

“Take me home country roads”: The limits of sanctuary on the American road trip¹

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Abstract

This paper synthesizes research on traversing the American landscape, and the authors’ three personal stories of moving through this space as members of minoritized communities. Land, property, and humanity are bound up in the American landscape in part because of dehumanizing policies rooted in extracting capital. Using contemporary examples from the authors’ experiences, this article explores how this history of encountering the American landscape, particularly in the modern era with the powerful imagery of the “road trip” can be understood and addressed today. This paper also serves as a brief survey of how Geography has addressed the historical narratives around this topic and the spatial impacts of policies and “unsanctioned” state violence. This article critically draws on the literature available in Geography to understand how Black people and others belonging to state-targeted populations can lack comfort with the concept of the American road trip.

Keywords: road trips, liminal space, automobility, racism, sanctuary, racialized mobility

¹ The first part of the title is the title of a song written by Bill Danoff, Taffy Nivert, and John Denver about West Virginia.

Introduction:

The landscape of the United States is rooted in loss, theft, and harm, as much as that landscape is part of the growth, and development of the country. Similarly, embedded in the American relationship to land and travel is the overriding preference for property and land over human rights, is for some a key component of the violent beginning of the United States. Colonization and disenfranchisement of land of Native Americans for the support of settlers has continued throughout history with many harmful methods. Today, this is often seen in the murder of Black Americans by police forces and the continued isolation and confinement of Native Americans to mere parcels of their former lands. This brutal colonization of the North American continent as part of the settler-colonialist project of the United States is key to the creation of the American landscape. This is an area where, depending on the person and geographic milieu they venture into, one may find the rights of property superseding their basic human rights, including the right to exist. We have each experienced this firsthand, struggling to have our humanity recognized by people in positions of authority over us while our physical safety is at risk. Being Black, and/or Indigenous, or marginalized through citizenship laws in the United States means living with an ever-present threat of violence--physical, verbal, emotional--as well as the ongoing effects of multigenerational and intergenerational trauma. Because of this, we ourselves and our communities need sanctuary, spaces where we can be ourselves, exist without facing undue threats, have our humanity recognized and respected, and thrive. Yet there are threats to this everywhere, including in spaces other North Americans may not expect, such as the personal automobile. We focus here on road trips, using our experiences as the basis for a broader discussion of where and how to find sanctuary in the United States.

How does this tension connect with the quintessentially American idea of the road trip? Is the road trip a quintessential American idea? Pesses (2017) reads the road trip, Black travel, and the “Negro Motorist Green Books” together to exemplify exactly how the American road trip is situated as key to the United States’ expansion and development. The United States’ space for driving has never been an equal place for white and Black drivers, or in some areas, even those perceived as “other” or unwanted, or unwelcome, because of a meaning placed upon them. That does not mean the automobile is incapable of serving as a place of sanctuary on the open road. While many people of color could not and still cannot stop in towns and areas of the U.S. as they pass through, the personal automobile can move them rapidly away from these spaces, hopefully to spaces of warmth, love, hope, and opportunity. A Black college student on their way home to their parents may see their destination as a haven. On their way back, their destination is a place to shape their future. The car offers an in-between space as they seek either place, allowing it to hold all the positive potential of where the driver is headed.

However, sanctuary is not guaranteed in a personal vehicle. As it carries the driver through “sundown towns” or past a police car or Confederate flag, the automobile is again an “in-between” space - this time, its physical boundaries at risk of being rendered inert or even sabotage to the safety of its occupants. An expired registration, a sagging bumper, the wrong paint color, and/or darkly tinted windows all set up travelers for further scrutiny depending on the whims of a police officer or racist passerby. What is sanctuary in the American road trip for a person of color? Is there such a thing? This paper synthesizes the experiences and anecdotes of the authors with ideas of race, space, and place in the United States, the American road trip, and geography to ask critically: for whom is the concept of the road trip throughout the United States, how do we encounter the complex history of the American landscape through the road trip, and what lessons do we take from that experience to apply to better futures?

