

Infrastructures of Social Determination:  
Highway Poetics and Race in the Contemporary

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**Abstract**

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This thesis examines North American contemporary poetries on the road that reverse the nationalist, mythic formulation articulated by American writers of the 1950s and 1960s. It looks at works by Cecily Nicholson, Nathaniel Mackey, and C.S. Giscombe to examine how all three poets represent the road as a fundamental tool for considering Blackness and histories of racialization and miscegenation. In making visible highway infrastructure in the poetic form, these poets reveal Blackness as a historically constructed social phenomenon and category that is produced and reproduced by infrastructural determinations as well as their organization of space and resources.

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The mythos of the highway has long been a figure of fascination for American writers and artists. Within the American literary canon, the road serves as a mode of self-expression within a highly nationalist social order. For example, in Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt*, protagonist Therese joins Carol on a cross-country trip to "see America" (153). The road trip expresses mobility as the forging of intimacies between two queer women whose geographically situated domesticities are upended into a borderless method of entry and incorporation into the larger nation. The act of travelling allows both gay characters to create and experience both a romantic relationship and national citizenry, which would not otherwise be possible in 1950s New York public life. Similarly, to write his 1960s travelogue *Travel's with Charley: In Search of America*, John Steinbeck left New York for the road, reflecting, "I discovered that I did not know my own country" (qtd. in Brigham 54). To better comprehend national trends of rising consumerism, encroaching domesticity, and the terror of the Cold War, Steinbeck flees his urban setting for the romance and detachment of the road. His mobility along highways allows him to construct and then experience "true America". National unity and his newly articulated American subjectivity come into view only as he charts his way through various interstates that seem to symbolically function as a psychological venture through historical uncertainty. Finally, and most infamously, in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, protagonist Sal Paradise follows Route 6 as a "red line across America" (8) to find and express an ambivalent white masculinity against the backdrop of passive, feminized consumerism. His journey functions as a social practice of carving out his autonomy within highly nationalist constructions of citizenship and gender. Intriguingly, these popular road narratives all express the road as a key vantage point from which one can, as Ann Brigham observes, "see America and thus become American" (2). They all

take up an idealized American history and tradition across landscapes to enact a physical mobility that can then stand in for a range of other mobilities: artistic, social, and economic.

These three Golden Age road books provide a small glimpse into how the highly mythologized highway comes to symbolize citizenship, national unity and progress in a liberal imagination that continues to be reified in the public sphere.<sup>1</sup> These literary interpretations of infrastructure constitute a small handful of a century's worth of road narratives that populated twentieth-century pop novels, films, and artworks and which conferred the road as a national object.<sup>2</sup> One need only look to current political discourse to see how foundational the highway is to conceptions of national identity. For example, when President Obama was signing the post-2008 Recovery Act, he invoked the Highway Act, which saw the construction of a 42,800-mile road network through the United States (Avila 1). In a speech on infrastructure proposals, he exclaimed, "we're making a down payment on the economy for tomorrow, the economy that's going to drive us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in a way that the other—the highway system drove us in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century" (White House Archives). For him, and, by extension, liberal state apparatuses, the highway is indistinguishable from progress itself. We can see through his invocation how highway construction enacts the dreamwork of unity and futurity, automobility and market participation.

More recently, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's (AOC) and Sunset Movement's Green New Deal also invoked highway construction. This time, both actors referenced FDR's New Deal and its road projects, which include the construction of America's first freeway, the Arroyo Seco Parkway (Faber 741), to promote sweeping renewable energy transformations to our transit systems. While Obama's Recovery Act and Ocasio-Cortez's Green New Deal obviously differ in political scope, it's worth considering the two proposals together

because they both appeal to a nationalized, liberatory, and hypermobile imagination of the open road. In contemporary politics, the road seems to confer a whiff of progress that can be mobilized to shore up public support for increased spending. In both invocations, the mythic space of the highway as possibility, connection, and citizenship becomes a useful tool to endorse new infrastructural investments. The road expands outward. Its associations of mobility subsume local and federal scales into one monolithic orientation of national progress, even as its material construction continues to segregate communities and divide neighbourhoods into racialized parcels marked by unequal allocations of space, land, and resources.

This thesis examines North American contemporary poetics on the road that reverse this mythic formulation. After all, the highway construction that rosily inspired both Obama's Recovery Act and AOC's Green New Deal was accompanied by brutal racialized redevelopment schemes like redlining, urban renewal, and slum clearance. Neighbourhoods of colour provided, as Eric Avila puts it, an "easy target" (Avila 3) for highway programs. The contemporary political nostalgia for, and the Golden Age literary depictions surrounding, the Federal Highway Act overlook the deep social fissures inflicted by road construction and how racial and class privilege structure the contemporary city. The freeway construction of the early twentieth century made intranational travel more accessible to middle-class Americans. It connected once isolated parts of the map and introduced new forms of mobility to those who could afford it.<sup>3</sup> However, it also cleaved our built environments into isolated parcels where one's race and class materialized into vastly uneven allocations of resources, space, and mobility. In Los Angeles, for example, the 1960s major freeway construction coincided with the largest concentration of Black and Mexican American poverty in California. It fuelled new social patterns of racial inequality around debt, disenchantment, and dispossession (Avila 3). Communities like the predominantly

Chicano City Terrace were torn up for interchanges that dislocated thousands of families and isolated the neighbourhood from the rest of the city.<sup>4</sup> Paul Gilroy makes a similar observation in “Get Free or Die Tryin” when he argues that private car ownership worked within racial norms to “[secure] segregation and [prompt] the reproduction of racial hierarchy” (14). By growing social isolation, draining funds from public transit, and stranding once lively communities, cars and road infrastructure reproduced the violent racial politics that lay at the heart of Jim Crow. Despite their frequent invocation as agents of national unity and progress, the car and roads often act in isolating ways that directly contradict their myth. The highway becomes the very centre of economic and racialized negotiations. It splinters cities into stratified areas. On one side of the overpass lie wealthy communities that experience, as Jacob W. Faber writes, “robust job growth, housing value appreciation, and upward mobility” (741). On the other side lie neglected communities that are increasingly cut off from public resources and subject to multigenerational poverty, food deserts, underfunded public transit, and high levels of pollution.

With this second experience of the road in mind, it’s clear that highways are a much more nefarious object than their frequent invocation as a vehicle of “progress”. They organize the allocation of mobility, energy, and space itself. They configure access to resources. They concretely imply and partially determine whose rights matter and which bodies count. For poets such as C.S. Giscombe, Cecily Nicholson, and Nathaniel Mackey, the highway evokes historical catastrophe and the spatiality of this racialized social order. Their poetries are a testament to the ideologies and practices of conquest and domination built into our infrastructures. For these poets, race is imagined and enacted watching the bulldozers come, living beneath an overpass, hearing an omnipresent rush of traffic, inhaling the particulate matter released by tailpipes, or residing in a neighbourhood stranded by a freeway or divided by a railway. Nicholson for



example traces the journey of her birth father, a traveling musician, through American-Canadian highways along the Great Lakes region, taking up his passage as a means of thinking through the precarity of Black workers during and after the collapse of the auto industry. Her collection *Wayside Sang* centers on Detroit where highway planners unleashed their racist blueprints onto middle-and-working-class Black neighbourhoods. Projects like the Oakland-Hastings Freeway, the John C. Lodge Freeway, and the Edsel Freeway tore into these communities, decimating the Black churches and businesses that had once anchored Detroit social life (Avila 42). When the construction saw massive dislocations, housing crises, and bleak transformations to once cohesive communities, Detroit's then mayor Albert Cobo referred to such hardship as "the price of progress" (qt. in Avila 43). The social consequences of these infrastructural failures displace national culpability while, at the same time, designating those Black neighborhoods as fodder for national "progress" and unity. Thus, the highway enters Black space into this tension, or what Christina Sharpe would call "wake" (12), where the Black neighbourhood is simultaneously effaced through its erasure and dislocation (it is bulldozed) *and* reified in its foundational role and "originary locus" (Hartman 80) as "progress-making" (its bulldozing allows progress and national unity).

