; according to a letter Kerouac wrote to Neal Cassady, the pair planned an escape attempt together but it failed (*Selected Letters, 1940-1956* 307).

more or less, for years" (27). Kerouac takes to the road in large part because his circle of friends has spread out to several far-flung (though stable and relatively few in number) locales; his experience on the flatbed suggests that the road can still foster community and somewhat stable networks among even those constantly on the move.

Perhaps the novel's most significant departure from the ethic of the superhighway is the resistance to the equation of roads and productivity. From Bel Geddes's Futurama through the passage and development of the Interstate Highway System, boosters saw the superhighway as a mechanism for more efficiently developing the resources—including the human resources—of the nation, making individuals more economically efficient and productive. Even when Bel Geddes discusses the leisure potential of his magic highway, as regarding individuals and families being able to travel farther on vacation, he does so with respect to the economic effects of such tourism. Kerouac, however, resists the economic impetus of the open road; Sal Paradise does not take to the road to work, but rather works (to the extent that he does) to support his life on the road.

This is clear in his final encounter with Eddie, when they go together to find work in Denver. While Eddie has come to Denver to get a fresh start and responds to the boss's comment "I like boys who like to work" with "You've got your man," Sal "is not so sure about [him]self" (47). Sal and Eddie had been offered the chance to work together once before, while still stuck in Shelton, Nebraska. Sitting outside the train station, they are approached by "A tall lanky fellow" who "looked like a sheriff. We prepared our stories secretly" (20). As it turns out, the man runs a carnival and offers them the chance to work on a ring toss game in exchange for free board and a percentage of the take. They consider the offer but decide against it, and then kill some time wondering what it might

have been like: “I had visions of a dark and dusty night on the plains, and the faces of Nebraska families wandering by, with their rosy children looking at everything with awe, and I know I would have felt like the devil himself rooking them with all those cheap carnival tricks. And the Ferris wheel revolving in the flatlands darkness, and, Godalmighty, the sad music of the merry-go-round and me wanting to get on to my goal …” (20). The incident neatly captures two lines of opposition to commercial employment: it is restrictive and corruptive. The potential employer is initially perceived as a threat to Sal’s own freedom; he takes the approaching stranger for a sheriff and prepares his story in order to avoid legal sanction such as being thrown in jail for vagrancy. That the potential employer turns out to run a carnival is particularly interesting; the idea of “joining the carnival” (or the circus) suggests a fantasy of escape and mobility, but Sal still sees it as a restriction on his own freedom, and specifically his freedom of movement, preventing him from moving on to Denver and compounding the sadness of his imagined existence in the circus. The movement he desires is contrasted with the self-contained, geographically limited, and repetitive movement that the circus offers with its Ferris wheel and merry-go-round (a device which is itself deployed as a metaphor for the monotony and lack of self-determination of working life). Moreover, the prospect of steady employment through the carnival is seen as a potential compromise of his ethics. The carnival midway marketplace offers the illusory potential of reward for luck and skill, but the games are rigged, and so Sal cannot participate in the system without being corrupted as well. To participate as an employee in the market, the incident would suggest, is to sacrifice both one’s freedom and one’s soul.

Sal does go to work when he reaches California to live with Remi Boencouer, but once again the job is at odds with his values. He gets a job working with Remi as a guard in a local barracks that houses overseas construction workers: "I was sworn in by the local police chief, given a badge, a club, and now I was a special policeman. I wondered what Dean and Carlo and Old Bull Lee would say about this" (64). Though concerned about how his peers might perceive his new position, his need for employment leads Sal to join a policing system he despises. "The American police," Sal asserts while discussing a traffic stop on a later trip, "are involved in psychological warfare against those Americans who don't frighten them with imposing papers and threats. It's a Victorian police force; it peers out of musty windows and wants to inquire about everything, and can make crimes if the crimes don't exist to its satisfaction" (137). Circumstances have now conspired to make Sal himself one of these "neurotic busybodies," as the narrator calls the police in the original scroll (238). His co-workers at the barracks (aside from Remi) are "a horrible crew of men, men with cop-souls" (65), reflecting their willing and eager participation in such a system. They are all eager to crack down and make arrests, and they share stories about the brutality they inflict on argumentative subjects.[50] But while Sal clearly desires to keep his soul from becoming a cop-soul and "gulp[s] at the thought of making an arrest," the job forces him to actively participate, as his co-workers tell him that he has a quota of one arrest per month and will lose his job if he does not make it. Where the circus job would require him to cheat his fellow man, this job requires him to oppress them.

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[50] While their co-workers demonstrate one aspect of police corruption in their propensity towards violence, Remi and Sal tend towards a different aspect of police corruption, using their official position to enrich themselves by stealing food for groceries from the barracks cafeteria. Citing President Truman (who made the high cost of living a centerpiece of his 1948 State of the Union Address), Remi repeatedly insists that "*we must cut down on the high cost of living*" (71, italics in original).

Sal, however, quickly proves inadequate as a lawman, and his inability to transform himself into the requisite forceful authority figure further undermines the association of *On the Road* with the rugged individualism of American frontier myth. Sal is alone on duty the night before a big ship was to disembark, prompting many of the barracks residents to drink "like seamen the night before the anchor goes up" (65). Before hearing the "great hum of activity in the usually quiet night," Sal is sitting alone in the office "reading *Blue Book*[51] adventures about Oregon and the north country" (65). That he is reading frontier adventure stories when he hears the commotion outside invites a comparison between himself and the heroes of such tales. The analogy appears again when he reaches the first door intent on telling its occupants to keep it down: "They slammed the door in my face. I stood looking at the wood of it against my nose. It was like a Western movie; the time had come for me to assert myself" (65-66). But Sal is no Marshall Will Kane. The partiers offer him a drink before continuing his rounds and Sal accepts, a pattern which recurs at every door he knocks on. He winds up as drunk as any of the revelers, doing nothing to quell the noise (which draws complaints from residents across the canyon) and inadvertently raising the American flag upside down at the end of his shift the next morning.

While Sal's response to crisis as a special policeman has none of the characteristics of the mythic western hero, his deflection of the expectations for his position are telling of the novel's relationship to authority. Sal fails his audition as a western hero, but that failure carries something of the ambiguous refusal of the title character in Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853). Bartleby confounds his

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[51] *Blue Book* was a popular pulp magazine, publishing adventure stories from authors that included Edgar Rice Burroughs, Robert Heinlein, and Zane Grey, among others.

employer (who narrates the tale) by responding to the employer's various requests (to examine his copied documents for accuracy, to run errands for the firm, even to simply take a substantial severance bonus and cease coming to the office) with the refrain "I would prefer not to." This refrain has drawn the attention of recent philosophers such as Gilles DeLeuze, who says the phrase "hollows out an ever expanding zone of indiscernibility or indetermination between some nonpreferred activities and a preferable activity," abolishing "all particularity, all reference" (71), and Giorgio Agamben, who sees in Bartleby's simple declaration "the strongest objection against the principle of sovereignty … resist(ing) every possibility of deciding between potentiality and the potentiality not to" (*Homo Sacer* 48). In his refusal to articulate a preference beyond "not to," DeLeuze argues, Bartleby denies his own particularity and thus confounds mechanisms of control designed to act on individual and particular subjects. Agamben, meanwhile, argues that by not presenting his non-compliance as confrontation—by offering no hint of force that sovereignty could address with force of its own—Bartleby avoids becoming the oppositional figure which sovereignty is most equipped to engage and defeat. For DeLeuze and Agamben, then, Bartleby's non-compliance offers a uniquely effective form of civil disobedience.

Kerouac, too, was drawn to Melville's Scrivener, seeing him as a kindred spirit to the Beats. In an essay written shortly after *On the Road* was published, he explained the origins of the Beat movement, reacting in part to popular press characterizations of the beats as hoodlums and delinquents: "It never meant juvenile delinquents, it meant characters of a special spirituality who didn't gang up but were solitary Bartlebies staring out the dead wall window of our civilization" ("About" 559). Read in light of Bartleby's

passive resistance, Sal's deflection of the expectations for his position as a special policeman (which, like Bartleby's employment as a "law-copyist," aligns him, at least officially, with the system of law) is telling of the novel's relationship to authority. His employers expect him to keep order, by force if necessary—"It's your duty. You're sworn in. You can't compromise with things like this. Law and order's got to be kept," a former Alcatraz prison guard with whom he works tells him (67). Like Melville's famous scrivener, however, Sal "would prefer not to": "He was right," the narrator acknowledges after his co-worker's admonition, "but all I wanted to do was sneak out into the night and disappear somewhere, and go and find out what everybody was doing all over the country" (67). Sal is expected to enforce order, but would prefer not to.

Unlike Bartleby, he expresses a preference (to "disappear somewhere"), but like Bartleby his behavior resists his employer's expectations without explicitly confronting them. He may not measure up, in his moment of truth, to the mythic hero of western lore, but at the same time (to quote Giorgio Agamben describing Bartleby himself), "neither does he simply refuse to do what is asked of him; nothing is farther from him than the heroic pathos of negation" ("Bartleby, or On Contingency" 256). He neither accedes to his "duty" to enforce the law nor denies it. The "heroic pathos of negation" would offer a direct and explicit challenge to the authority of his special police unit, but that challenge would be easily met with his dismissal. In neither performing nor exactly refusing his duty, Sal does more to undermine that authority and presents a more difficult case for the system to address. The aftermath of his night along on duty reflects this—when he shows up at work the following day, he learns (to his horror) that he hung the flag upside down, an act which, one of his co-workers informs him, could send him to jail. But beyond that

vague threat and the general disapproval of his co-workers (something Bartleby aroused as well), there are no clear consequences for his failure to perform. “The chief is yelling at you,” one of his co-workers informs him (66), but this information comes only indirectly, as though the chief’s angry response must be diffused through this third party. In spite of Sal being specified as the target of the chief’s rage the reader (and Sal, as far as we know) never actually sees that anger, as though the chief is unable to address Sal’s indiscretion directly.

The awkward narrative structure surrounding the incident, too, confirms the difficulty of resolving the passive challenge Sal’s behavior poses. Rather than continuing with the fallout of that night, Kerouac’s narrative follows the officer’s comment with background detail about the officer himself, including his mannerisms and his past as a guard at Alcatraz. The narrator then digresses to a pair of stories, one told by the officer to Sal about an incident before Sal had joined the force and the other by Sal to the reader about a night he and the other cop went on an arrest together. The stories are impossible to place in the narrative timeline: there is no clear indication whether the cop begins telling his story immediately after dressing down Sal or if he told the story sometime before or after that event; likewise, it is not clear whether the story Sal tells takes place before or after the night in question. One might expect his apparent dereliction of duty to prompt some sort of conflict and consequence, but instead the narrative veers away, never to return.

In *Empire* (2000) Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri also take up the subject of Bartleby in their discussion of the refusal of authority; like DeLeuze and Agamben, they identify Bartleby’s strategy of refusal as particularly extreme, in that it “is so indefinite

that it becomes absolute" (203). Such "refusal of work and authority," they argue, "or really the refusal of voluntary servitude, is the beginning of liberatory politics" (204). They stress, however, that it is only a first step:

> The refusal in itself is empty. Bartleby and Michael K [from J. M. Coetzee's *The Life and Times of Michael K*] are beautiful souls, but their being in its absolute purity hangs on the edge of an abyss. Their lines of flight from authority are completely solitary, and they continuously tread on the verge of suicide. In political terms, too, refusal in itself (of work, authority, and voluntary servitude) leads only to a kind of social suicide …. Our lines of flight, our exodus must be constituent and create a new alternative. Beyond the simple refusal, or as part of that refusal, we need also to construct a new mode of life and above all a new community (204).

That is to say, Bartleby's refusal alone (or even the refusal of numerous "solitary Bartlebies") is insufficient to produce a more just and equitable society, and in isolation may even be counterproductive. Progress requires working to build new social structures rather than simply rejecting unacceptable social systems. As we have seen, Sal's adventures on the road do include such an attempt (imperfect though it may be) to construct new forms of community.

Sal and Dean's final adventure together is a trip to Mexico, which they imagine as a new frontier. On the surface, this might appear to suggest a celebration of rugged individualism and frontier myth, but this journey outside finally destroys their friendship. As they drive into Mexico, their imaginations work overtime to construct it as a true frontier, untouched by civilization. This desire reaches its fevered peak when they meet a

few young indigenous girls selling crystals on the roadside. Dean is enthralled: "They've only *recently* learned to sell these crystals, since the highway was built about ten years back—up until that time the entire nation must have been *silent!*" (297, emphasis in the original). Setting aside the severe ethnocentrism of imagining that "the entire nation"[52] was silent until the Pan-American Highway brought in outsiders to sell to, the passage suggests that, in their minds at least, Sal and Dean have finally reached a new frontier. Alas, their relationship cannot survive this movement to the outside. Sal takes ill with dysentery and spends several nights in a fevered, delusional state. At the height of Sal's illness, as he looks up at Dean "and didn't know who he was anymore" (301), Dean prepares to go back to the United States, leaving Sal sick in Mexico. Their relationship is never the same after that. When Sal recovers he "realize(s) what a rat [Dean] was" (302). Though he sees Dean once or twice again before the novel is over, Dean is no longer able to string a coherent sentence together and whatever sense of connection they had in the past appears gone. As a project of circulation, Sal's movement throughout the novel uses the road as both an outlet for his preference "not-to" and as a tool to explore and develop new possibilities of community, but the project breaks down when the characters switch from circulation to exodus, moving outside to the "frontier" of Mexico.

The examples of the carnival agent and the special policeman job suggest that employment, for Sal, is likely to involve some element that threatens to compromise his soul, but it also interferes with his other interests, including artistic production. The original plan when he moves in with Remi is that Remi will keep his job while Sal writes movie scripts, which Remi will then promote to a Hollywood director that he knows. But

[52] In context this likely refers to the indigenous nation of the crystal peddlers rather than the nation of Mexico, though there is some ambiguity.

while Sal does manage to produce one script (which is “far too sad”) his financial needs become too great and he abandons the arrangement and joins Remi on the force. That job, as we have seen, is not suited to him, leaving him desperate to “sneak out into the night and disappear somewhere, and go and find out what everybody was doing all over the country” (67). At a time when superhighways were being built as a way to move goods and labor more efficiently across the country as part of an economic system that could bring all citizens to their full productive potential, Kerouac views Sal’s experiences on the road as a way to avoid being inscribed in that system.

Play It As It Lays

Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays* is a very different novel from Kerouac’s *On the Road.* Structure and style are perhaps the most immediate and obvious differences. Kerouac’s novel was initially conceived in five parts, each of which was not only a single chapter but also a single paragraph, and while the published revision did incorporate chapters and paragraph breaks, the prose retains the breathless, unfiltered stream-of-consciousness designed, in his words, for an “undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words” (Kerouac “Essentials” 57). *Play It As It Lays*, on the other hand, offers 87 chapters averaging about two and a half pages each, with several containing less than 100 words. Didion’s prose is sparse and tightly calibrated, reflecting the increasing isolation of the novel’s main character. Geographically the novels differ as well. Though both main characters are interested in speed and the automobile, Sal Paradise wanders back and forth across the country more or less at will, while the main character in Didion’s novel struggles to escape the gravitational pull of her Los Angeles home and does most of her driving on the labyrinthine highway systems of southern California.

Finally, the novels are strikingly different in their treatment of women. *On the Road* is often (and justly) criticized for the lack of development in its female characters, its seeming lack of interest in women for much beyond sex, and its characters' general ignorance and indifference to the inner lives of their occasional female companions. "I suddenly realized," Sal acknowledges during a fight between Dean and one of his lovers, in one of the few passages that even attempts to imagine a feminine perspective, "that all these women were spending months of loneliness and womanliness together, chatting about the madness of the men" (187); even in the absence of men, Sal seems to believe, women's lives, thoughts, and conversations revolve around them.[53] *Play It As It Lays* has actress Maria (with a long *i*) Wyeth as the main character, and though only a handful of chapters are narrated by Maria herself, the third person narrator who tells most of the rest of the story is limited to her perspective.

Despite these differences in content, style, and perspective, the two novels are similar in their approach to the ethic of productivity that undergirds the postwar superhighway. Like Kerouac's novel, *Play It As It Lays* offers a main character who resists this intention of the freeway. Maria Wyeth instead develops a ritual of driving on the freeway which parodies the structured work days of the typical commuter and subverts the productivity ethic of the superhighway by circulating aimlessly and without destination.