Race and Automobility

In this paper, while we focus on the liminal space of the car and its movement through space with oft-targeted drivers in the seat, we do not forget the legality this “space” is rooted in. Bloch (2021) discusses in great detail the changes in U.S. law leading to this liminal space of the automobile and how the personal vehicle became a site of legalized confinement. Harris (1996) speaks to the advancement of a police state when the Supreme Court decision in *Whren v. United States* led to what Harris describes as traffic violations enabling the police to stop a driver in virtually any situation. Harris argues this further extends the right of the police to legally continue recreating the conditions for “driving while Black” (Harris, 1996). The laws governing the rights of the liminal automobile space can be considered “authority constraints” as put forth by Hägerstrand, constraints defined as factors limiting mobility or delineating space through the efforts of an authority (Hägerstrand, 1970). These authority constraints limit marginalized drivers in their movement through space in an automobile in ways darkly unique from pedestrian existence.

While some scholars of automobility (Bloch, 2021; Pesses, 2017; Seiler, 2012; Warren et al., 2010) have engaged racism as part of their work, the many discussions of mobility and automobiles, often referred to as automobility, do not at length interrogate racism and the automobile. Bloch (2021) cites a number of works (Cresswell, 2016; Harris, 1996; Meehan & Ponder, 2002; Nicholson & Sheller, 2016 to name a few) on this issue, ultimately finding the car has become a place designed for “coercive interactions” because of the status of the automobile as a “quasi-private/public space with debatable constitutional protections. (Bloch 2021, pg. 137)”

Broadly, “automobility” conceptualizes mobility as impacted by the automobile, because of which “automobility is a deeply contradictory mode of mobility and immobility insofar as it both 'frees' and 'fixes' populations” (Stuesse & Coleman, 2014, pg. 56). As a term, automobility appears to originate from Burnham (1961), and then is more well-defined for our current usage by Sheller and Urry (2000), where they identify automobility as a multi-dimensional concept, including:

1. the “manufactured object” of the automobile and the industry producing it,
2. the “individual consumption” of this object and the process and facets of its consumption,
3. the “machinic complex” supporting the automobile both as social and environmental infrastructure and mechanical parts,
4. the “quasi-private mobility” of using a car and how it impacts other mobilities,
5. the “dominant culture” or narrative of the automobile in society, and
6. the “environmental resource-use” of the automobile.

While all of these dimensions maintain relevance to automobility and racism, dimensions 3, 4, and 5 are particularly salient. Automobility is heavily connected to and monitored by policing through the development of its infrastructure, a quasi-private nature a source of legal contention for an individual’s rights and policing, and the dominant culture surrounding automobiles is invariably inclusive of police stops, race, and driving. While recent work focuses on these connections, other work on automobility speaks to the legal and societal compacts creating the space of coercive interactions (Bloch 2021). Sanger (1995) makes the case for issues surrounding gender and automobility noting the inherent lack of safety for a woman navigating the world in a car. Automobiles are not spaces individuals are afforded unshakeable power within, which is part of how automobility in space is structured and impacts legal redress.

Nevertheless, automobiles have the ability to help shape and define space. This shaping is referred to by Horvath as “machine space, or territory devoted primarily to the use of machines...designated when machines have priority over people in the use of territory” (Horvath, 1974, pg. 168). This support for prioritizing machines over people in space and place, Horvath notes, is easily viewable in the American city. Parking lots, garages, unhoused people sleeping in parking lots, highways built over old neighborhoods - these are policed spaces designed for automobiles, not people, and this underlies the policing of people out of them. Horvath described this as the territory of the automobile, spaces “devoted to the use of the automobile (Horvath, 1974, pg. 168)” as an overwhelming force in United States culture. Thus, in the conversion of large swathes of land and space servicing the automobile in both states of mobility and immobility, we recognize the car as a tool for colonization of land and also ask, can the car be more?

A form of territorial alienation occurs, Horvath (1974) argues, because of the preferential treatment of automobiles over people, particularly people of color. Eminent domain was frequently employed to separate people in predominantly Black neighborhoods from their land and property under the guise of creating major highways, and of course, the separation of Indigenous people from their land created the modern United States. With the consumption of the automobile and the affiliated environmental demands the car requires, economically privileged, “racially motivated physical movement of whites to outer suburban areas in North American and European cities is enabled by automobility...” (Henderson, 2006, pg. 300), demonstrating the importance of a racial lens on automobility.

What is the automobile as a tool of something other than colonization, and how do we make more of the car? While Horvath wrote notably on the automobile and the territory automobiles take up in U.S. cities, he speaks less of automobiles taken out of cities, out into spaces inaccessible without the aid of a motor. Most concretely, Horvath notes that machine space is ultimately, “a place of death.” People of color, sadly, know this all too well, as machine space creates the conditions for unseen or unrecorded harm in the name of legality.

