# A DRIVING FORCE: RELATIONAL BODIES IN THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PERIPHERY

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the act of driving a car shapes identity through relational moments of contact. So often in our social interactions individuals are recognized through the roles they inhabit or actions they repeatedly undertake, whether that be teacher, father, gardener, etc. These roles are not solidified identities, but are rather momentary performances that an individual must temporarily embody in accordance with the circumstances they find themselves in. For many people, driving is a mundane practice that enables 'more important' activities in their daily lives, and yet for the time that a person operates a motor vehicle they must make their embodiment of that role a top priority. Using auto-ethnography, I will be looking at how a person 'becomes' a driver when they are driving by locating themselves in relation with their surroundings and how those interactions may shape identity for the duration of time that a person is driving. I will be considering how the individual is an intermediary point of contact in a web of relations and how responses to those interactions can shape how that person shows up in the world by considering how a person recognizes and accommodates for their relations with the objects, environments, and people they come into contact with while operating a motor vehicle.

## KEYWORDS

driving, attention, embodiment, relationality, affect, human/non-human relations




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I glance quickly at the clock on my phone; "45 minutes until class starts." I absent-mindedly jam the phone into my coat pocket and lean down to pick up my backpack, swinging one strap over my shoulder; "I have to hurry or I'm going to be late." The strap digs into my shoulder and the weight of it makes me sway slightly as I adjust my balance; "This thing is so heavy, I'm going to have back problems." While feeling for my keys in my other pocket, I hurriedly start wriggling my feet into my shoes; "Every morning. Will I forever be known as the 'late person'?" I shuffle across the doormat to make my shoes fit more comfortably as I unlock and open the front door. I yell a quick "I'm going!" to no one visible and manage an odd run/walk to the car as I shut the door behind me; "The neighbor's car is in the driveway, what does she do for a living? Her husband is a lawyer, she was a painter, right?" I open the car door and see acorn shells littering the hood and windshield; "I really need to make time to clean, why is self-care so stressful?" I jam my keys into the ignition to start the car and begin rolling back out of the driveway. I feel fondness bubbling inside me as I look at the oak tree I was parked under, remembering how I climbed it in my youth. I shift into first gear and accelerate down the street.

In this essay, I will be exploring felt bodily tensions in moments that are peripheral to ethnographic fieldwork. I am exploring these moments to interrogate how a researcher comes to imagine both themselves within the field and the scope of their ethnographic focus. This is an interrogation into what ethnography is and when it is, or 'should be', taking place. My intention for this work is not directly related to a larger project but is, rather, an ethnography of 'non-ethnographic', 'pre-ethnographic', or 'inter-ethnographic' space, that is, space which is not conceptualized as being ideologically or materially central to a research objective. Rather, the objective of this exercise is to explore how research *comes* to matter, how subject matter may be identified, and how a researcher's daily engagements may impact the research process. It interrogates the perceived banality of the everyday by applying an ethnographic focus to tensions resulting from the actions that my body is constantly engaged in, at times when I would not normally be paying close attention. I am positioning this questioning of the ethnographic periphery as an exercise in affective praxis.

Chris Ingraham (2023) points to the difficulties in studying the pre-conscious, extra-lingual intra-actions that produce what we call affect, therefore in this essay I am attempting to *do* affect theory in hopes of "affecting theory." To do

this, I will first outline theoretical frameworks that I am drawing from, and will then provide a literal demonstration of the relationality I perform when driving a car. I am attending to driving because of the central, yet peripheral, role it plays in my everyday life. It serves as a "non-place" (Augé 1995), a transitory place with predetermined rules and modes of interaction. I do not live in an area with accessible public transit and my ability to physically go to work or to meet with people necessitates a car, yet rarely do I consider driving to be an activity that is 'worth' close examination. The event examined at the end of this piece is not of particular importance, but rather serves as a snapshot of a daily activity that enables my larger objectives without receiving commensurate recognition.

