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N2: reading, writing, walking the South African highway

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ABSTRACT

This piece is drawn from a larger project that asks what it might mean to write a cultural history or “biography” of the longest highway in South Africa, the N2. Influenced by literature on the everyday, on infrastructures and the “infra-ordinary,” my approach pays attention to the highway as a material artefact. Who builds, maintains and manages it; who makes their life along it; what subcultures, lexicons and social behaviours can be read off it? Exploring the possibilities of creative non-fiction within the environmental humanities, the piece here unfolds as an exercise in psychogeography, or a deconstructed travelogue. While much travel writing about modern Cape Town describes a (motorised) journey from airport to city, here I reverse the gaze and proceed on foot from town to the airport along the hard shoulder of the N2. In doing so I try to understand the vexed relations between drivers and pedestrians in a divided city, and to conduct an “anthropology of the near” on the road reserve: perhaps the most visible but least contemplated part of the modern urban landscape.

KEYWORDS

N2 highway; infrastructure; Anthropocene; environmental humanities; human geography; Cape Town

The N2 is the longest highway in South Africa, and also the busiest. It starts at an intersection near the docks in Cape Town, follows the eastern seaboard of the country for over 2000 kilometres, then bends inland below Swaziland to end at the town of Ermelo in the province of Mpumalanga. Curled up in that tiny alphanumeric are thousands of kilometres, hundreds of service stations, tons of concrete, millions of man hours of labour, construction and maintenance.

For a long time I have been wanting to write about the N2. Exactly why I am doing this, or how best to do it, I am not entirely sure – that is, I am uncertain of the final destination of this enquiry, or its genre. At some points, I imagine a scholarly work tracing the history of the highway: its construction, why it came to be where it is, and what this tells us about modern South Africa – a kind of social or cultural “biography” of a road. At other points the N2 seems more suited to narrative journalism, or even social anthropology: a project of talking to people who drive, live or make their lives along this route. I also want to preserve a more speculative, experimental register: one which owes something to psychogeography and the Situationists in trying to reimagine an “ordinary” space, and to probe how infrastructure might shape us as much as it is shaped by us.

Finally, there is a more personal, autobiographical impulse, one related to the relatively late age at which I (after many failed attempts) attained a driver's licence. Piloting vehicles along strips of tarmac has never quite lost its strangeness for me, and the psychology and social behaviours associated with driving are, I believe, complex and under-explored domains. With the passing of the cheap oil era, future humanity will look back on our cities with wonder, disbelief and disgust: at how totally urban spaces have been shaped around the velocities and demands of the private vehicle. From this, it follows that an important strategy for writing environments, or environmentally, in the twenty-first century is to estrange the practice of everyday life.

In this piece, I focus on just a small section of the highway: its first 20 kilometres. I register impressions from the hard shoulder and suggest 13 ways to think about or even theorise what one historian of infrastructure Joe Moran (2009, 147) has called “the most commonly viewed and least contemplated landscape” in modern industrial societies.



Figure 1.

1. Variable messages

On the side of major South African roads, there are electronic gantries known as Variable Message Signboards, or VMSs. In Cape Town these are programmed from a hi-tech traffic control centre built ahead of the 2010 soccer World Cup – part of an initiative to create a “smart city,” warn motorists about snarl-ups and generally convey the sense that roads, rather than being zones of anti-sociality and danger, are rational and manageable spaces.

Most messages are fairly standard and predictable: MAINTAIN A SAFE FOLLOWING DISTANCE. They often have a binary, or carrot-and-stick structure: ENJOY YOUR FESTIVE

SEASON hangs in the air for a second, only to be tempered with: BUT DON'T DRINK AND DRIVE. Then there is:

TEXTING AND DRIVING

DON'T MIX.

Sometimes they malfunction and display a line of deliberate or else a dot that goes up then down, but nobody has yet managed to hack the system, as happened in Los Angeles, where drivers have been confronted with messages like WARNING: INCOME GAP AHEAD.

