Document generated on 04/23/2024 9:53 p.m.

Studies in Canadian Literature
Études en littérature canadienne

"The Lines We Drive On"
Automobility in the Road Narratives of Donald Shebib and Alistair MacLeod

Christopher Armstrong

Volume 43, Number 2, 2018

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1062914ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1062914ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

University of New Brunswick, Dept. of English

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)
1718-7850 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Armstrong, C. (2018). "The Lines We Drive On": Automobility in the Road Narratives of Donald Shebib and Alistair MacLeod. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, *43*(2). https://doi.org/10.7202/1062914ar

All Rights Reserved © Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne, 2018

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

https://www.erudit.org/en/

"The Lines We Drive On"[1]: Automobility in the Road Narratives of Donald Shebib and Alistair MacLeod

Christopher J. Armstrong

Goin' Down the Road, Donald Shebib's landmark feature film about two economic migrants from Cape Breton, like many road movies, is a staging of "our desire for modernity, our desire to be perceived as moving . . . against or beyond tradition" (Orgeron 2). Offering a vision of Canadian urban modernity, the film has been celebrated by critics and audiences not merely for its compelling direct cinema technique, for its skillful handling of the American buddy road movie, but also, and importantly, for promising Canada a cinema of its own. Yet, as I shall argue, this road film is a largely ambivalent rendering of what André Gorz calls "the social ideology of the motorcar" (69). The film offers a vision of personal freedom and mobility, social as well as physical, in which two "hard-luck" Maritimers are lured by media images of abundance — an urban abundance that the film cannot help celebrating even as the mobile eye of the camera sympathetically renders these lively representatives of old Canada.

Like Shebib's film, Alistair MacLeod's short stories chronicle economic migration and, more generally, mobility, especially the mobility enabled by the car. Yet his stories engage automobility as a whole order of modern life: that is, as scholars and environmental activists define it, the automobile, the modern (consuming) subjects that it constitutes, and the vast array of infrastructure and services that enables it. MacLeod's stories explore how automobility reshapes work and personal relations, imposing a coercive flexibility on users; how it transforms natural environments and perceptions of people; how it channels state policies and resources; and how the vast continental highway system, part of a globalized order, comes with personal, social, economic, and environmental costs beyond the promise of freedom and the good life. Herb Wyile's extensive work on nostalgic folk renderings of Atlantic Canada, both inside and outside the region, as well as his observa-

tion that "mobility" rather than "stability" "has long been a central socioeconomic fact of life" ("Globalization" 1), inform this reading of automobility as integral to a regionalist response to global modernity.

This essay explores automobility in some of MacLeod's stories, published through the 1970s and early 1980s, that coincide with a growing disenchantment with the automobile and its culture. Turning to "The Vastness of the Dark" (1971)[2] with Shebib's film in mind, I want to explore the ways in which the story is cinematic or how it engages both cinema and automobility as twin forces of modernity. Indeed, I am tempted to read this story as a road movie insofar as it equates automobility with filmic spectatorship: MacLeod's story thematizes what Stanley Aronowitz sees as cinema's power to compress "distances, historical epochs, personal relationships," to arrange "fragments . . . according to conventional symbolisms, simulat[ing] the continuous while effectively destroying it" (113). Likewise, the story exposes the ways in which, as Timothy Corrigan suggests, the male gaze is a constitutive element of the narrative meanings that both film and automobility make possible (ch. 5).

Noting the rarity of its discussion in the scholarship on globalization, John Urry defines automobility as a comprehensive global system, "the self-organizing autopoietic, non-linear system that spreads world-wide, and includes cars, car-drivers, roads, petroleum supplies, and many novel objects, technologies and signs" ("Automobility" 27). The road and the automobile comprise but one facet of Urry's modern "mobility systems," complex human-technological interactions — road, rail, air routes — that facilitate the flows of people and link individuals, groups, communities, and nations in new regimes of time and space. Within this complex array, the automobile system, Urry says, has shaped modernity in six fundamental ways: (1) as "the quintessential *manufactured object*" providing social science with the major interpretive categories of Fordism and post-Fordism; (2) as a key modern object of individual consumption; (3) as an extensive system of infrastructure, technological industries, and services; (4) as the dominant global form of personal mobility; (5) as a pervasive cultural construct associated with the good life; and (6) as the "single most important cause of *environmental resource-use*" ("Automobility" 25-26). Political economist Matthew Paterson considers the automobile central to the reproduction of capitalism and definitive of the modern subject as mobile: "[T]o *be*

modern is to *be* mobile," he says, insisting that "automobility's politics [focuses on] the production of particular types of subjects" (121).

Urry, Paterson, and others have highlighted the role of the automobile in restructuring not only ways of life but also subjectivity and social identity. Where cultural historian Cotten Seiler sees automobility as creating a peculiarly American habitus (Introduction), Urry sees a gendered-nationalist nexus in the discourse of car culture, equating the good life and modern mobile citizenship: "[T]he whole notion of American society, its suburbs, urban strips, and mobile motel culture, is indissolubly intertwined with a car-based masculinist modernity" (*Mobilities* 117). Indeed, with its origin in North America, the road narrative not only has fed a reading of American exceptionalism that regards the genre as reaching "back over hundreds of years of storytelling about a culture on the move" (Primeau 18) but also betrays a "cycling from rebellion to exploitation, from innovation to commodification" (Mills 21), from critique to conformity (Laderman 4-6). Ronald Primeau and Katie Mills see the road narrative as an emblem of the modern quest for personal identity, national definition, or protest against the social order, allowing us to see ourselves "as agents of our own destinies" and accommodating new subcultural identities (Mills 21). To be sure, it is within the imaginary spaces of literature, film, television, drama, and advertising — Urry's cultural dimension of global automotive dominance — that notions tying freedom to mobility are inculcated in order to naturalize the car as the dominant means of transportation, "an icon of freedom of movement and . . . a great equalizer among citizens," often with explicit links between auto adoption and democratization (Freund and Martin 82). This latter thesis, among other things, is posed and tested in Shebib's acclaimed road movie.