## A Question of Methods

As a methodology, ethnography entails giving a certain level and quality of awareness to a situation in order to extract meaning that aligns with prior research questions. It is not defined by a strict adherence to the use of a limited set of methods but can instead be considered as a sensibility or sets of ideas or intentions that are applied to research engagements. As a doctoral candidate currently preparing for my dissertation fieldwork, the primary motivation for this examination is inspired by my own questioning of the efficacy of ethnography as a methodology. While ethnography has been taken up by many fields outside of its anthropological roots, it has also been the recipient of serious criticisms, two of which I will discuss here. The first is that ethnography is a more improvisational scientific process that can be left to interpretation and because of that has been criticized for its subjective parameters and lack of reliable reproducibility (LeCompte & Goetz 1982; Hammersley 2006). The second questions the motivations behind ethnographic work, which is tied to its sordid past linked to imperial projects of violence and domination and, thus, how it has been criticized for objectifying non-Western peoples as being 'primitive' or 'Other' (Fabian 2002; Trouillot 2003). I see these criticisms, first and foremost, as valid and necessary to be addressed by every potential ethnographer before entering the field.

In discussing ethnography's concern with reproducibility, it is important to recognize that scientific methods are generally concerned with extracting replicable results to gain an understanding of our lived experiences and our larger world. Replication is significant because it indicates an existing reality that is shared by multiple sources rather than existing in the mind of the researcher alone, thereby allowing research to better contribute to improving our shared realities. However, the understanding of replication in social science research should not be under-

stood on the level of a one-to-one comparison. To be able to arrive at precisely the same result multiple times requires that neither the 'objects' of study, nor their environments, introduce complicating factors by changing over time. Expecting multiple studies in the social sciences to produce the exact same result, rather than a symbolic, theoretical, or social similarity or alterity is also expecting that the subjects of study will exist and be in relation in the exact same way over time. To take my morning departure as an example, expecting exact reproducibility would expect that every day without fail I will sleep in, will be going to the same location, will have a functioning vehicle, etc. This is not a realistic expectation given the fluidity and malleability of lived experience and intentionally seeking some degree of exact reproducibility risks a researcher imposing their desires or preconceieved notions upon their interlocutors in ways that do not reflect the transformative nature of the conditions being studied. This desire informs a related concern of a historically motivated propensity to locate and construct Others through ethnographic research, by desiring static understandings of complex situations and individuals (Asad 1973; Smith 2012).

The reflexive turn in anthropology attempted to address some of these concerns by recognizing those biases that may influence a researcher's perspective and, thus, the potential power and privilege an ethnographer has in comparison with their interlocutors (Clifford & Marcus 1986). But even reflexivity has been criticized for not fully addressing these issues because recognizing one's position within a structure is not the same thing as altering that structure (Salzman 2002; Abu-Lughod 2008). While the problems of relation and representation are in many ways linked to ethnography's inception as a tool within the colonial arsenal, this does not necessarily mean that ethnography itself is a problem. Methodologies are tools that serve to assist the objectives of the users wielding them and it is therefore critical to understand how research objectives come to matter in the present as well as the histories they are situated within. Though ethnography has been historically undertaken in harmful ways, it is still an important tool for interrogating the systemic structures that influence and govern collective lived experience (Fassin 2013; Simmons & Smith 2019; Boylorn 2011).

This paper's focus on non-ethnographic space is an exploration of how fieldwork can be generatively disrupted in ways that provide an opportunity to question research motivations and interactions. By examining moments that are peripheral to fieldwork I seek a better understanding of what it means to be *in* the field, what

kinds of topics are worthy of study, and how I can imagine research that does not position relational contact as a process of constructing an Other. To do this, I intend to critically engage with how the moments leading up to applications of research methods are contextualized within already existing models of knowledge production by focusing on affect theory and relational embodiment. I am calling for a stronger recognition of the ways in which attuning to the relationality of sensory engagement on a bodily level may impact, locate, or disrupt a researcher's points of entry into a field.