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[53] The last 30 years have seen increasing attention to the role women played in the Beat Movement. Several women involved with major Beat figures have published memoirs detailing their role in and relationship to the Beat Movement. These include *Minor Characters: A Beat Memoir* (1983), by Joyce Johnson, who dated Kerouac in the late 1950s when *On the Road* was published; *Off the Road: My Years with Cassady, Kerouac, and Ginsberg* (1990), by Carolyn Cassady (Camille in *On the Road*), and *How I Became Hettie Jones* (1990), by Hettie Jones, who was married to LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka and was friends with several other Beats. Collections of the work of female Beat writers include *Women of the Beat Generation* (1996), edited by Brenda Knight, and *A Different Beat: Writing by Women of the Beat Generation* (1997), edited by Richard Peabody. For a scholarly discussion of female Beat writers, see *Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation* (2002), edited by Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace.

Like Hunter S. Thompson and Tom Wolfe, Didion was associated with the emerging New Journalism, a genre which was itself influenced by Jack Kerouac. She wrote her first novel, *Run, River* (1963), while working at *Vogue* in the early 1960s, but it was through her nonfiction essays for *Vogue* and *Saturday Evening Post* that she made her name. Her first collection of these essays, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968), was widely acclaimed for its depiction of a social fabric frayed by a decade of great social change. *Play It As It Lays* marked her return to fiction, and was both a critical and commercial success. The novel tells the story of Maria Wyeth, a minor actress who appeared in two movies directed by her husband Carter Lang: one, a studio film that brought her some degree of commercial success; and the other, a prize-winning independent film that, though never commercially distributed, made her something of a legend among film students at UCLA. Now in her early thirties, Maria is ambivalent about the film industry and no longer works regularly as an actress. She and Carter have a young daughter, Kate, who has been institutionalized and whom Maria, against Carter's judgment, desires to have released. The novel begins with three chapters named after their different narrators: Maria; Helene, a friend of Maria's and the widow of Carter's producer BZ; and then Carter. These three reminiscences make clear that Maria herself is now institutionalized and under psychiatric care (for, we find out later, choosing not to intervene when BZ commits suicide). These three short narratives frame the rest of the novel, which tells Maria's story from her estrangement from Carter through the incident that prompts her confinement.

Maria is an actress, wife, and mother, but all three of these facets of her identity are in a state of suspended animation when the novel begins chronologically: her career is

on hold; she is separated from her husband; and she has lost custody of her daughter to an institution. Following the three named chapters which frame the narrative, the first numbered chapter begins shortly after the separation from Carter, with a description of Maria's favored pastime, freeway driving:

> In the first hot month of the fall after the summer she left Carter (the summer Carter left her, the summer Carter stopped living in the house in Beverly Hills), Maria drove the freeway. She dressed every morning with a greater sense of purpose than she had felt in some time, a cotton skirt, a jersey, sandals she could kick off when she wanted the touch of the accelerator, and she dressed very fast, running a brush through her hair once or twice and tying it back with a ribbon, for it was essential (to pause was to throw herself into unspeakable peril) that she be on the freeway by ten o'clock. Not somewhere on Hollywood Boulevard, not on her way to the freeway, but actually on the freeway. If she was not she lost the day's rhythm, its precariously imposed momentum (13).

The ritual of driving on the freeway provides purpose and structure to her day, in the same way that a nine-to-five job structures the day of the commuters with whom she shares the freeway. She dresses the same way each day, with her cotton skirt, jersey, and sandals providing her work uniform. Her ten o'clock appointment with freeway traffic functions similarly to the scheduled start of the workday for one regularly employed, even forcing her harried departure lest she be late for the start of the day.

As Deborah Paes de Barros and Deborah Clarke note, the automobile and the freeway also provide her primary method for coping with her suspended identity. Paes de Barros covers the novel in her study of women's road narratives, *Fast Cars and Bad*

Girls: Nomadic Subjects and Women's Road Stories (2004) and Clarke addresses it in *Driving Women* (2007), her literary study of women and the automobile in twentieth-century American fiction. Both Paes de Barros and Clarke read Didion's treatment of the automobile (so often seen as a symbol of masculinity) as a tool by which to navigate the challenges of living in a culture dominated by the masculine.

Clarke situates her reading of the novel primarily within a discourse of maternity, as part of a chapter ("My Mother the Car") about the ways in which "mothers and cars intersect [and] both automobility and maternity get reshaped" (74). Clarke draws on other incidents in the novel that relate motherhood to the automobile—for instance, a sequence in which a hypnotist tells Maria to imagine herself in the womb, but Maria refuses and instead imagines herself behind the wheel, "driving Sunset" (124)—to help explain Maria's habit of driving, ultimately arguing that driving serves for Maria as "a kind of retreat where she can recoup and regain her position as mother …. To be a success on the road suggests the potential for success as a human being, a precondition for success as a mother" (93-94). This project of reclaiming her identity through automobility, Clarke argues, is not entirely successful; while Maria's driving "open[s] up an alternative automotive world, one in which women seek to control their lives by driving," this process "hardly comes across as liberatory, particularly given that within the frame of the novel, at the time of telling, Maria is committed to a psychiatric hospital and is not driving anywhere" (95). Maria's freeway ritual, then, points to empowering but as-yet-unrealized alternatives for women. Clarke's argument is convincing with respect to the relationship between the automobile and motherhood in Didion's novel, revealing "an incomplete vision of what a maternal cyborg might look like" in an era when "women

were expected to use cars to extend their maternal roles, to ferry kids to various activities and shop for the family" (95). (As the figure of the SUV-driving "soccer mom," which emerged as a key demographic in media analysis of the 1996 and 2000 presidential campaigns, and the later iteration of the "hockey mom" associated with Sarah Palin in the 2008 campaign demonstrate, this expectation did not vanish after the 1960s.)

There are revealing details in Didion's novel, however, that are outside the scope of Clarke's argument, in that she focuses on motherhood and gives less attention to other aspects of Maria's identity. Moreover, her analysis does not consider the implications of the specificity of the freeway (understandably so, given that the focus of her study is automobile per se rather than the road narrative). Clarke concludes that the novel is ambivalent about the automobile's potential for empowerment and independence in a world created by men; I would add that, to the extent such a possibility exists, it is restricted (in keeping with the metaphor of the limited-access highway, which suggests an ironic undertone to its synonym *freeway*) by class. The narrator makes clear that Maria's ritual requires driving on the freeway—"Not somewhere on Hollywood Boulevard, not on her way to the freeway, but actually on the freeway." Featuring such attractions as the Hollywood Walk of Fame, Grauman's Chinese Theatre, and Capitol Records, Hollywood Boulevard had once been metonymically associated with the glamour of Hollywood itself; by the 1970s the famous boulevard was a prominent example of urban decay. Though Hollywood Boulevard may still mean glamour to residents of small-town America, wrote *LA Times* journalist Doug Shuitt in 1972, "in Los Angeles, it has taken on a different meaning. Locally, it has become a street known for its panhandling, drug traffic and prostitution" (AB). The contrast between the freeway and

Hollywood Boulevard, which is unsuitable for Maria's ritual driving, suggests a class component to the ritual itself.

Maria's vehicle of choice, a Corvette convertible, reinforces the inherent social divisions of her ritual. Though the automobile's model year is not specified in the novel, the car was inspired by Didion's own 1969 Corvette Stingray. (A picture of her behind its wheel graces the cover of her 2006 collection *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live*.) The third generation of the Corvette, the Stingray is one of the most recognizable and iconic American sports cars ever made; like all Corvettes, its expense is beyond the reach of most Americans. The quality of the machine is essential to the ritual, as Maria prides herself on the intricate maneuvers she can perform in highway traffic (suggesting the importance of superior handling) and drives with her shoes off so that she can feel with her bare feet the power of the engine more intimately and directly through the pedal. Of course, reliability and expendable income to spend on gas for leisure purposes are also important, given that her attempt to construct an alternative automotive world has her behind the wheel for more than 7000 miles in a single month. Where Sal's travels across the country do not require vehicle ownership or significant financial investment, Maria's circulation through Los Angeles's freeway system does, making it inaccessible to most women. (At the same time, of course, Sal's method of traveling contains gender barriers of its own, given the disproportionate risks to females associated with hitchhiking, ridesharing, and so on. Both methods may be said to restrict participation by race, given the potential dangers of African American travel, particularly in the pre-Civil Rights era, and the hazards associated with Driving While Brown in Los Angeles and elsewhere.)

Where Clarke focuses on the relationship between automobility and motherhood, Paes de Barros focuses on Maria's driving as a form of resistance to patriarchal culture. Her reading is more optimistic than Clarke's: "It seems the larger empowered world seeks to eradicate Maria. But Maria discovers an alternative lexicon; she 'drives the freeways' and in that driving—past the rusting remains of the postapocalyptic world—finds freedom" (137). In her study as a whole, Paes de Barros argues that, unlike destination-driven male road narratives, women's road narratives reflect a nomadic sensibility that challenges the same social systems that the masculine road narrative, with its perpetuation of frontier myths and individualism, tends to reinforce. Drawing from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari on nomadism, Paes de Barros argues that the nomadic traveler's "lack of origination or destination is significant because these missing finite determinants place the nomad outside of the system of capital—a system that must culminate with the finality of production—and apart from the legitimacy conferred by clear organization" (8). This nomadism is particularly challenging to traditional expectations of female domesticity, a fact which Maria, who "finds salvation not in her Beverly Hills home, but on the road" (138) illustrates. The freeway, Paes de Barros argues, allows Maria to develop a "transgressive vocabulary" (138) which confounds the men in her life, who redouble their efforts to control her behavior. But their "lack of comprehension is exactly the point; driving permits Maria to transgress borders—geographical, moral, societal—and to establish an alternative existence that is outside common habits and understanding" (139). Where Clarke finds the text ambivalent about the potential of Maria's ritual since it does not lead to liberation, Paes de Barros sees Maria's passive resistance through the automobile as an end in itself.

While I disagree with the inclusion of *On the Road* as an example of the type of masculine road narrative to which she opposes female road narratives—as I have argued earlier in this chapter, Sal Paradise also evinces a nomadism and, contrary to conventional readings, undermines frontier mythology while resisting rugged individualism—Paes de Barros makes a persuasive case about female narratives in general, and with respect to *Play It As It Lays* the concept of nomadism is clearly evident. Maria rarely drives with a destination in mind, and when she does it is usually on the way either to a traumatic event (as when she drives to a specific Thriftimart on the Ventura Freeway to meet an emissary who will take her to the location of an illegal abortion which Carter has directed her to have under threat of never seeing Kate again) or in flight away from a traumatic event (as when she drives from Las Vegas home to Los Angeles after being refused entry to her agent's party by hotel staff, who take her to be a freelancing prostitute). The driving that has positive potential, by contrast, is not organized around destination, and if she gets anywhere specific it is usually unconsciously or by accident.

Although Paes de Barros's discussion of nomadism highlights Maria's resistance to patriarchal forms of power, attention to the specificity of the freeway (as opposed to other forms of automobile travel) once again can help to clarify and elaborate the novel's critique. Maria does not perform her driving ritual on roads designed and maintained primarily for pleasure or scenic travel, such as California's Pacific Coast Highway. The novel does include a scene on the PCH, but Carter is at the wheel and the scene is an unhappy one, involving Maria's revelation of her pregnancy. Instead, Maria's nomadic ritual involves those roads specifically designed, as we saw earlier, for purposeful driving

meant to maximize the productivity of both individuals and the community. The narrator names some of her favored routes: "She drove the San Diego to the Harbor, the Harbor up to the Hollywood, the Hollywood to the Golden State, the Santa Monica, the Santa Ana, the Pasadena, the Ventura. She drove it as a riverman runs a river, every day more attuned to its currents, its deceptions" (13-14). The use of the definite article and the exclusion of the appellation *freeway* simultaneously serves to both concretize and make abstract the highways themselves, as though the route she takes is "the (real) Golden State" and as though California (the Golden State) and its freeways are one and the same.

The freeways in question help to form the central nervous system of megalopolitan Los Angeles and are essential to the region's industrial and commercial development. The San Diego Freeway (Interstate 405), for instance, runs almost the length of the Greater Los Angeles area, from Irvine in the south to San Fernando in the north, passing by both downtown Los Angeles and the region's most important airports. The Harbor Freeway connects downtown with the Port of Los Angeles and so is essentially in connecting commercial sea transport with LA and the rest of the country. The Hollywood Freeway connected LA to the San Fernando Valley, helping to open the latter up for increased development. The Pasadena was the region's first freeway, opening as the Arroyo Seco Parkway in 1940, a few months after the Pennsylvania Turnpike[54]; its construction provided a transition between the 1930s parkway mode and the superhighway modes of road construction and ushered in two decades of Southern California superhighway expansion following World War II. The comparison of Maria to a riverman both highlights the commercial importance of these freeways and recalls the

[54] The name was officially changed to the Pasadena Freeway in 1954. In 2010 the name was changed back to the Arroyo Seco Parkway.

tendency of early automobile narratives to associate the automobile with freedom and a closer access to nature. Southern California's highway system is nobody's idea of pastoral idyll, but this comparison suggests that driving brings Maria closer, in some way, to nature, or at the least makes her more attuned to her natural environment. More than a connection with nature, though, the allusion to the riverman suggests freedom, as the riverboat pilot was romanticized as "the only unfettered and entirely independent human being that lived in the earth" (Twain 105).[55] However free the riverboat pilot might be, of course, the navigation of the river was fundamentally a commercial endeavor; for Maria, freedom involves the subversive repurposing of Southern California's trade routes.

In addition to the promise of freedom that her driving offers, as Paes de Barros points out, and the possibility of success and some measure of control over her own life, as Clarke points out, the ritual of freeway driving offers Maria something else that she is interested in: the prospect of feeling *nothing*. Maria expands on the importance of nothing in the first chapter and the final chapter, both of which she narrates. The first explains her experience in the institution, enduring such psychological tests as the ink blot while the doctors try to figure out why she is the way she is, an effort she finds "beside the point": "NOTHING APPLIES, I print with the magnetized IBM pencil. What does apply, they ask later, as if the word 'nothing' were ambiguous" (2). In mocking the idea that the word is ambiguous, Maria actually calls attention to the fact that the phrase is, indeed, ambiguous: is it "nothing" that applies, or is it the case that there is nothing that applies? In the novel's final passage, after we have seen BZ, who shares Maria's existential despair that "nothing applies," commit suicide, Maria counts her ability to continue living

[55] As discussed in Chapter 1, the skill and knowledge required to operate the automobile were associated with the task of the riverboat pilot and contrasted with the operation of a train, which was seen as automated. (See Chapter 1, pages 57-9).

in spite of nothing as perhaps her final strength: “One thing in my defense, not that it matters: I knew something Carter never knew, or Helene, or maybe you. I know what nothing means, and keep playing. Why, BZ would say. Why not, I say” (216). Whatever her difficulties and shortcomings may be, she is willing to confront the idea that nothing applies (or that nothing matters, as she tells BZ) and still stay in the game.

Over the course of the novel, though, it becomes clear that “nothing” is not simply an idea to be despaired, but also something that provides Maria with a strategy for resisting the external forces exerting control over her own life. This is suggested in the first instance, noted above, where Maria uses the word to resist the “pursuit of reasons” that her doctors/wardens insist on. Just as Bartleby’s refrain “I would prefer not to” deflects undesirable alternatives imposed by his supervisor, refusing such commitments without explicitly rejecting them, so Maria uses *nothing* to decline the roles that her husband, her agent, her husband’s producer, and so on attempt to impose upon her. Sometimes she uses the word itself, as when Carter asks her what’s wrong, what she wants, and so on. Carter’s efforts to help Maria are frequently revealed to be selfish and controlling attempts to *fix* Maria, and his relationship to her is inherently exploitive, as suggested when BZ explains to Maria that Carter had initially wanted to hire Maria to work on the film he is currently shooting in the Nevada desert: “At one point he was ready to scrap the deal, jeopardize the entire project, just because he wanted to *use* you” [26, emphasis mine]. In refusing to specify complaints or desires for Carter, she refuses him the power to exploit those complaints or desires. Other times she uses not the word itself, but the nothing of silence—the phrases “Maria said nothing” or “she said nothing” appear at least a dozen times, responding to BZ’s sexist jokes and attempts to convince

her to make herself available sexually to a powerful attorney he knows, to Carter's attempts to get her to take a position which he can then argue against, and to her manipulative and parasitic ex-boyfriend's attempts to reconcile, for example. This approach to nothing affords Maria a defense against the challenges she faces as a woman in a world controlled by men, in which she is reduced to the status of a commodity.

