

Road registers

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Abstract

This article is an outline of a method to approach an object of analysis as generative, compositional, and immanent to ordinary ways of living and proliferating worlds. Using the case of the American road as an emergent assemblage, I trace its singular forms and the ways in which these forms register forces of all kinds. Road registers are material-symbolic composites charged with potentiality. They form links between disparate phenomena, scales, and compositional modes from literature to state thinking, structure to fantasy. I use creative non-fiction writing as a mode of critique that can follow the lines of diverging tendencies and events in which a range of elements throw together. I present a series of snapshots of the road's bodies and rhythms, orientations, and atmospheres. *Road Registers* is a middle-range concept used to rethink designations such as macro and micro, big and small, official and everyday. I elaborate affect theory's insight that structures of living have not just effects or conditions of possibility, but also capacities to affect and to be affected, or an energetics.

Keywords

cultural poesis, new materialism, non-representational theory, United States, worlding

Introduction

A long line of thought from Nietzsche¹ to Foucault², Spinoza³ to Deleuze⁴, and contemporary theorists such as Haraway⁵, Taussig⁶, Thrift⁷, Stengers⁸, DeLanda⁹, and Berlant¹⁰ has turned and re-turned attention to forms emergent in the conduct of life. In this line of thought, the forms and forces immanent to ordinary ways of living are taken as intimate registers of knowledge and power. A whole is re-theorized as a diverse and diffuse field of co-constituting elements thrown together into an assemblage in and as events. Here I use the case of one emergent assemblage – the road in the US. I argue that the American road as such is a registering form in which intensities lodged in institutional effects and lived affects, materialities and dreamworlds, differences and energies, reach a point of expressivity and become legible. As such, the road has a mixed ontological status. It is a composition scored into matter itself as a recursive refrain.¹¹ It is a multi-scalar, multi-modal,

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aesthetic and kinaesthetic, momentary or long-enduring composite of elements charged with potentiality.

DeLanda¹² defines an emergent system as one in which the capacities of its elements to affect and to be affected produce novelty or heterogeneity. Its elements are thrown together not through the conspiracy of a state power, or a preexisting common ground or ideal, but through events of articulation,¹³ histories of use, unintended consequences, and experiments that register.¹⁴ Its lines of force propel forward, spread laterally, and diverge into distinct trajectories.¹⁵

As an emergent form, the road is a capacity immanent in matter, fantasies, scales and temporalities, infrastructural projects and politics, national cultures¹⁶ and diverse lived experiences.¹⁷ It establishes lines¹⁸ and animates patterns of being and becoming.¹⁹ Its compositionality is evident in the prolific range of singular cultural poetics associated with the road and the way that their relations form an arrangement like a musical score. Shifting poetic forms are arranged as a simultaneity, a partial sync, or a linked seriality: a poetics of driving, of the landscape, of venturing forth, of the woman driver, or tourism, of truck driving or the traveling salesman or the hobo, of the low-rider, racial profiling, privatized lanes, public transportation, or the long-distance bus ride, a poetics of car styles, surround-sound music, regional horn-blowing, or texting while driving.

Road registers, then, form links between disparate phenomena, scales, and compositional modes from literature to ordinary practices to state thinking.²⁰ Like the many other such compositions that together comprise a placed and historical real, the road jumps from matter to metaphor, structure to fantasy, dull repetition to virtuality. ‘Even if accompanied by a semblance of unity, it remains no more than a composition, mixture, aggregation.’²¹ Its proliferating forms are a quality of its emergence – an intensity moving toward a point of expressivity – rather than the sum or outline of its essential parts and nature.²² The road magnetizes elements, dramatizes some things at certain times, lends objects a charge, and diffuses and compacts affects.

The road is itself a creative geography.²³ A cartography of effects and affects, propulsions and diffusions thrown into forms of practice and sensory engagement, dream and entrepreneurial competition, state thinking and inventions of person and time and space.²⁴ Such an object begs the question of the form of analysis and its possible stakes.²⁵ As Stengers has argued, we need critical narratives that populate our worlds and imaginations in different and varied ways. Rather than use critique to decide what matters and what does not matter, I follow her into a critical stance of curiosity and responsibility that attempts to approach the diverging practices, materialities, and events that comprise an object of analysis.²⁶

What follows here is an analytical experiment that suggests the lines of force and prismatic potentialities of the road. I present a series of snapshots²⁷ shot through with the road registers of rhythms, tones, and spatio-temporal orientations.²⁸ I draw attention to the prolific quality and tangled existence of road registers. Other equally useful experiments might turn attention to how one register of roadness emerges at a particular intersection of forces or they might follow the histories and trajectories of a single register such as regional driving styles or the effects of the military engineering origins of roads. Here I focus on evoking the multiplicity of compositional moments in which the road throws together into a mixed assemblage with legible qualities because I am trying to bring into legibility something of the weight of the road itself, to draw attention to its deadly flightiness.