To some extent, this methodological exploration brings notice to the ways in which the body and mind are not immediately unified in experience, and how the body produces felt tensions in response to its surroundings, and how the mind improvisationally adjusts to these responses. This is not a return to a sort of Cartesian dualism; it is not my intention to suggest that the body and mind are isolated as separately existing entities. Rather, I am considering the body as an intermediary point of contact, as a heuristic tool that recognizes its surroundings in a particular way (Bernstein 2009; Sofer 2012). In his contribution to an anthropology of sound, Stephan Helmreich (2007) uses the analogy of a submarine to discuss the methodological difference between immersion and transduction in ethnography: immersion being considered as the anthropological tradition of placing oneself 'in the field' and conducting participant observation, and transduction as attempting to detect what immersion may leave out by questioning the dichotomous positioning of inside/outside, sensor/sensee, etc. "Transductive ethnography would be a mode of attention that asks how definitions of subjects, objects, and field emerge in material relations that cannot be modeled in advance" (632).

Transductive ethnography provides a challenge to the process of preparing for fieldwork because it necessitates not knowing what will be found in the field but is nevertheless important in unsettling preconceived notions of what being in the field will entail. But how does one parse out what those preconceived notions are if they are produced from the banality of everyday life? I want to consider how this mode of transduction occurs through everyday practice in my own body and how the labor of detection that my body undertakes in realizing its surroundings exposes my relations to the environments I move through. This recognition can provide an opportunity to identify and trace tensions within those relations. To engage with these instances of transductive awareness, I am drawing from iterations of affect theory associated with Spinoza and Deleuze that consider how relationality between two, or more, entities transform experience through infinitesimally brief moments of time (Thrift 2004, 70). I am considering the actions of my body in this way to more deeply question how my attention

is directed and how the field emerges as a result. This contributes to discussions of subject formation, materiality, mobility, and relationality by calling attention to how moments of contact can direct attention both in and outside of the field. By placing focus on the labor that the body does, I hope to highlight these moments of contact as not being isolated products of the mind or body alone, but as a constantly shifting conversation our beings have with the environments they move through.

## Selves Through Contact

Before examining the labor of my body, I must first consider the body I am examining. What is 'my body'? Or more specifically, what aspects of my body am I aware of when conducting research? How do certain needs, like hunger, sleep, or mental health, impact how I consider my body in relation to fieldwork? I begin this inquiry by understanding my own body as a familiar stranger through noticing the dissonances I experience between my actions and intentions. Though I consider my body to be my own, there are times when I feel my body to be more than 'just me' through the actions I undertake in response to how I feel about myself or my surroundings. In her examination of how disease is conceived of and discussed in medical settings, Annemarie Mol (2002) puts forward the idea that no body or object is singular, and that attending to the reality of multiplicity and relationality is an action that intervenes in how objects and bodies are constructed. She argues that to limit a disease to existing as a singular event in a single body or to rely on medical knowledge alone misses a broader experience of the social, material, and biological networks that construct what it means to be a medical patient.

While this paper is not necessarily discussing a medical body, the idea that my physical body cannot be neatly categorized as a singularity of organic matter is pertinent to this discussion. Moreover, it inspires questions about the ways that I associate parts of my body as being fundamental to my identity. My body becomes me when I associate the organs, bones, etc. with some aspect of my 'self', and I make that association through action, through movement. In her discussion of biomedical tourism, Emily McDonald (2011) frames agency in subject formation through the idea of momentum, which suggests that "rather than enacting

motion, [I am] also caught up and enacted *by* motion" (484). This idea of momentum considers how moving across spaces acts to shape the subject within larger socio-political frameworks. I am transposing this idea to consider the movement that happens within the bio-scape of my own body in ways that ideologically shape or give voice to parts of my body that I may not otherwise consider.

At the moment I am writing this, I feel a slowly building pressure in my lower abdomen; I will have to go to the bathroom soon. In ways that are reminiscent of Andy Clark's "I am John's Brain" (1995), a short literary piece wherein the character of John's brain makes the case for the labor done that is hidden from John's consciousness, my own bladder is also moving and laboring in ways that are unbeknownst to me. It has an existence that is distinct from 'my' ideas, hopes, and desires, and there is no reasoning with it despite my best efforts. In spite of my intention to continue writing and despite the fact that I do not particularly want to go to the bathroom right now, I recognize this quickly filling bladder as being 'mine' and know that it is a consequence of the thirst I felt approximately an hour ago. I do not control these sensations of thirst or urinary relief, but nevertheless must place myself within these points of contact and must improvisationally respond and adjust to these movements and tensions produced seemingly adjacent to my own cognitive will. A bladder detached from a human body may be understood as being nonhuman in and of itself, but it becomes ideologically human when I recognize it as a factor that contributes to human life. Paying attention to the needs of the body and my relationship to it can not only disrupt my current action but can inspire a questioning of the conditions peripheral to my outlined field site that led to this 'disruption'. What were the circumstances I faced an hour ago that compelled me to drink so much? Why am I working against, or even upset by, the needs of my body?