In *Wayside Sang*, Nicholson mines this power matrix of highways and moves through the "roads investment overwhelmed" (15), writing:

*of people once horded and racked  
once holded and trapped  
once darker I was*

*an influx of rural working-class migrants  
employed in extraction construction transportation*

*mines and factories, mechanics and domestics  
waiters, porters, and clerks, still in these industries*

tourist to you now, roucou

*ska rock-steady grandad walks became motorways (15).*

Here, Nicholson represents the highway and its construction as a reiteration of the Middle Passage. She enters us into the space of the “hold”. Her intriguing conjugation of the verb “hold” (“holded”) refuses the simple past tense “held” and, in doing so, reaches towards an oceanic rather than protective association. Poetic language makes possible a grammar of captivity whose connotations evoke the hold of the ship (“holded”), rather than any possible care act (“held”). Combined with the references to “people horded and racked” and the various industries exploiting migrant labour, this “hold” expands through the text, enacting a poetics of captivity. As Christina Sharpe writes, “the holds multiply” (80). And yet, rather than linger with the embodied horrors of slavery, Nicholson moves us back to industry, capital, and the economic realm which, Hartman and Sharpe both remind us, are inseparable from chattel slavery. Nicholson therefore positions slavery as a distinctly *economic* structure of domination. The phrase “horded and racked” takes the same rhythm as “mines and factories, mechanics and domestics”. In this way, the disaster of Black subjugation becomes sonically imbedded into Nicholson’s history of industry. The sonic framing aligns both slavery and industry into racial capitalism. Within both registers we simultaneously hear subjugation *and* capital, with the highway becoming a poetic and political tool for Nicholson to move between both.

Nicholson’s poetry also reveals the infrastructure techniques, such as the Middle Passage or urban planning, that produce Blackness. Certainly, one need not look too far into the development of North American colonial states to see how systems of slavery and infrastructural development overlap.<sup>5</sup> Nicholson is keenly aware of this infrastructure legacy. In the stanza above, Black modes of mobility along the highway—namely, the speaker’s

grandfather's "walk"—are always emerging from spatial patterns produced under slavery. By turning to these infrastructural sites, it seems Nicholson hopes to recover the origin of those infrastructured patterns that are experienced as racialization. When she ends the above passage with the line, "ska rock-steady granddad walks becomes motorways", she inscribes her musician-grandfather into the very formation of highways. His body, which is made explicitly Black through the musical references to Jamaican musical genres, and its implied labour become the site for infrastructure and the highway's questions of nation, nationality, and national belonging.

Like Nicholson's *Wayside Sang*, Nathaniel Mackey's *Splay Anthem* and C.S. Giscombe's *Giscome Road* similarly represent the road as a fundamental tool for considering Blackness and histories of racialization and miscegenation. *Splay Anthem* moves along the physical space of the L.A. freeway system to sift through West African cosmologies, improvisational jazz, the Middle Passage, Greek myth, and American politics. *Giscome Road* tracks the roads and trails named after Giscombe's own possible relative and nineteenth-century Jamaican explorer John Robert Giscome. The physical road functions as a poetic artifact of Black migrations through British Columbia. While these collections explore different roadways and histories, they all turn the highway into a dialectical tool the speakers can use to address various histories of Black exploitation, settlement, and presence. Their poetically reproduced roads become—formally and metaphorically—a recurrent point of reference for the passage of Blackness and projects of racialization in North America with all the pain, possibility, and improvisation such passages can allow. These poets remind us that the infrastructure of highway construction has wellsprings in the infrastructural processes that saw Black people become enslaved as commodities.

Sara Nuttall argues that literary representations of built forms and environments provide the best vantage point from which to read contemporary configuration of race, class, and space

(740). It is from the city that Nuttall, focusing on South African post-apartheid literature, can register both legacies of apartheid and the spontaneous improvisation and possibility that citizens assert against these racialized spatial dynamics. Similarly, in making visible highway infrastructure in poetic form, these collections reveal Blackness as a historically constructed social phenomenon and category that is produced and reproduced by infrastructural determinations as well as their organization of space and resources.

### **Infrastructure in the Contemporary: Concrete Levels of Social Determination**

The framing of infrastructure as a key site of social antagonism has roots in contemporary political struggle. Amongst interlocking histories of Indigenous and Black dispossession throughout North America, it's no coincidence that most major social struggles in Canada and the U.S. in recent years have been fought with or around infrastructure: BLM and roadways; Standing Rock Sioux and the Dakota Access Pipeline; Neskantaga First Nation and water pipes; the Tyendinaga Mohawk Railway protests; the Unist'ot'en blockade against Coastal GasLink; or Extinction Rebellion's occupation of railcars. Occupations and blockades of highways, railways, ports, bridges, and dams are virtually ubiquitous protest strategies. This continued choice to demonstrate on transitory public spaces connects a range of political conflicts that might otherwise seem disparate to our built environments. Indigenous sovereignty, Land Back movements, climate action, prison abolition, and action against police brutality are drawn together within and on these public infrastructures.

For example, in February of 2020, out of solidarity with the Wet'suwet'en actions to protect unceded land from natural gas development, Tyendinaga Mohawk land defenders set up blockades alongside the Canadian National Rail (CNR) lines that run along the edge of their territory. They made signs reading "RCMP stay out" and "Indianland" to draw attention to the

railway's trespass of Mohawk territory. Out west, the RCMP had just raided the Wet'suwet'en camps that were built by hereditary chiefs to block the construction of the Coastal GasLink pipeline. It was violent. Chiefs were arrested. As a response, the Mohawk land defenders gathered near the railway, a gathering they said would continue until the RCMP left the Wet'suwet'en territory. For about a week, they stopped hundreds of trains from running. Eventually, after several court-granted injunctions from the CNR, the Ontario police cleared the blockade and arrested several people, ten of whom faced criminal charges.

While the blockades were up, Conservative politicians, under the leadership of Erin O'Toole, were quick to redirect media attention away from the legitimate display of Mohawk sovereignty and solidarity and to the mass and temporary layoffs of rail workers. Rather than question the inability of the rail companies to weather the disruptions—which, under post-Harper austerity politics, either couldn't afford or didn't want to support its employees through even the first few days of blockades—they shifted the blame to the rail blockades. O'Toole dramatically took to social media, tweeting the solidarity actions “crossed the line from illegal protest to terrorism” (Russell *GlobalNews.com*). Some commuters were frustrated by delays. Others cheered the solidarity actions on.