Marshall McLuhan famously called film a "hot" medium, one that, filling us up with "data," demands little participation (McLuhan 24). The testimony of Toronto moviegoers at the premiere of Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road* belies McLuhan's claim, suggesting the civic and nationalist investments of pride in the film. Critic Marshall Delaney (a.k.a. Robert Fulford) recalls the "joy" of the film's screening at a theatre on Yonge Street just "a few blocks from some of its settings": "The audience applauded with grateful surprise, not only because the characters were part of the life around us but because Shebib handled them with honesty and understanding and a measure of originality" (Delaney 14).

Scriptwriter Bill Fruet, also at the screening, recalls a journalist who was just "beyond himself" with delight, "laughing and . . . clapping, he just got so *involved* in this film" (qtd. in Pevere ch. 4). "[F]or the first time," writes critic Piers Handling, there "was a reflection of something that lay just around the corner — the Yonge Street strip at night, Sam the Record Man open until all hours, Toronto Island, and those gaudy and rudimentary taverns where they were all drinking Canadian beer. . . . [There was] something immediately identifiable, a type of visual shorthand[,] and we all filled in the gaps because we all knew it so well" (qtd. in Pevere ch. 4). Indeed, as Geoff Pevere notes, the image of a modern, youthful Toronto and its "unmistakable *Canadianness*" were essential to the film's appeal — equal in import to its socioeconomic message (Pevere ch. 4). As George Melnyk puts it, "the traditionally staid city of Toronto was portrayed cinematically as a metropolis. . . . a youthful and energizing image that had once been reserved for . . . New York, Los Angeles, London, and Paris" (Introduction).

A compelling image of an urban Canadian modernity — one in which "we" could (presumably) recognize ourselves — and the promise of a national cinema rest on the backs, it would seem, of two characters with little chance of participating in or even much appreciating any of it. But Joey and Pete from Cape Breton are fairly pure enthusiasts for modernity, in particular modernity as automobility. Both have drunk as deeply as other North Americans of the promise of the "good life" centred on the automobile: namely, as historian Dimitry Anastakis tells us, "Detroit's new cars [standing for] the outward signs of Canadian prosperity" and the suburban lifestyle (23). Newly arrived in Toronto, Pete dreams of having a secretary, his name on the door of his own office, and a company car (*Goin'* 00:9:44-57), and Joey fixates on an ad for a "1968 Plymouth, bucket seats . . . [$]1699" (00:09:34-35). Pete wants to go into advertising, for he has watched many commercials back home, as he tells his interviewer in the agency office: "You know, like some of those car commercials. Hey, when the GTO comes over the hill and shoots across the desert. Oh, I like that" (00:11:03-17). Classic film themes are fused to the car as commodity: the heroic cavalry coming over the hill; biblical exodus, the desert before arrival at the promised land as in the films of Ford, Capra, and Sturges (Schaber 39). Or is it merely an image of the pure abstraction of space and speed, Baudrillard's "desertification" of the social (Baudrillard 5)?

Taking us on the road to Toronto, Shebib's camera work, his cinematic scoring and editing, seduce us with the pleasures of driving, Pete and Joey's camaraderie, their pure innocence in automotive escape, in the joy of movement. The abandoned Cape Breton homestead, the aged, frail mother figure, and the auto graveyard of the film's opening montage are left behind. Non-diegetic, up-tempo, electric folk music plays as the two tick off the miles in a pure joy that is the stuff of advertising. Living the dream on the road, as long as one keeps moving: "If far enough I go," Bruce Cockburn's folk-song take on a modernity of constant motion. Then, curiously, Pete aims an emptied beer bottle into the landscape with care, seeming to follow its trajectory with his gaze (00:03:33-35). In a 1959 essay (later in a 1961 book of essays), social critic John A. Kouwenhoven meditated on the "beer can by the highway" as an emblem of American civilization, "the abundance it enjoys, and the waste it permits" (217), citing the growing mood of some Americans on the wastefulness of democracy: namely, "its emphasis on mobility and its denial of status" (222). Our democracy, he writes, is extremely wasteful in educating all or in allowing all to pursue their self-determined goals. That sentiment was echoed by a number of commentators on Maritimers and Newfoundlanders in Toronto in the 1960s, as historian Greg Marquis has shown. There are no worries that Pete and Joey will meet their self-determined goals, however. They will end up on an assembly line, not quite Chaplinesque with repetitive tremors but full of nervous energy after work, with pent-up sexuality on and off the job, both the mobile camera and the automobile facilitating their male gaze. Too bad "Joey's old heap" (00:37:20-26) of a car is inadequate to express male prowess to a modern urban woman such as Nicole. Ironically, it is in a bottling plant that they find themselves, or where they find their place in the modern urban order, later setting up pins in a bowling alley, both repetitive and futile labours that prompt Pete, in another gesture of futility, to total up the nothingness of their collective labours (00:31:00-43).