An incident with BZ, who specializes in connecting powerful men with the women (or men) they desire, provides a telling example. He is trying to convince Maria to attend a party at the home of Larry Kulik, a mob attorney:

> "Larry Kulik's a great admirer of yours," BZ insists. "You know what he said to Carter? He said, 'what I like about your wife, Carter, is she's not a cunt."
>
> Maria said nothing.
>
> "That's very funny, Maria, Kulik saying that to Carter, you lost your sense of humor?" (25).

The allegedly funny story presents Maria with a double bind frequently constructed by degrading forms of humor: to laugh it off would be to accept a social structure in which such comments are accepted as natural and to-be-expected, while to object would (within the twisted ethic of the joke) be to demonstrate a lack of humor and reify the dehumanizing distinctions implied by Kulik's assessment of Maria. The same structure underscores much of her relationship with Carter—to agree with Carter or to acquiesce to his demands would be to negate her own feelings and desires, while to articulate her opposition would simply give Carter, who has the power in their relationship, a specific point of attack, to expose a facet of herself to be worn down. Just as Bartleby's refrain confounds and infuriates his interlocutor, so too does Maria's

nothing foil hers. In their final argument, shortly before BZ's death, he asks what she wants and she replies "Nothing." He asks what she feels and she again replies "nothing." His frustration boils over, threatening violence: "You say that word again and I swear to Christ—" (207) he tells her. She responds with a shrug and says nothing, and he leaves.

Maria's freeway ritual empowers her to approach nothing on her own terms. The details which consume her waking life also haunt her sleep, but the ritual of driving provides an antidote: "Sometimes at night the dread would overtake her, bathe her in sweat, flood her mind with sharp flash images of Les Goodwin in New York and Carter out there on the desert with BZ and Helene and the irrevocability of what seemed already to have happened, but she never thought about that on the freeway" (16). The automobile and its freeway environs are "an organism which absorbed all her reflexes, all her attention" (15), freeing her from the burden of thinking about anything in particular. The effect is comparable to the pills Maria is addicted to, a habit which speeds her physical and emotional deterioration, prompts increasingly erratic behavior, and draws frequent criticism from Carter. The pills, too, take away the pain of something and allow her to feel nothing, but the pills are destructive and extrinsic, their effect a function of chemical reactions beyond her control.

The effect of freeway driving is at once more powerful and within her control, a function of her own skill and dedication. The two are directly compared the morning after a drunken night where she makes a scene and must be dragged from a party by BZ and Helene; she wakes up before dawn in Helene's bedroom, her body "undressed and bathed," Helene and BZ together on a Chaise nearby, and Maria with "only the faintest ugly memory" of the circumstances that brought her here. The precise details are never

disclosed, but they likely combine sex and violence: Helene has a bruise on her cheek the next morning (violence against women is routine in Maria's world), and when BZ strikes Helene again at breakfast Maria screams at him to stop, prompting his response: "You weren't talking that way last night" (165). To erase the ugly memory from her mind, Maria tries to sleep: "she fixed her imagination on a needle dripping sodium pentathol into her arm and began counting backward from one hundred. When that failed she imagined herself driving, conceived audacious lane changes, strategic shifts of gear, the Hollywood to the San Bernardino and straight on out, past Barstow, past Baker, driving straight on into the hard white empty core of the world. She slept and did not dream" (163). While a barbiturate injection may sedate her, the thought of skillfully driving the freeway, of moving masterfully through that environment, provides her with access to the desired state of nothingness in the "hard white empty core of the world."

In that sequence the act of imagining herself driving erases from her mind the ugly memories that prevent sleep, allowing her to experience the desired "nothing" of a dreamless sleep. Elsewhere we see that the physical navigation of the freeway can have the same effect. We have already seen that her nights are often defined by a sense of dread, as she is overwhelmed by "sharp flash images" of her life—images and ideas that the act of driving helps to temporarily dispel. The images that she sees on the freeway, though, stick in her mind and provide competing images during those nights when dread might otherwise take over: "…just as a riverman feels the pull of the rapids in the lull between sleeping and waking, so Maria lay at night in the still of Beverly Hills and saw the great signs roar overhead at seventy miles an hour, Normandie ¼ Vermont ¾ Harbor Fwy 1" (14). At the least, then, freeway driving provides her with a series of flash images

to combat those images she finds intolerable. But by driving skillfully she can go one better and erase all such images from her mind: “Again and again she returned to an intricate stretch just south of the interchange where successful passage from the Hollywood onto the Harbor required a diagonal move across four lanes of traffic. On the afternoon she finally did it without once braking or once losing the beat on the radio she was exhilarated, and that night slept dreamlessly” (14). Success as a driver, rather than demonstrating the potential for success as a human being, enables her to experience *nothing* on her own terms.

While in one respect *nothing* is seen as an oppressive force—the reality that BZ cannot face and which Maria perseveres in spite of—it is also a condition that Maria aspires to, offering a Bartleby-like resistance strategy to the repressive realities that she faces in a Hollywood world organized around the commodification and consumption of the female form and in which men express their power through physical and sexual violence towards women. She appropriates the freeway system, designed specifically to increase productivity and facilitate the region’s industry (including, of course, the film industry in which Maria is entangled) for her own project of resistance. Doing so actually becomes something of a job for her, with a regular starting time that structures the rest of her day. But unlike the hundreds of thousands of fellow commuters who pack the region’s notoriously crowded highway system on their way to and from work in pursuit of the American Dream, Maria’s purpose is simply to circulate, in pursuit of nothing. As the back roads do for Sal Paradise, the freeways provide Maria an alternative to the external forces seeking to restrict and control her. Maria’s reappropriation of the freeway

system, like Sal's nostalgia for older, slower roads, resists inscription in the regime of the superhighway, which values productivity over natural beauty, community, and freedom.

I have focused, in this chapter, on two novels which rely particularly heavily on the distinctions between the superhighway and the surface road. While other texts (*Blue Highways*, especially, but also *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and *Travels with Charley*) make the contrast a central element or even an organizing feature, it is equally informative (and heretofore overlooked) in *On the Road* and *Play It As It Lays.* Similarly, the distinctions between modern superhighway and earlier forms of automobile travel might offer insight into other postwar road narratives. Perhaps counter-intuitively, given their nostalgic associations and overtones, the back roads were often celebrated in texts designed to appeal to the nation's youth. While at least partly a direct effect of *On the Road*'s popularity, this trend also reinforces that novel's critique of contemporary culture's emphasis on efficiency and productivity as represented by the superhighway. In some cases, these texts, like Kerouac's, gesture towards the possibility of building (or repairing) community along such highways. The TV series *Route 66*, which ran from 1960 to 1964, followed two young friends who traveled the nation's secondary highways in a new Corvette, each week finding a new individual or community in need of their assistance. In other cases the possibility of lasting community is less pronounced, and such travel is more simply a celebration of resistance and rebellion, as in several films of the New Hollywood era (*Easy Rider*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, and *Badlands*, for example).

The efficiency of the superhighway's mammoth scale was but one component of the magic highways imagined in such texts as the Futurama exhibit and Disney's "Magic Highway, USA," though. The "magic" of automation and integrated communication (and

the attendant possibilities for control and surveillance) took much longer to develop. In the following chapter, I examine the response to this aspect of the modern superhighway.

Chapter Six: Decline and Collapse on the Magic Highway

As Americans in the middle of the twentieth century imagined a national infrastructure designed around the automobile, many envisioned motorways that were not only grand in scale but also as technologically advanced as the automobiles that traversed them. These highways would sense and respond to weather conditions; communicate traffic, direction, and emergency information directly to the cab of the vehicles; and even automatically control the automobiles, making for a safer and more relaxing driving experience. While the contemporary, hyper-communicative automobile and is extended integration with communications networks and technology brings us ever closer to many of its components, for most of the twentieth century the magic of the magic highway remained in the realm of science fiction. As early as David H. Keller's 1935 short story "The Living Machine," science fiction writers imagined the possibilities of automated vehicles, and countless writers followed, incorporating projected automobile technologies in their work. This speculative discourse about the future of the automobile and its implications, often dystopian in nature, is certainly interesting in its own right; but what of work outside of science fiction that grapples with the communicative automobile as it emerges in the real world? Such texts appear less frequently outside of science fiction, since it often takes time for real-world technology to fully infiltrate the public consciousness and find their way into literature and film. Those texts that have appeared, though, reveal how artists perceive the integration of communication networks and the automobile as it actually happens.

In this chapter, I examine three novels that address this integration at different stages of development. Edward Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975) is most

notable for its opposition to industrial destruction of the natural landscape, as wrought by mining operations, the construction of massive dams and reservoirs, and even the presence of the highways themselves. I demonstrate that the novel is also concerned with the potential for corporate and state abuse of the link between communication and transportation, and that the fantasy of collapse that the novel promotes (with protagonists who plot to blow up dams, highways, and bridges) also seeks to halt the commercial and authoritarian exploitation of that link. Larry McMurtry's *Cadillac Jack* (1982), the earliest novel I have been able to find outside of spy or science fiction novels that prominently features a car phone, depicts an America in decline, its most precious cultural and historical treasures (including much of the Smithsonian's collections) being secretly sold by some of the country's wealthiest families. The car phone appears to offer the title character, a roving antiques dealer whose profession puts him on the edges of this process, the opportunity to maintain vital relationships even while on the road; in truth, however, it prevents him from moving forward and developing new relationships, thereby keeping him, like the nation, mired in the past. Finally, Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003) features a hyper-communicative automobile, taking place primarily in a limousine that has television feeds, computers with full internet access, and video cameras that capture the main character's every move. Like *The Monkey Wrench Gang,* DeLillo's novel offers a fantasy of collapse, with the important difference that, in the latter novel, the protagonist turns the system against itself, using the communicative capabilities of his automobile to bring down the global economy from the comfort of his limousine.

The three novels collected here cover the connection of communication and transportation networks from its earliest, mysterious stages in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* through the development of the car phone in *Cadillac Jack* to, finally, the sophisticated synthesis of communication and transportation in *Cosmopolis*. Taken together, they add texture to the dystopian depictions often found in science fiction. These novels associate this integration with decline and collapse, and explore issues of authoritarian, plutocratic, or corporate power. Still, the collective narrative, from *The Monkey Wrench Gang*'s determined resistance to the communication-transportation complex through *Cosmopolis*, in which the tools of this system are turned against the system itself, retain optimism in the potential to resist or transform the effects of these technologies. Before looking at these novels in more detail, however, it will be helpful to provide some context with a brief overview of the development of the hyper-communicative automobile, as well as how that has been represented in science fiction and elsewhere.

Smart Cars and Smart Highways

In F. Gary Gray's remake of *The Italian Job* (2003), a band of thieves seek to recover a large quantity of gold bullion from an associate (Steve) who double-crossed them and left them for dead after the initial heist in Venice. Knowing that Steve will be moving the bullion from his home in the Hollywood Hills to the airport in an armored van, they plan to place a series of explosives that will collapse the road beneath the armored van, dropping it into the subway tunnel below; there the gang will be waiting to disarm the drivers, crack the safe, and reclaim the gold. To pull the caper off, though, they need to get the armored van to the precise location in the city's traffic grid where they have planted the explosives. Fortunately, the gang's tech expert, Lyle, has already

hacked into the Automated Traffic Surveillance and Control System (ATSAC), where traffic engineers monitor and control almost all the traffic signals in Los Angeles to identify disruptions in traffic flow, adjust for traffic patterns based on time of day and special events, and keep traffic running smoothly. Having commandeered the system, Lyle can use traffic cameras to monitor the truck's progress and can manually control the traffic lights to create targeted congestion designed to push the armored van towards the target. "I command you to turn left," Lyle says to the truck on his laptop screen as he sees it stopped at a red light; then, with a push of a button, the green arrow appears at the intersection and the armored van obeys. A few more such adjustments to the network allows Lyle to successfully guide the van to the precise spot on Hollywood Boulevard where the explosives have been planted. After they have set off the explosives and recovered the gold, Lyle further manipulates the system to ensure his compatriots have a clear escape route to Union Station and that any police inclined to investigate are trapped in gridlock elsewhere.

Used in this case for criminal gain, the sequence suggests both the power of the system, in its ability to anticipate and control user behavior, and the potential for chaos should the system be disrupted or commandeered by outside forces. Other films have also picked up on this possibility as a plot point, with a band of social-justice-minded high school kids taking control of New York's traffic control system in Iain Softley's *Hackers* (1995) and high-tech terrorists attacking the traffic control system (along with other transportation networks) in Len Wiseman's *Live Free or Die Hard* (2007). In real life, ATSAC (like similar central-control systems in other cities) operates largely automatically, relying on complex algorithms that account for things like time of day,

holidays, and specific neighborhood demographics and needs. However, engineers can use the system to guide specific vehicles through LA's streets with relative ease, as they do annually to ensure that lines of limousines carrying attendees make it to the red carpet at the Academy Awards in a timely fashion.[56] The potential also remains for the system to be used subversively. Tom Vanderbilt explains that on Oscar night 2006 there were about 300 municipal engineers participating in a sick-out and picketing the streets near the ceremony. Kartik Patel, the engineer running the show in ATSAC that night, was also in contact with the demonstrating workers, using the information from his monitors to help them find the most strategic crossing points (110). Later that same year, Patel and Gabriel Murillo tied up traffic over large parts of the city's surface streets and highways by extending the red light timing at just four key intersections to coincide with a work action. (Bernstein and Blankstein).

First developed to address traffic congestion for the 1984 Olympic Games, LA's ATSAC is considered a state-of-the-art centralized traffic control system, but it is far from the only one in operation. The parallel of the ATSAC for state and federal highways in California are the Traffic Management Centers (TMC) operated by Caltrans, the state's department of transportation. TMCs "operate under a mandate to aggressively manage the statewide transportation network" (Gerfen and Hockaday iv). From the TMCs traffic engineers monitor traffic volume and speed through sensors implanted in the highways as well as through traffic cameras. They coordinate with the California Highway Patrol to respond to issues identified by these surveillance systems or reported by drivers, and

[56] The award ceremony is held annually at the Kodak Theater (now known as the Hollywood and Highland Center), its permanent home since 2002. Coincidentally, the site to which Lyle directs the van in *The Italian Job* is almost the same spot, on the edge of Hollywood Boulevard between the Kodak and Grauman's Chinese Theater.

communicate things like travel times, congestion and visibility warnings, construction and road closures, and other safety information to drivers through changeable message signs placed throughout the highway system. They monitor and coordinate traffic flow through signals both on state-run surface streets and on entrance ramps to limited-access highways. The system's wealth of information is available through an interactive map on the Caltrans web site (see quickmap.dot.ca.gov), which allows users to see the locations and reasons for lane closures, view the messages on highway message boards, get up-to-the minute reports on accidents and other incidents reported by the California Highway Patrol, and even locate traffic cameras and view images of current traffic conditions. Much of this information is also available through mobile phone apps, allowing drivers to get updates and anticipate traffic delays while en route. Beyond California, other cities and states have operations similar to ATSAC and Caltrans's TMCs. In 2011 the Washington State Department of Transportation began operation of its own Active Traffic Management system, which, in addition to sensors and ramp metering, includes lane-specific signaling to notify drivers of variable speed limits, quickly close or reopen lanes, and even open up the shoulder as a legal driving lane during times of peak congestion.

Though full automation of vehicles and highways remains unrealized, the centralization of traffic control through systems such as ATSAC reflect the degree to which the last thirty years have brought the American roadway closer to the magic highway that Norman Bel Geddes (and others) envisioned in the 1930s and 1940s. ATSAC is but one example of how both vehicles and roadways have been moving closer to automation. Since 2000, for instance, GM's OnStar service (which puts drivers in

satellite contact with a central control system for assistance with such issues as minor mechanical problems, safety checks after crashes, remote unlocking if you've locked your keys in the car, and so on) has developed technology (promoted as an anti-theft feature) that allows the service to remotely control steering and engine power. Companies like Lexus and Ford have introduced cars capable of parallel parking themselves, independent of driver control. Several companies have made tremendous advances in autonomous cars, which would allow drivers to select a destination but require no human input in the mechanical operation to reach that destination. The most famous project along these lines, popularly known as the Google Car, is sponsored by the world's most popular search engine, reflecting the degree to which the information superhighway (as the Internet came to be known during the 1990s, when it first reached prominence in the national consciousness) and the automobile superhighway have come to overlap as transportation networks merge with communication infrastructure.