Research at the intersection of racism, policing, and automobility in Geography often cite cases outside of the United States (Cook and Whowell, 2011). However, the specific racial context of the United States from which policing and automobility are formed and intertwined is less examined. Within this set of research, automobility can be redefined in relation to race as “a crucial site where state power touches down into lives in racialized ways with material consequences” (Derickson, 2017, pg. 234). With this lens on automobility our paper’s vignettes are examined. Nicholson and Sheller (2016) recognize the history of mobility in the U.S. and race, asking about bringing race and mobility together in both historical and contemporary ways, similar to our own intentions with this paper to explore our own experiences through the lens of the American Road Trip. Automobility has been primarily a tool of whiteness, first to assert or secede to spaces of whiteness, and now to police them.

While the space the automobile takes up is clearly a factor, why do we also attend to the space of the car itself, the space created within the automobile? Bloch (2021) notes the liminality of this space and Barker (2014) recognizes locations create the context for social relations and how they unfold. In his study on the effects of automobile ownership (or lack thereof) on children, Barker (2014) identifies a form of social exclusion can occur without owning a car. Here, people of color and other marginalized groups face a double bind - if they drive a car, they must contend with the police state. If they do not drive a car, they will find themselves likely socially excluded and struggle to move forward in society. Our experiences with the American road trip and landscape point to individual experiences wrought by

systemic racism and support a broader argument that automobility is a freedom for the privileged and an authority constraint for the “other.” Accordingly, combatting this constraint with a societal shift could be liberating.

The potential freedom provided through an automobile also increases the pace of a person’s daily life, the geographic area they can cover, and the geographic fragmentation of social networks and community. Referred to by Barker (2014, pg. 3) as “intense forms of flexibility,” this change in the spatiotemporal nature of every aspect of a person’s life creates a space-time cost that may not be rooted in race and gender but helps to exacerbate the systemic racism and sexism the automobile is designed to service. Thus, seeing society choose automobility over community mobility as a public utility in the form of the underfunded, neglected public transportation systems in a country that would benefit immensely from a well-supported community mobility model is not a hard logic to follow. The United States was first founded on a “Manifest Destiny” framework, building on the imperialist notion that America was “empty” (ignoring and actively violating the treaties, needs, and rights of Indigenous tribes and communities) and in need of settlement to make the most of its beautiful, abundantly-resourced landscape (Snow, 2013). Yet, as automobiles became popular, defending the environment by *not* co-opting the large amount of land “available” for machine space did not occur (Barker, 2014; Horvath, 1974).

Again, all of this exists under systemic racism, and seeps into the ways people of color and those from minoritized backgrounds interact with their own automobiles and pursue automobility. One example of this is Chappell (2010)’s examination of how community policing led to the criminalization of low-rider drivers, primarily a process of negative racialization of Latines in Austin, TX. This can be seen in vignettes 1 (when the author experiences a notable level of surveillance while driving home) and 3 (when the author’s explicit markers of whiteness ease passing through a border checkpoint) of this paper as well.

While urban stops of marginalized people are not unheard of, attention is placed on the rural South as the most likely site of police violence on drivers. However, this regionalized attention, which is likely borne from the Civil War and later, Jim Crow era, and characterizations of the North as not racist and the South as racist, ignores the development and growth of the surveillance state throughout the United States. The border is reinforced throughout the country, with checkpoints installed in a 100 mile zone along its entirety (ACLU, 2021; Gonzalez, 2019). White supremacist settlement and the continued maintenance of the United States, a white settler project, require not only a system of policing and surveillance, but also the marking of the landscape itself as belonging to that system (Bonds & Inwood, 2016). State and country borders, the naming of landmarks after white imperialists, and the literal scarring of the landscape into the faces of white presidents are the white settler’s reminders of who is in control of the overarching system the traveler is driving through (Fortier, 2022). These are not landscapes, but rather, “settler deathscapes” (Fortier, 2022; Barker, 2018) and the policing and supportive surveillance of these settler deathscapes represent attempts and acts to preserve them. Fortier’s (2022) usage of spaces as “spectre” is reminiscent of the experiences that flash through a minoritized person’s mind when driving through a landscape - here exist the ghosts of past stops and encounters, repeated through generations, reverberating through time, codified through laws and people upholding them.