Arriving in the big city, the buddies make their first stop in a Toronto suburb — the very form of the modern landscape, sprawl, made possible by the automobile. Their "dreadful car," as the immaculate suburban housewife calls it (00:05:57), marks their identities as outsiders. Of course, Pete and Joey make their sudden, unannounced visit to these successful suburban relatives because they can, because the

car — because automobility — enables them to take off at a whim, to go get those jobs, or to "look up" relatives who once "offered" accommodations. And the car enables their escape west as they end up petty criminals, fleeing the scene of their heist at a supermarket — the preeminent symbol of North American abundance. They assault a grocery boy with a tire iron, but their filmic destiny is not to become murderous fugitive celebrities, anti-capitalist renegades, as depicted in Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*. No, automobility signifies the promise of the good life, yet it sets in motion Pete and Joey's farcical failure, two "losers" unable to participate in the modern order as fully autonomous male subjects. Although acknowledging careful readings of class and gender, and region and culture, by Christine Ramsay and Christopher E. Gittings, and dissenting from the nationalist preoccupation with victimization (Atwood), I suggest that the plight of these "hard-luck" Maritimers is not the focal point of a founding Canadian cinema; rather, it is a new and compelling urban Canadian modernity, that of southern Ontario and Toronto, its abundance and its national economic dominance underwritten by an American capital that does not, cannot, appear. This shift in sentiment inspired is inspired in no small way by the automobile and the automobile industry.

Recent scholarship on MacLeod, including Herb Wyile's work on neoliberalism and Atlantic Canadian literature (*Anne*) and his discussions of mobility in the region's fiction ("Globalization"), has prompted us to see MacLeod's characters negotiating both a mythic, archetypal space of story and song and, as Wyile writes, a "conspicuously historicized and contemporary" global order (*Anne* 59). Jody Mason sees in MacLeod's work "a history of labour migration embedded in the slow birth of neoliberalism" (152). Indeed, for much of Atlantic Canada, "mobility rather than stability," Wyile writes, "has long been a central socioeconomic fact of life," especially so in this era of "increasingly mobile, globalized time." Mobility is "compelled by necessity . . . coming at a cost" ("Globalization" 1). The automobile, a key motif in many of MacLeod's stories, is rarely considered under the rubric of globalization. Yet it is the prime force in "the reproduction of capitalism as a system" (Paterson 92) and "a global model for economic development" (Freund and Martin 10), organizing production, stimulating economic growth (Paterson 92), and consuming vast resources, all the while signifying social and economic advance because of the car's "flexibility and

associations with personal freedom" (Paterson 95). A pre-eminent object of consumption, the private automobile is also seen in a growing body of commentary as imposing "compulsory consumption" on its users (Soron). Our "love affair" with the automobile can be explained partially by the magical persuasions of advertising and paeans — artistic or otherwise — to the freedom that it enables and partially by the "locked in" nature of postwar economic and infrastructural arrangements.

The automotive industry arrived in MacLeod's adopted home of Windsor, Ontario, with the establishment of the Ford Motor Company of Canada in 1904, giving the American branch plant access to the lucrative imperial market. General Motors and Chrysler arrived in the early 1920s — all three, with government support and promotion, promising to change an older way of life: namely, as Anastakis tells us, the breaking of Canada's "dependence on the seasonal extraction of staple goods" (3). The auto industry altered national economic priorities, as Donald J. Savoie notes, becoming perennially a national interest, whereas the fishery became a regional interest (290). Meanwhile, the national highway system imposed unwanted financial burdens on the treasuries of the Maritime provinces, as Daniel Francis points out in his history of the Trans-Canada Highway (74). MacLeod's stories published in North American magazines through the 1970s and early 1980s coincided with what historian James Flink and political economist Matthew Paterson call a growing "disenchantment" with the automobile. The disenchantment began with the largely industry-focused critiques appearing in John Keats's wry satire *The Insolent Chariots* (1958) and Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed* (1965, 1972), turning in the 1970s and early 1980s to a wide-ranging "total critique" of the automobile way of life. Critics questioned the human and environmental costs, the restructuring of urban and rural space by road building and commercial services, and the car's promotion of a culture of "atomistic individualism," Fordist production, and indeed the entire geopolitics of "oil imperialism" (Flink, *Automobile Age*; Flink, *Car Culture*; Paterson). Automobility structures the lives of MacLeod's characters — intensely so. Journeys by road and highway are key plot elements in many of his stories. Cars signify wealth, modernity, and the city; they are linked to a frenetic North American mobility, to intrusive tourists, and to other forms of commerce. Elsewhere, his narrators provide quasi-ethnographic accounts of local road travel, devoting descriptive and expository space

to roads and infrastructure: footpaths, bridges, dirt roads, paved roads, main roads, public and private roads — storied and sometimes pastoral contrasts to the "maple-leafed Trans-Canada Highway" and the vast continental highway system (MacLeod, "Road" 127).

Stories such as "Winter Dog" (1981) and "The Closing Down of Summer" (1976) illustrate Urry's claim that automobility coerces modern subjects into an "intense flexibility" and "constrain[s] car 'users' to live their lives in spatially stretched and time-compressed ways" (*Mobilities* 120). The frame narrative of "Winter Dog" centres on the anxieties about a family illness exacerbated not only by distance but also by automobility: namely, the imperative of making the long journey home to the east coast by car. The mature narrator recalls a childhood memory of a beloved canine amid this family crisis, the story triggered by the sudden appearance of a "golden dog" that sports with the children in the early morning snow. The narrator's compulsion to tell/record the "triggered" memory represents, it seems, a kind of counternarrative to the "unbidden dreams" that haunt the couple troubled by "illness and uncertainty in those we love far away on Canada's east coast" ("Winter Dog" 33). Like the abstract geographical reference to "Canada's east coast," the frame narrative, involving grown, settled, and far-flung kin, is narrated in abstract terms — no names of family members or relatives, no name of the ill father — as if the narrator/writer is addressing an auditor/audience unfamiliar with the specific circumstances of the family but nonetheless understanding this shared condition of modern life. As the story unfolds in the frame, narrated in the present tense, the obligation to return home, and the logistics of doing so, trouble the siblings, spread as they are across the country from Newfoundland to Vancouver. The narrator's family has "already considered and rejected driving the fifteen hundred miles. Too far, too uncertain, too expensive, fickle weather" (33). Yet, as events evolve, so does further anxiety. The family debates making the car trip, narrated through a series of clipped phone conversations, hashing out a host of logistical problems for getting home in time, among them having "*to drive straight through*" (34). At precisely this point, as events "seem to remain the same," the dog appears, and the narrator's story unrolls in the past tense, telling of an incident in his youth — interestingly, his first experience of a more primitive form of mobility (the dog attached to a sleigh) — and a life-threatening fall through the ice. At the end of the memory, the