Nonetheless, there is one that seems less purely informational, and more like a pithy text for thought and meditation. It goes: REMEMBER: EVERY DRIVER HAS ALSO BEEN A PEDESTRIAN. And then: SLOW DOWN WHEN YOU SEE PEDESTRIANS. This is doing more work than the average VMS because it is trying to inculcate a kind of empathy – asking us to do the imaginative work of inhabiting each other's lives.

The first statement is surely not reversible – there are millions of pedestrians who never have been and never will be drivers. And is it even true? Have all those who pilot large, insulating vehicles ever actually experienced what it means to walk along or across a busy road? Have they ever crossed a national highway on foot? As for the second part: it certainly suggests that some drivers don't slow down for pedestrians. But is there a subtext that they might even speed up?

Trying to understand the vexed relation between motor traffic and foot traffic in this country, and between human bodies and highways more generally, we set out to walk from Cape Town's city centre to its airport, on the hard shoulder of the N2.



Figure 2.

2. The tyranny of place

BE MORE VISIBLE TO OTHERS. Holding in mind another of the variable messages, I went to Builders Warehouse and bought high-visibility waistcoats (M for me, XL for my co-researcher slash bodyguard Sean) hoping that we could pose as civil engineers. He argued for us being joggers instead: two figures doing a swift half marathon on a Saturday morning.

The other preparation was to re-read Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* (1988), her book-length essay that begins by describing a journey from the airport to the city. "If you go to Antigua as a tourist, this is what you will see" runs the opening line (3). The second-person voice – the "you" – is unnerving: it is rare to find this insistent, claustrophobic kind of narration extended over such a long distance. It can read as the more impersonal you, the kind used when giving directions ("You turn right, you follow the main road"), but then again it is always turning on *you*, the reader, the potential tourist in someone else's reality. And like the VMS, it plays with ideas of potential reversibility – or irreversibility, given the economic straitjacket she goes on to describe.

"That the native does not like the tourist is not hard to explain. For every native of every place is a potential tourist, and every tourist is a native of somewhere" (18). The words "native" and "tourist" could be swapped with "pedestrian" and "driver." Private car ownership is one of South Africa's great social dividers, something not often remarked on but (I sense) smouldering as a kind of social protest in the way that people cross roads here: ignoring footbridges, putting their bodies on the line, lingering in front of speeding vehicles for one second longer than is safe, daring "you." *That the pedestrian does not like the driver is not hard to explain...*

Most Antiguan, Kincaid goes on, cannot afford to go anywhere because they are too poor:

They are too poor to escape the reality of their lives; and they are too poor to live properly in the places where they live, which is the very place you, the tourist, want to go – so when the natives see you, the tourist, they envy you, they envy your ability to leave your own banality and boredom, they envy your ability to turn your own banality and boredom into a source of pleasure for yourself. (Kincaid 1988, 19)

I first came across the piece as a student, and have never quite recovered from it, or stopped learning its lessons. But now I find myself working in a city where (like so many other cities) that condition – of economic stuckness, irreversibility and stunted empathy – is built into the very structure of daily life.

The journey from airport to city is by now a well-worn device, a trope even, in writing about Cape Town, which is one of the most spatially distorted cities in the world. But few manage it as well as Kincaid does in Antigua (who, I think, implicates even herself, the famous writer now living abroad, in that corrosive you). Many articles and op-eds begin with a sketch of shantytowns as seen from the N2, which are then juxtaposed with super-rich mansions on the Atlantic seaboard. Creating word paintings of poverty set against wealth – the problem is not that it's not true. The problem is that it's too easy. As a rhetorical move or structuring device, it is entirely predictable.

Our South African situation "has become a terrible cliché as literary material," Es'kia Mphahlele reflected as far back as 1959, in an autobiography, *Down Second Avenue*, that is also haunted by a road ([1959] 2004, 200). In his 1973 essay "Exile, the tyranny of place and the literary compromise" Mphahlele turns over in his mind that phrase, "the tyranny of place," like a riff that keeps coming back ([1973] 2002, 278). Not for him the polite,

felicitous “sense of place” traditionally celebrated by literary criticism. Place is painful and tyrannical because it keeps acting on you, keeps entrapping you as a writer. South Africa keeps following on your heels, even when you want to leave it behind, even when you are away from it, abroad. And what, after all, can you *do* with this kind of blatant disjunctiveness – the unremitting obviousness of apartheid’s spatial geographies – as a writer or artist?