As cars have gotten smarter, so too have the highways themselves: technologies such as traffic cameras allow the infrastructure to discipline driver behavior; data from GPS navigation systems and from cellular phone signals are used to monitor traffic speeds and patterns; various sensing technologies, from video cameras to radio-frequency identification chips, can be used to alert authorities to stationary vehicles in dangerous areas such as tunnels, inform drivers (through electronic road signs or even through such devices as cell phones and GPS) of hazards or delays, orchestrate variable speed limits based on traffic conditions, and operate traffic control systems such as stop lights to maximum efficiency, to name but a few of the advancements currently at various stages of development and implementation.

The increasing integration of communication and transportation networks brings us ever closer to that magic highway. The way we drive now, with GPS satellite communications beaming maps and turn-by-turn directions to our dashboards, cell phones providing constant contact with the world beyond the highway, and new cars providing full integration with social media and the internet so that one can surf the information superhighway while driving on a concrete one, reveals the degree to which the functions of communication and transportation have reintegrated within the automobile. The expansion of wireless technology has paved the way for further integration in the form of municipal wireless networks, designed to provide full coverage for a city or town and enable anyone therein to access the internet using a laptop, a cellular phone, or another device. As has been pointed out in plans, proposals, and feasibility studies for municipal wireless networks, this intersection of communication and transportation technology provides a number of personal, commercial, and governmental applications. They can provide tourists, commuters, and other drivers with easy access to information about nearby goods and services as well as driving directions for popular commercial, historical, and cultural locations. Companies and government agencies can also more easily track and direct resources (fleet, personnel, inventory) in transit. Municipal wireless networks provide for much more precise target marketing, as mobile devices with “location-awareness” make it possible to target advertisements to an individual’s precise location and direction of movement.

The potential applications for regulation and control are even broader. GPS helps law-enforcement agencies track individuals suspected in crimes ranging from theft to terrorism. In 2012, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that agencies could not affix GPS

devices to vehicles without obtaining a search warrant; it remains an open question, however, whether a warrant is required to track data from cell phones or other devices with GPS (Biskupic). Fire departments, ambulances, and police officers in patrol cars have access to more efficient communication networks and, potentially, to a vast array of information sources (such as "site plans, mug-shots, maps, hazardous materials inventories" ["Options for Deployment"]) through mobile data terminals in their vehicles on the way to the scene of an accident, crime, or complaint. Police departments in numerous cities have used municipal wireless networks to expand and make more efficient their system of cameras at intersections and in other public places (Titch). The city of Vancouver even posits that the wireless network might extend camera networks into private space as well: "Subject to privacy concerns being addressed, cameras could either monitor or be activated to display public areas, homes, taxis, transit vehicles, and incidents attended by emergency response crews to provide an additional level of protection to both public and employees" ("Options for Deployment"). For all the benefits that the wireless networks might provide city residents or visitors, an advertisement for a Canon mobile police printer in *Law Enforcement Technology* magazine effectively sums up the bottom line: "The long arm of the law just got longer." It might as easily say that the long gaze of the law just got longer. As the police radio, by freeing police cars to circulate through the city, mobilized the disciplinary gaze, the municipal wireless network, by transmitting blueprints, security camera footage and similar information directly to the police car/mobile data center, eliminates obstacles to that gaze, smoothing the striated space of disciplinary societies and ushering in what

Gilles Deleuze has called the societies of control, which began to replace disciplinary society as the primary means of social organization in the latter twentieth century.

While disciplinary society was firmly established at the beginning of the twentieth century, Foucault's work implies that disciplinary power was already in the process of evolving into new forms of power. Other philosophers have explicitly analyzed these emerging forms, including Deleuze as well as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who further analyze control society and its implications in *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004). Where disciplinary society relies on observation within enclosures to modify individual behavior, societies of control build networks of observation extending through and beyond enclosures and are centrally concerned not with modifying individuals' behavior but with modulating their interaction. Where disciplinary society is exemplified by the panopticon's observation of docile bodies, the model for societies of control tracks and manipulates mobile bodies:

> Felix Guattari has imagined a city where one would be able to leave one's apartment, one's street, one's neighborhood, thanks to one's (dividual) electronic card that raises a given barrier; but the card could just as easily be rejected on a given day or between certain hours; what counts is not the barrier but the computer that tracks each person's position--licit or illicit--and effects a universal modulation (Deleuze 312).

The advanced integration of communications technology and the automobile has moved modern automobility ever closer to realizing that scenario, and the scene from *The Italian Job* suggests the degree to which such systems are functioning even now.

Perhaps the most obvious and prominent literary response to full integration of communication and transportation and the potential it has for monitoring and controlling citizen behavior has been the representation of paranoid dystopias. The potential dangers of automated vehicles were the subject of speculative fiction even before the 1939 debut of Futurama: in David H. Keller's 1935 short story "The Living Machine," inventor John Poorson designs a system that can automatically navigate an automobile after a driver provides the destination. The device quickly becomes standard, increasing efficiency and drastically reducing the number of accidents; but when Big Oil (the monopolistic "World Gasoline Company") is cut out of the profits for the device, they add cocaine to their gasoline, which causes Poorson's device (which he believes to be a living entity) to go haywire, making automobiles even less safe than they had been before. More famous than Keller's story is the work of Philip K. Dick, which first appears in the 1950s and remains popular and influential, both in its original form and in film adaptations. Dick provides a dystopic counterpoint to Disney's exultant "Magic Highway, USA," with engines that fail to work if the driver tries to move too far from home (*Time Out of Joint* [1959]), smart cars that nag and argue with their owners and can be used to provide evidence of their operator's activities for police investigations (*The Game Players of Titan* [1963]), and extensive surveillance systems inside car radios that broadcast in-car conversations to police authorities and provide a variety of complicated policing information (including the location of undercover vehicles) encoded in what appear to be normal radio broadcasts (*A Scanner Darkly* [1977]).

This fascination continued in science fiction and fantasy of the 1970s and 1980s, often taking a postapocalyptic turn. While apocalypses of several varieties (nuclear, alien,

viral) were a popular subject for science fiction films in the 1950s and 1960s, the energy crisis of the 1970s prompted several texts exploring an earth that has outstripped its own resources, resulting in either a postapocalyptic breakdown of society (as in *Mad Max* [1979] and its two sequels) or a dystopia in which nature is essentially eliminated and the world overrun by technology, as in *Blade Runner* (1982; based on a short story by Dick), where non-human animals are extinct and the lack of natural resources is encouraging those humans left on earth to migrate to off-world colonies.

These scenarios often revolve around the automobile and offer insight into the combination of the automobile and communications technology. In the postapocalyptic scenarios, the breakdown of society has once again severed the connection between transportation and communication, leaving travelers vulnerable to roving marauders along the highways. The films in the *Mad Max* series (*Mad Max*, *The Road Warrior* [1981], and *Beyond Thunderdome* [1985]) rely heavily on the motifs and archetypes of the Western genre, suggesting that a post-magic-highway future would be as bleak and brutal as the pre-automotive frontier. In the dystopic Los Angeles of 2019 depicted in *Blade Runner*, on the other hand, the magic highway has expanded to a third dimension, with automobiles cruising the surface streets and similar vehicles hovering through the skies above, all surrounded by a bleak industrial landscape in which building-sized digital billboards project animated commercials for various products. Every available surface has been conscripted in order to allow corporations to communicate with passing motorists.

Outside of science fiction, several films have also picked up on the association of communications technology with paranoia and surveillance. Francis Ford Coppola's *The*

Conversation (1974) tells the story of Harry Caul (Gene Hackman), a surveillance expert who is psychologically incapacitated by both paranoia about being bugged himself and by a sense of guilt over his own profession and its consequences, because the information he collected on a previous job enraged his client and motivated a murder. In the operation depicted in the film, that paranoia and guilt inform his interpretation of the conversation he records. Because of the technical difficulty of this surveillance task, he has recorded the conversation through three separate sources, each of which only captures part of the conversation. In piecing the conversation together, Caul becomes convinced that there will be another murder; he tries to interfere to protect his subjects, but only succeeds in further complicating matters. Though the film is about surveillance techniques and technology generally and is not specific to automobile or highway surveillance, Caul's intricate setup for recording the conversation in question does rely on a motor vehicle (the surveillance van, also seen in countless movies and TV shows since) as a mobile command center. The script for the film was written in the 1960s, but its production and release at the height of the Watergate scandal was timely, and in fact featured some of the same equipment that the Nixon administration had used to spy on political opponents, though the filmmakers were not aware of that coincidence during production (Coppola). *The Conversation*'s themes of paranoia, guilt, and unintended consequences associated with widespread surveillance persist in films such as *Sneakers* (1992), *Enemy of the State* (1998, which features Gene Hackman, again, as a paranoid surveillance expert), and *The Departed* (2006).

Such surveillance networks are not always viewed through paranoid eyes, however, and countless spy novels, TV shows, and films depict the surveillance state as

necessary for national defense. In the TV series *24,* for instance, special agent Jack Bauer (Keifer Sutherland) relies on, among other tools, electronic surveillance and a mobile computer network through which he can have such things as building schematics, suspect dossiers, and so forth sent directly to his SUV in the field in order to thwart presidential candidate assassinations, nuclear bombs, biological warfare, and various other threats to national security. The show was criticized by some in the media, the military, and elsewhere as providing support for torture at a time when the Bush administration's use of "enhanced interrogation" techniques was a subject of public debate; though the show occasionally gave lipservice to the ineffectiveness of torture at getting accurate and useful information, it often proves useful for Bauer. At the same time, the show also depicts powerful government and corporate forces abusing the same networks that Bauer uses to save the world. A similar example can be found in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight,* which finds Batman (Christian Bale) using an extensive surveillance network that can detect and transmit conversations from any cell phone in Gotham, whether the phone is in use or not. Batman's associate Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman) expresses the obvious ethical reservations about a system that can eavesdrop on any unsuspecting citizen with a cell phone, but consents to its use, given the desperate situation. At best, then, the film demonstrates an ambivalence towards such systems: on the one hand, they work; on the other hand, the suggestion that such systems can be trustworthy and effective as long as they are in the hands of Batman (or, for that matter, Jack Bauer) is hardly an optimistic assessment for their potential in the real world.

But what of the potential of such technology in the hands of the average citizen? There appears to be some optimism, in the 1970s and 1980s, that the integration of

communication networks and the automobile could be used to resist corrupt forms of state power and to bring about a more just society. Early expressions of this optimism can be found in the flurry of 1970s songs, TV shows, and films about truck driving. In shows like *Movin' On* (which like *Route 66* featured a pair of travelers helping out people in need in various communities across the land, but with the twist that the pair drove a diesel semi rather than a red Corvette) and *B.J. and the Bear*, truckers used the CB radio to find and help people in trouble and to avoid corrupt lawmen and other authorities as needed. C. W. McCall's song "Convoy" (1975) uses the CB radio to tell the story of a growing trucker's rebellion, dodging "Smokeys" and crashing through roadblocks as they travel to the East coast. Sam Peckinpah's 1978 film *Convoy* was inspired by the song, but is more explicitly antinomian—when a corrupt sheriff declares "I am the law," trucker Rubber Duck (Kris Kristofferson) responds "Well piss on ya. And piss on your law." Hal Needham's *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977) pits a pair of drivers—Bandit (Burt Reynolds) driving a Pontiac Trans-Am escort and Snowman (Jerry Reed) driving the truck—who agree to deliver a truckload of illegal beer from Texarkana to the Southern Classic car race in Georgia. They use the CB and a variety of other tricks to evade Texas sheriff Buford T. Justice (Jackie Gleason), who chases them the entire way.

In the 1980s, TV shows developed this theme beyond merely the CB radio. The NBC series *Knight Rider* (1982-1986), which debuted in 1982, featured a Pontiac Trans-Am, KITT, modified not only with various mechanical upgrades but also with an artificial intelligence system that allowed it to communicate verbally with the driver, patch into the telephone network, display live and recorded footage from security cameras, and so on. The human lead (played by David Hasselhoff) was a former Green

Beret who was shot and almost killed by an industrial spy while working undercover for the LAPD. Declared dead to the public, he was given facial reconstruction surgery by a dying billionaire committed to using his fortune to help the powerless. With his new identity and KITT (designed by the philanthropist), he takes over the billionaire's mission, driving the car across the United States to find people in trouble and help them to prevail not only against criminals, but also against corrupt industrialists, politicians, and legal authorities. It was, in the words of the narrator for the show's original opening credit sequence, "a shadowy flight into the dangerous world of a man who does not exist. Michael Knight, a young loner on a crusade to champion the cause of the innocent, the helpless, the powerless, in a world of criminals who operate above the law" ("Knight of the Phoenix"). True, the car was designed by a wealthy industrialist, but in Michael Knight's hands the communicative automobile defends common citizens and provides a check against those whose wealth and power makes them immune to the law itself.

A few months after *Knight Rider*, *The A-Team* (1983-1986) debuted on NBC. Though more weapons-oriented than *Knight Rider* (part of Michael Knight's hook was that he rarely used firearms and avoided direct violence where possible), the series also included the integration of communication and transportation through the occasional use of surveillance equipment out of the team's famous GMC van. Where Knight has an ambiguous relationship to the law (legally, he doesn't really exist, since his real identity is officially deceased), the A-Team are explicitly outlaws. The team was a "crack commando unit" during the Vietnam War; in 1972 they were "sent to prison by a military court for a crime they didn't commit," but then "escaped to the Los Angeles underground." In the time of the series they are "still wanted by the government," and

help out those who “have a problem [and] no one else can help” (“Mexican Slayride”). Moreover, almost every episode includes a prison break of sorts, with one of the members of the team (Murdock, who has been declared legally insane) escaping from the VA Psychiatric Hospital where he is held.

Rounding out this subgenre of picaresque do-gooders using communication and the automobile to help out strangers as they roamed from town to town is *Highway to Heaven* (1984-1989), which also ran on NBC. Unlike Michael Knight’s high-tech KITT or the A-Team’s GMC van (the interior of which would, conveniently, contain whatever layout and technology, be it weapons or recording equipment, most useful on a given mission), there was nothing special about the 1977 Ford LTD II that Jonathan (Michael Landon) and Mark (Victor French) use to get around; but Jonathan *is* special—he is an angel on probation, sent back to earth to help enough people to earn back his wings. His communication abilities are not technological but supernatural; his contact with “The Boss” lets him know where he and Mark will go next and why. He also has “The Stuff”: supernatural abilities he sometimes uses to get the pair out of difficult situations. The Stuff allows him to interact with automobiles in a way that parallels the capabilities of communication technologies, such as unlocking doors and overriding the driver’s controls. In the opening scene of the first episode, for instance, Jonathan is hitchhiking on a deserted highway when an old man in a pickup pulls over for him. Though heading to the same town as Jonathan is, the man tries to charge ten dollars for the ride. Jonathan declines the offer and watches the truck move down the dusty road. As he squints his eyes slightly, though, the truck backfires, spits out a bellow of smoke, and dies. The old man can’t get the engine started again, but Jonathan can, of course, and so he gets his ride

into town. Using supernatural powers rather than advanced technology he interacts with automobiles in ways that mimic the magic of the magic highway. This series lacks the rebellious angle of the other two series; Mark and Jonathan are not fugitives, nor do their projects generally involve resisting or rectifying corrupt authorities abusing their power. Like Michael Knight and the A-Team, though, they use their powers to find and help those who are often on the margins of society. Looked at together, the trajectory of the three series suggests that the technological optimism greeting the integration of communications technology and the automobile is rapidly eroded: while Michael Knight needs only the technology to help out the oppressed, the A-Team supplements such technology with weaponry, even as *Highway to Heaven* supplants the technology in favor of divine intervention.

The magic of the magic superhighway, then, has evoked a variety of responses from the hopeful through the dystopian. In the balance of this chapter, I examine three novels which incorporate smart cars and smart highways at varying stages of development. These novels employ the integration of communication technology and the automobile to represent (and to resist) increasing authoritarianism, cultural malaise, and the expansion of corporate power. While science fiction works and fantastical texts such as *Knight Rider* explore the positive and negative potential of such a system, the first of these novels employs a radically different response, seeking to avert the system altogether. To some extent the popularity of post-apocalyptic literature and film since the 1980s may be read as an expression of the same desire. Whether the cause of the apocalypse is technological (as in the TV series *Jericho* [2006-2008]), biological (as in the comic and TV series *The Walking Dead* [2002 and 2010-2012, respectively]) or

undetermined (as in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* [2006]), the automobile and especially the highway often remain central to survival and security, with characters forced to rely on more direct and human means of communication and navigation to survive. Such post-apocalyptic texts may express a sublimated desire to return to the highway without the magic. Edward Abbey's *The Monkey-Wrench Gang* on the other hand, desires to destroy both magic and highway.