narrator reflects on how the dog's rescue allowed him "to come this far in time" (49), and returning to his current anxieties he concludes that, "Should we be forced to drive tonight, it will be a long, tough journey. . . . Should we be drawn by death, we might well meet our own" (49).

"The Closing Down of Summer" illustrates in greater depth and range Urry's "intense flexibility" as "spatially stretched and time-compressed" routines. The story focuses on a group of expert "shaft and development miners" who await their journey by car from Cape Breton to Toronto and by air to an overseas mining site ("Closing" 8). Narrating in the present tense, the unnamed narrator reflects on sex and love, on marriage and family, and on work. Yet, while giving an account of a life of work that has exacted a physical and personal toll, that has garnered little understanding from his wife and family (or much celebration in the national media), he is also constantly aware of the looming pressures of time, the necessity of making decisions, the calculations of travel time, and the always hectic and often transgressive movement of the men: "[W]e were due in South Africa on the seventh of July," the "telegrams from Renco Development in Toronto . . . unanswered" (8). Rather, the men on the beach obey the rhythm of the seasons, delaying their departure until the August gale heralds the "traditional," "unofficial end of summer" (8). Nonetheless, the narrator looks ahead to the moment of departure from the beach, noting that the climb to the cliff where their cars await will take twenty minutes (8). They will "drive them hard and fast and be in Toronto tomorrow afternoon," "hurtl[ing] in a dark night convoy across the landscapes and the borders of four waiting provinces" (30). The risk of being stopped by the police, indeed the locations where violations have occurred, are calculated into the journey, the narrator telling us that the police let them off or allow them to pay fines on the spot and that the men take care not to be discovered transporting illegal alcohol across provincial borders (11).

As in "Winter Dog," the characters in "The Closing Down of Summer" are unindividualized — an anonymous I-narration and an account of a life that, though personal in reference, remains generic, mostly plural: the men, their wives, and their children (22-23); "our relatives back in the hills"; and their "now-dead grandmothers" (10). This use of generic plural signifiers suggests a group of nameless subjects of modernity whose lives are transformed through the systems of automobility and regimes of work and consumption. Numerous spaces

of lodging and transit (roads, airports, mines, hospital wards) are also rendered generic and plural; however, the proper names for nodes in a global network, and indeed the brand names of circulating objects of consumption, are enumerated extensively: South Africa, Russia, Spain, and Portugal; Quebec and Ontario; Elliot Lake and Bancroft and Uranium City; the Renco Development Corporation; "the metropolitan banks of New York or Toronto or London" (18); the Junior Chambers of Commerce (25); Mount Thom, the Wentworth Valley, "the narrow road to Fredericton," "the fast straight road that leads from Rivière du Loup to Lévis," and the 401 (10-11); Cadillacs, Lincolns, Oldsmobiles (10); Javex containers, Teem, Sprite, and Seven-Up (11). Proper personal names, when they *are* given, refer only to collectivities, family parcels of land ("Cameron's Point" 8, 28), and groups of miners (MacKinnon), these modern clans organized around work, rivalry, and sometimes violence (26) — not even the narrator's wife or children (22) or dead brother are named (15).

For the miners, now aged and battered by work, the automobile is an emblem not only of flexibility but also of masculine power and, incongruously perhaps, with its speed and mobility, of an ancient heroic identity. The cars, like the physically imposing men, are "big" and battered: "Cadillacs with banged-in fenders and Lincolns and Oldsmobiles" (10). As the cars depart from the secluded beach, navigating "vague paths" and "sheep trails," the "resilient young spruce trees scrape against the mufflers and oilpans of our cars and scratch the doors," lodging pieces in the grilles and headlights, pieces that will serve "as mementos or talismans or symbols of identity" on the men's journey abroad, much like the badges of their Scottish ancestors on "the battlefields of the world" (11). Inside "this speeding car," the "anonymous lyric" from the fifteenth century (31), an ancient poetic figuring of mobility, comes to the narrator. Like the sprigs of spruce, this literary fragment can be read as an emblem of the fragmented, uprooted, desynchronized time experienced by the miners. According to Urry, the automobile fits within Anthony Giddens's account of the "increased significance of personalised, subjective temporalities and the reflexive monitoring of the less structured self" that constitutes the experience of modernity (*Mobilities* 122). And, though this narration is notable for the absence of personal names, the road journey is a central modern form in which the quest for personal identity and meaning is undertaken (Primeau 69).

The narrator wishes to communicate his life and work to his family, to explain "the *route* to my inevitable death" (22; emphasis added), and in an aesthetic turn he longs to articulate "the beauty of motion on the edge of violence" (24).