To extend this further, this act of self-creation through contact does not occur solely within the confines of one's body but rather in interaction or communication with an externality that gives a body its bearings, providing a sense of orientation. In her book *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed (2006) more deeply asks what it means to have an orientation, or to understand where we are in relation to the things around us (15). This line of questioning helps us to immediately consider the idea of a self as a co-created concept, one that requires something or someone to be in relation to. It can also be one way to ask where the lines of a person can be drawn. I don't mean this in some kind of hypothetical or fantastical sense, inasmuch as the idea of a self is not already an imagining of one's relationship to the world.

I am not suggesting that I am anyone or anything other than what I truly consider to be my own self and vice versa; however, there are many factors that deeply shape and impact myself that do not exist or originate within my physical body. For example, the death of my cousin deeply impacted me, and I felt as though I had lost a part of my 'self' when he passed, though my visible physical being remained untouched. My ties with family or friends, my access to mobility, my ties to conceptions of race, gender, sex, class, or my interactions with works of art are just some examples of externalities that I consider to be central to 'who I am'. While these things are not necessarily physical parts of my body, I take steps to embody them in order to perform their ties to my identity; whether that be through my patterns of speech, through articles of clothing or jewelry I wear, or in how I moderate and regulate my actions or beliefs.

Understanding selves 'in relation to' challenges the idea of an individual as being an autonomous and wholistic entity echoes Marilyn Strathern's (1988) discussion of the "dividual" in her comparison of Melanesian and Western ideas of personhood. The notion of "dividual", or distributed individual, contends that a person is comprised of multiple separate factors and is therefore also able to be divisible. The clear self/other distinction being made here, and in other conversations of the plurality of personhood, has been criticized as being a dichotomous understanding of identity. In elucidation of this critique, Karl Smith (2012) asks for the consideration of selves as "porous subjects" that neither discount personal autonomy nor the external influences that shape personhood, suggesting that this "porosity" is fundamental to the constitution of the self.

Putting the idea of plural, fractal, or permeable selves in conversation with the previously addressed concept of McDonald's (2011) momentum suggests a more intimate relationship between 'subject' and 'surrounding' that physically and socially implicates subjects in their movements through or interactions with environments. Studies of mobility, which can be defined as "a complex assemblage of movement, social imaginaries and experience" (Salazar 2017, 6), consider the constantly variable nature of how a subject is constructed in relation to their surroundings and experiences, and vice versa. It is not just other people or ideas that help to shape a human experience, but the spaces that people are moving through and the objects they move with as well. For example, when I am driving to work (expanded upon below) I am putting myself directly in relation to the functionality of my car, to the road and weather conditions, and to other motorists

that will influence the ease of my journey. If I wake up to a particularly frigid morning and my car will not start, or if I run over a pothole and get a flat tire, my journey will be delayed or altered completely. While these relations are not central to what I will do at my intended destination, leaving space for these relations to matter allows for a more complex picture of what 'work' is and how it shapes me.

The study of spaces through the frame of mobility leans into previous rejections of the nature/culture binarism, wherein 'nature' is an inert entity to be manipulated and consumed and 'culture' signifies lively forms of human intervention (Castree 2001; Bennett 2010; Latour 2005). Just as I am able to enact motion upon my surroundings, they are also able react to me. Attuning to the ways in which environments and subjects impact each other is especially important for ethnography, as research takes place in a field site. In her book *Spatializing Culture*, Setha Low (2016) elucidates the unique contributions ethnography can make in conceptualizing and theorizing the constantly changing shapes of bodies in motion in relation to their surroundings. Significant for this essay, she positions explorations of emotional, affective, and embodied spaces as being essential to the experiencing and interpreting of spaces in ways that provoke new social and political possibilities and imaginings of space and place (146). The training that allows ethnographers to connect lived experiences, like the anxiety of being late for work, with larger theoretical frameworks, like the lack of care given to the self in neoliberal systems of production, makes room for reimaginings of what movement means for the human experience and how experiences of these interactions shape my perceptions and actions.