People of color and other marginalized people are tied into difficult spatiotemporal realities due to the conjunction of these laws and arms of the legal system with the fraught “freedom” of automobility. Surviving the U.S. capitalist system requires driving while simultaneously putting the most vulnerable in danger of incarceration, deportation, litigation, or even death (Stuesse and Coleman, 2014). As the literature shows, automobility can contribute to a fragmentation of life throughout space, taking people

both to their desired destinations and loved ones, and away from them, by belonging and necessary to the larger systemic of a white supremacist project. Traversing the United States in a personal vehicle creates a tie to the same systems an individual might seek to use a car to escape.

The vignettes in this paper illustrate travels taking place in these mobile, surveilled spaces as minoritized peoples pass through the haunted landscape of the United States. These vignettes also speak to how the elaborate systems exist within the driving network, while also dividing networks and communities call for further exploration by geographers. Particularly, this exploration needs to be approached from a critical anti-racist and spatiotemporal lens to understand how these experiences may speak to the larger need for more concrete policies and infrastructure in U.S. society (Stuesse and Coleman, 2014; Horvath, 1974).

Methods:

Each autoethnographic vignette is written by an author, reflecting on an individual experience of driving through the United States on the “road trips” so common to the country. Each author reflected on their experiences with driving, thinking back on extended driving periods they have taken. They asked how those experiences were shaped by their racial and cultural backgrounds, how driving was discussed in their families growing up, and how interactions with law enforcement or strangers while driving are affected by their race, ethnicity, and other identity markers. Each vignette is then contextualized and discussed in conversation with research on these elements.

Vignettes and Discussion:

Vignette 1: Getting pulled over in the middle of northeastern Minnesota was not the way that I had planned to spend the late hours of a Monday evening, but that was the situation that I found myself in at that very moment.

A bit of context is necessary to start my story--I had just left the city of Grand Rapids, MN--about 200 miles north of Minneapolis, and about 80 miles west of Duluth, where I was going to graduate school. I had just got done visiting a friend as part of a long weekend that I had spent traveling across most of Minnesota, and I was ready to get back to Duluth, and the upcoming week of classes and work.

I left Grand Rapids at about 12:30 in the morning and began the drive down Highway 2. Northeastern Minnesota is a very heavily wooded place, and it was a dark two lane road that I was driving down, so I kept my high beams on for the most part--very few cars were coming in the other direction, and I needed to keep an eye out for deer--hitting one of those with my car would be a very unfortunate end to my long weekend. I passed through a few tiny small towns as I listened to a talk radio show to try and keep myself focused. At the edges of one tiny town, I saw an Itasca County sheriff's car parked alongside the shoulder of the road. I flipped off my high beams to try and not blind the deputy, but I didn't think anything else of it--I was going the speed limit, I was completely sober, and I had nothing to hide.

The road trip is a quintessential part of American culture. There is academic text written about the role the road trip plays in our collective cultural identity as Americans (Laderman, 1996; Company, 2014), but most people reading this piece will have their own personal experiences with the road trip. Feelings such as freedom, adventure, new sights, smells and tastes, and the soothing mundaneness of the American landscape are things that might come to mind when one thinks about the road trip (Barker, 2014). These feelings are often associated with America itself--the freedom to explore the country and all made available. The history of ‘pioneers’ and ‘explorers’ who ventured across what would become the United States is often invoked in such exploration as in the “American DNA” to explore and see new places.

However, that freedom has not existed for all Americans historically. Travel across the country has not been a pleasurable experience for some of the most marginalized populations in the United States.

For example, during the Trail of Tears in the early 19th century, Indigenous tribes in the Southeast also embarked on a journey, in this case, to the Indian Territory (modern-day Oklahoma) (Wolfe, 2006). Unlike someone hopping in their car and driving from Atlanta to Tulsa for fun, this journey was done at gunpoint, as these tribal members were forcibly relocated to reservations in the Territory so that their lands in the South could be taken by white settler farmers (Wolfe, 2006). The same happened to other tribes, and they were often not truly free to leave or explore once they were in their new ‘homes’--in fact, in one case, the U.S. Army gave chase to a group of Northern Cheyenne people who left their open-air captivity in Oklahoma to try and return to their Montana homelands (Chief Dull Knife College, 2008).