The contested meanings for the Mohawk actions that were negotiated by the land defenders, their allies, O'Toole, the commuters, the rail workers, the media, etc are worth teasing out in this thesis because, like my examples of poetry collections, they all place the railway at the center of struggles over sovereignty, labour, and mobility. They position the railway as a highly charged object of social relation, historical catastrophe, and state power, which is precisely the contemporary phenomenon to which Nicholson, Giscombe, and Mackey are responding. O'Toole's vehement objections to the blockades invoke the widespread imperial ideology for

infrastructure as a politically neutral, public good built across terra nullius. Brian Larkin investigates the legacy of colonialism within material structures (Larkin *Signal and Noise* 8). He argues that in the wake of colonization, media (in this case, the railway) has absorbed colonial power dynamics and shifted them to represent the promise of naturalized, independent rule. O'Toole shifts the space of the railway into an uncontested public tool that is shared by the colonial state (it connects Canada) and capitalism (it facilitates the exchange of goods and services). According to this kind of free-market liberalism, any interruption to this flow, as in the actions by the Mohawk, violates the nation and its economy, regardless of the history of the space above which the railroad runs. By blaming the land defenders for the railway's layoffs, O'Toole constructs the railway as independent from the land negotiations (i.e., theft) on which it was situated. By calling the demonstration "illegal" he denies Mohawk sovereignty first to the territory stolen by the Simcoe Deed and other illegal land sales, but then secondly to the colonially determined and devised reserve from which they demonstrate. O'Toole therefore reiterates the railway as an ongoing process of recolonization, where its tracks run over Mohawk sovereignty and overwrite it into infinitely blank, conquerable space.

In O'Toole's articulations, the railway plays a civilizing role and obscures the colonial land politics on which its flows rely. Steve Graham and Simon Marvin speak to this phenomenon in their chapter "Understanding Splintering Urbanism" when they connect post-enlightenment city planning—which sought to "tame" the city and its chaos into a single "territory to be bounded, mapped, occupied and exploited" (52)—to current experiences of place. They argue that the very ideas of urban cohesion—and one can extend this analysis to the provincial and national—depend on the abstraction of independent, localized lands into one homogenous, empty landscape. O'Toole's comments reveal the ways in which the colonial state uses railway

infrastructure to abstract Tyendinaga Mohawk land, alongside other implied Indigenous territories, into one seamless Canadian landscape. Unlike its territorialized parts, this abstracted whole can be used by state and corporate apparatuses to reaffirm Canadian enterprise and recolonize the space of the railway into nationalized economic momentum.

The Mohawk actions intervene in this utilitarian and colonial imagination. Their demonstration exposes the railway as a highly contentious marker of citizenship and sovereignty that appropriates Mohawk land for colonial economic growth. By stressing their autochthony to the land beneath the tracks, they make visible the historical colonial projects of expropriated territory that made intercoastal rail transit possible. At the same time, they appropriate state infrastructure to make possible new networks of belonging. In addition to being the space where coloniality is narrated, the very tracks become the tool of their solidarity with other Indigenous nations, of affirmation for an active Mohawk presence, and of resistance to police brutality and corporate land theft. By using the railway in the struggle against B.C.'s colonial rule, the land defenders draw up the Ontario railroad and British Columbia pipeline alike into a vast colonial infrastructural system against which the Wet'suwet'en and Mohawk nations can find common ground. Furthermore, in stopping a small corner of world trade, they assert their lawful right to the soil under CNR tracks and reveal the precarity on which global capital flows rely. Thus, the railway under their demonstration becomes a vexed site of historical catastrophe that they can retool into articulations of ongoing sovereignty throughout non-settler time. As Deborah Cowen writes, "infrastructure is not only a vehicle of domination and violence. It is also a means for transformation" (Cowen, no pagination). Here, the railway works as a "vehicle" for colonialism in the historical present, but also the "means for transformation" that the land defenders use to assert their sovereignty, belonging, and access. And while it's worth considering why and how

their actions did or didn't succeed in removing police presence and gas development projects from Wet'suwet'en land, this thesis is interested in what is revealed about the potentially *fluid* space of infrastructure despite its concrete materialism, as well as which new publics have the potential to be infrastructurally activated in these kinds of upheavals.

Poetry puts these dynamics into high relief. Poetic language unearths and refigures a density of references and meanings evoked by these infrastructural problems. Through an attention to sound and rhythm, history and racial signifiers, Nicholson, Giscombe, and Mackey break away from the road's often monolithic orientations towards colonial governance structures and narratives of state progress. They produce an experience of the road that infrastructural space and political discourse might not otherwise allow on their own terms. In the process, they approach a poetics that opens onto improvisational and yet unrealized alternatives.

### **Giscombe's Road: Deterritorialized Place, Racialized Boundaries**

In Mackey's, Nicholson's, and Giscombe's poetics, the road is a space of historical catastrophe and structural violence. Giscombe perhaps reveals these infrastructural connections most explicitly when he introduces the roadways of British Columbia's Interior Plateau with lines from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*:

The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark-green  
as to be almost black, *someone white sd—went a story—*  
*from the river, a man speaking from there,*  
*on the way in, going upriver in a long story, having put in & going on from that: (57).*

Here, Giscombe borrows the first two italicized lines from Conrad's novel when English protagonist Charles Marlow first observes the Congo River from its "edge" (17). In Conrad's novel, the phrase "so dark-green as to be almost black" works to imbed Blackness into an exotic and foreign landscape. Under Marlow's colonial imagination, the "dark-green jungle" is tied to racial signifiers ("black") as a way of solidifying and naturalizing the projects of racialization



that fueled Belgium's colonial occupation. In Giscombe's poetic rendering of Western Canadian roads, Marlow's white desire for an imagined Africa is placed onto the physical map of the Interior Plateau that follows this poetic section. Giscombe places Marlow's spatial vision of pristine and racialized wilderness onto Jamaican miner John Robert Giscome's exploration into Eaglet Lake and the surrounding topography. In doing so, he reveals how the tentative mapping of place through infrastructure is made possible by highly racialized ideology. The road becomes the site where race is articulated and understood. Later in the passage, Giscome writes a poetic legend for understanding the Interior Plateau, "it designates a relation (w/out saying / which is the greater, dark green ~ black) that's heard of acknowledged" (57). In this passage, he makes race into a crucial cartographic symbol of placemaking. He positions the mapping of space as a "relation" equally informed by landscape ("the dark green") and ideology ("black"). Roads—both the informal ones of Marlow's and explorer Giscome's as well as the federal roads mapped throughout the collection—become an exercise of mapping racial hierarchy and white desire into an organized experience of state power.

This placement works in two ways. First, it reveals the ways in which B.C.'s Black history overwrote Indigenous territory to narrate a racialized experience of place for Canada. Secondly, it implicates explorer Giscombe within those racialized structures. Giscombe layers Marlow's journey atop explorer Giscome's, allowing us to contemplate how Giscome's legacy and, by extension, the Black history in the province has, as Peter James Hudson writes, "been indelibly linked to the history of colonial settlement and the political economy of the British Empire" (156). Historically, John Robert Giscome's prospecting paved the way for miners and other settlers to navigate the Omineca and Peace districts, previously safeguarded by the Dakelh (Hudson 155). Politically, figures like Robert Giscome were critical to the emergence of imperial

capitalism in the region that reified the presence of the British state on the West Coast. The early prospecting trips of these Black pioneers paved the way for floods of miners who were able to bring consumable “Canadian” objects onto the world market, thereby using flows of capital to legitimize the British state within structures of globalized liberalism. When Marlow’s infamous river journey is reimagined onto Jamaican explorer Giscome’s trek “in & going on from” Eaglet Lake, Giscombe arguably references the ways in which explorer Giscome and other historical Black figures, such as Sir James Douglas and Mifflin Wistar Gibbs, helped map the land for colonial development and land theft, while at the same time facilitating a Canadian Gold Rush that transformed the province into a commercial hotspot for mining natural resources (Hudson 156). It’s worth noting that Nicholson’s poetry too references this gold rush when she writes “gold prices peaks foster ill opportunities” (10). In Giscombe’s and Nicholson’s poetics alike, the gold rush is an imperial tool of territorial definition that is made concrete through road infrastructure. In Giscombe’s case, however, Black settlement has a more active role in state articulations.