I use a creative non-fictional, or fictocritical²⁹ form of writing/theorizing to approach the road as a live composition.³⁰ This enables me to sometimes slow down and shrink analysis to home in on a minor and intimate moment of the road’s existence.³¹ These slowed scenes tend to take the form of a still life. At other times my writing speeds to evoke the condensation of elements in a road register and their multiple potential forms and trajectories. In this case the writing tends to take the form of a list of mixed elements ranging from the clearly recognizable to the

incommensurate or surprising. This analytical and compositional approach, then, enables me to score over some of the road's own lines of composition when they can be spied for one reason or another. It means trying to follow a line of the road in a scene or on a horizon that seems to matter though it might not be clear how or why it matters. It means wondering³² and worlding.³³

Road registers

Road Registers is a middle-range concept articulating a specific mixed-ontological analytical method and domain.³⁴ Like concepts of atmosphere, mood, rhythm, clusters and scenes, its middle range is used not just to articulate the gap between 'macro' and 'micro' forces but to displace and flatten conceptual hierarchies between the big (important) and small (off-register, invisible) or between notions of an official system in a distance and the lived affects of everyday life.³⁵ The effort to attend to the registers of an assemblage also draws on affect theory's insight that structures of living have not just effects or conditions of possibility, but also capacities to affect and to be affected, or an energetics.³⁶

I use the concept of road registers here to cull attention to the energetic life of an emergent object. The road *registers* as meaning, energy, and potentiality in objects, scenes, situations, social formations, laws, or figures. A road register is something that happens in the structures and dynamics of momentary events, in the vibrant matter³⁷ of asphalt and overpasses, or in any one of the many long-term forms that score over practices of road use, scenes of its proximity to home, work, or the possibility of recluse or violence, or the various almost hard-wired and iconic landscape scenes that have thrown together in historical moments and endured or perhaps decayed or collapsed: the railroad cutting across a prairie in the west, a barn beside a rural road, a roadside cluttered with fast food places and big box stores, a series of named master-planned housing developments separated by walls, the wastelands of decrepit city blocks or rural zones of heavy methamphetamine production and use.³⁸ Each element thrown together into a form of the road has precise and shifting histories, generative forms, divergent social functions, and qualities that link it to countless other elements and partial assemblages. Elements and assemblages flicker in and out of view, gather tentatively into lines and angles, or harden into kernels of no escape or utopic fulfillment.³⁹

As it registers, and *because it has to register*, the road takes divergent form. Speed, for example, is one of many elements through which the road ontologically exists. As a register of the road, speed is not one phenomenon but a quality that might become emergent in one way when it articulates the Sunday drive in post WWII or in quite another when, now, the rage induced by bad traffic registers in the face of increasingly inflammatory expectations of magical transport or the increasingly harsh lines of power signaled by the achieved or frustrated expectation of fluid mobility. To take another example of an emerging register, at the moment in the US, car industry marketing is putting forth the register of a 'live ride' versus a 'dead ride' (an older car). This articulates an exaggerated aspirational mode of being on the road and in the world in the form of a super-transport accessorized with sensory drives and shored up fantasies. At the same time the US road is now registering the emergent weight of surveillance society not only in cameras on traffic lights or through the enhancement of policing through pervasive microcomputing but in bodies and neighborhoods and forms of sociality.

A story is useful to portray the field of splayed out and condensed elements that comprise the emergent bodily register of surveillance and its accompanying social and normative registers. I am raking leaves in the backyard when I hear loud honking and yelling on the street. Thinking one of our dogs or cats has gotten out (again), I run through the gate to find neighbors and pedestrians standing in the street yelling back and forth. 'What was that? We should call the police. Did you

get her license plate?" A woman had been pushing a stroller with a dog attached. Later I thought maybe she had to walk around the parked car into the middle of the street (there are no sidewalks). A car speeding up the street had nearly hit her and then stopped to yell 'GET OUT OF THE ROAD!!!' before screeching off. The woman of a young couple coming down the street from the other direction (also with a stroller) says the driver is well known as the crazy driver and there's a YouTube clip of her doing this kind of thing. The police have been called many times, her license plate has been circulated on the neighborhood listserv. There's a pause. We look at each other. The scene feels over-filled with the tangled, ricocheting resonances of – what? – isolation, vulnerability, snapping, judging, the state of place, community, policing and the law. And that woman, the crazy driver. I wonder where she lives, what it's like inside her house/life/car. The impulse to call the police or something shifts to an impulse to see the YouTube clip, find the listserve. This road where people walk and speed is a site that registers a material, phenomenological, and analytical composition. It is itself, then, camera worthy.