The ways that moving through a space is felt and embodied impacts how that space is conceived and how attuning to those experiences influences conceptions of the self in relation. In this way, one could argue that a 'self' is a constantly shifting entity that slightly changes with every new moment of contact. In the case of this essay for example, I feel that the ideas I am thinking about are very much a product of myself. I have had these thoughts and I have written them down. However, I have had these thoughts or have modified these thoughts after reading the thoughts that other people have written, or after talking to my colleagues and friends, or after having been cut off by another car while driving. I can also recognize that my current momentary identity extends beyond the confines of my relationship with this text (which has now become external to my own body). Are these thoughts me? Are these still me once they have left my body to statically exist on a page? Does their stasis represent a death? Does a 'self' have to be alive? I can feel myself reordering and reimagining these flickerings of thought and experience in a way that makes sense to me. I do not exist in a vacuum, but I do exist. My existence is touched by the world, and I also reach

out to touch back. By following the tensions that are corporeally presented to me, the buzz of caffeine I feel or the slight cramp in my foot from the position I am sitting in, I can question how this moment is existing around me and how I am moving in and with this space. Paying attention to the labors of the body in relation to the environments I move through provides me with a framework to isolate moments where I am able to understand how I am finding and responding to my own humanity in the environments I find myself in and how this directs and attunes my focus in particular ways.

This level and quality of attention is a monumental task, maybe an impossible one. After all, ethnographers are also human and there is only so much that a person can be aware of in every moment of every day. Rather than demand a kind of omnipresent hyper-attention, this paper asks only that a genuine striving for this level of attention be applied in considering the potentially overlooked marks of everyday experience left upon our bodies and in our research foci. It asks for a deeper consideration of how those points of contact may be shaping conceptions of value in research, and thereby shaping research itself. And it asks for an acceptance of the possibility of failure that will require a shift in research scope or approach. Along with the recognition of our co-constructed beings must also come the recognition that we too have an active role in the constructions of others, especially in fieldwork; and because of this, we have a responsibility to attend to how we come to value the importance of research questions and objectives.

We have a responsibility for how we are shaping ourselves and 'others' through our work. This "response-ability", as described by Karen Barad (2012) in their discussion of touching as understood through quantum field theory, questions what exactly constitutes the other and what constitutes the self on the level of particle matter. They position touching as an infinite alterity wherein touching the Other is touching all Others, including the 'self', and touching the 'self' entails touching the strangers within. … Touching is a matter of response. Each of 'us' is constituted in response-ability. Each of 'us' is constituted as responsible for the other, as the other (214–215).

By paying attention to moments of contact, I extend the associations that make my body-parts human to the surrounding environments I find myself in, making those environments also human-adjacent by my associations with them, and

possibly making myself less so through their association with me. In doing this, I hope to deepen understandings of how some interactions are privileged over others and how attention is produced in the field or how attention produces the field.

## Driving as Relation

As previously stated, affect theory is broadly concerned with the transformations that occur in moments of contact. This is very much akin to the activity of driving itself. Drivers are required to enter a state of continual call and response with conditions that are constantly changing, and failure to adjust can result in frustrating or even deadly outcomes. In his study of traffic jams, physicist and civil engineer Boris Kerner (1999) discusses synchronized traffic flows, which occur when several cars across many lanes on a road are moving at generally the same speed. He notes that when there are changes to an existing traffic flow that has many vehicles, say a car abruptly changes its speed or merges into the existing traffic, there will be a slowdown in the overall traffic. Having been confronted with many a traffic slowdown myself, it is tempting to succumb to impatience and closely follow the car in front of you, either because you want it to speed up or to move out of your lane. However, doing this causes a fluctuation in the traffic flow that ultimately causes you and the cars behind you to apply the brakes, slowing the overall traffic flow. Counterintuitively, it is instead more effective to make allowances for the movements of a vehicle that disrupts a preexisting flow, by slowing down for example, allowing it to adjust to the collective speed so that the larger body of cars can maintain their forward momentum. How we react in moments of contact will have implications on the larger circumstances that we find ourselves in ways that will both effect ourselves and those around us. Approaching potentially unexpected interactions with an attitude of patience and cooperation can see benefits that extend beyond the initial bodies making contact.