Black Americans are another group who historically have lacked the liberty of traveling without harassment. ‘Driving while Black’ is a phrase of terrifying implications for Black Americans, who are stopped by police at a much higher rate than other groups of Americans (Harris, 1996; Harris, 1999; Lundman & Kaufman, 2003; Harris, 2010; Lamberth, 2010; Alderman et al, 2023). While much attention has been paid to the effects of increased policing on Black drivers, similar issues exist for other minoritized groups (Graham et al., 2020). For historically marginalized peoples in the United States, travel, like other activities, requires a whole new form of awareness. Rather than counting the number of red cars or looking out for a roadside attraction, one also needs to be aware of what to do if they are stopped by the police or the highway patrol on their travels. Parents, grandparents, and uncles prepare youths of color by giving them “the talk” - a specific tutorial on what to do when stopped, including keeping their hands visible and on the steering wheel, verbally explaining any actions being performed (even those they are told to take like retrieving their license and registration), and remembering to stay calm. This conversation has been named as an example of the racial divide hypothesis, in that Black people worry about police violence and brutality more than white people (Graham et al., 2020; Brunson & Weitzer, 2011). Yet as the deaths of Philando Castile, Sandra Bland, and others have shown, following the steps of ‘the talk’ does not guarantee one’s safety or survival.

We argue this unsettling displacement of marginalized people is part and parcel of settler colonialism. This displacement makes the road trip possible and safe for some Americans while being a fraught process for others--in the settler colonial state, space is meant to be held by settlers. Therefore, that freedom to openly travel within said space is also meant to be the domain of settlers. Black and Indigenous people do not get such open freedom since the point is for them to disappear (in the case of Indigenous people), or to only exist in spaces serving the needs of the settler colonial state (in the case of Black Americans).

Vignette 1 (continued): *To my surprise, as soon as I passed the car, it turned on, flipped on its headlights, and drove up quickly behind me, turning on its emergency lights. I pulled over immediately, wondering to myself what I could have possibly done to get pulled over--as I mentioned before, I was obeying the traffic laws. I wondered if the deputy might have been annoyed by my high beams? I rolled down the window as the deputy approached my car. He asked for my license and proof of insurance and then asked me where I was coming from. I replied that I had been visiting a friend in Grand Rapids and was now on my way home to Duluth. He said that he would be right back and took my information back to his car.*

It was at that moment that my mind started racing. I realized for one, that when he ran the license plates on the car, it was going to come back to my mother--I was temporarily driving my mother’s car, as my car was undergoing some much needed repairs back in the Twin Cities. “Oh shit, what if he thinks I stole this car,” I thought to myself. I could offer to call my mother and get things straightened out, but what if she was asleep? After all, it was after midnight on a work night--if she didn’t pick up, I could be in serious trouble. I also remembered that the county I was in is not particularly known for its hospitality towards Native people--in particular, I remembered cops in Grand Rapids (the county seat) making racist remarks to my cousins when we’d go shopping there when visiting nearby family. This was also a time when protests

and controversy were occurring regarding the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri--so I was very keenly aware of the fraught dynamics that could occur to a Black person in an encounter with the police. To top it all off, we were in the middle of the woods, on a pitch black highway, with no one around. At 12:30 AM, my mind immediately went to, 'Something could happen to me out here and no one would even know'.

The deputy came back a few minutes later, handed me my information back and told me to have a good night. He then got back in his car, turned around and drove back in the other direction. The remaining hour of my drive back to Duluth was probably the tensest I have ever been while driving. Every little thing that I saw on the road sent my anxiety into high gear--the shadow of a deer on the side of the road was enough to make me grip my steering wheel with a vice grip. I finally made it back to Duluth, stopped long enough to grab a bite to eat at a gas station, and went directly to my apartment, where I sat in my bed, unable to sleep. I messaged my cousin about what happened. His response: "They didn't tell you why they stopped you? That's super illegal, man." I agreed with him that it seemed odd, but what was I gonna do--argue with a sheriff out in the middle of the north woods in the early hours of the morning? This was in the time before body cams were widespread--anything could have happened, and it would have been the word of a law enforcement officer versus a Black Native man who was driving a car that wasn't even technically his. I could see the headlines and the accompanying judgement from the social media peanut gallery. Not worth it in my mind.