The road I am talking about here exists as a register of mobility, and/or speed and the military-industrial complex, spatio-temporal orientations, senses of possibility, privacy and publicness, nationalisms, industries, landscapes, practices, literary compositions, aesthetic and kinaesthetic sensibilities, state regulations, styles, kinds of journeys, modes of agency, or the political-economic-social-material-aesthetic-kinaesthetic forces of class and race or gender.⁴⁰ Each assemblage of the road remains an aggregate of objects, industrial times, urban and suburban designs, and marketing – a powerful machinic assemblage of interlocking technical and social components that generate its spread across fields and phenomena.⁴¹

Registering the American road

As a register, the American road is a national macadam of living form. A live detritus that magnetizes collective dreams and historical presents ripe with rhythms and speeds. It emerged in a prism of initiating events that became streams of matter and thought. And at some point it became recognizable as a thing in itself – a capacious assemblage that has qualities, lived modalities, and a history of its production and use. Precise compositions were assembled and perhaps intermittently reanimated and transmogrified. They etched hard lines of the road's recursivity onto smooth surfaces, ruts, and treacherous patches of black ice. Sediments accrued. Sensibilities were almost accidentally captured in it. The road became both a residue of a series of social inventions and their generative scene: the family vacation, the open road, the road trip, the serendipitous encounter, local color, the national park system, an authenticity off the beaten track, living 'on the street', a way to kill time, or the desperate flight to escape failure, threat, starvation, or the law. As it pulled into alignment with existential grooves of vulnerability, freedom, adventure, escape, witness, the accident, it also highlighted sideline events – the roadside attraction, the panic-stress of the daily traffic jam, the lostness or restlessness of drifters, encounters while walking or biking, and all the things people do in cars and buses moving through landscapes.

As an infrastructure, the road is a charged composition with its own evolution. They say it took 100 years to build the first National Road⁴² – a six hundred-mile road from Cumberland, Maryland to Vandalia, IL. It started in 1753 when George Washington rode to a fort in Pennsylvania to tell the French to withdraw from British territory, and took form through the field or affects and effects of a military defeat, a retreat, a new fort built, a road cut by a British General for his infantry and supply wagons, a US federal tax exemption, an appropriation by the treasury, an act of congress. By the 1820s, the road had become a steady stream of six-horse-team wagons pulling merchandise that first had to be dragged over ground or shipped on schooners up and down the rivers. The War Department introduced the macadam process on it. The railroad killed it for 40 years; the horseless

carriage resurrected it and killed the train. In 1926, the first big road-building public works project literally cemented the national road, making it into a link of the new US 40 and setting off the tendrils of a highway system that would become 'a single comprehensible place, a coherent state of mind, a complete way of life ... an ecology'.⁴³

As a landscape, the road has 'always been in a state of becoming, being actively worked through the movements and actions of surveyors, migrant labourers, construction machines, soil, concrete, rainwater, maintenance workers, drivers and passengers. Vegetation grows on the (sides). New technologies for governing the movement of drivers have been incorporated into (its) structures ... journeys, media stories and the products of children's writers, pop bands and toy manufacturers have worked the landscapes'.⁴⁴ In the US the road also pulled together a field of national forms and forces that endured, morphed, and re-magnetized things. It was a poem lined out of military money, the post World War II American Dream, suburban development, place names, nostalgia, the Cold War, Jim Crow, engineered landscapes, drinking while driving, class, the slow production of dead zones all along the highways, the icons to the power of popular culture in the roadside attractions of the world's largest cherry pie or a giant raisin box. Soon the road had become a riven, shimmering registering circuit in which intensities passed from body to body – human bodies, animal bodies, machine bodies, bodies of thought, ecosystems, viscerality and noumena, the seamless habitus of supermarkets and credit cards.

Four million miles of road in the US literally tracked the spread of aggressively banal and ugly things that popped up, decayed, and were replaced with new forms over and over again as capitalism blanketed the country.

The road is not finished matter or representation but an assembling, registering machinery of impacts and potentialities. It is the big public project and the abjection of state neglect. It is the production of futures and the massive injury and death toll. It is wanted and forced mobilities and scenes of some world's potential. The city streets, the streets of gated communities, the Main streets, the Martin Luther King Boulevards, and the roads that hug the coast are scenes of matter touching dreamworlds. Virtualities touch down in the road like the path of a tornado. The droning of routine is embedded in the asphalt. Mind-drifting senses orbit the purgatory of gridlock. The fantasies of potential 'home' scenes spied, in passing, on the side of the road are lodged in the daily commute side by side with the shock of near collisions and the desperation of being trapped.