In the above passage, “a man speaking there”, in the “there” of the Congo and B.C., is simultaneously Marlow *and* Giscome. He overlays both legacies into the singular settler body as their joint explorations are collapsed into one abstract, global network. Rubber and gold are blended into currencies of domination, as the road narrates their flow. By overlaying those B.C. roadways named after Giscome’s voyage atop of Conrad’s Congolese River systems, Giscombe’s poetry reveals how colonial developments of British empire have always been linked to the highway, those made by ships or cement. As Gordon E. Slethaug observes, “European colonists went by transatlantic highways to settle the New World” (12). Although the river requires no construction or intervention while the road alters the natural world to fit its own

requirements, both routes have served historically as a promise of discovery and new occupation for colonial actors. With these blended topographies and commodities in sight, we can see how Giscome's quintessential use of deixis, in this case "in & out", reflects the grammar of abstracted global capitalism by disorienting us in anonymous and therefore conquerable space. This territory is the "endless invisible present" (13) into which he first drops his reader. The road becomes the expression of the projects of racialization that pave the way for financial abstraction and nation building, and which Katherine McKittrick speaks to in her book *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*.

It's worth noting that, perhaps unlike Nicholson's collections, Giscombe is careful not to collapse Blackness and Indigeneity into one imagined site of injury. In Nicholson's work, whiteness and mutual subjugation under whiteness becomes the basis for an imagined Black-Indigenous coalition. Nicholson references Indigenous nations and history as a means of confronting the violence of infrastructure projects experienced by Black people. For example, in the "Road Shoulders" section, the speaker registers the migratory routes of Caldwell members, pausing to reflect on the ways their lands were "razed then cultivated [for] grid sections" (29). However, these scenes serve more to register the violence of Black dispossession through the flight of the speaker's grandfather over vast northeastern distances than to stage a solid Caldwell presence in the text. The poem ends "mud and the musician—mechanic drives on" (29), thereby drawing the Black diaspora, as is enacted by the grandfather, in with Indigenous dispossessions. The two structures can only exist on the same plane through the material infrastructure and violence of the road. Infrastructure connects Black and Indigenous dispossession, but Nicholson's text seems unable to move past this mutual subjugation under state modes of governance into more imaginative and autochthonous horizons. Arguably, issues of Indigenous

sovereignty provide an all-too-obvious example of this violence, especially when one considers the “Highway of Tears”, a 725-kilometre corridor of Highway 16 where hundreds of Indigenous women have disappeared at the hands of murderous white men working the northern oil camps. However, this imagined poetic solidarity also, as Mark Rifkin, building on Tiffany King, notes, “enacts denials of belonging in ways that are also dispossessive” (*Beyond Settler Time* 53). Her poetry centers Black injustice and seemingly leverages Indigenous injury to illuminate material structures of white supremacy, rather than coloniality. This question of dispossessive coalition seems to activate Giscombe’s work. How might one orient themselves on the space of the road while attending to Black political autonomy, emplacement, and, ultimately, settlement *and* Indigenous modes of landedness?

In Giscombe’s work, Blackness is both subject to infrastructural violence and a subject of the crown that created it. For example, earlier in the collection Giscombe writes:

*The arrival, w/ John R Giscome, of the blackest name’s edge  
(& its variations & the effaced speaker’s own name & parentage, Afro-  
Caribbean, the spiral of announced approaches,  
of decent & association, the long heart’s most basic necessity out  
where ambiguous fields meet the rim of houses, something  
presignified, uninhabited— (17).*

This passage evocatively encapsulates this tension of Black settlement. Explorer Giscombe’s Blackness and heritage are “effaced” in formations of state. His presence as an Afro-Caribbean man delineate “ambiguous fields” into mapped place. The “rim of houses” and its associative forms of settlement overwrite Indigenous land into one “presignified, uninhabited” territory available to the whims of first Britain and then Canada. This process happens throughout his collection. Earlier, for example, Giscombe signifies a similar Black center when he describes the

“African highlights giving specificity to the remote” (60). At the same time, this process of state formation defines and then appropriates Giscome’s Blackness (“the blackest name’s edge”) into its ongoing processes of settlement. It then “effaces” his own experience of self to narrate a more convenient racialized ideology that works, as in *Heart of Darkness*, to overwrite local landscapes with a highly exoticized and united Canadian whole. Thus, in his legacy, Giscome moves from person to “the blackest name’s edge”. His own body becomes a kind of road, inscribing and plotting state territorial boundaries and “edges”.

Giscombe again enacts this tension when he lifts two passages and maps of the Nlaka’pamux from archival documentation of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition (1897-1902). This Arctic expedition was funded by banker-philanthropist Morris K. Jesup to document what the colonial state deemed at-risk, extant Indigenous nations (Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music). The first map is a spiritual chart of the nation’s worldview of the afterlife (35); the second is a linguistic sketch of the nation’s written language (37). Like the passage quoted above, these maps use the space of the road to enact the tensions inherent in Black settlement. Their inclusion asserts an active Nlaka’pamux presence in the emptied out, “endless description” (34) of the Canadian northern roads, while, at the same time, staging how EuroAmerican historicisms fail to include Indigenous modes of being within settler temporal recognition (Rifkin).

On the one hand, Giscombe uses these available documents to inscribe Nlaka’pamux ways of being onto B.C. roads. On the other, he includes them to reproduce an anthropological stance towards Indigeneity whose path of development (Rifkin 4) is frozen. Leanne Simpson writes, “my nationhood, by its very nature calls into question this system of settler colonialism” (7). Building on her theorization, these reproduced maps—which indisputably mark

Nlaka'pamux presence and knowledge—create an alternative spatial understanding which exceed the paths of development envisioned by settler-colonialism and articulated in the other represented maps. When Giscombe's poetics borrow from the map's "intestinal" (34) form, he stresses the movement and flow signified by the shapes of the language's characters. He voices a fluid articulation of place. At the same time, the layering of these documents alongside poetry accentuates their anthropological stance and settler orientation. Within the context of poetry, their inclusion and textbook aesthetic take on a jarring, ethnographic orientation, going as far as to refer to the nation by its colonizing name, "The Thompson Indians of British Columbia". Thus, Giscombe as writer enacts a meta-anthropological curation of colonial artifacts within his own narration of place. As writer and mapper, Giscombe has a heavy hand in establishing an arguably colonial experience of place which still measures, standardizes, and binds space into an albeit poetic but static practice. He includes his own authorship in the production of Black settlement over Indigenous territory. This self-conscious dynamic perhaps marks a move towards nation-specific relationality. Rather than representing the road as a site of ongoing *collective* Black-Indigenous injury, it foregrounds the role of Black settlement as a simultaneous diasporic *and* colonizing force. Highly exoticized Black signifiers are conscripted into the settlement of state that overwrites Indigeneity with an excessive Blackness. This substitute can still help narrate a foreignness for the Canadian North, thus making it available for conquest and domination, while denying any Indigenous placemaking that might otherwise undermine Canada's fictional territorial claims.

At the same time, and crucial to this dynamic, Giscome was *not* Marlow. As a Black man, he was also implicated by these highly racialized constructions of space. In *They Call Me George*, Cecil Foster outlines early twentieth century British imperial aspirations for Canada to

be “the home for whiteness in the western hemisphere” (34). He quotes Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier’s 1904 reflections on North American racial tension when he declared that Canada’s economic success was tied to its enforcement of a *transnational* Jim Crow in North America. Giscombe illuminates the legacies of these state sponsored projects of institutionalized racism. Canada’s early twentieth century political goals depended on the explicit transformation of white, former colonies into a single, British outpost in the Americas. This mode of state formation explicitly denies multiculturalism and creolization as its ideological coherence depends on the specific distancing of Blackness (Morrison 8). After all, the fiction of Canada only becomes possible through a construction, both metaphorical and infrastructural, of hegemony. When the speaker stresses the white narrativity of Marlow’s journey (“someone white sd—went a story”), he ultimately connects the ways white desire forms ideas of race, nationhood, and white belonging in the Congo *and* in Canada. Or, as Giscombe later puts it, “Africa & America on the same bicycle” (53).