I eventually settled down and fell asleep, extremely glad that I was safe and sound in my bed and not shot and dying on the side of a highway. My little apartment in Duluth was my sanctuary that night.

Many view taking a trip on the road or going out for a long afternoon drive as an escape, a way to break free of the constraints of everyday life. Yet that sense of freedom can be so easily taken away through experiences that for Black, Indigenous, and Latine people have become almost quotidian due to their frequency, as the vignette above highlights. There is a fear that the driver will not arrive at their destination safely because of the unpredictable actions of the police who could pull them over for something as mundane as failing to use a turn-signal when changing lanes. There is also the fear that the car could break down and the driver going to a nearby house for assistance might only be met with violence. In the settler colonial state, only settlers are able to take for granted the road trip and the experience of arriving at the intended destination without threats to their personal safety.

Vignette 2: *As a graduate student, I would try to take advantage of long weekends to make the six hour drive home. The route I needed to take was one I was largely familiar with, having taken many trips between north Florida and the Atlanta area to visit family over the years. We would typically make the trip during the day, stopping just once in one of the larger southern Georgia towns for fuel and food. I can still remember two times when we got a flat tire. Once, while returning home with a car and trunk full of Christmas presents, where a nice white couple helped us manage the toys, spare, and getting to a gas station to have the tire repaired. The other, more recent time is a much starker memory. My mom was jumping on the tire iron to loosen the bolts as cars whizzed by us on the interstate. Rather than stop to help, vehicles honked their horns at her, turning what was already an annoying task into something more sinister.*

The legacies of segregation, false arrests, and potential violence were ever-present as an adult journeying home. I received repeated reminders to travel through rural and south Georgia during the daytime, to watch my speed and avoid speed traps on the rural US highways which were a necessary part of the journey, and not to stop in random small towns for gas or a snack. There were only three towns once off I-75 that were deemed safe enough to stop in, each with large truck stop facilities that were frequently busy. On the US highways, I relied on cruise control to ensure I was always going 1 mile per hour below the speed limit to avoid looking like a speeder and giving someone a reason to pull me over. Every time I would pass a cop car on the highway, my heart would race as I checked--and often slowed--my speed, trying to make sure I wouldn't get pulled over.

One particular road trip stands out, not because anything happened but because it was the first time I got to witness how white folks saw these precautions. I remember telling a few people in the geography department that I would be missing that day's colloquium because I needed to drive home. They were surprised that I would skip the mandatory colloquium for a trip that, in their eyes, could just begin afterwards. My eyes went wide in response as I explained to them that there was absolutely no way I was driving the car I was borrowing from my aunt through rural south Georgia at night by myself. Many of them were surprised, with one even going so far as to ask what I was afraid of. It became clear that what I viewed as necessary steps for safety, they viewed as an unnecessary oddity or quirk. We clearly didn't see or experience space the same way.

The typical preparations associated with road trips are having the license and registration handy, a full tank of gas, properly inflated tires, and a map or charged GPS to assist with navigation. For Black, Indigenous, and Latine people, preparations include careful consideration of the route in an effort to avoid sundown towns and other areas known for open racial hostility, planning gas stops around larger gas stations to avoid an unfriendly convenience store, and considering the time during which one travels. Here, Fortier (2022)'s "spectres" are relevant. The previous encounters shared through communities and passed on as advice to keep their members safe are the spectres Fortier speaks of from the past. Rather than the hauntings of death, they are an attempt to maintain life. However, these spectres require navigation and difficult travel choices that go beyond what other drivers may experience. "Conventional" wisdom for many is to travel at night when traffic is lighter, advice which ignores the additional threats some face at night. Here, the opportunity for policing work to be made "invisible" becomes all too possible, as defined by Cook & Whowell (2011). As they note, policing work is not just about visibly to the public displaying certain police functions, but also how much of policing is *not* seen by the majority of society; in fact, much of it is "covert and deceptive." There are parts of policing that are by execution, meant to be hidden, and much of that relates to how Black people are treated by the police. Facing these realities while simply trying to move throughout space is part of the mental toll of 'driving while Black.' With this movement through space and time being so fraught with danger, the fourth dimension of automobility (the "quasi-private" space of the automobile, or the "quasi" or permeability of the space of the car), becomes notable. The car is not just a private space to the Black person within; and can frighteningly become a private space that police can cross into to perform their darkest efforts on behalf of the state within, without notice.