The road is a series of events accreting in a material-symbolic infrastructure. It is as if slabs of asphalt were thrown into the black hole of the American dream. As if little worlds proliferated in the traces of roadside forms that were once lived and perhaps abandoned, revived, replaced, or swept away. The history of the road is a history of major or minor moments folded into an assembling composition.

Drivers in the 1920s liked Burma Shave signs. The small red, white, and blue notices, each with one line of a jingle, were spread out over several hundred feet so a driver going 40 miles per hour could easily read them.⁴⁵

He married Grace
With scratchy face
He only got
One day of Grace

By then, people were already gypsying – camping in farmers' fields without facilities. Locals were already complaining of travelers' loose morals and they had noticed that some were beginning to

linger for weeks or months. Unimproved camps were established. Dustbowl farm families who had loaded old cars and trucks with what they could carry and took to the road for a chance to start over, broke down or ran out of gas, transforming the campgrounds into overcrowded drought refugee camps that came to be known as Hoovervilles. Then roadside campgrounds appeared as alien forms – crowded, wild, loud and uncouth, too democratic. Some towns established free public campgrounds. No doubt there were also fights, arrests, and everything that prohibition gave voice to and gave rise to. Free public campgrounds shifted into private camps that charged fees. Then came cottage courts built to conform to a motif and arranged in a closed circle around a shared lawn, an increasingly ostentatious cottage office, and a prominent roadside sign advertising cleanliness, toilets, and home cooked meals. The hoboes were pushed back to the railroads.⁴⁶ An image of a nation of drivers appeared on the horizon as a form of middle-class citizenship and the proper traveling subject.

Mobile citizenship redefined political rights and participation, underscoring the differences and dangers of class and race. The image of ‘the woman driver’ was born. The road took on a charge. Travelers complained of noise, noxious fumes, trash, oil slicks, shabby refreshment stands, ramshackle gas and service stations. The modern auto court emerged to offer tiled baths, hot water, carpeted floors, perfect sleeper beds, air conditioning, steam-heat, a radio in every room. The family vacation surged into view. For black drivers automobility was an economic and geographical escape from Jim Crow but the road also composed and sustained racist laws, social codes, governmental regulation and commercial practices that restricted the mobility of the black driver. Segregated roadside mechanical and medical aid, food and shelter, the discriminatory membership policies of motoring organizations such as the American Automobile Association, racial profiling, the racial spatial politics of highway planning and real estate, and the race-bound economics of auto financing and insurance underwriting⁴⁷ were all animated by the compositions of the road.

By then so much had already registered in the asphalt. The lunch stands shaped like watermelons, corncobs, cows, and pancakes had already cropped up. The first drive-in movie theatre had been built in 1933.⁴⁸ My grandfather had already dropped his four little girls at school in a neighboring town and never came back to get them. Little girls. They waited there, wondering what to do. They asked a woman on the sidewalk for a nickel so they could get something to drink. They gathered themselves and began to move in the direction they thought was the way home.

The road grew up with a tourist industry pieced together out of commercial clubs, railroad corporations, the National Park Service, good-roads advocates, guidebook publishers, and a wide array of enthusiasts who promoted tourism as a patriotic duty. It imagined-forward a 19th-century elite tradition of secular pilgrimage to sacred American landscapes into a moral nationalism based on the mundane, recreational pursuit of see-it-yourselfness.⁴⁹ It became nostalgias and futurisms, hitchhiking.

The road had become a mode of common sense, a material semiosis of choices, styles and risks.⁵⁰ It registered violence, potentialities, and difference itself through the accrued poetics of state power, the complexities of inclusion and exclusion, the uses of road photography and the singularities of the motorcycle as a machine, a figure, and a stage. The road pulled the senses into alignment with circuits of territory, attachment, attunement, isolation, injury. Driving was the occasion for new kinesthetic skills, habits and experiences⁵¹ and it morphed, eventually, into the cushioned cordoned off zone of a car interior cruising through the world in a sense-based affinity with malls, television, and video games.⁵² It became the perpetual distraction⁵³ of the ‘invisibility, transparency, or transversality in things’,⁵⁴ the ‘aesthetics of disappearance’,⁵⁵ a spectacular form of amnesia.⁵⁶

Everything the road touched became a metaphor. It was a clearing in the distance, a path to a horizon, a promise of witnessing, encounter, timeout, fantasy, distraction. It was an endurance, a drivenness, a juncture, a meaningless stop. It was time stretched, shortened, wasted. It was space

unfolding or compressed. It was speed, transgression, self-control, a retreat, a racial privilege or threat, a duty, a consumerist compensation, a burden.