Meera Atkinson (2018) has described affect as a "connective tissue between the human and nonhuman" (iii), and I will be exploring this space alongside the non-human body of my own car as well as other road fixtures that draw my attention–or the phonetically similar, *a-tension*, which I understand as a strongly concentrated and bodily felt moment of physical, mental, spiritual, and/ or emotional attunement that can disrupt moments of unawareness- through interaction. I understand *a-tension* as a labor of focus by recounting and theorizing

a series of moments on my drive to work. While going to work is peripheral to my research, it enables my research by providing me with a paycheck and can serve as a space where I am passively accepting conditions presented to me rather than having a specific research question be front of mind. In her article, "quiet theater: The Radical Politics of Silence", Magdalena Kazubowski-Houston (2018) explores the idea of "radical silence" as a way of generating knowledge in her dramatic storytelling sessions with Romani women in Poland. The space left in between different translations of the same story, or in the silences I experience when I consider how I come into relation with my surroundings, provides an opportunity for unsettling previously fixed distinctions of self and environment. Affective moments of felt understanding are infinitesimally brief, and yet are always already ongoing as a mode of engaging with one's experience of the world.

The opaque and plural nature of affect as a field of study makes it difficult, if not inherently impossible to identify as a solidly fixed object of discussion, and because of that I will use a narrative approach of elucidation in this essay going forward. As I have discussed elsewhere (Conte 2022), personal storytelling can serve as a vehicle for building community; and, this paper extends what defines community to include the human/nonhuman relations that also outline spaces and experience as worthy of notice. I will use personal storytelling to explicate the disruptions of my own expectations and discomforts in an effort to expose how my mind and body come into relation with my surrounding environments. Following recent explorations in literary anthropology that seek to both challenge how ethnography is presented and interrogate what writing and other modes of transmission can do in complicating and enriching understandings of the field (Culhane & Elliot 2017; Pandian & McLean 2017), I will intersperse my personal narrative with theoretical concepts I am using to understand my experience. I will abruptly switch between these literary and narrative explanations of my drive and the spaces between these transitions will require brief moments wherein you, my respected reader, will have to do the labor of switching between modes of transmission.

My hands grip the pliable rubber of the steering wheel as I sit at a red light. The traffic light is at the top of a hill, and today not only did I catch the red, but the several cars in front of me mean that my car is resting on an incline as I wait for the light to turn green. "That means that I'm sitting at like, what, a 40-degree angle?" I lean my head back against the head rest, nodding in time with the mu-

sic blasting from my car speakers, the vibratory hum of the idling of the engine shivering up my body. "This light is taking so long. I have about 20 minutes before class begins and I… Ah!" My foot is starting to cramp. I try wiggling my toes to release some of the tension. I'm jamming the brake pedal down so that I don't start rolling backward into the car behind me. "I like driving standard, but this is always the downfall. Hills. And I guess traffic. Haha, hills? Downfall? I crack myself up." The brake lights from the cars in front of me start flashing. "Finally, the green." Still pressing the brake pedal, I quickly shove the clutch pedal down hard with my other foot and throw the car into first gear. The cars ahead of me are starting to creep forward one by one. I release my death stomp on the brake and time my release of the clutch as I gingerly tap my right foot on the gas pedal. "Stalling now would not be ideal, the guy behind me is going to honk if I do. Geez, this hill is steep. I know it's early but come on, wake up!!" I release the clutch completely and, at the same time, slowly push down on the gas pedal, creaking forward in pace with the other cars.

The recognition of this event is focused neither purely on phenomenology, nor on discourse, but is rather a simultaneous experiencing of two (Reason & Lindelof 2016). In understanding ethnography through affect as a both sentient and embodied experience, I exercise various parts of myself to be in this space; my ability to physically operate my vehicle and navigate road conditions, my awareness and reactions to the presence of other drivers, my anxiety at the thought of being late or incurring the wrath of others, my ever persistent and eye-rollingly wry sense of humor. Through a continual call and response of slightly altering circumstances, I place my 'self' within a recognizable structure of identity or identities, in this case, one of which is being a capable driver on the road.