So instead of looking from the highway at the city (and giving self-assured socio-economic diagnoses at 120 km per hour) the idea here is to look *at* the highway from the city. To describe the road reserve as physical artefact, naively and uncertainly, in pedestrian prose with the mind at (just under) 5 km per hour. To conduct an anthropology of the near on infrastructure that (if it is working as intended) effaces itself, and recedes from view in the mirror. The idea is not to gaze voyeuristically into the poorest areas of the city; but to turn around and look at the N2 itself: a space where we are all in it together – though not, of course, all in the same way.



Figure 3.

3. An urban tide

The mixture of commonality and inequality that one can read off on a modern industrial highway – a shared space that is not really shared – reveals the challenge of trying to think environmentally (in the widest sense of that word). The onset of the Anthropocene – this era in which human agency has assumed the parameters of a geophysical, geological force – asks us to understand this agency as (somehow) both human and non-human (or inhuman, or post-human) at the same time. And also to hold in mind that our rapidly changing environments are a matter of “common but differentiated responsibility,” to use the language of climate negotiations.

These are complex and much-debated ideas; they span disciplines from earth sciences to political economy, social justice and critical theory. But I am interested in how they manifest themselves in “ordinary” spaces and spatial practices. In the way, for example, that people speak about rush hour. This is generally imagined as a kind of humiliating inevitability, an urban tide that rises and falls between certain hours. As a “natural” urban phenomenon, in other words, that we have great cognitive difficulty in relating to our selves, or considering our own behaviours as implicated in. *DON’T BLAME THE TRAFFIC*, says another of the Zen-like Variable Messages, *YOU ARE THE TRAFFIC*.



Figure 4.

4. Acoustic footsteps

The parameters of our hike will be described by sound. We will keep within what road planners call the “acoustic footsteps” of the N2: the envelope of noise that a highway creates around itself.

On the evening before the expedition, there was by chance an avant-garde music festival that includes a performance for “Cello, Saxophone and Traffic,” staged in the dusk where the M5 flyover crosses VOORTREKKER in Maitland. The audience gathered under the concrete stanchions; the cello player looped herself through a delay pedal while the cars made railway sleeper noises, crossing the concrete slats above us: *click-clack, click-clack, click-clack*. The effect was of industrial echoes in full surround sound, the bridge noise joining with the instruments to produce something strangely restful and beautiful as the sun went down over the heavily polluted Black River.

Here I met a friend and photographer who had spent many weeks on the N1, producing a series of surreal, tender and sometimes cryptic images of the highway: children playing in a Shell Ultra City sandpit; articulated lorries disappearing into the mist; side-cuttings near

De Doorns in the evening light; a shattered windscreen on gravel. An editor was urging him to give the project a more metaphorical, allegorical dimension.

She wants me to write an introduction about the Karoo, the Voortrekkers, National Route 1, State of the Nation etc. But I'm more interested in what it means to pass a truck, you know? The kind of relation you develop with the back of a SHOPRITE truck on the highway, for ten, twenty minutes or so – it's an intense psychological bond.

Most road trips, road movies, road novels, we agreed, are about anything but the road. Most travel writing is eager to get as far away from the highway as possible. *Lonely Planet*, *Getaway*, *Weg* – the names of these publications all imply that the post-Romantic voyagers following in the tracks of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* should really be *off* the road. Or at least, well away from any major, national route. This is all part of the interminable tension basic to the late twentieth-century travelogue: a desire for singular, authentic experience set against the mass mobility and vast trans-individual infrastructures that enable the genre in the first place.

We recommitted to the mundane, “the banal, quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual” – the list is from the Situationist Georges Perec (1997, 205). He goes on:

How are we to speak of these “common things”, how to track them down rather, flush them out, wrest them from the dross in which they remain mired, how to give them a meaning, a tongue, to let them, finally, speak of what is, of what we are. (205)

At the same time I wondered whether his common, his ordinary, could ever be the same as ours – and what might happen as the concept travels from global North to global South, from imperial city to post-colonial metropolis. The more you think about it, the more slippery the ordinary becomes...