The Monkey Wrench Gang

Edward Abbey earned popular and critical acclaim following the publication of *Desert Solitaire* (1968), a collection of vignettes based on journals he kept as a park ranger at Arches National Monument (now Arches National Park) in southern Utah in 1956 and 1957. He had previously written and published three novels, none of which were particularly successful—one editor even suggested he give up writing and "try [his] hand at shoe repair or the mechanical arts" (Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* viii). The memoir received positive critical notices, including one from the *New York Times*, which found it "passionately felt, deeply poetic" (Teale BR7). What inspired Abbey's passion and poetry was a desert southwest that, at the time of his journals, was not yet paved or otherwise tamed, and which he described in the opening pages as "the most beautiful place on earth … the one true home": "the canyonlands. The slick-rock desert. The red dust and the burnt cliffs of the lonely sky—all that which lies beyond the end of the roads" (1). He found the landscape threatened, however, by industrial tourism, with paved roads and parking lots replacing the dirt roads and backpacking trails he traversed in his two summers as a ranger. "Excluding the automobile from the heart of the great cities has been seriously advocated by thoughtful observers of our urban problems,"

Abbey noted. “It seems to me an equally proper solution to the problems besetting our national parks” (54). Accordingly, when a survey team from the Bureau of Public Roads came to Arches to plan a new paved highway meant to draw automobile tourists, Abbey, after chatting with them amiably and then seeing them on their way, waited until nightfall and then dutifully followed their path back to headquarters, pulling up the stakes and cutting up the ribbons that mark the path of the road to come. “A futile effort, in the long run,” Abbey acknowledges, “but it made me feel good” (55).

Desert Solitaire earned Abbey a reputation as a nature writer, but it was a label he rejected. Writing in a preface to the 1986 edition of *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey claims to rarely read nature writing personally and to respect only those nature writers “who not only describe the world of nature but attempt, in their writing and in their lives, to defend it. (It is not enough to understand nature; the point is to save it.)” (*Desert Solitaire* xi). In *The Monkey Wrench Gang,* Abbey puts that philosophy into action, with a novel that not only offers a vivid description of nature in the American southwest (both untamed and in the process of being tamed by industry) but also seeks to defend it. The story of four ecologically-minded outsiders who come together to perform various acts of sabotage against industrial developments (including mines, roads, and bridges) around the Four Corners area both celebrates the saboteurs and provides something of a how-to manual for like-minded readers. The novel succeeded in this mission, reportedly inspiring the founders of the eco-defense organization Earth First! and giving rise to the term “monkeywrenching” for environmentally-minded industrial sabotage.

The novel has four main characters, each dedicated to protecting, even through criminal means, the natural southwestern landscape they love: George Hayduke, a

Vietnam veteran and survivalist who is much more comfortable in the solitude of the wilderness than in civilization; Doc Sarvis, an Albuquerque surgeon whose environmental concerns stem partly from the effects pollution has on his patients and who funds the gang's activities; "Seldom Seen" Smith, a polygamist jack-Mormon river guide who knows the region like the back of his hand; and Bonnie Abbzug, a northeastern refugee who (similar to Abbey himself) came to New Mexico in her early twenties, "fell in love—at first sight—with mountains and desert" (44), and made a new home for herself in the southwest.

The group first comes together on a rafting expedition down the Colorado River: Smith is the guide, Hayduke the man he hires when his assistant boatman fails to show, and Doc and Bonnie two of his clients. While drinking around the campfire on the first night they bond over a shared hatred of the Glen Canyon Dam. Begun in 1956 and completed ten years later, the hydroelectric dam created Lake Powell (the second-largest man-made lake in the country behind Lake Mead) and submerged much of Glen Canyon in the process.[57] Although the dam was authorized with relatively little opposition—environmentalists focused their attention on stopping two proposed dams near Dinosaur National Monument and agreed not to oppose the authorization of the Glen Canyon Dam if the Bureau of Reclamation would drop plans for those two dams—concerns about the loss of Glen Canyon grew during the ten years it took to complete the dam, and the years since its completion have seen a growing movement to remove the dam. Their opposition to the Glen Canyon Dam is a motivating factor and long-term goal, but the actual work of

[57] Also submerged was the town of Hite, which was "once home for Seldom Seen and still unofficial headquarters for his business" (111); like Maria in *Play It as It Lays*, whose Nevada hometown is now part of a military missile range, Seldom Seen's place of origin has been obliterated by progress.

the Monkey Wrench Gang in the novel focuses on other targets, including highway construction equipment, mining operations, and bridges.

True to his preference for nature writers "like Thoreau, who went far beyond simple nature writing to become critics of society, of the state, of our modern industrial culture" (*Desert Solitaire* xi), Abbey's novel connects his characters' environmental impulses with a critique of modern industrialism and the state, expressing concern not just about the direct environmental consequences of the expanding network of roads and electrical wires that signify progress, but also (in keeping with the increasingly powerful gaze that accompanies the magic highway) the attendant threat to privacy. Sarvis, the group's reigning intellectual, sees in the landscape scar of a mining operation "the whole conglomerated cartel" of corporations, trusts, and government agencies, "spread out upon half the planet Earth like a global kraken, pan-tentacled, wall-eyed and parrot-beaked, its brain a bank of computer data centers, its blood the flow of money, its heart a radioactive dynamo, its language the technotronic monologue of number imprinted on magnetic tape" (159). The Hobbesian Leviathan has mutated into a "global Kraken" which requires data collection in order to function; this mechanical monster—the "megamachine" as Sarvis calls it elsewhere (155)—is the real enemy of the monkey wrench gang.

The possibility of being tracked by the megamachine is a central and repeated concern for the group. This is particularly true for Hayduke and Sarvis. Hayduke, whose experience in Vietnam leaves him feeling perennially under attack, hears the incantation "They back in them data banks, trackin' you down" (231) while listening to the monotonous song of a nearby blackbird. For Doc Sarvis, the concern about computer networks knowing his activities is yet more pronounced, perhaps because he is financing

the operation. He articulates this fear even when the members of the group first meet one another on the Colorado River. As they sit around the campfire deep in Marble Canyon and talk about the possibility of attacking the Glen Canyon Dam, Sarvis begins to worry: "Who knows what ears these shadows have?" he asks in warning; when Seldom Seen assures him there is no one around "but us bombers," Sarvis reiterates his concern: "Who can be sure? The state may have its sensors anywhere" (64). Concern about the growing presence of the state and the proliferation of its surveillance network parallels the concern about the expansion of industry and technological networks. In the same conversation, Sarvis lists the "computer centers" among the necessary targets for the gang, along with billboards, strip mines, and power plants (64-65).

The concern about surveillance finds particular expression with respect to credit cards, which were still a relatively new phenomenon at the time.[58] Early on in their campaign, the gang is filling up at a gas station and Doc prepares to pay with a credit card until Hayduke pulls him aside: "No fucking credit cards; you want to leave a fucking documented trail one mile wide with your fucking signature on it everywhere we go?" (69). The danger of using credit cards in this situation is captured in a quasi-transportation metaphor that suggests not just movement but movement through the wilderness. A trail is an intermediary stage in the transition from wilderness to industrial civilization: it is, traditionally, an initial path through wilderness, but also points the way for larger, more sophisticated roads, since major highways tend to follow these trails. The data trail of the credit card, similarly, can be seen as but an initial incursion into the

[58] Bank-issued credit cards first appeared in 1958 with the BankAmericard, but it wasn't until the late 1960s, when multiple banks banded together to form credit card networks, that their availability became common and their use mainstream. On the early development of the credit card and credit card industry, see Evans and Schmalensee, 53-74.

privacy of individuals, eventually to be followed by more sophisticated and voluminous data superhighways.

That this incident takes place at a gas station is also significant. For one thing, the "courtesy cards" offered by oil companies allowing customers to purchase fuel on credit were among the earliest antecedents of the modern credit card. For another, the expansion of the highway network in the decades following World War II helped to fuel the development of the credit card by increasing the prevalence of travel in American life. Credit card companies touted their product as an important convenience for both business and leisure travelers. As the slogan for a 1971 BankAmericard (by then the network that would eventually become Visa) puts it: "Think of it as money. Travel money." (BankAmericard). Credit cards mark a point of intersection between the superhighway (of which they are, at least in part, a product) and the information superhighway, and provide one of the primary means of monitoring movement through America's transportation network.

In the action they take against highway construction, the Monkey Wrench Gang enact a more extreme version of the contemporaneous "freeway revolts," which found activists successfully opposing highway developments in various cities across the nation in the 1960s and 1970s. Upset by the havoc freeways had wrought on inner-city communities, outraged at the prospect that additional highways would threaten valued neighborhoods and resources such as Greenwich Village or the panhandle of the Golden Gate park, and inspired by Jane Jacobs's *The Life and Death of Great American Cities* (1961), activists rallied to defeat proposed highways in cities across the country. The members of the Monkey Wrench Gang go farther, opposing highway construction not

politically but directly and physically, by sabotaging construction equipment, blowing up a bridge, and (just as Abbey described doing himself in *Desert Solitaire*), tearing up survey stakes from roads not yet built. But the members of the Monkey Wrench Gang also specifically oppose the magic highway as the nexus of industrial development and the expansion of the state's surveillance capabilities. They take on an automated transportation system as an early target—specifically an "all-electric automated railway" that is part of a mining operation on Black Mesa. "The company has been boasting about these trains for a year," Hayduke explains. "Computerized. No human hand at the controls! World's first automated train" (165). Not an automated highway, of course, but it is significant that their first major target is an automated transportation system.

In addition to concern about how the megamachine combines transportation networks and surveillance networks, the individual members of the Monkey Wrench Gang are interested in disrupting the link between communication and transportation at more basic levels. When we first meet Bonnie and Doc Sarvis in the opening chapter, they are engaged in a peculiar hobby: setting fire to highway billboards. The book's opening sentence (aside from a prologue that actually takes place after the events of the book and bears the title "The Aftermath"[59]) reveals the narrator's hostility both to roadside billboards, describing their destruction as "a routine neighborhood beautification project," and the superhighway, identifying the road in question as "U.S. 66, soon to be devoured by the superstate's interstate autobahn" (9). The hostility to the superhighway is evident in the attribution of the project to the superstate, which amplifies the potentially

[59] "Prologue: The Aftermath" plays with the narrative time of the novel, offering a bridge explosion that takes place after the novel ends, perhaps by the protagonists, or perhaps by someone inspired by the protagonists—or even by the novel itself. Similarly, an author's note before the table of contents informs us that the book "though fictional in form, is based strictly on fact. Everything in it is real and actually happened. And it all began just one year from today."

sinister association of supremely concentrated power with the autobahn, which originated under Hitler's rule in Nazi Germany. Furthermore, this is not just any road being supplanted by the superhighway, but specifically Route 66, the most famous pre-Interstate highway. The billboards, on the other hand, are conventional billboards, offering a low-tech combination of communication and transportation, and in the process obscuring the natural landscape in order to sell a commercial product. Abbey's journals and the recollections of friends suggest that Sarvis's chosen hobby was inspired by Abbey's own destruction of billboards beginning as an undergraduate at the University of New Mexico in 1947. He also admits in *Desert Solitaire* to chopping down a billboard which carries an offensive Chamber of Commerce message ("Moab, Uranium Capital of the World") and provides a favorite hiding place for the local highway patrolman (192). Billboards are offensive because they are a blight on the landscape and appropriate the landscape for commercial purposes, creating, as Abbey describes them in a later (1988) novel, "a near-continuous wall of urgent exhortation" (*Fool's Progress* 135). Before turning their attention to grander targets with the Monkey Wrench Gang, Sarvis and Bonnie cut their teeth by working to eradicate such commercial communication from the roadside landscape by means of gasoline, chainsaws, and (once the outdoor advertising companies respond by using steel posts) an acetylene torch.

In the book's second chapter, which introduces George Hayduke, we again find a character disrupting the integration of communication and transportation, this time wreaking havoc by commandeering a police car and its radio system. Recently returned from Vietnam, where he served as a green beret medic and spent several months as a POW, Hayduke (who turned to memories of the wild canyons of the Colorado River to

get him through his captivity) is enraged by the industrial development around his hometown of Tucson, believing that "they were trying to do the same thing to the West that they did to that little country over there" (330). Frustrated by this industrial degradation of his homeland, he purchases a used jeep and drives up to canyon country to clear his head. When the "asphalt trail" leads him through Flagstaff, Arizona, he recognizes an opportunity to avenge a past injustice—three years before, he had been wrongfully arrested for public intoxication, merely because he had made the officer, who was "not accustomed to being overseen by an unknown civilian," nervous when he "stopped to watch Hall the cop and a nonuniformed companion interrogate a passing Indian" (19). Hayduke spent the night in the drunk tank and has nursed a grudge against Officer Hall ever since. With nothing else to do as he passed through Flagstaff en route to the canyon, he decides to exact revenge.

He finds Hall's house and, while he is trying to decide exactly what form his revenge would take (assault, perhaps, but not murder), Hall comes home for a brief break, taking coffee with his wife inside while his police cruiser sits unlocked and running in the driveway. Hayduke seizes the opportunity and eases the car quietly out of the driveway. As he does so, "the green eye of the police Motorola glow[s] from the dark under the dashboard, the speaker conveying a steady traffic of calm male voices discussing blood, wreckage, disaster" from a major car accident (20-21). Knowing the accident will buy him time (since police attention will be focused elsewhere) Hayduke cruises the streets, even passing another cruiser, whose occupant greets him with a casual wave. Then Hall gets on the line from a police radio at home and the voices on the Motorola release a series of alphanumeric codes (KB-34, 10-99, etc.) as Hall, dispatch, and the car that

Hayduke just passed try to figure out exactly what's going on. When the dispatcher asks who is driving Car Twelve (Hall's car), Hayduke picks up the radio and interjects himself into the conversation: "I am, you shitkickers. Just having a little fun in your two-bit town, okay? KB-34, over" (22; KB-34 being the number Hall had earlier used to identify himself on the radio). When a voice asks him to identify himself, he thinks for a moment and then calls himself Rudolf, introducing the alias (Rudolf the Red) that he will later use to claim responsibility for the Monkey Wrench Gang's activities. He uses the two-way radio, a combination of communication and transportation technology that expanded the powers of the state (see Chapters 2, 3, and 4), to introduce his dissident identity to the police.

Suspecting that his broadcast is likely being recorded at police headquarters, he has a moment of concern about "something called voice prints, the audible analogue to fingerprints" that could aid in his conviction for this mayhem. When a dispatcher warns him that radio broadcasts are monitored by the FCC, and that "abuse or misuse of police transmission systems is a Federal offense," his response is characteristically resistant and profane: "Fuck the Federal Communications Commission. Fuck you, too, Flagstaff fuzz. I piss on you all from a considerable height" (22). He then proceeds to hold the button on his receiver, shutting down all communication on the channel for a while, until he figures out his escape plan, which involves leaving the car on the railroad tracks in front of an oncoming train and slipping away in the mayhem of the ensuing collision. Through his appropriation of both police vehicle and its communication system, Hayduke asserts himself as an opponent of the police department as well as the forces in charge of the communications networks that bring magic to the superhighway.

The first two chapters of the novel, then, highlight the link between communication and transportation as a means for advancing consumerism and state surveillance networks, the same two features that power the full and final convergence of communication and transportation on our highways now. In destroying the billboards that line the highways around Albuquerque, Doc Sarvis and Bonnie disrupt the link between the automobile and commercial communication. Hayduke, with his profane taunting of Flagstaff police and the FCC, disrupts the link between the automobile and mobile surveillance. Later these characters will come together to prevent the further encroachment of highways and other industry on the desert they love, but their work begins with these pre-emptive blows against the magic highway.