My foot strains against the gas pedal and I feel the weight of the car under me as I drive up and over the crest of the hill, and onward to the stretch of road leading to the highway. The engine revs, signaling me to quickly shift from first gear to second, from second to third. In my rear-view mirror, I see that the car behind me seems to be lagging. "Looks like he wasn't paying attention. I'm glad I'm not behind him, I'd probably get upset." I hear the whistle of the wind through the crack of my open window and the cold of it stings my face. It's December. "I thought there would be more snow on the ground, but there isn't really much. At least the roads are dry I guess, but it might not be a white Christmas. Christmas. I should really think about what I'm… Ugh, what's this guy doing?" I audibly exhale as the car in front of me begins to slow down, brake lights flashing a red warning. I feel frustration spike at the thought of a momentary delay. Looking ahead, I see a driveway on the right side of the road leading to a small industrial building. I try to look down the opposite lane to see if there is oncoming traffic.

"Maybe I can pass this guy… no, there's another car coming." The right turn signal light of the car in front of me begins blinking and I ease up on the gas, trying to leave enough space between us so that I don't actually have to push the brakes. The car turns into the driveway and I once again press down on the gas, a little harder than I meant to, and head toward the highway on-ramp.

Though my attention wanders to other aspects of my life or to different things I notice that are not related directly to driving, I am consistently drawn back to my role as a driver through moments of intensity, to potentialities of disruption in what I expect will come next (Massumi 2002, 26). I privilege these moments over the other mental, emotional, or physical intensities I experience because, despite my being a daughter/academic/gamer etc., in this moment, I have decided that being a driver is a more important role to attend to. These other nodes of identity do not disappear when I privilege one, and they may even be motivating my decision to privilege my current role. For example, I must go to work to afford gifts for my family, however those motivations are not explicit to me as I drive to work.

In her book, *Cruel Optimism,* Lauren Berlant (2011) describes the present as that which "makes itself present to us before it becomes anything else" (4). She goes on to say that what this present may become is a relational "cluster of promises" that sustain normative ideas of day-to-day life; however, these models of relationality may prove to be individually harmful or "cruel". Though I may want to think about what to get my family for Christmas, I cannot devote time to it if that *a-tension* disrupts my driving. My motivation for driving is to get to a place on time, another promise I have made, but this promise must also take a 'back seat' as I drive because I must work to be in relation to other cars on the road, any animals I might see on the sides of the road, and to the road itself. Other promises do not cease existing for me in this moment, but I do not give them equal attention and therefore am not attuning to whether or how they are motivating my current action or intention. By the fact of my driving a car alongside others, I am entering a social condition wherein I promise to drive 'well' and must therefore work to meet that standard of 'good' driving. My striving to meet this standard slightly silences other priorities I have and my emotional attunement to this activity, if guided by impatience, can enable me to disregard those I come into relation with who are not directly related to this activity.

My experiences of the present become centered around moments of intensity related to driving and the inconvenience caused by 'Other' people who aren't driving in the way that I expect them to or would like them to. My immediate response to the recognition of these events is to also do the work of trying to communicate this feeling by embodying this sense of frustration, even though I am alone in the car and the driver ahead of me cannot see my face or hear my frustrated exhalations. I perform my frustrations to an audience of one: me. Once aligned with my chosen priority, I unintentionally manage the display of my emotion to communicate a certain state of being that supports a predetermined objective that I have outlined for myself. In his discussion of drivers in L.A. getting pissed-off when other cars cut them off, Jack Katz (1999) discusses how these moments of frustration expose emotional meaning in everyday life. Examining an emotional response in a moment of frustration can inspire a person to orient themselves morally within the situation they're reacting to (48). When I am not in a rush, I do not provide similar demonstrations of frustration, even in cases where other drivers might be completely disregarding rules of the road. In this instance however, my performance reinforces a set of values I hold in that moment to myself. My frustration also results in my disregarding the circumstances of the driver who caused me a momentary delay. The tensions that present themselves to me during my drive, such as my reaction to a person turning off the road, are informed by larger circumstances of existence. However, I may not be consciously acknowledging those larger circumstances because of the stakes presented by the activity I am currently engaged in. Through closer examination, recognition of my reactions to disruptions I face can lead to a questioning of how or why I am responding that way. In this case, I can examine whether I am attempting to flatten or disregard the complex experience of a person who is not directly related to my primary goal and if that response is merited or aligned with my larger goals or intentions, rather than being confined to an activity that has displaced or monopolized my focus.