Figure 5.

5. Corridor crisis

It rained in the night and so we arrived at Gallows Hill Traffic Department early on a fresh, cool Saturday morning. We took the famous unfinished flyover on BUITENGRACHT as the official starting point, and now we just had to work out how to access it. As we walked along the fence, a minibus taxi pulled up on the shoulder of HELEN SUZMAN and an exiting passenger stepped through an unofficial but well-established gap. Not only was the stop for “Traffic Department” in violation of traffic regulations, it also revealed one of the first lessons of highway hiking: there is always a way through. Even when you think you have been corralled by clover-leaf on-ramps or snookered by palisade fencing, there will always be a desire line snaking its way through, a reminder that these no-pedestrian zones are walked all the time.

Described in terms of its major highways, greater Cape Town is an isosceles triangle. The N1 and N2 split apart from the apex of the city centre, forming two sides of similar length. The R300 or Cape Flats Freeway provides the third side – or more accurately, the crossbar of an A whose legs keep widening as the two national routes take their different ways through the escarpment, one through, one over.

In a 24-hour period, CCTV footage records 26,000 people crossing the lines of tarmac that make up the highway triangle. The statistic is from an ENCA press article of October 2013 titled “Cape highway plagued by pedestrians,” and there are many variations on the theme. “Corridor Crisis,” “Chaos as N2 Shut Down,” “City Vows to Tackle N2 Protest Menace” – front page headlines of the *Cape Times* and *Cape Argus* all describe increasing attempts to separate people from highways altogether, via new kinds of barrier and deterrent. Millions have been set aside for a new fence to “secure the N2,” in the words of city officials: to head off not only pedestrians but also the protests that have repeatedly closed the highway in the last years. It is a space, particularly in the stretch between airport and city centre, which increasingly seems to be emerging as the Achilles’ heel of the aspirant world-class city. Reading across the press articles about the N2 as a “hell run” – a corridor of motorist anxiety and middle-class paranoia – one sees a blurring of the categories pedestrian, protester and criminal. “It’s only criminals that cross the highway” is a recurring claim (see for example “N2 under siege,” *Go South Online*, August 1, 2014). In this sense, the highway can be viewed as an on-going argument between soft, perishable human bodies and an environment not made with them in mind.

At the same time, there is no doubt that the N2 is a site of malevolent criminal activity. In a spate of 2014 attacks near the airport off-ramps, robbers placed cardboard boxes concealing concrete blocks in the middle of the road to damage vehicles and bring them to a halt, then stabbed their drivers. Often the victims were South African Airways’ pilots, driving home in the small hours; the incidents capture a strange conjuncture of global mobility and local immobility. In 2015, a Facebook group called Safe N2 was formed, one that treads a fine line between well-meaning community outreach and vigilantist calls to arms. Motorists can sign up to be alerted about incidents, and to send out distress calls to other members of the group. Response times are very quick; the page is full of stories of gratitude and Good Samaritans. The highway is being privatised, or privately securitised via social media; or to phrase it more optimistically: made safer for drivers by unpaid volunteers, by committed and patriotic citizens. It seems like a new kind of social formation, and I watch the newsfeed carefully to see how things will go.



Figure 6.

6. Preventative rock field

We were now on the unfinished flyover, and could look down to see hundreds of sharp stones that the City of Cape Town has installed below the structure at ground level. This “preventative rock field” (to use the official terminology) was built to displace those who had been taking shelter under the flyovers, part of a worldwide trend towards “defensive” or “disciplinary” architecture. Writing in *The Guardian*, Alex Andreou tracks the creeping progress of this urban ideology:

From ubiquitous protrusions on window ledges to bus-shelter seats that pivot forward, from water sprinklers and loud muzak to hard tubular rests, from metal park benches with solid dividers to forests of pointed cement bollards under bridges, urban spaces are aggressively rejecting soft, human bodies. (February 18, 2015)

He mentions a conceptual artist who created “Pay Benches” where users can insert coins so that metal spikes are retracted for a certain time – an idea that was then taken up with all seriousness by officials in Shangdong Province, China.