The road had become a machine driving fascinations and fantasies. It cast a spell over politicians, architects, designers, filmmakers, and planners. It inspired 'a flood of photography, painterly, literary and cinematic documentation. The road existed as much to be photographed as to be driven upon.'⁵⁷ It facilitated communication in the manner Foucault understood as emblematic of the exercise of modern power; becoming both medium and message in one, it was a means to conquer spatial distance that also transformed the meaning of the territory it traversed and the subject who traversed it. It was a catalyst for self-transformation.⁵⁸ It was an assemblage of assemblages – '... a self-organizing, autopoietic, non-linear system that ... includes cars, car-drivers, roads, petroleum supplies and many novel objects, technologies and signs.'⁵⁹ It stretched to encompass the relocation of jobs to suburbs inaccessible to mass transit, car dealerships' financing practices that penalized the poor, middle-class tax breaks, the car cultures of the hot rod, the Mercedes, the stock car, the low-rider, cruising. It made citizenship material and legible in the driver's license, insurance, registration, inspection, speed limits, and national road signs.

In its generativity, the road began to spin around fantastic axes of national unity, frictionless circulation, and dystopian breakdown. Nostalgias bubbled up for the early intimate relationship between drivers and cars, in the time of full service gas stations where men in uniforms with their names stitched on the left front shirt pocket pumped gas, checked oil, water and tire pressure, washed the windows, and gave directions with the help of other men hanging out at the station.

In short, the road had become a mundane realignment of attentions charged with experience itself. It leaned into the place where the actual and virtual mix.⁶⁰ Now, the road is a heartless sprawl, a national pastime, a realist bore, an infrastructural problem. It's the speedy glide through blurred space, the roadblock, the pot hole, the bump in the road, being lost, being cut adrift, being free, being a snow bird or a day tripper or a trucker on speed. It's the final isolation of elderly people losing their drivers' licenses. It's carless poor people unable to get to a job or to the hospital. It's the spectral sight of black bodies floating in the flooded streets.⁶¹ Giant roadside sight-seeing spectacles are opportunistic gifts to the road's charged potential for disaster and escape: a ham, a catfish, a paper cup, a towering milk bottle, a gargantuan rocking chair, the world-famous ball of twine or pencil or hairball, a lug nut the size of a horse.

The road has out-survived its own asphalt. The state finds itself split between the need to rebuild aged and dangerous infrastructure and the need to reign in car culture to the mere possibility of moderation, energy conservation, walkability, and sustainability. Now it's bikes lanes, public education, dense urban development and anti texting-while-driving legislation while industry and popular demand revs up the surround sound of the car and the integration of its distraction circuits with a landscape abuzz with connectivity. People drive more than they used to, now driving kids to school and after school classes, driving their babies around to get them to sleep, building extra trips to coffee shops and errands into their multi-tasking daily routine. Only 22 percent of drive time is now work-related.⁶² No cost is too high: the death toll stands at 30,000 annually, the injury toll at 2.3 million, the direct cost of automobile travel is 1.4 trillion dollars annually, greater than the total expenditure on education or health.⁶³ The three big killers – alcohol, rollovers and speed – are quickly being replaced by the driver distraction embedded in people talking on the phone, putting on makeup, drinking coffee or coke, smoking, reading, listening to music with headphones, watching TV, changing their clothes. Whites are twice as likely as Latinos to own a car, three times as likely as Blacks.⁶⁴ These are not just facts but each the tip of an iceberg of worlds taking place through and on the road.

The worlds of the road

The road is a worlding that co-exists and co-constitutes with other compositionally generative scenes of a life. A world in this sense is a partial stabilization of practices, capacities, tendencies and affordances in the form of a recursive patterning.⁶⁵ It takes place in compositional events that are generative if only partially and if only for a minute. The tendencies, habits and sensibilities it helps set in motion may take iconic form or they may slip away when something else happens. They may articulate with a force of some kind and later disarticulate from it. They may become a common sense or suddenly fail to make sense.

In this final section I present a series of road registers that reflect aspects or angles of the American road. I try to describe what these registers do: their capacities, their splitting, prismatic paths, their singular iterations. These cases of the roads legibilities are one way to begin to trace the ontological contact zone that marks the strange and prolific coexistence of word and world.