Poet Giscombe intervenes in this fraught history when he embeds racial markers of explorer Giscome’s passage into the Canadian landscape. He rips open racially encoded and foreclosed determinates of place. While these determinations might not be as explicit as Laurier’s formulation, they do very much play an active role in contemporary spatial orientations. Giscombe describes the “prominent lips” (49) of the journey and the map as a “lip of information” (61). These descriptions play off his earlier collection *Here*, which ends with an experience of place that is “unimaginably intricate at the thick lip” (62). *Here* ends by mapping out a diasporic and transatlantic experience of place whose disparate localities are held together by “intricate” projects of racialization. And Giscombe notably uses these highly racialized descriptions to narrate how local production of space by infrastructure relies on an exotic and

excessive imagination for Blackness (“thick lip”). Later, his speaker mentions a “noble stream” (33) and “the coloured man’s house of Bald Mtn” (52). These highly charged descriptions produce a racialized roadway that narrates the production of the white, British state while expunges Black people from its landscape. Notably, Black body parts are imagined first in excess and then dismembered in the construction of B.C. roadways.

By referencing Marlow’s trip, Giscombe shrinks the gap between the source and edge of diaspora as well as the sensation of vast physical separation between global colonial projects onto the space of the road. In Marlow’s case, racialization produces a highly exoticized and conquerable river space for Belgium; in Giscombe’s, it charts first the colonial settlement of Interior B.C. and secondly the highly racialized emergence of capitalism in the province. The road becomes the site of this tension between source and edge of diaspora and dispossession, the center of historical catastrophe and its global resonance as the speaker travels along the Interior Plateau. Giscombe evokes the wide physical separation between source and edge of diaspora in Canada when the state maintained specific policies to limit Black migration to students or car porters in the early twentieth century (Foster 37). In Giscombe’s work, each time the speaker crosses a boundary, walkway, or mountain, he crosses through these histories of dispossession and re-experiences his racialized body within the curvatures of the road. In the historical present, Giscombe reminds us, Black people are both subjects of Canadian governance and subjected to it. The roadway becomes the container for the complex negotiation of colonization, the de-territorialization of Indigenous land, Black settlement, and the tentative production of local landscape.

### **Nicholson’s Road: Black Labour and Exploitation**



Nicholson similarly uses the road to index historical catastrophe and racialized productions of space. Her highways move through histories of Black labour, exploitation, and dispossession as her speaker follows her birth father through the Great Lakes region highways and through his precarious employment in, and eventual flight from, the Detroit workers struggle (1967-74). The highway becomes a dialectical tool for her to move through first Black labour histories and then migrations in North America, particularly her father's experience of the rise and fall of auto manufacturing in "muddy places of manufacture" (5). From cotton plantations to Black train cars, automobile production to "crises of carceral logic" (30) and "concrete drillers" (58), Nicholson's poetry uses the road to consider the "corrugated ground" (6) of Black labour where domination and abjection rein.

We can see this ability of the road to index globalized labour systems through Nicholson's references to labour relations in the nineteenth-century Canadian railway industry as well as the twentieth-century American auto industry. Driving along a highway, Nicholson's speaker notices the railroads bisecting the surrounding landscape and dividing Canada from the U.S. This railway, like the highway, marks an infrastructurally determined citizenship. I believe we can read it within Nicholson's work as a kind of proto highway in that it too included massive state investments and dispossessions of Indigenous territory. Within Nicholson's poetry, the movement from rail to road seems to mark the transition from embedded-liberal to neoliberal consensus (Harvey 11). Nicholson focusses not so much on the social policies and constraints that led to these infrastructures, as both were constructed with the legacies of Jim Crow ideologies. Instead, she focusses on the mode, with the train enacting a more social economic project, and the highway working to restore more individualized and less protected modes of class power. The train car is social; the car is individualized. Nicholson's rail sections therefore

lay the groundwork for the latter, more disastrous social relations and dissolved solidarity to come into frame within the contemporary period and out on the rapidly deteriorating (i.e. from neglected infrastructure and decreased infrastructural spending) space of the road.

For example, in the “Port of Entry” section, Nicholson stealthily ties together racialized subjugation, nation, labour, and infrastructure. She starts the section with, “there’s good work at the chrysler and the Canadian border services agency” (39), thus dropping us into the economic flows and job opportunities that accompany infrastructural investments. Her speaker then reflects, “trains gouge / borders determine sovereign privileges / the thirsty archives at sea” (40). She morphs the once seductive image of rail cutting through landscape, imagined first by Romantic painters such as J.M.W. Turner and later by impressionist painters such as Camille Pissarro, into a violent, “gouging” form that defines territory. And this “good work” is subject to reinterpretation through this later revelation of violence. Here, conditions for national mobility, cohesion, and access (“sovereign privileges”) are charted by these infrastructural and violent determinations of national space. But, perhaps this passage’s most evocative aspect is Nicholson’s orientation back to “the thirsty archives at sea” (40). This line directly references the lives lost on the Middle Passage and the historical atrocity of the Atlantic Slave trade. Here, Nicholson seems to riff on M. NourbeSe Philip’s serial poem *Zong!* which serves as a poetic archive to the 133 enslaved Africans murdered by drowning in 1781 so that the slave ship’s captain could collect insurance money. In *Zong!*, the sea takes on a “thirst” (6) that both mimics the dehydration of the enslaved people, the salty choke of the sea, and the urgency around this neglected archive of those who were murdered. Much of Philip’s poetic language is ripped apart in a way that speaks to the inability to articulate such terrors and in a way that also reflects incomprehensible levels of bodily thirst and pain. Here, Nicholson’s “thirsty archives at sea”

seems a direct nod to Philip's "sustenance / water & / want" (12) and pervasive poetic thirst. Using Philip's temporal break of the Middle Passage, where her poetry demands both remembrance and hyper presence, Nicholson brings the Middle Passage to bear first on the working conditions of Canada's railway boom, and then on the highways her speaker drifts across in the present tense. Furthermore, she uses it to reveal how narratives of national progress have historically relied on the heavy waters of Black exploitation. When Nicholson brings this history onto the present tense of the rail *and* road, she intervenes in these linear temporal models of progress to foreground Black presence, suffering, and immobility.

Furthermore, and as we can see in the above example, in Nicholson's poetry, racial difference performs its role as a marker of national territory. It is precisely this history of racialized subjugation ("thirsty archives at sea") that marks out ("gouges") the border. In *North of the Color Line*, Sarah-Jane Mathieu expands on this territorial impetus of infrastructure. Analysing the history of Canadian rail, she argues that an imagination for national cohesion was bound up in a "docile" (64) Black masculinity of service. Mathieu surveys the racialized working conditions of those who worked the rails and concludes that railway companies, in particular the Pullman Palace Car Company, permanently "fixed the image of black men to the railroads" (40). The Canadian railways were serviced by "black men [acting] out an antiquated racialized and gendered performance as servants, entertainers, sleeping car porters" (5). And thus, the territorial expansion and unification of Canada marked by the rail was charted with these highly racialized imaginaries. Nicholson too taps into this history of infrastructure when she marries legacies of slavery ("the thirsty archives) to the formation of the Canadian state ("gouges / borders"). Nicholson and Mathieu position the railways' racialized wage disparities, histories of brutalization, and a specifically domestic Black masculinity as accelerators of Canada's national

cohesion and mobility. They reveal how the tracks for Canada's Blackness and nationhood were lain together, often at the expense of Black lives. Public infrastructure becomes the site where race is made and enacted in real space as a means of policing national belonging and citizenship, as well as establish a deeply racial politics of mobility and immobility (Cowen, no pagination).