Vignette 3: *My earliest memories of the pressure to "pass" as white (I am white, and I am Latina) reside in the many Texan living rooms of my childhood. Being a small child playing while my mother helped my father pack for another work trip. Each of these included, to me, a comical reminder - my mother sternly suggesting if my father was pulled over, "Your name is Michael, not Miguel." I would smirk - my father's name wasn't Michael!*

Her warnings were more serious and adamant when he was making trips to North Texas. "No speeding." I didn't understand these warnings, and didn't even understand them as I grew, facing potential trips of my own, and my mother would speak of these hypothetically. "If you're ever in a situation while driving through the South, you're white."

In Texas, even as a white Latina, I grew up being told to stay away from the police and avoid interactions with government authorities. With a first name that was seen as "foreign," similarly to my parents' names, in my parents' mind, avoiding any interaction with the police was best. However, this really was not an issue until I began attending college three hours away, and would make trips back and forth from San Antonio, TX, to Texas A&M University, passing through rural spaces, heading further into North Texas, where police abuses of Black people, and some Latine people, were spoken of more frequently. Growing up with white privilege, but my mother's Tejana-informed concerns, I was

ambivalent in my early college years to these trips to school. I did not think I was likely to be pulled over, usually avoided speeding, and often traveled with a friend or partner.

But other trips slowly became part of my repertoire as I got older, and soon I was making trips further into South Texas, often even less concerned about the police or questions of whiteness, as I was traveling into areas where Latine people often composed the majority of the population. In these areas, I felt self-assured of the people I was around - of the communities I felt kinship with. But I soon found myself having to encounter border checkpoints and passing through them became a process. One checkpoint stop I was with my partner, and I was driving. As we sat at the station, the Border Patrol officer looked over my driver's license. He looked at me, asked where we were going, and I told him - San Antonio. To my parents. Home. He stared at me. Then he asked to look in the trunk of my car. I turned to my partner; he shrugged. Exactly what could someone do in such a situation but agree? I nodded at the officer and he repeated, "Can I search your trunk?" a little louder, and more forcefully. I answered curtly, "Yes."

He and another officer brought a dog over, and they sniffed the trunk. The officer returned to my side of the car, leaned over, and with a slight smile on his face that I had not seen before and a notable shift in tone, asked, "So, who is the Geography major at A&M?"

After confirming it was me, he waved us on through the gate, not pulling us aside, not asking us more detailed questions. I suspect my first name, given to me in Spanish, signaling someone potentially foreign, drew his attention. I suspect that my whiteness, combined with the whiteness of my partner and my status as a Texas A&M 'Aggie,' afforded me the privilege to continue moving through the checkpoint without further interrogation or concern from him, and the positive change in his demeanor.

Protecting the defined political borders of the United States has a long, complicated history throughout the U.S., but especially along the Southern U.S.-Mexico border (Massey et al., 2003). In Texas, entire generations of family geographic distributions can be traced based on programs the U.S. government supported or restricted based on political and economic expectations around migrant workers and xenophobic concerns. Despite increased attention to the border wall, we often fail to remain cognizant of the fact that the wall itself is not the only place of potential harm and disruption anymore. Now, with border checkpoints extending 100 miles from the actual border, there are an increased number of places where if a border officer views someone as "other" or "suspicious," they are going to experience more interrogation and suspicion, limiting or impeding the mobility of Black and Indigenous people, and people suspected of non-citizenship. While border officers and police have always utilized their suspicion as justification for the interruption of independent mobility, the carte blanche that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents have reached speaks to the level of concern the author of vignette 3 experienced from her mother.

Black, Indigenous, and Latine folks' self-imposed restrictions on mobility might seem unnecessary, especially given the concerted efforts made by the Freedom Riders to test segregation laws and the subsequent passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. While the green book may no longer be legally necessary, Southern white attitudes did not change quickly. As Feagin reminds us, "There is a spatial dimension to discrimination" (1991, pg. 102). The car, rather than providing freedom from discrimination, becomes another potential source of racial hostility and discrimination because the police are likely to react based on the perceived race and ethnicity of the driver.