The state's promotion of tourism is also broached in "The Closing Down of Summer." Contrasting a summer of intense heat and its consequences for fish, forest, and water resources, the narrator notes media reports ("we are constantly being told") of a record year for tourism in Nova Scotia, a record measured by automobile traffic: "More motorists have crossed the border at Amherst than ever before. . . . Motels and campsites have been filled to capacity. The highways are heavy with touring buses and camper trailers and cars" (7). The end of summer will banish the tourists, the narrator notes with some relief; however, the overcrowding, the roads "heavy" with traffic, comprise a contrast to the men's location on a secluded beach unreachable by "public roads," suggesting the damage wrought on highways and the overload of local resources by tourists.

The image of tourist vehicles is extended in "The Road to Rankin's Point" (1976) in a long meditation on the local, national, and continental highway system, envisioning a vast confluence of people and goods, "a big, fast, brutal road" ("Road" 128). As the story opens, twenty-six-year-old Calum navigates an early morning road, the path ahead diverging, one lane, "a narrow paved road," turning away from the sea and running "inland and outward" (127), taking one anywhere on the continent or even into another continent, as far away as South America. For now, though, some fifty miles of narrow paved road are slow, he tells us, until a vast and "rushing stream" of commerce comes into view as the road "boom[s] across the Canso Causeway and off Cape Breton Island and out into the world" (127). All manner of vehicles and models, roadside amenities, and automotive dangers are enumerated in a two-paragraph, grimly humorous catalogue of a typical day on this "brutal road": the motels and campsites and gas stations; trucks and motorcycles and station wagons, camper trailers, and "lumbering high-domed motor homes" (127). None of them is to be outdone by the "high-powered 'luxury' product of Detroit speeding at 80 miles an hour" (127). In addition to signalling the expansive, uninterrupted flow of highway traffic, the narrator's epic catalogue captures a number of industry-critical themes: Keats's excoriation of the "gew-gawry" of extras

that makes cars "fantastically expensive" and their "upkeep exorbitant" (175), a trend that reached its apex in the late 1960s, what Flink calls Detroit's "irrational automotive design" that culminated in high-powered "muscle cars" (*Car Culture* 197). The era's "galloping inflation" is turned on its head by "galloping depreciation" (MacLeod, "Road" 127), which the large automobile is seen futilely attempting to outrun as it speeds from station to station for fuel and presumably repairs. The "scuttling Volkswagens" (127) are the import foil to Detroit's excesses in product design and profit: four million purchased by Americans by 1969 prompted by concerns about inflation and rising fuel costs (Flink, *Car Culture* 197-99). Then there is the grim wreckage, among which are the injured and the dead, over 55,000 in the United States in 1968, a yearly thirteen million accidents and four million injuries (Schneider 163). This vision of the highway is an expression of automobility as absolute freedom, liberal North America's promise with all of its contradictions, frenzy, and risks.

The vastness of the continental highway system is a contrast to the road that the narrator chooses to travel on — an eight-mile winding dirt road that ends in a cliff wall, "the road's end," and is "an end in every way" ("Road" 128) — for the house of his aged and frail grandmother lies at the terminus, and he himself is terminally ill. Although treacherous like the land-hungry highway, this is not only a slower and sometimes impassable and storied road but also a road on which "the wildness of the summer's beauty falls and splashes . . . even to the extent that it is close to lost" (128); "red-and-white roses . . . cascade and strew their fragile, perfumed petals across [the car's] hood even as their thorns scratch the finished lacquer of its sides" (129). Compared with expansive modern highway systems, where each mile of road typically requires twenty-five acres of land (Freund and Martin 19), this is not only a pastoral vision of mobility but also one in which the car and the road possess no intrusive, space-consuming force.

Other stories touch on how the automobile and modern roads transform the landscape and shape the mobile practices of users. A discourse on the relative convenience of cars and paved roads posed against their tax burden emerges in the exposition of "The Tuning of Perfection" (1984), a story that engages broader themes of how modernity transforms both nature and local traditions of work and culture: the mechanized harvesting of forests, the bio-engineering of human reproduc-

tion, and, as Thomas Hodd has argued, the commodification of Cape Breton's Gaelic musical heritage. The story centres on an elderly man named Archibald, who occupies a mountain-top tract settled by his great-grandfather from the Isle of Skye. His house is located, the narrator tells us, some five miles distant by automobile via the "paved or the 'main road'" ("Tuning" 86), a fact immediately qualified by the statement that the now disused or decrepit "paths and footbridges," which once received "a great deal of traffic," constitute a much shorter route to the dwelling. Those pathways, we learn, fell out of use as more and more people adopted automobiles (86). This glimpse of infrastructural modernizaton coupled with a subtle undercutting of the car's convenience is complemented by an account of local residents' contradictory views of public and private roads, the former served by the Department of Highways, the latter maintained at residents' expense. Although the entire passage suggests residents' uncertainty about whether the surrender of private land to public management is a social good, this fictionalized instance of local road politics underscores the point that the cost of private automobility is borne by the government and individuals — disproportionately so by the latter, for in some Canadian jurisdictions almost sixty percent of the total costs are laid on the backs of taxpayers, regardless of whether they drive or not (Freund and Martin 10).