Positioned amid one of the city’s busiest intersections, the scale of the Cape Town rockery is startling up close: an expansive urban hillock prickling with open hostility to the unmotorised body, so exhaustive and attentive to detail that it is reminiscent of an art installation. When new, it might almost have belonged in a gallery, mistaken for a work by Anthony

Gormley or Joseph Beuys. Though now the spikes have caught litter like hair in a brush, warped KFC cartons and plastic bags threaded through the stone bristles.

The official reason given by the City for this action is that the fires being made by rough sleepers are weakening the concrete structures, but the subtext is not hard to read. In the NO PEDESTRIAN signs dotted around, the pictogram of a crossed-out figure can't help but expand to suggest No Humans, No People. Or rather: (Some) People Are Not Welcome. The result was that the community who had been living beneath the flyover had now been forced onto its top, where they sleep under tarps. But that morning, perhaps because of the rain, there was nobody around.



Figure 7.

7. Sheer coincidence

We loitered on the expanse of unused tarmac, all freshly rinsed and shining. In his essay on “Thing theory,” Bill Brown suggests that it is only when things stop working – when the drill breaks or the car won’t start – that you fully grasp them as things: “when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily” (2001, 4). And that is the case here, the bitten-off hunk of road revealing itself as an artefact of contours, weight, substance – disclosing its materiality, its thingness. What are highways made of, you begin to wonder, how are they made? What substances and histories of labour pass below as we move across them?

During the 2010 football World Cup, this ramp to nowhere carried a large vuvuzela that sounded whenever a goal was scored in the Green Point stadium. Now there was a scuffed helipad on the road surface and a cowsuit drying on a crash barrier. Water dripped from each of the suspended flyovers onto the green shade-cloth of parking bays below, a kind of urban counterpart to all the waterfalls that were now trickling in their thousands through mountain kloofs to the south. The stream ran past the Salvation Army building, down to a pool near the edge of BUITENGRACHT where a group of rough sleepers were doing their laundry.

“Don’t be suicidal,” someone shouted up to us, “just enjoy the view!”

We looked out over the central business district of Cape Town, a mix of high apartheid modernism and financial post-modernism, much of it built on land reclaimed from the sea. Then the docks beyond – that great industrial unknown, oil rigs attaching and detaching themselves from the cityscape like part-time skyscrapers. In the middle distance, cars waited at the traffic lights below, to ramp up onto the raised carriageways of the N2 proper, which is also the N1 until they diverge (respectively, controversially) into NELSON MANDELA and FW DE KLERK boulevards. This overlapping of two routes in one space is called “coincidence” in road-planning speak, and seems like an apt metaphor for the way people share road space without really sharing it: they simply coincide there for a while.

Other irreconcilable things occupy the same space around here. Behind you, a part of the city that was once outside the boundaries of the colonial street grid: District One, where unnamed labourers, slaves and plague victims were once buried. Now it is all sushi restaurants, jewellers and advertising agencies, the Traffic Department marking the spot where a gallows did indeed stand on a hill, or rather a sand dune (now levelled). Exiting the flyover you can make a quick detour via the Prestwich Memorial complex, where a mausoleum for exhumed remains coincides with Truth, a hip café with skull and crossbones logo on its bags of beans. Chill-out compilations drift into the passages where anonymous bones are shelved in cardboard boxes, Nora Jones punctuated by the occasional shriek of the coffee grinder. I scanned through the Visitors’ Book to see if anyone else felt that this was an unusual coincidence. Eventually I found one entry penned in full caps by “Anonymous African”: DISRESPECTFUL PORTRAYAL OF ENSLAVED PPL’S BONES NEXT TO THE COFFEE SHOP. THINK ABOUT THAT!



Figure 8.