1. Road registers as events

The state of public transportation in the US is an *event* in the worlding of bodies in motion. Its poor and worsening state, coupled with the privatization of speed in traffic-free private lanes and highways, is an actual hardening of the lines of money and class, a field of force pulling together into a hard-wiring of money, movement, futures, and the public visibility of bodies. In all but the largest, mass transit-rich cities, it is socially unacceptable to be a person who doesn't drive. The sight of elderly, handicapped, and minority bodies waiting at bus stops is the sight of a world held apart, stripped of basic rights and possibilities.

2. On the Road

Jack Kerouac wrote *On the Road*⁶⁶ on a continuous scroll of telegraph paper laid out in front of his typewriter like a miniature road. Writing almost hallucinogenically in twenty-hour sessions, he invented a minor literature characterized by a stuttering repetition in which word pulls into proximity with world. The writing was breathless, as if he were just covering ground. There was so much to see, so much to do. Then the writing would skid into epiphanies at the sight of something. A book in a drugstore window was a miraculously materialized sign of the American spirit. An ecstatic intimacy resonated from a pile of objects, sounds, and places. The vast American landscape was a big back yard in a too-huge world. Characters kept running into each other in a universe of recursive connection.

The road Kerouac articulated and composed was a series of encounters and energies throwing together in scenes, characters and events. Kerouac's poetics was a refrain piling up words and sentences until a threshold was reached, folding world into word, partially stabilizing the link in a form of expressivity and experience, and then opening the word/world merger to difference or divergence and states of potential, good or bad.⁶⁷ Kerouac invented not only a new poetics but a new map of the American landscape and experience. His jazz-like, energetic composition forces his language to such an extreme that it leaves behind the level of representation to create a road in perpetual variation and to anticipate and produce a future, an audience yet to come.⁶⁸

3. Our New Hampshire

There are worlds made of things like walks and roads caught in a compositional moment that registers proximities, vibrations, energies, forces, and rhythms on the verge of expression. They

recompose sensations, venture out in the manner of, register refrains that score over landscapes and unfold. A prismatic mapping of elements becomes immanent in a path moving along through something brought into focus as some kind of world. An intensive network of pulled-together somethings resonates and takes on affective tone; textures give way to qualities of form; thought-feeling ventures into an incipiency. In this moment there is a simultaneous attunement to the states of emergence and concrescence.⁶⁹

It must have been 15 years ago the day my sister and I decided to take our mother's car to the garage in town and walk the five miles back up the foothills, most of it on the main road. I remember it was harder than we had thought it would be and a little disappointing in the end as we walked along the sandy, artificial shoulder of the road. We set off on an adventure and ended up one foot in the front of the other for the last mile or so. Our talk hit flat plateaus weighted with grooves of reaction laid down in childhood. In our New England – especially mine, truth be told – the sensorial habit of full-on peaks of performative sociality under the sign of a common humanity would drop into a ravine of stillness as if the intensity needed backup or a compensation. We had set out on the thread of a poem we did not quite achieve. We were sisters out to see the world in early middle age. I remember we didn't bring water or stop to get any when we passed through the village.

Gilford was a still life on the other side of a rocky stream. History gathered into the whiteness of the houses, the country store with an ancient gas pump in front, the town library, the old grange building, a church. Orange day lilies grew in clumps. Mountain peaks sparked the background composition with greens and blues. A little further down the main road sat the fire department and town hall in a modern colonial-style plaza surrounded by parking spaces. As if to correct the stylistic mistake of the modern plaza just beyond the picturesque village, the fire fighters had lead a community effort to build a small covered walking bridge across a stream in the back of the plaza, connecting the plaza to a back street of the village. I don't think people used the bridge to do their business at town hall, though. They drove around. The plaza was a thing in itself quite apart from the picture-perfect village but perhaps too close to it to be left unsupplemented by the literal, material bridge between the two compositions.

We now remember that walk as an event of our New Hampshire years – a world we didn't know was only for then.

This was a time when we would climb the ski resort trails to pick low bush blueberries along the ridges. Or walk down the mountain to the lake to swim, towels on our heads like turbans. The peak of Mount Major was windy and rocky; you could stand at the edges where trails trailed off over the ridges in all directions, touching the edges of wilderness. I remember crouching with my young niece Alexis over a large puddle formed on a stony ledge watching a spider negotiate its unlikely territory. Time opened into a perfectly useless concentration.⁷⁰ 'People slip out of the story they're living all the time; daily life is full of small moments of rupture, disappearance, and interiority.'⁷¹

Our New Hampshire was etched into matter from landmark boulders to dogs' teeth. There were wildflowers, horses, porcupines whose quills had to be pulled one by one from dog noses and mouths, the smell of skunk on dog fur. In the winter, there was cross-country skiing on deserted trails, often a push to find the way out of the woods as dark fell, the light turning a cold navy blue.