Nicholson again references this infrastructurally realized Black exploitation when she indexes American automobile production. Driving through Michigan, she reflects on the collapse of industry, and uses the road to move us back in time to when the factory "mechanize[d] time" and "synchronize[d]" (13) social life in Detroit. She speaks to a growing "north American system" (13) and calls automobile production the national "yardstick" (9), so that, once again, she moves between the rise of industry as both national cohesion and racialized subjugation. Her references to "unseen labourers" (45), "whitewashed" (58) towers, and the "balance sheets for profit [that] axe production shifts / and kill models" (72) scrape through the labour disputes and racialized working conditions of the auto factory that Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin span in their book *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying*. Georgakas and Surkin survey the 1960s Black liberation movement in Motor City and the kinds of resistances Black workers organized in response to increasingly precarious jobs, compulsory overtime, and the 90-day rule that allowed auto companies to dismiss hundreds of workers per week before contract protection, thus ensuring a rotating pool of insecure job seekers (34). They reveal the anti-black racism fueling these decisions and detail how high paying, secure jobs were overwhelmingly dominated by white managers, whereas difficult, dangerous jobs were maintained by Black contract workers (4). Nicholson's diction—"axe" and "kill"—unveils the violence beneath seemingly mechanized hiring decisions and working conditions, enveloping these contentious labour histories into the material space of the road. Once again, it is only through understanding this labour that a

complete image of the road comes into view. The highway emerges as the material condition in which these signs of Black exploitation are articulated and understood. Race is transformed and refigured along its reaches. This choice positions the road as a mode of Black exploitation which is at once slippery and solid. Highways, exit signs, roads, and gas stations exploit the tension between institutionalized citizenship and non-belonging, mobility and stasis (or capture), and access and neglect.

When Nicholson eventually tracks her birth father's flight from Detroit, she ties his migration into a wider network of historical Black diaspora. She writes, "mechanic-griot left home following emancipation" (69). By tying together his two identities as musician and auto worker ("mechanic-griot"), she creates a causal relationship between his flight and the collapse of the auto industry. By relocating this event in time to the vast temporal category of "following emancipation", she clocks his journey alongside the many other flights of Black people out of the rural South since Reconstruction. Nicholson seems to be specifically interested in the Great Northward Migration (1910-70) which saw six million Black people flee the South and Jim Crow. Her interest in the steel, rail, auto, and meatpacking labour trends, as well as her speaker's psychic affinity with "the north", evoke mass migration that took place before the first World War. And the effect of her overlapped migrations throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is that her birth father's journey is absorbed by the highway space into a series of multiple and resounding Black dispossessions under, first, imperialism and, later, capitalism. By bringing our attention to the literal and figural shared routes that her birth father and millions of other Black men took north, Nicholson uses the highway to knit together seemingly disparate historical catastrophes and Black diasporas into the ongoing construction of race through flight, exploitation, and redress.

For example, when Nicholson's poems cross into Canada from Michigan, the speaker reflects:

*fleeting through border again black in the belly  
meadow marsh to a march of pavement*

*inhalants exhausted is more particulates  
particles and ultra-fine particles  
all kinds of dust (42).*

Here, we have a riff on Marlow's "so dark-green as to almost be black" where the blended topographies of the meadow space and marsh space take on a solidifying blackness ("black in the belly"). Only here, rather than facilitating Marlow's *colonial* imaginary, it facilitates North America's *contemporary* one. Nicholson draws us towards present-day struggles of environmental racism, spatial justice, and micropollutants in the next lines when she writes of "inhalants exhausted", "ultra-fine particles", and "all kinds of dust". Her term "exhausted" creates a doubling effect for the scene's toxicity, simultaneously evoking the "exhaust" and polluting aggregate of a car, and also feelings of depletion or weariness from such "exhausted" scales of industrial pollution. Furthermore, the blackness of the "marsh" produces a "march of pavement", which seems to nod to postwar highway construction unleashed by the 1956 Interstate Highway Act. The description of cement takes on a Black wetland that works to naturalize its construction and racialized projects, while evoking the kinds of ecosystems often decimated by such infrastructural projects. Just last year, for example, Conservative Ontario Premier Doug Ford faced backlash from environmental groups for his proposed Bradford Bypass. This proposed highway would cut through the sensitive Holland Marsh and potentially send chemical runoff into nearby Lake Simcoe. It's one of the many infrastructural projects that would drain (or has drained) marsh deposits and degrade the surrounding soil.<sup>6</sup> In Nicholson's poetry, the pavement's ability to take up this "marsh" speaks to these environmental impacts and

the way infrastructure naturalizes the spatiality of social relation and race. Furthermore, the sonic resonance of “marsh” and “march” presents an active expansion of road construction that relies on a military vocabulary. This choice suggests empire. Like Giscome’s road, Nicholson’s absorbs colonial constructions of space while revealing how this process of abstraction and settlement depend on a racialized determination for place.

Furthermore, Nicholson relies on slippages to evoke transatlantic slavery, an effect she does produce throughout her collection. Earlier, her speaker reflects on the development of midwestern manufacturing and claims “liberation seceded” (6). When foremen train new workers, she describes them as “master and apprentice” (13). When this industry collapses just pages later, the company “auctioned everything off” (9). Nicholson’s diction slips between contemporary and antebellum (“secede”, “master”, “auction”) registers of racial subjection. In her poetry, modern industry constantly risks and reiterates systems of slavery and terror. She lets us reconsider the meanings of these contemporary labour relations, casting doubt on their narratives of progress and multiculturalism. When she writes “fleeting”, she again plays up this slippage by evoking flight (“fleeing”). Her other explicit references to systems of slavery code this association with an antebellum escape to the Canadian border. This otherwise innocuous passage of the speaker teeters toward unspoken and unrealized violence. But rather than explicitly name or confront this tension, Nicholson instead stresses the transience of the action. Her speaker is “fleeting” through borders. Through this diction, Nicholson opens her speaker’s passage—both the poetic passage (stanza) and the speaker’s passage (crossing) through the border—so that the road introduces layers of diaspora without any identifiable beginning or end. Her road cycles through histories and time. It loops back on itself and histories of brutalization,

rather than arrive definitively in an emancipated space. Mackey perhaps references a similar temporal curve when he writes, “merciless the loop” (79).

Saidiya V. Hartman speaks to “the discontinuity between substantial freedom and legal emancipation”. She calls it the absent “partition between slavery and freedom” (12). The legacies of slavery limit Black mobility, settlement, and belonging, closing off the potential for fully realized emancipation. Under these constraints, she writes, “there is at best a transient and *fleeting* expression of possibility that cannot ensconce itself as a durable temporal marker” (13, emphasis my own). When Nicholson “fleets” through the border, she enacts Hartman’s “transient expression of possibility”. Her crossing becomes a short-lived practice of mobility and freedom. And arguably, its instability in time, its fragile “temporal marker” and ephemeral mode, enact a fugitivity for the poetics that opens outwards from the text to the reader. Nicholson thus takes up both meanings for the word “fugitive”: a person who has escaped, an object that is quick to disappear. Nicholson’s roadways are therefore one of impasse: the very possibility of the speaker’s Black mobility are overdetermined by legacies of chattel slavery and the limits of emancipation (Hartman 6) within contemporary labour relations. The speaker’s safe passage therefore must remain “fugitive” by relying on glitch, redress, and temporal breaks.