Roads and automobiles are linked to some of the story's central concerns about modernity, in particular consumption practices, in which display and use signify social divides between rural and urban cultures, as they do in Shebib's film. Midway through "The Tuning of Perfection," Archibald is offered a substantial sum of money for his only remaining mare by a horse buyer such as he has never seen before: a man "in a suit and in an elaborate car" (97). Not only his accent but also his style of driving mark the man, for he has "a peculiar caution as if he had never been off pavement before and was afraid that the woods might swallow him" (99). In contrast, MacLeod depicts local drivers as exercising expressive creativity in their appropriation of infrastructure — much the same as that which Michel de Certeau calls "making do" (29). As seen in "The Road to Rankin's Point," local users of the roads demonstrate knowledge of these pathways — as environmental fact and communal lore — in addition to a singular competence in navigating them, even to expressive ends. The narrator

notes that Archibald's granddaughter Sarah (Sal) has her own signature spray of gravel on arrival and departure from the old man's home (97, 111). Yet more conformist varieties of consumption are also at play here. The promise of paid accommodation and transportation to Halifax for the taping of the music performance is the main lure for the mostly younger generation of residents: Sarah and her singing group will shop and see friends, while Carver, a local tough guy bearing the scars of a violent past, sees the festival as a chance to get to Halifax to buy a boat motor and a truck (111).

Just as the pastoral evocations of the local dirt road signal human fragility and death in "The Road to Rankin's Point," so too Archibald imagines these roads as a living network in "The Tuning of Perfection," recalling "the intricate blue veins winding like the map lines of roads and rivers upon his [dead son's] fragile, delicate skull" (102). This image of the map with its roads and rivers figured as the veins of a child's lifeless body resonate with Archibald's sense of isolation and despair at his loss, associated with modernity's exploitation of nature — as embodied in the disposed colt fetuses, his deceased wife, and the eagles, a native species that has hitherto flourished and is associated with Archibald himself and the idealized life that he and his wife once lived. The eagles in flight up the mountain are now described, however, as "weary commuters trying to make it home," having to fly farther for food and water (102).

In the story's final scene, as Archibald begins to feel unease with the reverberations in the community over his refusal to lead the group of singers in the Halifax festival, he spies an automobile leaving the paved main road, driving "hard and fast," and beginning its ascent on the mountain's switchbacks (114). Almost two pages of the story are devoted to the ascent of the car, building suspense about its arrival, Archibald convinced that the car bears a vengeful driver coming for him. The more he observes the car and the driver's handling of it on the road, the more he finds himself able to "read" both the road and the identity of the driver. "Whoever that is, he thought, is very drunk but also very good" (116). In the car are Carver and friends, who have been drinking all day, coming to deliver bootleg whiskey to Archibald in an ambiguous gesture of thanks or admiration. In the closing passage, Archibald tacitly renounces his former criticism and sees these men, like

the hypermasculine miners of "The Closing Down of Summer," as the embodiment of an ancient heroism.

With "The Vastness of the Dark," MacLeod's representation of automobility accelerates in a sustained, visceral, first-person account of speed on the highway. In the story, as in the road movie, automobility and the visual come into alignment. Indeed, the story is organized around the dialectical tension, constitutive of modernity, between knowing and seeing, in which mobility and visuality eviscerate understanding in favour of the intrusive gaze of desire and violence. This gaze is embodied in the figure of a fast-talking, fast-driving, horn-honking, horny, travelling salesman, also a junior emissary of central Canadian capital. The story's young narrator travels some ninety miles in his company car before arriving at Springhill, where — with sudden vividness, both personal and historical — his own community's aid in the mining disasters of 1956 and 1958 brings him to a realization of the bonds of family and community and class.

Like the classic road narrative defined by Ronald Primeau, "The Vastness of the Dark" begins with dissatisfaction and protest. The young narrator, the eldest of eight children, awakes on 28 June 1960, his eighteenth birthday, his day of "deliverance" ("Vastness" 24) from "this grimy Cape Breton coal-mining town" where he has felt imprisoned (29-30). This protest is like the lyric commentary and montage opening of *Goin' Down the Road*. Yet the I-narration is a painfully conflicted meditation on home and family and leaving, in particular the awkward, privacy-violating closeness of the narrator to his parents and an awareness of the sense of futility borne by his unemployed father. Occupying a room adjacent to his mother, the young narrator, having reached sexual maturity, is discomfited by his knowledge of his parents' intimate lives, for he is aware that his conception trapped his father in marriage and a life in the mines. Seeking some consolation, the narrator engages in a desperate imaginative search among "the back seats of the old cars I've *seen* in pictures, or the grassy hills behind the now torn-down dance halls," places where his mother and father might have conceived him in joy rather than "grim release" (29; emphasis added). But he can find no assurance. In contrast, his unemployed father — now with "no place at all" to go — is consumed by an agitated futility, which the narrator figures as automotive speed: "[H]e has always used his body as if it were a car with its accelerator always to the floor" (32). Now he can only use

it for sex or "taut too-rapid walks" to the shore (32), numbing himself on occasion in bouts of drinking. Without consoling knowledge, bereft of action, the young narrator must escape.