Our New Hampshire was pulled together out of walks, drives, gatherings, natural disasters, or shopping trips (I remember at the Wal-Mart there was always a scruffy-looking middle aged man or two with elderly mothers who were buying them food and clothing). All of these – the walks, the shopping, the shoveling snow – were ventures, experiments. We were a 'slipstream of sensations'⁷² made of all the ways that world impressed itself upon us. The place itself was a thing made up of our itineraries shuttling back and forth across its surface.

Our New Hampshire was a compositional habit we'd learned from our mother not by copying her, or mirroring what she did, but by moving in the manner of her. In our literal passages between self and world we were becoming sentient.

4. Witnessing

Experience itself becomes a witnessing when the kernel of an event registers as an assembling intensity.

Michael Taussig's *I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely my Own* is a book about a drawing he made in his notebook when he saw what might have been a woman leaning over what looked like a man lying down at the entrance to a freeway tunnel in Medellin in 2006. She was sewing him into a white nylon bag. 'There were even people lying in the pitchblack tunnel. It was 1:30 in the afternoon. The sides of the freeway before you enter the tunnel are high there, like a canyon, and there is not much room between the cars and the cliff-like walls ... I saw all this in the three seconds or less it took my taxi to speed past. I made a note in my notebook. Underneath in red pencil I later wrote: I SWEAR I SAW THIS.'⁷³

The book is a meditation on writing and drawing in a horrible world. 'There is no nice safe world upon which or after which we create fictions. The world is shot through with fictions.'⁷⁴ In the poesis of living out the unthinkable, life is an incipient verge. The hand that draws a picture of its scene also draws itself into its corporeality, conjuring it in the manner of. A line drawn is important not so much for what it records as for what it leads the doodler to see. It is an autobiographical record of a discovery of an event – a trace and suspension of a wobbly emergence of alertedness. The drawing in the notebook, like the story or the dream, is an incantation of an Other that is beside itself and tottering on the verge.

I Swear I Saw This could be in Brian Massumi and Erin Manning's book series, The Technologies of Lived Abstraction, which they describe as an orientation to how facets of subjective, social and ethical-political emergence come formatively, reverberatively together if only to then diverge in a mass of differences. They propose that the possible paradigms for the convergence of emergence are many: affinity, complexity, (auto)poesis, perception as action, speculative realism, radical virtualization. The common aim of such modes is to reorient to the creativity of thought-action crossings, through which life is germinally aesthetic, and the aesthetic anywhere is already political. The motto of the book series is 'Concepts must be experienced. They are lived.'

For Taussig, the automobile offers the fantasy of a safe space in a cruel and unpredictable world, a space of intimacy and daydreaming. '... As against this, consider a home on the freeway made of nylon bags, a home that takes the organic form of the insect world, like the cocoon of a grub destined to become a butterfly'.⁷⁵ The woman sewing the man into the bag will sew herself into it too. The bag will be their death shroud. She is drawing herself into the picture no less than into the bag. The corporeality of the sewing is a way of drawing herself into something composed of the world of the now one-in-four people homeless in rural Columbia as paramilitaries, often assisted by the army, drive peasants off the land and into the cocoons of dark tunnels such as this one. Taussig suspects that 'this hideous location is chosen because it is hideous and, what's more, dangerous. There, at least, you are probably safer from attack by police, death-squad vigilantes, and other poor people'.⁷⁶

5. Road blocks

In the coal-mining camps of West Virginia in the 1980s people struck the schools to get the roads fixed. Then, when the mines all closed again, the road was about dangerous and expensive commutes to scarce work – the price of gas and whether you could afford to take a job at Hardees an

hour away over the mountain. It was about suicidal drunken drag races, the threat of the police, routes home after decades in diaspora. The poor state of the roads measured distance from the center of America. The distance you lived from the main road down the dirt roads of the hollers measured distance from economic viability and a legal, organized lifeworld. The road was a scene of thrill, death, disaster, maiming and defeat. Teenagers routinely drove beat up cars up the roadless side of mountains to see how far they could get or flew cars off the sides of winding roads into the creeks. The only police presence was the roadblock set up in the dark of the night on the only road in or out of a camp or a raid on a ring of car thieves down some dark holler. An invasion from an outside world. Fragile or boisterous bodies would appear in handcuffs, disheveled, peering out of the back seats of police cars. Old people who could no longer get out on their own liked to be taken on a final drive through camps and hills to the places of their stories.