In discussing the temporalities of commuting, David Bissell (2014) draws on Bergson's notion of the virtual to critique a chronological accounting of time. Our capitalist models of production are structured around clock-based models of duration; however, the idea of the virtual, a pluri-bodied potentiality, suggests a folding or weaving of past and present that belies linear progression and can resist a capitalist chronology. Even though I take this road every day, every drive is different because "…each experience in time alters the constitution of bodies and milieus" (1950). Each time is constituted of different unknown potentialities, my own state of being included in those unknowns. In terms of ethnographic fieldwork, it is through doing the work of recognizing these re-constitutions or disruptions, leaving room for silences, and tracing the reactions and *a-tensions* that may lead to deeper understandings of a situation. The car turning into the driveway is following the rules

of the road. However, because that driveway does not fit into a predetermined idea of what *my* day entails and in fact causes me a five second delay in 'beginning' my day or keeping the promise of arriving at my destination in the time I am expected to, this moment of relational contact causes me frustration. Noticing this hiccup in what I expected might lead me to ask questions that expand the understanding I have of the space within this moment. Why did this seemingly inconsequential interaction frustrate me? If I am worried about being on time, why didn't I leave earlier? Well, I woke up late. Am I not considering my health enough? Am I overworking myself? Will doing that be beneficial in the long term? How? In the moment of this interaction, this car does not fit into the frame of what I have already chosen to care about in a way that will move my narrative forward. I am also not considering the toll that my selected preoccupations are taking on other aspects of my life, including the ways in which my 'self' is being depleted by the "cruel" attunements that I am attending to. By recognizing the tensions in my own reaction to this event, I am given an opportunity to question the value and logic of that narrative in a way I would not if I ignored my momentary frustration.

This decision of what matters to me fits into a larger discussion around a politics of care, which has been defined as "an affectively charged and selective mode of attention that directs action, affection, or concern at something, and in effect, it draws attention away from other things" (Martin et al. 2015, 11). In this moment I have chosen to direct care toward my career. I am performing frustration at the thought of being late to reinforce the importance of that objective to myself, but one of the factors influencing my tardiness is a lack of care directed toward my own health and wellbeing. Examining my frustrated response is an opportunity to question where I am placing value and enacting care and why. The work I do in resisting the desire to let these interactions pass uncritically by changes how I am considering my surroundings and how I am existing in relation. It provides an opportunity to notice a disconnect between a theoretical outcome and the lived reality in a way that can inspire the creation of a new research objective, or alternatively, to reconsider preexisting objectives that are not centered around my drive to and from the site of interest. The resulting form of labor shifts my attention, or *a-tension*, (in this case, my diverted focus caused by the literal tension in my body as I drive my car and worry about being late) from striving to meet an expected standard of what it means to drive well to also considering what these tensions I am experiencing might mean beyond the act of just driving.

## CAPACIOUS

In giving space for *a-tension* to the body and the spaces it moves through, I am also providing myself with an opportunity to question the validity and value of the activities I'm engaged in. As I give awareness and energy to the singular factors I identify while driving, I am participating in a larger narrative of what it means to drive and am actively working to meet the conditions surrounding the narrative of this activity. However, this activity is not removed from time and space and I am doing this in conjunction with other commitments and intentions I am striving to achieve. By attuning to tensions or intensities that are present to me, I enact an affective labor of value and care that helps to locate and question my present identity and sensibilities of value. Doing the work of noticing what, why, and how I am privileging certain moments of intensity over a multitude of simultaneous others does the work of allowing me to better identify where and how I am in relation to the larger worlds I move through and what matters to me, both in 'important' spaces like a fieldsite and in more mundane spaces such as this moment of driving.

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