Cadillac Jack

Still, it would be several years after *The Monkey Wrench Gang* before these components of the magic highway would become reality, and so as elements of fiction they remained in the realm of genre fiction for most of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Even the cell phone, the first element of the communicative automobile to become ubiquitous, is rarely mentioned in literature in the 1980s or early 1990s, with the exception of spy novels (James Bond has one, of course, on film as early as 1963's *From Russia with Love* and in books beginning with *Icebreaker* in 1983) and crime novels by authors such as Patricia Cornwall, Stephen Coonts, and Robert Crais. Given that the protagonists of these novels are usually connected to the legal system, the car phone is generally a tool to aid in investigations, surveillance, and other police functions. In Coonts's *The Minotaur* (1989), for instance, FBI agents use cell phones to coordinate a complex tailing operation in which several cars follow a suspected spy along the highways around Washington,

D.C. A passage in Michael Connelly's *The Black Echo* (1992) suggests that the proliferation of cellular phones among the public may provide a check on police power. After the novel's protagonist, Detective Harry Bosch, roughs up a motorist in a case of mistaken identity, his supervisor calls him out on his behavior: "Jesus, Bosch, you rough him up on the side of the freeway. Every asshole with a car phone is dialing nine one one reporting kidnap, murder, who knows what else" (317-8). Bosch's act of police brutality is a problem for his supervisor not so much because he attacked an innocent man, but because advances in communications technology make it easy for the public to identify and report such actions. The novel was published the year after a citizen with a video camera captured the Rodney King beating on tape, making an event that may have otherwise passed unnoticed into a national scandal for the LAPD. Before long, camera and video functionality would be built into cell phones themselves, providing another check on police power. In 2009, when a police officer fatally shot in the back an unarmed civilian, Oscar Grant, at a transit station in Oakland, several bystanders captured the event on cell phone video cameras; that footage was distributed to traditional media and spread rapidly through the Internet, focusing attention on the case, and was later used at the officer's trial (where he was convicted of involuntary manslaughter).

These early texts also occasionally address the lack of security that this form of communication provides. In *Clear and Present Danger* (1989), Tom Clancy outlines the false sense of security a Columbian drug cartel feels in conducting their business without resorting to code language on cell phones, which were thought to be impenetrable to law enforcement: "The United States government had been in the business of intercepting

foreign radio communications since the days of Yardley's famous Black Chamber[60] …. It was a field in which America had excelled for generations. Whole constellations of satellites were deployed to eavesdrop on foreign nations, catching snippets of radio calls, side-lobe signals from microwave relay towers. Often encoded in one way or another, the signals were most often processed at the headquarters of the National Security Agency … whose acres of basement held most of the supercomputers in the world" (258). The passage touches on the vulnerability of car phones and other cellular communications as well as the computer infrastructure (which has expanded considerably in the twenty years since Clancy's novel was published) devoted to intercepting, decoding, and storing information collected from such exchanges. Former Naval Secretary (and current U.S. Senator) James Webb also notes the lack of security in car phone communications in *Something to Die For* (1991), as two security agents riding in a limo with the U.S. Secretary of Defense recognize a nearby car as belonging to Russian agents who had "electronically ambushed" the secretary. The secretary's aides caution him against using the car phone, since the Russians will be listening. The secretary, "feeling gallant," jokes that he could make a call about laying mines around Vladivostok. "Just think, sir," one of the agents responds, "We could start World War Three right here on the car phone" (196). The passage reinforces that communication through the car phone is vulnerable to interception and exposure, but also suggests the instrument's power.

The car phone makes an early, maybe the very first, appearance outside of science fiction or crime novels in Larry McMurtry's *Cadillac Jack*. The narrator and title character is a roving antique scout who "keep(s) on the move constantly" covering the

[60] This refers to cryptologist Herbert Yardley and the Cipher Bureau, which he headed. Founded shortly after World War I, the Cipher Bureau was the first peacetime agency devoted to signal intelligence and a forerunner of the NSA.

nation's "vast grid" of dealers, junk shops, antique shows, and so on (12). He packs the objects he finds in the trunk of his car but rarely keeps one more than a week or two before selling it to one of the many connections he has cultivated over the years. Before becoming a picker, Jack had been a rodeo star, and the connecting thread in both lines of work is a life on the road: "In my rodeo days I had seen a lot of America, but mostly only its filling stations and rodeo arenas. Once I became a scout I tended to spend a lot of time in the parking lots of the same arenas, since that's where a lot of America's flea markets are held" (15). Like Least Heat-Moon in *Blue Highways* and Sal Paradise in *On the Road*, Jack spends his time roaming the country, but his limited interaction with the areas he visits reflects the superficial experience of the superhighway. For Jack, who uses it more for personal matters than for business purposes, the car phone would appear to alleviate some of the isolation associated with a life on the road. In truth, it inhibits the meaningful pursuit of promising new directions in his personal life.

His career as an antique scout gives Jack a tangible relationship to American history. He does not exclusively collect Americana (his only criterion is that a given object be exceptional) but naturally many of the objects that he buys are associated with American history, culture, and myth, including custom hubcaps from one of Valentino's cars and Billy the Kid's last pair of boots. The introduction to the History Channel TV show *American Pickers*, about a pair of antique scouts who likewise travel the country looking for valuable antiques, claims that the pickers "make a living telling the history of America one piece at a time."[61] Jack, though, makes his living (as do the pickers on TV, absent income from the television show) *selling* the history of America one piece at a

[61] The show is one of several currently popular reality shows which discuss American history and culture through the framework of characters who, like Jack, specialize in the finding, buying, and selling antiques; similar shows include *American Restoration*, *Pawn Stars*, *Auction Hunters*, and *Storage Wars*.

time. For his part, Jack has a deep appreciation for his objects, as well as interest in and knowledge of the history they represent. The most compelling objects he finds function "like time machines, effortlessly removing [him] from [his] time and inserting [him] briefly in theirs" (214). His buyers, on the other hand, are not so much interested in his wares for the history they contain so much as the status they afford the purchaser.

Jack's role as a broker in the commercial parceling of American history fits perfectly within the broader context of the novel's plot, which satirizes Washington society and politics, and the historical context of the novel's production, coming in the midst of the early '80s recession with the political scandal of Watergate still relatively fresh and the nation on the verge of a new era defined by corporate greed and trickle-down economics. Fairly early in the novel, Jack discovers that even the nation's most expansive historical treasure trove, the Smithsonian Institution, is being parceled out by a man named Cyrus Folmsbee. The Folmsbees, explains Jack's friend Boog (a wealthy Texan whose connections in Washington run deep), "own just about everythang in America that's worth havin,'" and Cyrus thinks "his family just kind of lent [the Smithsonian] to the nation" (98). The plan is to sell off various treasures stored in the Smithsonian's warehouse to emergent nations (from whom many of these objects had been taken in the first place) and then replace those items with fakes. Jack is even offered the chance to buy part of it (a warehouse filled with 190,000 baskets), but does not act quickly enough, nor does he have the funds. Still, like everything else in America, the nation's cultural treasures are for sale. Operating from his pearl-colored Cadillac, Jack is reduced to being a mobile middle man for a country being sold for parts.

While the automobile and automobile culture had once been important symbols and evidence of the nation's vitality and ingenuity, in *Cadillac Jack* they are suggestive of a nation whose best days appear to be past. For Jack, who claims mastery of "the freeway system in every American city," the long and empty stretches outside the cities remain a source of solace, and even in his most frenzied and confused moments, he trusts "that the long roads and blue skies of America will restore [him] to lucidity and a simple sense of purpose: to find the best things to be found along the roads and beneath the skies" (102).[62] Of course, given his tastes and line of work, all those best things are from eras past. Even the long roads and blue skies themselves are, in an era when the regulations of the Clean Air Act were still new and American urban skies were choked with haze and pollution, remnants of the past.

Other texts of the era, too, associate the automobile with a culture in the process of winding down. The opening passage of John Updike's *Rabbit Is Rich* [1981] finds Rabbit Angstrom, who has recently inherited a Toyota dealership from his father-in-law, reflecting on the state of the world around him: "Running out of gas, Rabbit Angstrom thinks as he stands behind the summer-dusty windows of the Springer Motors display room watching the traffic go by on Route 111, traffic somehow thin and scared compared to what it used to be. The fucking world is running out of gas" (1). The observation is not only literal, recording the memory of the oil crisis of the decade immediately past, but also speaks metaphorically of a community that is sputtering to some final rest. The

[62] As Janis P. Stout points out Jack's interest in the road echoes both the themes of his earlier work and of the two novels that would immediately follow, *Desert Rose* (1983) and the Pulitzer-prize winning *Lonesome Dove* (1985). It also parallels McMurtry's own fascination with the highway, which began as a child living next to U.S. Route 281, which served his landlocked imagination as something akin to a "river, its hidden reaches a mystery and an enticement" (*Roads* 12). McMurtry's 2000 travelogue *Roads: Driving America's Great Highways* takes the unusual strategy of describing his solo travels along the nation's interstates, eschewing both the back roads that define Heat-Moon's *Blue Highways* and the desire to connect with the real people of America that defines Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*.

imports Rabbit sells get gas mileage superior to American automobiles; that appeals to the public, which is “getting frantic, they know the great American ride is ending” (1). Like Cadillac Jack, who makes his living traveling the highways to find and sell the best things to be found among the relics of the past, Rabbit’s wealth and career are a function of the nation’s decline, specifically with respect to industrial production.

As Jack’s professional life involves fleeting relationships with infatuating artifacts, his personal life, too, is a series of temporary engagements. He is twice divorced and throughout the novel he bounces between two primary love interests: one the socially-ambitious owner of an art gallery and the other a recently-divorced, novice antiques dealer. His rationale for being a mobile dealer rather than setting roots with a shop of his own offers insight into his relationship difficulties: “If you open a store, you have to stay and run the store. And then, instead of buying things you really love, you start buying what people bring you, in order to fill the store and have something to sell” (215). The need to defer to interests other than his own deters him from permanence of place, both professionally and romantically. As McMurtry describes him in a preface, when Jack “yearns, he yearns for individuals, not for a home” (7). But while he remains essentially rootless, he is not completely disconnected. Nor does he simply rid himself of women the way he rids himself of objects; rather, his relationships with women frequently abide beyond their romantic expiration date. Even as he prefers to stay on the move, his car phone connects him to the people he cares about personally.

He acquires his car phone shortly after his first marriage breaks up, and it proves a boon to both Jack and his ex-wife, Coffee. For Jack it provides a sense of connection while out on the road. He uses it primarily to keep in touch with Coffee, who moved back

home to Austin following their divorce. With his equipment installed, he proceeds to "[eat] up thousands of American miles while chatting with Coffee, who had not left Austin since her return" (22). Coffee is apparently more satisfied with this long-distance relationship than she was with their marriage itself: "What she really liked to do was talk on the phone when nothing was happening around the real estate office—when she discovered that she could do that without having to put up with my antiques she was delighted" (22). The car phone allows him to maintain his relationship with the individual he once yearned for (and still cares for) even after the home (which he never yearned for) has become untenable, and affords for her some the most satisfying components of their relationship without having to participate in the mobility that made her uncomfortable.

Their relationship by car phone continues throughout the book, though several years have passed since their divorce and though both have had several other relationships. They talk frequently (about twenty hours per week, he says at one point), and their conversations—about things that have happened to him on the road, about deeply-felt anxieties and fears, and about her various other romantic relationships—are emotionally engaged and substantial. The emotional connection the car phone provides is captured in Coffee's ability to transmit her mood to him during a conversation about her current relationship. When the conversation begins Coffee is at work, feeling unfulfilled and insignificant, but by "the end of the conversation she was perfectly cheerful, and had transferred her emptiness to me" (129). His car phone connection with Coffee not only communicates information about her life and her mood, but conducts the moods themselves to him as well. After another conversation that ends with Coffee in a less cheerful mood, he comments after she hangs up that "though it was 1,700 miles to

Austin, I could feel her crying as I started the car and drove out of Wheaton [Maryland]" (347). In spite of the physical distance and the layers of phone wire and radio waves that mediate their conversation (and their relationship in general), he describes the contact that the car phone conveys in physical terms.

Other times, too, the connection of the car phone is presented as physical and direct; after spending most of the drive from Portland, Oregon, to Montrose, Colorado on the phone with Coffee, "discussing various of her problems and trying to decide if we were up to a meeting," he finds that he "had let Coffee's husky childish voice, talking endlessly, pull me slowly south and I was seriously thinking of paying her a quick visit before going back east to take the Arbers to Disney World" (391). The Arbers are Jean (the antique dealer he has been seeing) and her two daughters; Jean rebuffed his attempts to marry her before this final trip, instead sending him back onto the road he loves; but they still plan to meet when he is in town and have planned the trip to Florida with her daughters. The novel ends before we find out whether, in fact, Jack visits Texas before heading back east, but the metaphor of her voice pulling him physically from his path again speaks to the intensity of the connection the car phone provides.

Coffee is not the only person he talks to on his car phone. His relationships with Cindy (the ambitious gallery owner) and Jean also involve considerable time spent on the car phone. But while he does negotiate the shifting terrain of these relationships through the car phone, the results are not always as satisfactory as they are with Coffee, with whom there is less at stake. Ultimately the car phone interferes with each relationship. At a crossroads in their relationship, he and Cindy take a scouting trip together to New Mexico, where he hopes to purchase Billy the Kid's boots. Cindy has recently begun

seeing another man, Spud Breyfogle, but has not completely severed her relationship with Jack, who remains, he surmises, “a pal with sexual privileges, perhaps even sexual responsibilities” (271). Jack, still infatuated, is unnerved when she keeps using the car phone to call her message service to see if Spud has called. When an incoming call from the service alerts her that Spud wants to meet in Miami, she immediately calls off the rest of the trip and keeps “the phone tied up for fifty miles, trying to find an air route that would get her to Florida sometime that night” (281). In Jack’s ideal world, perhaps, the time spent together on the long trip might have salvaged their relationship, but instead the connectivity of the car phone brings final news of its demise.

In his relationship with Jean, too, the car phone plays a mixed role. On the one hand, he has positive conversations with her through the device—he improves his mood after Cindy leaves by calling her, for instance, and the phone endears him to Jean’s precocious younger daughter Belinda, who almost always answers when he calls Jean. When Jean calls him, though, the device disrupts their relationship. Jack is returning to Washington after the trip to New Mexico. Cindy is in Miami, but Spud has not arrived to meet her, and so she has called Jack as a backup, hoping he will come to Miami to keep her company until Spud shows up, an offer which he is still considering when Jean calls. She asks when he might return, and he tells her probably in a day or two, “although there’s a distant prospect that I might have to go to Miami. I’ve heard of an estate that sounds interesting” (309). Jean correctly surmises that it is not an estate but a woman and calls him on it. She does so playfully at first (their relationship has never been exclusive), but when Jack hedges his bets (“It might be a little of both” [309]) she calls him on that as well, and he ultimately admits to lying, thereby precipitating an argument. Eventually

he tries to end the argument by saying the trip to Miami is unlikely and he doesn't know why he mentioned it. But Jean does know: "You mentioned it to leave yourself an out … I wish I could find a man somewhere who didn't constantly feel the need to leave himself an out" (310). Jean sees this need for an out as typical of male behavior (or, at least, of the males she has been involved with), but Jack's is not a typical out. Rather than claiming he may have to work late or be otherwise engaged, his out is *way* out—more than one thousand miles away in Miami.

Jean's comment insightfully captures Jack's dilemma in his phone relationship with her. Talking to Coffee is no real threat to Jack or his way of life, since their relationship has already run its course. Cindy, meanwhile, has called him repeatedly (even getting upset with him for not being constantly available—"Now and then I'm out of the car" [303], he says in his defense) to convince him to keep her company in Miami while she waits for her new lover to arrive. This, too, is not a threat to Jack's way of life, since he knows his infatuation with Cindy is temporary and physical, and so there is no risk of permanence. In Jean, on the other hand, he sees a kindred spirit and someone for whom he could, if given the opportunity, give up his life on the open road. With Coffee the car phone provides a safe and valuable connection back to the domestic life he has rejected; with Jean, it is potentially a tether. So long as he controls the access, the car phone is a boon to their relationship; but when she calls him they wind up arguing, leaving him depressed and her alienated.