### **Mackey’s Road: Destabilized Place, Confusion and Terror**

Where Giscome and Nicholson use the highway to index specific histories with identifiable motives, institutions, and actors, Mackey seems to use it as a dreamlike vista to experience inarticulable racialized tensions, anxieties, and antipathies that come within grasp but exceed comprehension. For Mackey, this violence is highly felt while its source is obscured. He writes from a “freeway overpass” that is “east of La Brea” (57), the road which divides the city in half:



*Head of echoic welter. Head I was  
hit upside. Curlicue accosting my  
neck, ears bitten by flues, fluted  
wind, Stra hest... Head I was hit  
upside, a glancing blow. (58)*

Here, Mackey stages the speaker's slow recognition of an unspeakable and unidentifiable violence. We have an injury, a "hit", that seems to stagger onto the page both in its alignment and action. Yet, its source cannot be located. The repetition of the event, "head I was / hit" happens three times in this short passage. First, in its impact where it is experienced ("head of echoic welter") as a surge (a "welter") of confused but intense sensation. In its second strike, the speaker registers the pain and the attack ("head I was / hit upside"). And in its third mention, we can see the speaker trip over his poetic vocabulary to make sense of what has happened. This densely reproduced pain creates an anxiety within the text to make visible and intelligible that initial strike which cannot be recovered. Mackey decentralizes cause and effect so we are left with pure and repeated sensation in order to give expression to this violence. The rhythm jerks "curlicue accosting", "ears bitten by flues, fluted". What drives Mackey's poetry seems to be an attempt to sound out an obstructed violence, rather than explain or locate the initial strike. The ripping apart of the unidentifiable word "Stra hest..." works to stage an experience of pain. The mind struggles to work out what has happened, as the discomfort travels into the body. As readers, we must attune ourselves to a different form of knowledge that is received through sensation, rather than sense making. Arguably, this lack of certitude over source, this absence of concrete proof or culpability, seems to expand this poem's blind violence and horror. Without cause, the speaker and reader can only relive the sensed experience, turning it over to try to position this injury as an adequate source for evidence *some* event which remains absent or otherwise just out of reach.

Later in the poem, “head I was hit / upside” becomes a poetic refrain that seemingly centers the text’s meaning. As the wandering “we” of Mackey’s collection move through vast spaces and times, from the 1609 Moorish expulsion in Spain to the prison industrial system in California to Dogon funeral rites throughout time in Mali, “head / I was hit upside” and that initial experience of pain on the road provides a rhythmic and sensory consistency for the text across racialized experience. Its reflexive mode steers us through spatial and temporal discontinuity so that even as we are disoriented in space and time, we are familiar with one overarching, violent pattern of movement and sensation. Even in those more pleasurable scenes, where the wandering “we” tests new records over a nameless highway, the pain of that first register is mixed in. This repetition produces a certain ambivalence in the text towards absolute periodization and discrepant temporal markers. There is no partition between *before* the strike and *after*. Instead, the event and violence resound. In Giscombe’s and Nicholson’s poetics, the speakers use specific roadways tied to specific histories to reveal how Black forms of mobility are always emerging through those patterns produced under slavery. Mackey seems to use a hyper mobile and fluid projection of road to move through all of human history to reveal how Black forms of mobility are hindered by incomprehensible and seemingly inarticulable horrors.

This violence becomes a kind of rhythm Mackey can punctuate or syncopate, but never escape. Notably, the key phrase is a direct reference to “Champion” Jack Dupree’s 1956 blues song “Walkin’ Upside Your Head”, in which the speaker tries to convince his girlfriend not to leave him. In the original song, Dupree sings in a lilted vocal affect, “I’ll be staying in your collar / walking upside your head”. Paired with other promises of care, these lines read as a promise of attention. Curiously, the occupation of her body (“staying in your collar”, “walking upside your head”) becomes a tender recourse to pleasure and intimacy. The song uses a brassy

blues and features a heavy saxophone that at times drowns out Dupree's words. When Dupree sings "I'll be staying", he uses elision so it sounds like "I'll B'stay". Mackey takes up this voiced dental approximate in his poetry, but he changes the verbal phrase to stress obligation rather than remainder. Later in the poem he writes "B'est its visitor", which becomes, in the quoted section above "Stra hest...". While one can read into these slight changes, I believe the reference serves a more tonal rather than explicative purpose. One can imagine Mackey listening to this song and writing "Song of the Andoumboulou: 48" where poetry becomes a vehicle of transference for the mood of Dupree's vocals, without one singular, concrete interpretation. In Mackey's version, "head I was hit upside" reverses "upside your head" to absorb the impact and introduce a new level of violence to the interaction. His reference to the blues song lends the violence of the interaction's simultaneous tenderness and anxiety. He lifts Dupree's desire for repair with a lover onto the road section. At the same time, his strange inversion of "upside your head" asks that we read his text both forward and backwards. The blues reference therefore creates a certain temporal and cultural coherence for the road that his poetry and reproduced roadway then dislodges. As readers, we experience the racialized violence of infrastructure while longing for a simpler relational mode.

Mackey's poetry becomes a material artifact and highly sensory experience of an infrastructural violence that cannot be understood, while also producing the confusion of that violence discursively through fragment, slowed comprehension, and ripped speech patterns. This orientation to the incomprehensible, the unknowable, and the abyss drives Mackey's poetic rendering of the road. For example, Mackey briefly places us on the roads of Los Angeles, writing:

*It was a freeway overpass we  
were on, an overpass east of*

*La Brea. There we stood watching  
cars pass under us, desert  
flutes gargling wind at  
our  
backs, an overpass we stood  
on  
looking west... What there  
was wasn't music but music was  
there. Where it came from  
was nowhere, we heard it  
nonetheless, not hearing  
it  
before put us there.... So we  
thought  
but wrongly thought, wrong to have  
thought we could. There we stood  
atop the world looking out at  
the world. L.A. it now was we  
were in... (57).*

Mackey glitches our ability to land within the text. He briefly offers us the city of Los Angeles. We can imagine a Griffith-Observatory-like vista point in the hills, looking over the hazy, hot and browning city. However, the direct predecessor to this setting forecloses any possible settlement by disorienting us in space. The repetition of “the world” (“atop the world looking”, “out at / the world”) creates a self-observing loop. Are we atop the world or are we looking out at it? Just as we approach one perspective, our viewpoint disintegrates, as the winding structure seems to unsettle the poetic ground.

I believe this unsettlement has interesting implications for Black modes of landedness within colonial governance structures. As I have argued, Giscombe and Nicholson both use a specific poetic road to reveal how Blackness is in part produced by infrastructure techniques, such as territorial definition, the development of northern mining roads, or Detroit highway construction. For both poets, the trope and material presence of specific roadways becomes a tool of spatial and social measurement and standardization upon which social determinants are

written. And it is arguably the specific geolocatedness of their roadways that allows their poetry to index these social determinisms. At the same time, and to which especially Giscombe's poetry is attuned, the distinct geographical focus introduces a Black settlement over Indigenous land in the text, which can be acknowledged but not overcome. This landedness might be useful for forming certain political alliances. For example, Giscombe's poetry adopts a solidarity with Nlaka'pamux ways of being. However, the problem of adopting this allegiance is that it centers mutual subjugation under whiteness and, by doing so—as Rifkin argues in *Fictions of Land and Flesh*—perhaps creates difficulty for engaging with Indigenous projects of self-determination (10).