8. Unsettled history

We headed for the Foreshore to walk along the highways' underbellies, greeting Big Issue sellers as we crossed BUITENGRACHT. The next time or space that vendors are able to approach stationary vehicles on the N2, we calculated, would be some 60 kilometres away at the interminable traffic lights of Somerset West. Here a subculture of cellphone car charger sellers ply their trade, pinned to the hard shoulder while making mobile people even more mobile. It is an amplified version of the paradox that forms the next lesson of highway hiking: that those who live or make their livelihoods next to major highways generally enjoy the least movement. To proceed on foot from Cape Town International Conference Centre to Cape Town International is to encounter a 19.7 km demonstration of it. You will encounter many still and lonely points amid the welter of high-speed traffic: stowed blankets; folded-up clothes; the scorch mark of a small fire against cement.

Whole PhDs have been written about why the Foreshore looks the way it does: about the warring ideologies that shaped a zone that definitively separates the central city from the sea. The raised carriageways of the N1/N2 bisect and cauterise all the longitudinal avenues which once led down to the water's edge. It is a place where the most overbearing, least self-doubting elements of twentieth-century modernism were combined with high apartheid capitalism; today the result is acres of wind-tormented car park. It is an example, too, of the necrotic or infectious quality of tarmac. Building more space for traffic simply begets more traffic: this is the "induced demand" theory that people who continually demand more roads and more parking (on the campus where I work for example, which is already one big mountainside car park) have not quite grasped. And if you have raised carriageways for cars in the middle of a city, the only option for the space below them becomes more cars – it is too noisy to do much else, hence: car parks.

At the same time, there was a kind of relief in exiting the glossy spaces of the Prestwich heritage precinct and re-enter this uncertain, unincorporated zone. It is an area where city planners have not managed to solve the errors of city planners before them, where the utopian visions of modernist and "rational" city planning are so entirely undercut, broken off mid-argument like the other four bridge stubs concealed hereabouts.

Looking back at proud, colour-saturated postcards of newly built British highways from the 1950s, Moran (2009, 15) writes about how sad and strange they now seem: "Ford Populares and Triumph Heralds with the shiny newness of diecast models, dotted around those impossibly empty motorways." These weirdly haunting images, he goes on, are a reminder that highways "are beginning to acquire a cultural history, but of a rather unsettling kind that evades the secure meanings of the heritage industry or the easy consolations of nostalgia" (15). A walk along a highway, in other words, cannot be a trip down memory lane. It operates too fast for contemplation and affection; you normally experience it only when moving, never from a still point. But it still carries an elusive kind of pastness.

Its meanings may have changed since those celebratory, mid-twentieth-century postcards; but as a physical artefact the modern highway remains powerfully photogenic: its geometrically curved masses of light and shade; the powerful splay of an overpass as it

hits the top of the frame. I went around clipping bits out of this urban fabric with a phone camera while Sean looked for the Beach Boys, a community of Tanzanian migrants who watch the port, trying to stowaway on container ships, and have covered the crash barriers and concrete retaining walls with (as he put it) “wistful sea-drunk slogans”: SEA NEVER DRY, ESCAPE FROM CAPE, TODAY AFRICA TOMORROW YUROPE. One of them needed a bit more glossing: MEMORY CARD ME LIKE SHIP NO LIKE PUSSY. Memory Card was the alias of a man he had befriended, Adam, who once explained that when stowing away, you need to take a piece of metal with you. So that when your water runs out, you can begin tapping on the side of the ship, and be discovered. If you forget the piece of metal, you will likely die in the hold.

We reached the area nicknamed The Freezer, where the wind whips particularly viciously under the pillars and a Central City Improvement District trailer perches on grassy embankment, continuing the long argument between forced removal and the barest forms of shelter. Again, the night rain seemed to have evacuated the area of any human presence. Below a stanchion, next to another preventative rock field, a herd of shopping trolleys huddled like cattle in a storm.

Before meeting the stowaway community, Sean had written, he viewed the docks and ocean behind as a kind of oil painting, a changeable canvas of light and water. But now, after years of speaking to Adam and others, he saw only “bent palisade struts, tunnels, portals, hatches – not flaws just in a postcard perfect view but rents in a great system of human controls. And I see the human nobodies crawling through them, or lying curled up in dark spaces” (Christie 2015, 107).



Figure 9.