If a space, such as a car, or a town, is created by people and institutions, this space can also be interrupted by others. Is a space still able to be a sanctuary when definable by one person and interrupted by another? Do we lose the moments prior, when we have our peace and we have our safety, after they have been invaded by someone gifted authority by a larger political body? As geographers, we also ask: what are the geographies uncovered as part of our experiences with various forms of automobiles as

space, and as a vector through which we move through space? We begin to address these questions in the conclusion.

Conclusion

The experiences here are three examples of what Black, Latine, and Indigenous peoples and those who are “othered” experience while on road trips in the contemporary settler colonial United States. There is no sanctuary in a vehicle on a road trip if the driver is a person of color. Instead, there is the ever-present looming threat of being pulled over by the police and whether they would survive that encounter. What does sanctuary mean when their “safe space” (a vehicle) can be rendered a site of violence in seconds by the police? What connections are there between the US South (typically imagined as the only place where such negative encounters occur) and rural America in terms of struggling to find safety and sanctuary on a road trip?

We argue here that automobility and sanctuary become contested and tenuous discursive and physical spaces for Black, Latine, and Indigenous peoples within the contexts of specific spaces and places, in this case rural America. Two of these vignettes occurred in what we understand to be the ‘American South’, but the presence of an example from rural Minnesota points us towards the understanding that racism knows no imagined/political/socio-cultural boundary in the settler colonial state. There are two clear implications about the automobile and personal safety.

First, the automobile is not a uniformly safe space. Instead, based on the identities of the person driving (or riding in) the automobile, or riding in the automobile, can become yet another fraught space of racialization and exposure to settler and state-sanctioned violence, or the threat of such. Rather than being a tool through which we can experience the freedom of the “road trip”, automobiles become a contact zone through which our lack of freedom to move about the landscape becomes quite clear. The automobile becomes a space of confinement. Furthermore, this confinement space creates an unconscious desire and need to compress time and space (to borrow from Massey, 2004 & 2008). Rather than sitting back, and enjoying the landscapes we are moving through, we begin to desire to move through these geographies as quickly as possible, further limiting our engagement with the places and sites within.

Second, the entirety of the United States (in the context of this article), and figuratively speaking, the settler state, is indicted in this lack of safety within the space of the automobile. As mentioned previously, there is a tendency to reduce racism, in general and specific contexts, as well as both within the contexts of road trips and in moving through space in general, to being an issue isolated to or most found in the American South. However, as our stories show, these issues can occur anywhere in the United States. This revelation removes an analogue to ‘settler moves to innocence’ (Allard-Tremblay, 2024; Simpson, 2016; Allard-Tremblay, 2024), and a particularly insidious one—that certain geographies of the settler state can be viewed as inherently being ‘safer’ than others. This is clearly not the case.

We see this in the choices people of color must make when interacting with space, or moving through space. These interactions and movements are not banal and routine but become situated within decisions that may have consequences for their--and our--safety and well-being. Whether these decisions are made in rural Minnesota, or in Texas along the southern border, or in rural Georgia, they are deeply intertwined with contestations over power, space, and the freedom of movement.

Our stories show how racism and the threat of racial violence are not just a “Southern problem.” They are and have long been a national problem in the United States. Road trips are not safe for Black, Latine, and Indigenous folks now nor have they ever been. While we may not be forcibly marched at gunpoint, we can still be pulled over and killed for nonexistent offenses, we can still be subject to verbal or physical violence while stopping for gas or at a highway rest stop, and have our entire lives disrupted through detainment and deportation.

For the road trip to truly have a place in Americana, the road trip must be safe for everyone. What would it take for everyone to be able to go on a road trip without fear about where they are driving, of getting pulled over by the police, of being flagged for extra screening by border patrol, or stopping in the wrong place for gas or lodging? How do we work collectively to challenge the institutional practices and rules which keep the car from being a sanctuary for some? Calls to defund and abolish police present a step in that direction but they are not enough because the police are not the only ones making road trips unsafe. Inwood and Alderman (2015) recommend a nationwide Truth and Reconciliation Commission focused on the history and legacies of white supremacy as a way to advance a broader understanding of racialized violence in the US. Such a commission would provide an opportunity to question and disrupt the racist foundations of US society and serve as a first step towards creating a nation where road trips are safe for everyone. However, until the day comes that such a commission is formed, the “American Road Trip” will continue to be a fraught space of racialization and state violence. Our hope is that one day, this figurative space, and the assemblages of real geographies and space represented, will become a freer, safer space for all.

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