The roadways of Mackey's collection use a highly mobile articulation to deny settlement in a way that reflects Black diaspora and adopts a Black poetic placemaking in the act of dislocation and mobility. Mackey uses a constant grammar of negation and uncertainty to deny both speaker and reader any kind of settlement. In the passage above, for example, we are given more access into “what isn't” (“was wasn't”, “was nowhere”, “not hearing”, “wrongly thought”) than what is. At the same time, Mackey seems to charge these negations with an immense presence. When he writes, “what there was / wasn't music but music was / there. Where it came from / was nowhere”, he arguably locates the originary capacity and potentiality of the abyss. I believe this presence and charge creates its own placemaking within the “nowhere” so that Mackey's dislocated poetics become a project of situating Black subjectivity within figurations of marronage, dispossession, and diaspora.

In Mackey's poetic centrifuge, we are caught in drift with no identifiable center or source. When his speaker reflects, “before put us there”, we get the sense that the road is orienting the speaker back to some place he's been before, perhaps to an ancestral tradition that's

been long forgotten. However, that place and source is, as Fred Moten writes, “an always already unavailable and substitutive origin” (6). For Moten, who builds on Saidiya Harman, this “cut” of Black diaspora from origin first obscures its source and secondly demands an imaginative restoration of its origin (19). This mood evokes Hartman’s work on the impossibility of recovering the voices of enslaved and emancipated people. There is no access to what she calls a “subaltern consciousness” (10) outside of elite archives and documents produced under systems of domination. Instead, Hartman argues that the “ruins of the dismembered past be retried. . . . [by] attending to the cultivated silence, exclusions, relations of violence and domination that engender the official accounts” (11). Christina Sharpe makes a similar observation when she writes that scholars of slavery constantly face absences in the archives and must work with and against “erasures, projections, fabulations, and misnamings” (22). Mackey’s poetics seem to adopt this orientation to silence, redaction, and misrepresentation. As Lucy Alford notes of Mackey’s work, the very form of his poetry, the grinding, double-helix structures, seem to interweave absence into its presence (1261). Certainly, we can see this quality in the way “it”, “thought”, and “were in” risk breaking away from the text, only to be stitched back in at the last breath by the following line. In the process, they visually pull the blankness of the page into the very center of Mackey’s form. While at the same time, the content offers itself up to those histories we can’t quite make out, those directions we can’t quite locate. His poetry seems to follow that “subaltern” impulse towards cultivated silences, as those white spaces on a page of poetry or those unidentifiable sounds grinding in the distance.

Furthermore, “West” means very little without a concrete spatial point of entry. Mackey’s road is unfixed in both time and space. He offers us neither source nor destination, so that “west” is understood as pure directional impetus. Its operation is relational, rather than

definitional. By refusing to situate his reader, he degrades the meaning of the direction “west”, and, by extension, the poetic spatial arrangement itself. To navigate ourselves in the text, we must rely on speculation and fragment. Mackey therefore uses cardinal direction and its implied associations of situatedness to do the very opposite: stage a rootless sprawl over the text so that we are drifted, rather than oriented, through a violent experience of the L.A. highway system. The road in its poetic mode becomes a way of occupying the abyss, which I take in the way of Moten’s unavailable origin, while degrading our ability to make sense of its source or points of departure. In geography, direction is established by the pathway of a moving object departing from a particular location or feature. In Mackey’s poetry, direction is established through a slow, hazy recognition of sonic registers. Within this highly destabilized matrix, one can only observe the road as a sensation and one’s experience of its relation. Mackey therefore enters his reader into this confused space of infrastructural relation and racialization, only to reveal the incomprehensible violence at its edges.

### **The Poetically Open Road**

Giscombe, Nicholson and Mackey all tie the road to contemporary conditions of(?) political address that are underwritten by colonization and imperialism. In the process, they uphold the imaginations of those social groups, such as the Tyendinaga Mohawk actions mentioned in the beginning of this thesis, using so-called public infrastructure as a tool of political confrontation. They offer us an alternative modernity and infrastructure to counter the naturalized mobility associated with that mythos of the highway. In unearthing those violent processes of signification that underwrite the roads, they arguably displace their governance structures. Poetry allows them to participate in an experience of space that is at once determinate and open. They use language to revise and rearticulate those political apparatuses built into

infrastructure space, while still acknowledging the very real impact those structures have on Black lives. Thus, language and infrastructure are brought together in a way that emphasizes their reliance on their built forms and then moves them into areas neither could address on their own terms. Through poetry, infrastructure continues to transfigure itself so that the reader can register both historical catastrophe and improvisational possibility at the same time.

As in Sharpe's "wake work", these poets reveal Blackness as a centrifugal force to the road and its associative body politics, undistinguishable and accountable to both the Canadian and American imaginaries. A signifying Black presence is central to any spatial understanding as it structures contemporary nation states. Giscombe reminds us that this structuring is quite literal. In *Invisible Man*, which is listed in Giscombe's acknowledgements, Ralph Ellison's protagonist briefly works at a paint factory and discovers the ten black drops that amalgamate the white enamel to produce the "purest white paint" (109). Ellison's text includes an evocative passage where his protagonist "measured the glistening black drops, seeing them settle upon the surface and become blacker still, spreading suddenly out to the edge" (109). Giscombe adopts this Black center of whiteness to consider the role of Black migration in the establishment of Canada. As I have noted, Giscombe maps the "blackest name's edge" (17) as it spreads to narrate production of national space. This seems a direct nod to Ellison's black drops where, as Toni Morrison writes, a "dark, abiding signing Africanist presence" (5) binds disparate and independent territories into a frail, diasporic, Canadian whole. Social space is conceived of and cemented within these highly racialized roads, which allows a select group of citizens to think nationally, while defining who does and does not belong. In the poetry of Giscombe, Nicholson and Mackey, they reveal the racialized infrastructures at the core of our social orders to demystify the myth of the highway and, by extension, state governance. In their adept hands, infrastructure



emerges as a place where race is made and enacted. In poetic form these infrastructural projects of racialization become increasingly manmade, indeterminate, and therefore open to interruption.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Eric Avila's chapter "A Matter of Perspective" makes a similar observation when he surveys famous representations of the highways painted and photographed by white artists "discovering" (122) Los Angeles' iconic overpasses. Artworks such as Robert Kuntz's "Freeway Shadow" (1960), Ed Ruscha's "Standard Station" (1966), and Ansel Adam's "Freeway Interchange, Los Angeles" (1967) work to abstract human relation and labour in favour of formal experimentations with lines, solids, and voids (Avila 123). As he observes, these artworks' derelated scenes present a pleasant aesthetic drama and urban fantasy where the highway enacts concrete levels of social determination.

<sup>2</sup> The social consequences of these road narratives have been thoughtfully dissected by scholars such as Paul Gilroy (*Darker than Blue* 34), Ann Bringham (18), Douglas R. Anderson, Jason Spangler, Kate Marshall, and Robert Bennett.

<sup>3</sup> As W.E.B. Du Bois noted, car travel and roads distinguished the social and economic particularity of the Black middle class (Gilroy *Darker than Blue* 40).

<sup>4</sup> Poet Sesshu Foster references this history in his book *City Terrace: Field Manual* when he refers to the neighbourhood as "highways without end" (2).

<sup>5</sup> Vice President John C. Calhoun, for example, a southern plantation owner infamous for his vehement defence of slavery, was the first U.S. representative who called for a centralized road system under the "Bonus Bill" (Skidmore, 41). That Calhoun's political desires included slavery *and* road construction indicates how roadways were produced by the very same exploitative, white supremacist state that first enslaved Black people and then exploited slavery's legacy to develop a racialized division of labour for industrial capitalism (Gilroy).

<sup>6</sup> Ford's most recent anti-labour attack on teachers and the union CUPE was even called a "distraction" for him to move this infrastructure bill forward.

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