The road journey of the young narrator unrolls in stages. On leaving Cape Breton, he assumes his new identity as a returning Vancouverite, a resident of the most distant place that he can imagine. The ride as far as New Glasgow takes place in the company of three black Nova Scotians whose politeness and caution reflect their wish to avoid trouble with the police (41), suggesting that the highway is a space of surveillance and coercion. The final stage unrolls in the company of the aforementioned Ontario salesman, where in the driver's and passenger's seats of the car, as in the road film, mobility and the visual converge in a violent male gaze. Corrigan argues that the road movie registers a growing postwar crisis in which history and public ritual are supplanted by narcissistic obsessions and in which the male driver's (and passenger's) perspectives reproduce the "voyeuristic mechanisms of a historically patriarchal medium through which all the world might be seen as 'male' while being founded on heterosexual desire" (ch. 5). The "spectorial gaze" of cinema, Norman K. Denzin tells us, increases "the sensual pleasures derived from gazing at the other, teaching people how to violate the norms of civil inattention" (28-29), whereas Fredric Jameson calls the visuality of cinema fundamentally "pornographic" ("Introduction"). The travelling salesman, when not spouting racist stereotypes or maligning the dwellers of the Nova Scotia countryside and their way of life (a similar but less malignant amateur ethnography that we find in the Maysles Brothers' 1969 direct cinema classic *Salesman*), vents his sexual obsessions and predatory adventures among the widows of the mines. Later, in a more explicitly pornographic imagining, framed by the car's windshield, they pass "a young girl and her mother" by the roadside, "some clothespins in their teeth" as they hang out laundry. He boasts, "'If I had my way, they'd have something better'n that in their mouths. . . . [W]ouldn't mind resting my balls on the young one's chin for the second round'" (44). Significantly, the salesman's continuous stream of assured, knowing talk, the set of reductive stories that speed and the gaze (and film) make possible, bear on the young passenger as a regional migrant labourer. Unlike the more civil, if also patronizing, counsel that Pete receives at his Toronto job interview, the salesman espouses the brutal dictates of an incipient neoliberalism — an end to federal trans-

fers and government-managed outmigration, not to mention maligning, victim-blaming stereotypes (43, 48).

Stopping in Springhill, the salesman alludes to the mining disasters, and with sudden and vivid force James recalls the tragedies that joined his community to this one, the hitherto empty deictic of "there" lodged in his memory becoming the immediacy of a present "here" (45). A narrative shift from present tense to past tense — that is, from the present tense-figured immediacy of speed and visuality to the realm of memory and history — brings to the narrator factual reportage and personal recollection of his family's role in aiding the stricken miners. Interestingly, in his account of the 1956 and 1958 incidents, the image of idling "old cars" (45, 47) waiting to carry relief and rescue to Springhill stands out. At the same time, the narrator recalls his sisters' reluctance to give up their saved coins to the miners' relief fund for their continued consumption of distractive fantasies: "Other people's buried fathers are very strange and far away but licorice and movie matinees are very close and real" (46). Here in Springhill the mobile male gaze that has served as a tool of reductive violence throughout the journey is countered and reversed in the penultimate scene of the story, not only because memory and history are activated, but also because James himself becomes an object of scrutiny, sitting alone in the parked car, noting the dismissive glances of the townspeople at the bright car with the Ontario plates, "a sort of movable red and glass showcase" (48).

Coincident with a growing North American critique of car culture, MacLeod's stories examine automobility's extensive impact on modern life as a vehicle of (compulsory) consumption, reshaping identity, social life, and landscape. Moreover, a story such as "The Vastness of the Dark," published within a year of Shebib's celebration of an urban Canadian modernity, links automobility with a male (filmic) gaze of cultural reduction and sexual violence. In this regard, MacLeod's story seems to be less an oral performance — a description on which MacLeod has often insisted in reference to his work — than a cinematic envisioning in the moment, the illusion of narrative retrospection in classic (past tense) fiction eschewed for experience and narration unrolling simultaneously in the present tense. MacLeod's American contemporary, John Updike, wrote about his own foray into present-tense narration as an attempt to render "thought and act . . . on one shimmering plane . . . on the travelling edge of the future. . . . It is the

way motion pictures occur before us, immersingly" (269). Modern perception becomes "a mobile activity" before film's arrival (Charney and Schwartz 2). Modernity might well have reached its fullest expression in cinema, yet it remains but one among "an array of new modes of technology, representation, spectacle, distraction, consumerism, ephemerality, mobility, and entertainment" (1). The cultural history of modernity reveals concerns about the "centrality of the body as the site of vision, attention, and stimulation," about "the impulse to define, fix, and represent isolated moments in the face of modernity's distractions and sensations," and about "the increased blurring of the line between reality and its representations" (3). For me, these concerns resonate insistently in MacLeod's stories, identifying MacLeod not as a writer of nostalgia — a label befitting Shebib — but as a writer confronting our experience of modernity. Moreover, if mobility "and its greater facilitation and extension throughout every level of society" constitute "the hidden history of globalism and global governance" (Douglas 146), then Wyile's work on globalization, neoliberalism, and Atlantic Canada helps us to see how MacLeod and other writers of the region are attuned to mobility and migration as part of the region's modern experience.

Author's Note

A version of this essay was delivered at ACCUTE in May 2017 in memory of Herb Wyile. From our first meeting at ACCUTE in 1995, where Herb organized a session on East Coast Writing in which I presented on MacLeod, he inspired me with his passion for literature and generously gave advice and encouragement. Above all else, he was a good friend.

I gratefully acknowledge funding for this research from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, Japan.

Notes

[1] "The Lines We Drive On" comes from Elizabeth Bishop's "From the Country to the City" (*Complete Poems* 13).

[2] Original dates of publication are indicated in parentheses.