At the end of the novel, after Jean rebuffs Jack's offer of marriage and sends him back out on the road, he finds himself hoping that she will reach out and pull him back through the car phone. She does not break up with him completely, but instead tells him

to “Hit the road. Find me something wonderful. You can’t come back till you do” (379). He understands from this that their relationship will continue in some as-yet-undefined capacity. Her reasons are varied and complex: she envies and admires both his vocation and his skill at it, and so is reluctant to disrupt it; she accepts that he is willing, at the moment, to settle down, but believes he may eventually get bored and resent it; and she is hesitant to tie herself down as well. She states these reasons clearly but without rancor, and they part on good terms, enjoying a family outing with her daughters before he actually leaves. Still, Jack has difficulty grasping the finality of her decision. Even as he selects a destination (Seattle) and speculates as to the treasures he might find there, he “[does]n’t really want to start. [He keeps] thinking the car phone would ring. It would be Jean, changing her mind in the nick of time” (382). Hoping to “give her a little more time,” he gets off the highway so that he might kill some more time before conceding defeat and leaving town. Where the car phone had once represented a somewhat threatening connection to Jean, now he looks at it as a lifeline, as though she might still reach out through the car phone to rein him back in.

Jack’s car phone, then, has both positive and negative consequences for Jack’s relationships with other people. Comparing Coffee, with whom the car phone provides Jack a legitimate sense of connection, and Jean, with whom the car phone is less successful, provides more insight into how the device functions in the novel. Jack’s commentary occasionally calls into question Coffee’s maturity and intellect. She is his “most girlish girl” (129), with a voice he describes as “childish” (314) and a manner of argument that is “as dogmatic as [Jean’s younger daughter] Belinda” (345). Coffee is “nice, in a vacant sort of way” (125), but her engagement in the world around her seems

minimal: though she worries in one phone call with Jack that “nothing will ever happen” to her (124), he remarks to the reader that during their marriage she “had seldom been awake enough to notice that not much had happened yet” (129). Should anything of significance happen to her, it is questionable whether it would have any long-term effect on Coffee, whose “terrible memory had been a source of trouble ever since [Jack had] known her. She really had almost no memory at all. Once she forgot what butter was, for example” (345). Coffee’s most egregious flaw, however, is not her lack of curiosity or engagement, but that her taste is inferior to his: “The problem was never one of money,” he says of the buying habits that interfered with their marital bliss. “The problem was that I had become an object-snob. Coffee had reasonably good taste, but mine was better. She loved modern furniture and was constantly buying chairs and lamps, but they were always a cut below the really classic modern chairs and lamps” (21). For his own part, Jack can only summon passion for that which is exceptional; even that which is merely first-rate cannot really hold his attention. “When it came down to it,” he concludes, “I loved Coffee but couldn’t tolerate her objects” (21-22). Though he maintains an affection for Coffee, he finds her maturity, her engagement with the world, and in particular her taste, wanting.

Jean, on the other hand, is insightful, as her ability to diagnose Jack’s deceptions and motivations demonstrates. She is at least somewhat adventurous and engaged and, more importantly, has tastes approaching his own. From their first meeting—at an auction both attend specifically to purchase a quadripartite icon that Jack assumes might pass unnoticed among the old rakes and broken-down lawnmowers that comprise the bulk of the lots—Jack feels she might be a kindred spirit. He wins the bidding war, which

opens at forty dollars and shoots quickly past her 700-dollar budget to his winning $1300 bid. After picking up his icon, he is intrigued to see her staring angrily at him: “So far as I could remember, a woman had never got mad at me over an icon, and I was curious” (78). But when he approaches to make conversation, she gets flustered and flees the room in tears. “I had the unhappy sense that I had just managed to bruise a kindred spirit,” Jack reflects. “Probably the young lady was just like me. When I see something like the icon, I *want* it. Sometimes the mere sight of such an object causes me to hyperventilate, out of fear that it will somehow slip out of reach” (79; emphasis in original). Jack sees in Jean a person whose temperament, interests, and taste match his own. His first visit to her newly-opened antiques store reinforces their concordant tastes. There he finds several attractive pieces, but only one, a Pennsylvania dower chest, that he considers truly exceptional; he immediately surmises that the chest must be her favorite piece, and in fact it is. Her exceptional tastes are confirmed, and their relationship blossoms. As we have already seen, though, and in contrast to his relationship with Coffee, the car phone is not an effective tool for building this relationship.

While it is true, then, that the car phone provides the rootless Jack with a stable and emotionally significant connection to balance his wandering life on the road, it is also true that the connection involves a relationship that has little substantial to offer him. The car phone keeps him connected, yes, but only to a stagnant past, while it interferes with a potentially satisfying relationship developing in the present. Jack evinces some understanding of how their mobile phone relationship might impede Coffee’s ability to move forward. When she hears Jean’s daughters in the background after calling him, she grows jealous, recognizing that the daughters likely have a mother who may be involved

with Jack. He hangs up the phone knowing that he "was in deep trouble in Austin—the kind of trouble that occurs when you keep talking to a lazy woman you have divorced, thus encouraging her not to bother building a new life" (114). He ascribes her jealousy to their mobile phone relationship, but does not appear to recognize the degree to which the car phone also prevents him from building a new life. Superficially, the car phone appears to ameliorate the alienating effects of the superhighway, a space organized not around travel for pleasure but for commerce and productivity, which carries drivers through a region instead of offering entry into that region, and which isolates drivers from other people instead of providing opportunities for contact and communication. In reality, it instead exacerbates those effects. It prevents Jack, in particular, from cultivating productive new relationships and from pursuing promising new avenues in his personal life, instead keeping him tethered to past relationships that have long since played out.

Cosmopolis

A novelty in the early-1980s setting of *Cadillac Jack*, the car phone became more common in the following decade but was once again a rarity by the turn of the century, a victim of the cellular revolution. Several factors contributed to the rapid expansion of cell phone use in the 1990s, including the obvious business applications, lower costs both for service and production, and (perhaps most importantly) improved technology allowing for much smaller phones that easily fit in purses, pockets, or belt clips. (Early cell phone models came with briefcase-sized battery packs.) As cell phones became inexpensive and the number of cell phone users increased (from one million subscribers in 1987 to more than 70 million by 1999), the need to install a phone specifically in a vehicle all but disappeared, even as the actual use of phones in automobiles increased.

Other innovations in automobile communications soon followed, as the field of vehicle telematics (the integration of communications and information technology) brought innumerable services to motorists. Navigation systems using global positioning satellites to pinpoint user location and provide turn-by-turn directions and updated maps first appeared in the 1980s and began to be offered by automobile manufacturers in the mid-90s.[63] GPS navigation systems really took off after May 2000, when the United States encouraged commercial use by stopping the intentional degradation of the signal for the public. Satellite radio was conceived in the early 1990s but because of FCC regulations did not go live in the U.S. until 2001, when it quickly became popular with motorists and car-rental companies. Backseat televisions and theater systems moved from luxury limousines to SUVs and other family vehicles by the middle of the decade, whether as integrated equipment or through relatively inexpensive portable DVD players; the proliferation of mobile devices such as smart phones and tablet PCs in the last half of the decade made visual communication in the automobile all the more common. Security services such as OnStar, which launched in 1996, gave motorists access to remote operators who could be contacted with the touch of a dashboard button for help with such things as roadside assistance, directions, or contacting emergency services after an accident. OnStar was a General Motors initiative, but other companies followed suit with services such as BMW Assist and Lexus Link. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, these services evolved to include such things as wi-fi hotspots and video chat.

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[63] As with car phones, automobile navigation systems have been around much longer than many might imagine. A "New Things for the Motorist" feature in the February, 1910, issue of *Motor* contains a notice for the "Jones Live Map," produced by a well-known speedometer manufacturer. Motorists could load a specially-designed scroll containing a map of a given route (including such information as inns and other services along the way [Slauson 40]); like an ordinary speedometer, the device gauged the vehicle's speed, but also scrolled the map through the viewing area "in accordance with the progress of the car," with an indicator to "show the position of the car at all times" (112f).

Bluetooth connectivity integrates a driver's cell phone with the vehicle's sound system. Motorists and passengers can access the Internet for commerce, news, or entertainment with in-car command centers in many new models, using either subscription services or community wireless networks that have cropped up across the continent. Between innovations in mobile communications technology that can be used anywhere (cell phones, smart phones, iPads, and so on) and innovations in technology and services designed specifically for vehicle telematics, the integration of communications technology into the fabric and function of the automobile continues to tighten.

The Internet boom and the dot-com bubble of the late 1990s were integral to these innovations. Although dating to the 1960s, the Internet entered public consciousness in the 1990s thanks to the development of graphical browsers and the World Wide Web, which quickly became the Internet's most popular feature. New companies organized specifically around Internet commerce and services attracted lavish attention from venture capitalists and other investors. At the same time, the exploding popularity of the web (and the attendant awakening to the possibilities of the Internet in general) inspired older businesses to invest heavily in Internet-related services and technology as they scrambled to establish their online presence, exploit the new frontier for marketing and sales, and incorporate the new technology into their product and service lines. Local and state governments, too, sought to attract high-tech businesses (which would bring prestige, a highly-skilled workforce, and financial rewards) by offering economic incentives and by investing in technology for their own jurisdictions. One net result of this investment was an expanding infrastructure of fiber optic cables and communications satellites, which helped to lay the groundwork for some of the automobile innovations

mentioned in the paragraph above. Another result was that fevered speculation (the "irrational exuberance," as Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan famously referred to it) eventually gave out, resulting in the bursting of what became known as the dot-com bubble. After several years of steady growth, Internet, communications, and related stocks peaked in value in March 2000; in April, these stocks began deflating rapidly, precipitating a far-reaching market decline.

Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* takes place in the midst of this bursting bubble, on an unspecified day in April, 2000. The book follows Eric Packer, a billionaire asset manager in his late twenties, as he makes his way across Manhattan by limousine to get a haircut. His progress is impeded by traffic from a celebrity funeral, traffic and security surrounding a presidential motorcade, and anti-globalization riots; meanwhile, his attention is diverted by such issues as his health, his relationships, and the dollar's falling value against the yen, which threatens to wipe out his fortune. Though Packer's primary financial concerns on the day in question are not related directly to technology stocks, the debris radius of that bursting bubble covers the market as a whole, and the novel is situated within this wider crash. "It is an April day in the year 2000, and an era is about to end" declares the promotional blurb on the book's back cover. "The booming times of market optimism—when the culture boiled with money and corporations seemed more vital and influential than governments—are poised to crash." One component of the collapse described here is historical—along with wiping out a decade of gains in stock market value buoyed by technological optimism, the market downturn certainly brought an end to an era of market optimism. The other component, suggesting that corporations lost influence and power, remains in the realm of fantasy; the early-decade market

setback aside, corporate power has intensified in the increasing globalization wrought by the information economy and the expansion of communications technology. Still, like *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Delillo's novel offers a fantasy of collapse; while Hayduke and company sought to destroy a new technological regime before it took root, however, Packer exploits the technology itself to destroy the system from within.

The magic superhighway and the hyper-communicative automobile are product and symbol of the rise of mobile technology and the information superhighway, and Packer's limo epitomizes the automobile as a communicative space. The limo's coach is complete with phone and internet access, satellite television keeping him apprised of global markets, and video cameras transmitting all that happens in the coach to a personal security force at his company headquarters. It does not represent the full realization of the magic highways imagined in the 1940s and '50s, since it is not fully automated, but it does come with the next best thing: like Edith Wharton and Theodore Dreiser in their early automobile narratives, Packer has a chauffeur to drive him. Like the denizens of Disney's *Magic Highway, U.S.A.* and similar speculative texts, Packer can make his way across town to his destination without things like the traffic or the surrounding environment constantly diverting his personal attention away from business, which he follows on an "array of visual display units" with "medleys of data on every screen" (13). There is also a small spy camera that follows his every move, displaying it back to him on a small monitor and also sending it back to his office, where a nurse and two armed guards watch for any sign of failing health. All of these communication devices are controlled by his own audio and visual communication: "He could talk most systems into operation or wave a hand at a screen and make it go blank" (13). When an assistant asks

Packer why they are in the car rather than the office on this day, Packer responds: “How do you know we’re in the car instead of the office?” (15). Henry Ford speculated that the car phone would allow a businessman to transform the automobile into an office, and Packer’s limo is the fully-equipped realization of that vision. But while Ford’s roving office allowed him to remain connected to stationary loci of power (manufacturing not being a particular portable undertaking), Packer’s roving office represents power uprooted, fully and freely mobile across global financial networks. The word “office,” he reflects, “is outdated now. It had zero saturation” (15). The communicative automobile does not supplement the office, but supplants it.

An early passage reveals how different the technological environment is for Packer from his motoring ancestors. After leaving his apartment he crosses the street to gaze at his 89-story apartment building, at first thinking of it as a skyscraper, though that word gives him pause: “He took out his hand organizer and poked a note to himself about the anachronistic quality of the word skyscraper. No recent structure ought to bear this word. It belonged to the olden soul of awe, to the arrowed towers that were a narrative long before he was born. The hand device itself was an object whose original culture had just about disappeared. He knew he’d have to junk it” (9). The juxtaposition of these technologies is revealing. On the one hand, these towering structures, the quintessential engineering marvels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, are now too commonplace to warrant the awe or romance of the word “skyscraper”; on the other, the handheld PDA has passed from science fiction fantasy to archaic relic in a span of less than thirty years. One might be tempted to see in this comparison a contrast of the lasting structural contributions of the modern with the transitory, disposable whims of the

postmodern—after all, the skyscrapers themselves abide and remain functional, while the PDA is junk to be discarded. But while the modern skyscraper has been made mundane by repetition, the PDA is disposable only because technological innovation has made it irrelevant.[64] The same innovations that made the PDA obsolete have also made possible the hyper-communicative characteristics of Packer's own automobile which, like Wharton's Panhard, heralds the dawn of a new era. But while Wharton celebrated this new technology's ability to restore romance and wonder, the rapid pace of technological innovation and change in Packer's era has rendered wonder itself—the olden soul of awe—obsolete.

The self-contained nature of the limousine coach suggests the apotheosis of the automobile as private space. The speculation in "Magic Highway, U.S.A." that automobiles would have all the comforts of home is realized in Packer's automobile, which includes such amenities as a cooler stocked with refreshments, a microwave for heating food, and a functioning toilet. Packer does not need to leave the limousine (though he repeatedly does, to the consternation of Torval, his head of security) for food, water, or information. The windows make it difficult or impossible for those outside the car to see inside, making the space all the more private (excepting the webcam transmitting his image to headquarters, of course). Packer can see something of the world outside of the car, but with the array of satellite feeds available inside the car and no responsibility for guiding the vehicle itself there is little need. Since the view through the

[64] In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, skyscrapers too were quickly rendered obsolete and replaced as new technologies and techniques made yet taller buildings possible. The Home Insurance Building in Chicago (often considered the first skyscraper because it was the first tall building with a structural steel frame) was built in 1884, but razed to make way for taller fare in 1931. It lasted longer than the Rand-McNally building, which was built in 1889, served as headquarters for the World's Columbian Exposition in 1892, and was gone by 1911. New York City's first skyscraper, the Tower Building, was built in 1889 and was destroyed in 1914.

window is somewhat limited in direction and range, when he really wants to see what is happening around him Packer opens the sun roof and sticks out his head, like a turtle emerging from his high tech, twenty-first-century shell. Packer's security team defends this private space forcefully, quickly intercepting, interrogating, even physically assaulting those who approach the car, be they rioters in a wave of destruction or a physician who approaches the car to give Packer a scheduled examination.

The enclosed, private nature of the automobile, as an incursion of a mobile private space into the public square, is frequently the subject of critiques of the automobile and automobile culture; this separation from public space isolates and alienates and runs counter to the cultivation of community that public spaces can offer. While Packer's limousine would appear to take that aspect of automobility to new extremes, the depiction of the people moving outside of the automobile undermines the notion that the automobile inhibits community that might otherwise flourish. Stepping outside the limo to stretch while traffic is stalled completely, Packer examines the pedestrians around him:

> He felt the street around him, unremitting, people moving past each other in coded moments of gesture and dance. They tried to walk without breaking stride because breaking stride is well-meaning and weak but they were forced sometimes to sidestep and even pause and they almost always averted their eyes. Eye contact was a delicate matter. A quarter second of a shared glance was a violation of agreements that made the city operational. Who steps aside for whom, who looks or does not look at whom, what level of umbrage does a brush or a touch constitute? No one wanted to be touched. There was a pact of untouchability. Even here, in the huddle of old cultures, tactile and close-woven,

> with passersby mixed in, and security guards, and shoppers pressed to windows, and wandering fools, people did not touch each other (66).