6. Car culture

When I was in Las Vegas in the late 1980s, working class migrants poured into town from the rustbelt (and, later, from everywhere). Everyone had a story to tell about taking off from wherever with what they could carry, breaking down, just ending up in Vegas. Homeless women begged for diaper money in supermarket parking lots. There were car clubs of all kinds, everything was drive-through, per capita expenditure on car and truck ornamentation was orders of magnitude higher than anywhere else in the country. Vegas was a breaking wave in car culture.⁷⁷ All the houses were new and the entrance was always through the garage. Neighbors never spoke; everyone had unlisted numbers; but there was plenty of talking going on in supermarkets and casinos and in the form of the tricked out trucks on the roads.

7. Town lines

In the Merrimack Valley north of Boston each town is a village. A sharply tuned space with a muscled core so powerful it's as if a town line is an actual gate; you can feel it in your gut when you drive over it. People don't cross town lines without a sense of danger, hassle, inordinate distance. They don't know street names one town over; you can get lost two miles from home. A shopping trip to Target three miles away in the next town seems hard, even disorienting and dangerous. 'You went all the way over theyah?'

Here driving or walking is an existential journey of venturing out; this alignment with an edge is what one local recognizes in the eyes of another. There is a regional habit of setting out mapless, alone, and unprepared, into the world beyond the carefully cordoned zones of familiarity. So driving here is tense. It's a middle finger whipped out, a scream of rage and a quick escape, or the kind of anxious driving that is more a gesture than a plan: eyes straight ahead, neck rigid, you whip out of blind driveways, around packed rotaries, and into rushing lanes of traffic as if driving on a prayer, as if the game is always already lost – fuck it, I'm going, hope for the best, expect the worst.

8. States of potentiality and emergence

The road is a hinge opening onto an abandoned car, an ordinary road sign, a national shift in the speed limit, a white cross, a railway crossing, a streetlight equipped with a camera, bike lanes, a walk across country for cancer or birth defects, the only public space you can find in a situation, desperate passages formed by frozen rivers or tundra. It's walking your kid to school hand in hand, the ways that driving or long-distance running tightens muscles, the sudden thought of the road not taken, the realization that gas prices just went up too high for you to drive anymore. The road is

Sunday drives, the old days traveling over mountain roads, the nausea in the back seat, the West Virginia drivers racing around steep curves they knew every inch of, the Vermont mountain road I walked one cold dark night, the footsteps following me in the woods, the sudden appearance of the aurora borealis all across the sky, or that winter that defeated New England, the snow piles narrowing the roads to one tentative lane with corners you couldn't see around, the rooftops collapsing under the weight of the snow in Connecticut.

9. Compositional affects

The road is a tone of voice or a sleepless night. I remember lying awake in bed in my grandmother's house listening to the whine of the trucks passing on the turnpike 30 feet away. The feeling of that composition was dread. I remember my brother throwing up on the side of the road every day on the way to school, where the nuns reigned. Anxiety. I remember the tree-lined street we walk (pleasure, home, a lovely world of colors and leaves) and the time a man came out from behind one of the trees with his penis hanging out (just keep walking). The road is the quivering of experience, a chore, a comfort, a route entombed in bodily memory, un-signified intensities.

Conclusions

Roads register the ordinary, heady business of making sense of and making use of what happens. Writing to approach the material-semiosis of roads as such is an effort to describe what is gesturing into form. Such writing and its form of critique is a magnet burdened with impressions, a matter of drawing lines that set off reveries and produce palpable edges.

There is a pleasure in describing the animacy of forms as we pass them on a walk or in noting the material-sensory arc of history as a series of present moments sensed through forms and events. There is a weight in watching a mixed media composite of matter and thought-feelings stretch beyond the representational register of signification to etch across uses and forms of alertness and gather enigmatic mass as frictions, constraints and lines of desire and dread. These are forms of attunement to worldly compositions in which matter and thought are not opposed but emerge together as aspects and lines that throw together and are, one way or another, lived.

A road register is something that happens in the structures and dynamics of events, in forms of practices of use, and in scenes of proximity or distance. What it registers is the energetic life of an emergent object that exists as meaning, matter, and potentiality in objects, scenes, situations, social formations, laws, and figures. Each assemblage of the road is a folding of differences and tendencies into angles that flicker in and out of view or harden into kernels of things that have weight and edges.

Each element thrown together has precise and shifting histories, generativities, and divergent social functions and qualities of its own.

Singular iterations or legibilities register aspects of or angles on the possibilities that constitute the American road. The question is not what they mean but what they do. I suggest that what they do is worth trying to describe as the registering of blockages, affordances and capacities emanating from forms. The cases gathered here as registering circuits of the road are one way to begin to trace the compositionality of matter and the ontological contact zone that marks the strange and prolific coexistence of word and world.

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