Works Cited

Anastakis, Dimitry. *Auto Pact: Creating a Borderless North American Auto Industry, 1960-71*. U of Toronto P, 2005.
Aronowitz, Stanley. "Film: The Art Form of Late Capitalism." *Social Text*, vol. 1, Winter 1979, pp. 110-29.
Atwood, Margaret. *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Anansi, 1972.
Baudrillard, Jean. *America*. Translated by Chris Turner, Verso, 1988.
Bishop, Elizabeth. *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984.
Cockburn, Bruce. "Going Down the Road." *The Cockburn Project*, http://cockburnproject.net/songs&music/gdtr.html.
Charney, Leo, and Vanessa R. Schwartz. "Introduction." *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, edited by Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, U of California P, 1995, pp. 1-12.
Corrigan, Timothy. *A Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam*. Kindle ed., Rutgers UP, 1991.
de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall, U of California P, 1988.
Delaney, Marshall (Robert Fulford). "Artists in the Shadows: Some Notable Canadian Movies." *Take Two: A Tribute to Film in Canada*, edited by Seth Feldman, Irwin, 1984, pp. 2-17.
Denzin, Norman K. *The Cinematic Society: The Voyeur's Gaze*. Sage, 1995.
Douglas, Ian R. "Globalization *as* Governance: Toward an Archaeology of Contemporary Political Reason." *Globalization and Governance*, edited by Aseem Prakash and Jeffrey A. Hart, Routledge, 1999, pp. 135-60.
Flink, James J. *The Automobile Age*. MIT P, 1988.
—. *The Car Culture*. MIT P, 1975.
Francis, Daniel. *A Road for Canada: The Illustrated Story of the Trans-Canada Highway*. Stanton Atkins and Dosil, 2006.
Freund, Peter, and George Martin. *The Ecology of the Automobile*. Black Rose Books, 1993.
Gittings, Christopher E. *Canadian National Cinema*. Routledge, 2002.
Goin' Down the Road. Directed by Donald Shebib, performances by Doug McGrath, Paul Bradley, and Jane Eastwood, Seville Pictures, 2002.
Gorz, André. *Ecology as Politics*. Translated by Patsy Vigderman and Jonathan Cloud, Black Rose Books, 1980.
Hodd, Thomas. "Shoring Against Our Ruin: Sheldon Currie, Alistair MacLeod, and the Heritage Preservation Narrative." *Studies in Canadian Literature*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2008, pp. 191-209.
Jameson, Fredric. *Signatures of the Visible*. Kindle ed., Routledge, 1992.
Keats, John. *The Insolent Chariots*. J.B. Lippincott, 1958.
Kouwenhoven, John A. *The Beer Can by the Highway: Essays on What's American about America*. 1961. Johns Hopkins UP, 1988.
Laderman, David. *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie*. U of Texas P, 2002.
MacLeod, Alistair. "The Closing Down of Summer." *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun*, McClelland and Stewart, 1986, pp. 7-31.
—. "The Road to Rankin's Point." *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, McClelland and Stewart, 1976, pp. 126-56.
—. "The Tuning of Perfection." *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun*, McClelland and Stewart, 1986, pp. 85-117.

—. "The Vastness of the Dark." *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood*, McClelland and Stewart, 1976, pp. 24-51.

—. "Winter Dog." *As Birds Bring Forth the Sun*, McClelland and Stewart, 1986, pp. 32-49.

Marquis, Greg. "Confederation's Casualties: The 'Maritimer' as a Problem in 1960s Toronto." *Acadiensis*, vol. 39, no. 1, Winter-Spring 2010, pp. 83-107.

Mason, Jody. "A Family of Migrant Workers: Region and the Rise of Neoliberalism in the Fiction of Alistair MacLeod." *Studies in Canadian Literature*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2013, pp. 151-69.

McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Routledge, 2005.

Melnyk, George. *Film and the City: The Urban Imaginary in Canadian Cinema*. Kindle ed., Athabasca UP, 2014.

Mills, Katie. *The Road Story and the Rebel: Moving Through Film, Fiction, and Television*. Southern Illinois UP, 2006.

Nader, Ralph. *Unsafe at Any Speed*. 2nd ed. Grossman,1972.

Orgeron, Devin. *Road Movies: From Muybridge and Méliès to Lynch and Kiarostami*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Paterson, Matthew. *Automobile Politics: Ecology and Cultural Political Economy*. Cambridge UP, 2007.

Pevere, Geoff. *Donald Shebib's* Goin' Down the Road. Kindle ed., U of Toronto P, 2012. Canadian Cinema 8.

Primeau, Ronald. *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway.* Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1996.

Ramsay, Christine. "Canadian Narrative Cinema from the Margins: 'The Nation' and Masculinity in *Goin' Down the Road*." *Canada's Best Features: Critical Essays on 15 Canadian Films*, edited by Gene Walz. Rodopi, 2002, pp. 3-24. *Cross/Cultures 56*.

Savoie, Donald J. *Visiting Grandchildren: Economic Development in the Maritimes*. U of Toronto P, 2006.

Schaber, Bennet. "'Hitler Can't Keep 'Em That Long': The Road, the People." *The Road Movie Book*, edited by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, Routledge, 1997, pp. 17-44.

Schneider, Kenneth. *Autokind vs. Mankind*. 1971. Author's Choice, 2005.

Seiler, Cotten. *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America*. Kindle ed., U of Chicago P, 2008.

Soron, Dennis. "Driven to Drive: Cars and the Problem of 'Compulsory Consumption.'" *Car Troubles: Critical Studies of Automobility and Auto-Mobility,* edited by Jim Conley and Arlene Tigar McLaren, Kindle ed., Routledge, 2009, ch. 10.

Updike, John. *Rabbit, Run*. Penguin Books, 2006.

Urry, John. *Mobilities*. Polity, 2007.

—. "The 'System' of Automobility." *Automobilities*, edited by Mike Featherstone et al., *Theory, Culture, and Society*, vol. 21, nos. 4-5, 2004, pp. 25-39.

Wyile, Herb. *Anne of Tim Hortons: Globalization and the Shaping of Atlantic-Canadian Literature*. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2011.

—. "Globalization and Mobility in Contemporary Atlantic-Canadian Fiction." *Japanese Review of Canadian Literature*, vol. 22, 2014, pp. 1-10.