Even for pedestrians in Manhattan, one of the most pedestrian-heavy and pedestrian-friendly urban spaces in America, moving through such public space does not alleviate the sense of alienation, and may in fact compound it. Mass transit, too, compounds that sense of alienation: as John Timberman Newcomb points out in his study of "rapid transit verse," the alienating effect of "the promiscuous mingling of bodies in confined conveyances" (220) was an important feature of poetry about urban movement throughout the twentieth century. Packer's analysis of the city's pedestrian condition—leery of physical contact or even eye contact—suggests that the lack of community sometimes attributed to the rise of the automobile may be inherent in urbanization itself.

More than providing a defense against unwanted contact, the hyper-communicative automobile actually alleviates the isolation of the urban space, keeping Packer connected to important people in his life as well as the world. As his journey across Manhattan progresses he receives a series of visitors in the car to discuss business and other matters. His chief of technology is in the car at the beginning of the trip, followed by his currency analyst, a physician, his chief of finance, and his theory advisor, with whom Packer discusses his behavior (as he might with a therapist) as well as the riots that surround the limo while they talk. The communication technology within the automobile, meanwhile, gives him access to events happening across the globe (for example, the assassination of the head of the International Monetary Fund, captured on the Money Channel as it happens) and also helps him to better understand the events in his immediate vicinity. When Packer hears a disturbance in the street while talking with

his theory advisor, he inspects the situation using the sun roof and sees a rowdy crowd of ski-mask clad protestors storming the street, swarming cars, and breaking windows. The scene is disorienting, but when he returns his head to the car he is able to make sense of it, thanks to the news coverage playing on the screens inside: "It made more sense on TV. He poured two vodkas and they watched, trusting what they saw. It was a protest all right and they were smashing the windows of chain stores and loosing battalions of rats in restaurants and hotel lobbies" (89). Trust in what one sees on the TV news may, in many cases, be misplaced, and the communicative automobile provides a mediated experience at the expense of the immediate, personal experience available outside his mobile fortress; at the same time, the communicative automobile provides context and details that he would not otherwise have. As DeLillo shows, the integration of communications technology and the automobile, by connecting the private space of the automobile with vast networks and infinite sources of information, complicates the assumption that the automobile is a source of alienation and isolation.

Though they are very different people dealing with very different problems, for both Packer and Maria Wyeth in *Play It As It Lays* the alienation and monotony of modern life inspire a similar nihilistic malaise, captured in the phrase "nothing applies." Maria introduces this refrain in that novel's opening chapter, as a response to the psychiatric staff's attempt to analyze her, and carries the refrain through the remainder of the book.[65] Packer utters the same refrain in response to his currency analyst, who is trying to figure out why the yen continues to rise, against both their expectations and their financial interests. When the analyst offers to return to the office and "chart events over time and see what I can find that applies," Packer responds: "Nothing applies. But it's

[65] See pages 295-301.

there. It charts. You'll see it" (37). Packer's use of the phrase highlights the ambiguity that (despite Maria's insistence to the contrary) it contains: is it that not a thing applies or is *nothing* that which applies? How can *nothing* be there, chart, or make itself visible? In Packer's case, it seems nothing is the thing that applies, as the world itself is increasingly organized around nothing. His communications command center requires nothing tangible to control it, but can be spoken into action and manipulated with a wave of his hand. Money may make the world go round, but it is obsolete in its physical form, existing primarily as nothing but "lines of code that interact in simulated space" (124). Property itself, his theory advisor tells him, is "no longer about power, personality, and command …. Because it no longer has weight or shape" (78). Packer's assertion that "nothing applies" reveals both the random unpredictability of the universe and a future powered by things that have no tangible physical existence.

Even Packer's own physical existence is tending towards nothingness. This is literally true in that the specter of death hangs over him. His regular physician once described his prostate as "asymmetrical," and the substitute physician who performs his examination on the day of the novel confirms this diagnosis. Packer does not know (or ask) what this means, but it instills a sense of dread, and indeed an asymmetrical prostate can be a risk factor for prostate cancer. Near the end of the novel we learn from his barber (an old friend of his father's) that his father died only a few months after being diagnosed of some unnamed illness when Packer was a child. Packer fears a similar fate, his body wasting (in spite of his workout regime and daily medical examinations) to nothingness. This feeling of impending death informs his cavalier attitude towards what his security team considers a credible threat on his life. Torval repeatedly presses Packer

to behave more carefully, but Packer persists, growing increasingly reckless until, finally, he meets the source of the threat face-to-face and (after a brief conversation) is shot and killed. Beyond the simple fact of his mortality, though, advances in technology raise the prospect of the body itself becoming obsolete, with the cultivation of a consciousness that transcends the physical body providing a logical telos for the digital revolution. Packer himself had "always wanted to become quantum dust, transcending his body mass" (206). Even so, Packer also recognizes this "natural next step" to immortality not as a boon to humanity so much as a concentration of corporate power, the "master thrust of cyber-capital, to extend the human experience toward infinity as a medium for corporate growth and investment, for the accumulation of profits and vigorous reinvestment" (207). Where industrial capitalism treats the human body as a resource to be consumed, cyber-capitalism renders it expendable, as even mortality and the physical body are being pushed toward nothingness in the interest of corporate power.

Technological advancement also threatens the body indirectly by the havoc that it inflicts on time. The introduction of the railroad, as we saw in Chapter 1, helped to regulate and standardize time, while early automobile narratives celebrate the freedom that the motorcar provided from such regulation of time. Late twentieth-century communications technologies, having completed the annihilation of space by time, distort time itself to the extent that the past, present, and future are blurred as Packer watches his own video image in the limousine monitor. The first suggestion of this appears early in his journey: "The car was moving. Eric watched himself on the oval screen below the spycam, running his thumb along his chinline. The car stopped and moved and he realized queerly that he'd just placed his thumb on his chinline, a second or two after

he'd seen it on-screen" (22). The passage is not definitive as to whether the screen action actually takes place before the real-world action. It is also possible that Packer stroked his chin unconsciously, saw the action on-screen, and then repeated the action, this time becoming aware of his action. Either way, the passage suggests Packer's disorientation in time, and the car itself (which "was moving" then "stopped and moved" again) reinforces this disorientation.

The wrinkle in time appears again during an unusual sexual encounter Packer has with his chief of finance, Jane Melman. It is her day off, but she has been called from her morning run to meet with him because the rising value of the yen has created a financial emergency for the firm. Packer has borrowed large quantities of yen to invest in stocks with the expectation that the yen will fall, thus reducing the value of his debt and mitigating the risk of the potentially high-return stocks. Against all expectations, however, the value of the yen continues to climb, raising the value of his debt and threatening to wipe his fortune out completely. While they meet, a physician arrives to give Packer his daily examination, during which Packer continues his discussion with Melman. They are, as the exam progresses, in mutually and uncharacteristically vulnerable positions: Melman, who at the office is "an edgy presence, skeptical, adversarial, aloof, with a gift for sustained complaint" (47), sits in the car in her running clothes, out of breath and sweating from her run; Packer, meanwhile, is in the middle of a prostate exam. Their conversation becomes increasingly erotically charged, until they reach "completion more or less together, touching neither each other nor themselves" (52). In the moments immediately before orgasm, Packer again catches a glimpse of what might be the future in the spycam: "He saw his face on the screen, eyes closed, mouth

framed in a soundless little simian howl. He knew the spycam operated in real time, or was supposed to. How could he see himself if his eyes were closed? There wasn't time to analyze. He felt his body catching up to the independent image" (52). Once again the passage is not definitive—it could be that the supposedly real-time camera feed simply has a short lag, rather than Packer's more implausible perception that the world lags behind the camera. Even so, we again see Packer's disorientation with respect to time. The peculiar circumstance of this temporal glitch—that Melman and he are becoming "touchless lovers," with the physical body relegated to background material even in the process of getting physical—again underscores the disappearance of the body in the new technological regime.

While the first two incidents merely suggest the possibility that the spycam is capturing the future rather than the present, Packer gets independent confirmation of his concerns while the car is stalled in the middle of the riot. His theory advisor, Vija Kinski, is with him while the protestors break windows in nearby buildings and attack the limousine with skateboards and spray paint. They watch the television coverage from inside the coach, the screens swaying as protestors heave the car back and forth. In the chaos, his attention is again drawn to the spycam's monitor: "His own image caught his eye, live on the oval screen beneath the spycam. Some seconds passed. He saw himself recoil in shock. More time passed. He felt suspended, waiting. Then there was a detonation, loud and deep, near enough to consume all the information around him. He recoiled in shock. Everyone did" (93). A bomb has gone off outside a nearby investment bank, but Packer sees himself recoil in shock onscreen before the detonation actually happens. This instance, finally, is definitive: when he asks Kinski if she saw what

happened, she confirms that she saw him recoil onscreen before recoiling in person. (Packer refers to this second reaction as recoiling "for real," to which Kinski responds: "Whatever that means" [95].)

As they grapple for some sort of explanation, she posits that perhaps he anticipated the blast: "There are rare minds operating, a few, here and there, the polymath, the true futurist. A consciousness such as yours, hypermaniacal, may have contact points beyond the general perception" (95). They do not continue to push the matter, though of course the explanation is unsatisfactory: Packer himself does not appear to have anticipated the shock; rather his onscreen image did. If any entity has shown evidence of having "contact points beyond the general perception," it is the technology itself. Throughout the twentieth century, communications technology increased the speed of information flow until finally, in Packer's hyper-communicative automobile on an April day in the year 2000, information moves faster than life itself. Distinctions between image and object, between reality and representation, and between future and present collapse. With the future already displayed on screen and the "real" Packer lagging ever behind, the body approaches irrelevance.

Like Maria, Packer has an underlying belief that nothing applies, and though his mammoth, well-equipped, slow moving limousine is quite different from her sleek Corvette, he too retreats to the automobile to deal with that awareness. Their situations are dissimilar: Maria's world lacks structure and she lacks control, with both her personal and professional life subject to the whims of powerful men in her life; Packer's world is too structured and he is very much in control, leaving him craving risk and adventure. As discussed in Chapter 5, Maria's highway ritual (in which she drives LA's freeway system

as a riverman runs a river) provides her a sense of mastery and control, allowing her to navigate powerful currents instead of being tossed by them as she is in her day-to-day life.[66] For Packer, the automobile breaks down the binary structure of the office and home; and, since the trip across town puts him in the line of a riot and leaves him potentially vulnerable to the credible security threat, it provides the opportunity to court the adventure and danger he craves. Though Torval repeatedly tries to dissuade Packer from continuing across town to his chosen barbershop because being in traffic (especially stalled in traffic) makes him vulnerable, Packer persists for precisely that reason: "the credible threat was the thing that moved and quickened him …. that spoke to him most surely about some principle of fate he'd always known would come clear in time. Now he could begin the process of living" (107). The credible threat (and his ability to invite that threat and to seek its source with his automobile) makes him feel alive and connected in a world where everything that matters (himself included) is verging on nothingness.

Not content to risk only his physical body, Packer also deals with his sense of alienation by doubling down on his risky wager against the yen, thus increasing the vulnerability of his financial empire. Throughout the day, advisors have cautioned him to pull back from the yen, thereby taking a loss but living to invest another day; but Packer has held his course, insisting that the yen could go no higher. After the riot his perspective changes, though, and rather than holding to his investment he increases his exposure to the yen. Though he survives the riot by remaining bunkered in his car and letting his security team deal with the protestors who attack the limousine as a symbol of wealth, he also feels a certain affinity with the protestors. He believes them to be "confused and wrongheaded," but admires their ingenuity in reprogramming the stock

[66] See pages 290-301.

ticker outside a nearby bank to display a modification of the opening line to *The Communist Manifesto:* "A SPECTER IS HAUNTING THE WORLD—THE SPECTER OF CAPITALISM" (96). He sticks his head out of the sunroof in time to see their second message on another ticker: "A RAT BECAME THE UNIT OF CURRENCY." The line (which is also the book's epigraph) is from the poem "Report from the Besieged City," by Zbigniew Herbert, and Packer himself has recently been studying the same poem. Where he admires the first quote, this second quote moves him: "It was exhilarating, his head in the fumes, to see the struggle and ruin around him, the gassed men and women in their defiance, waving looted Nasdaq T-shirts, and to realize they'd been reading the same poetry he'd been reading. He sat down long enough to take a web phone out of a slot and execute an order for more yen. He borrowed yen in dumbfounding amounts. He wanted all the yen there was" (97). It is ironic, perhaps, that this connection to the protestors manifests itself in yet more market activity, but the reinvestment is for him, like the protesters' submission to violence from police and security forces, a form of sacrifice.

The protesters stand in opposition to the system of global capital, but cannot actually put that system in crisis. They are, according to Kinski, produced by that same system: a "fantasy generated by the market" itself, to give that system "energy and definition" (90). But Kinski's belief that the market is totalizing and capable of absorbing absolutely anything—a belief Packer initially agrees with—is challenged by the final act of the protest, when a man sets himself on fire on the sidewalk. "He did a serious thing," Packer comments, "He took his own life. Isn't this what you have to do to show them that you're serious?" (100). Like the quote from Herbert's poem, the gesture moves Packer,

who spends the rest of the novel subjecting his life and fortune to increasingly greater risk. He repeats his bet against the yen until his company's portfolio and his own private fortune have "been reduced to near nothingness" (121). When his new wife (who comes from old money) offers to help him get back on his feet and reestablish his reputation, he uses his watch (which also contains a screen and can access the Internet) to hack into her accounts and lose her fortune as well.

Unlike the protesters, Packer does have the power to send the system into crisis. Packer's influence in the market is extensive, both because of the amount of money that he invests and because of his reputation, which he first made running a website on which he shared his stock forecasts and could "tout a technology stock or bless an entire sector and automatically cause doublings in share price and the shifting of worldviews" (75). Now, he uses that influence to collapse the global economy as he sits "in the car, borrowing yen and watching his fund's numbers sink into the mist on several screens" (115): "There were currencies tumbling everywhere. Bank failures were spreading …. Strategists could not explain the speed and depth of the fall. They opened their mouths and words came out. He knew it was the yen. His actions regarding the yen were causing storms of disorder. He was so leveraged, his firm's portfolio large and sprawling, linked crucially to the affairs of so many key institutions, all reciprocally vulnerable, that the whole system was in danger" (115-116). From the coach of his limousine, Packer has brought the global economy to rubble. Shortly thereafter, his work accomplished, he breaks down the array of screens that connect his vehicle on the streets of New York City with the farthest reaches of the information superhighway.

Conclusion

The three novels I have focused on in this chapter assess the magic highway at various stages of development and for varying purposes, yet they capture attitudes that continue to influence how Americans respond to these new technologies. The fear, espoused by Doc Sarvis and George Hayduke in Abbey's *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, that such technology could be abused by state and corporate powers to limit privacy and liberty remains very much a part of public discussions over the role technology plays. Such concerns have increased with the rise of the security state in the years following 9/11. In an ironic twist, the novel's sequel, *Hayduke Lives!* (1990), precipitated a minor controversy in October, 2001, when a Philadelphia man was stopped at security and prevented from boarding his flight because he was carrying a copy of the novel, the cover of which shows a hand holding several sticks of dynamite (Shaffer). Still common, too, is the belief, suggested in *Cadillac Jack*, that modern communication provides only illusory or superficial connection while actually inhibiting meaningful interaction between individuals. This belief has intensified for later forms of communication associated with the cell phone, including text messaging and social media such as twitter. *Cosmopolis* registers ambivalence towards such technologies: on the one hand, the sheer speed of technological innovation is disorienting, even dehumanizing; on the other hand, these technologies alleviate some of the alienating and isolating effects of the modern city. Packer also demonstrates that mobile communications can be turned against the system of global capital that created them. In this sense, the novel anticipates the use of mobile communications and social media in organizing, documenting, and mobilizing massive demonstrations such as the Occupy Wall Street protests and the 2011 Wisconsin protests.

The literature of the twenty-first century, both in form and content, will undoubtedly reflect the mobile communication revolution more forcefully than the literature of the late twentieth century, when such technologies were still in the process of emerging. Still, these three novels respond to and incorporate elements of mobile communication more than do most novels of the era, and as such offer insight into how the new technologies of the magic highway reshape the potential benefits and drawbacks of American automobility. Abbey's and DeLillo's novel, in particular, capture a central tension—between the technology as a means of extending power over the public and as a means for the public to demonstrate power of their own—which informs the development of the automobile and communications technologies throughout the long twentieth century. This tension, too, will no doubt continue to inform the development of communications technology and its role in American automobility in the years to come.

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