9. The unreconciled

At this point the two Nobel laureates unreconcile themselves: DE KLERK stretches north through districts given over entirely to shipping containers – acres of commodities, tucked up safe and dry – while we peeled off under NELSON MANDELA. Approaching the railyards, we asked a man for advice on how to cross, and he gave us very precise directions. You go through the small gap in this fence down there, cross diagonally back on yourself, go through a bigger gap the opposite side. And don't worry about the police van parked there – it's always empty.

Sure enough the vehicle was unoccupied, an urban scarecrow next to the tracks – but still menacing and vaguely humanoid, the ways vehicles are. Across the tracks, then past the MyCiti bus lane in its alluring rose pink tarmac, which strikes out through Paarden Island industria with a cycle path alongside that makes for an intriguing psychogeographical transect through agapanthus beds and warehouses to the Atlantic, but has also been taken up enthusiastically by bike-propelled drug couriers.

Where the boulevard curves leisurely across MAIN ROAD and upward into the ruins of District Six, there were a series of sepia family portraits, blown up and wallpapered onto the concrete pillars: women in head shawls, men wearing fezzes. You imagine them to be pictures from the albums of those forcibly moved to make way for the road, the negatives re-developing on its cement undersurface over half a century later: finite, makeshift memorials, and all the more powerful for that.

The construction of Grand Boulevard East (as it was then called) began in 1960 and led to the first demolitions in District Six. But the construction of its inevitability began much earlier, and can be traced to road planning documents of 1940. In her PhD on the Foreshore scheme, Lisa Kane (2004) suggests that the modernist dream of the highway functioned as a kind of stalking horse for a planned “slum clearance” which long predated formal apartheid. I had ordered up the planning documents in the National Archives, and seen how a swathe of blue pencil arcs through the condemned properties on either side, the text keeping the new, still unfamiliar word “flyover” in inverted commas throughout.

Walking through Woodstock towards Walmer Estate, we passed a house that had escaped by the narrowest margin: there was just a few metres between its enclosed porch and the concrete embankment.

“That's the history man,” said a local resident we talked to about what it meant to have a highway displace your neighbours. Walking away, you are unsure if he was pointing to his grandfather – That's the history-man – or the highway itself: That's the history, man.

On one of the blue information signs here, DISTRICT SIX has been pasted over ZONNEBLOEM (the apartheid government's anodyne attempt to rename the area in Dutch: Sunflower). The artist responsible has exactly mimicked the DIN 1451 typeface that was adopted for South African road signage in 1994 – a German font family originally popularised via its use on Autobahnen in the 1930s, and now used worldwide. Perhaps because it is inhabiting an everyday typeface so perfectly, so unnoticeably, this intervention is permitted to stay.



Figure 10.

10. A social conscience

From the edge of District Six onwards, footbridges begin to cross the Boulevard, seven of them – complex, asymmetrical structures that are obviously the result of some very careful computer modelling. In 2014 the City of Cape Town opened a public process online to solicit possible names, but the page was soon taken down after being flooded with suggestions like Marikana Bridge, Andries Tatane Bridge: names commemorating human rights abuses of recent South African history, the killing of civilians by police. The embankments, signs and “furniture” of the road reserve are an enormous canvas for street artists and stencil collectives engaged in an on-going game of cat and mouse with power hoses and grey, municipal paint. The N2 is known for a more socially conscious graffiti than the N1, where you are more likely to see individual tags and boasts.

As the highway approaches Hospital Bend – a complex and dangerous zone of merging roads, twisty onramps, weaving traffic – there is a traffic island where you often see bedding wedged into the infrastructural cracks and crevices. *DEHUMANISATION ZONE* appeared there for a day or two, the work of a stencil collective who also hacked the City of Cape Town’s slogan (This City Works for You) and printed *THIS CITY WORKS FOR A FEW* where the Joe Slovo / N2 Gateway “Human Settlements” project meets the road reserve, with one letter per standalone concrete toilet, facing the traffic.

We run across to the island, having to judge things very carefully. This is foolhardy, I realise, not to mention illegal. This concrete sandbar amid the merging streams of N2 and M3 performs an inversion of J. G. Ballard’s *Concrete Island*, a dystopian 1974 fiction about a motorist who breaks down, becoming stranded amid the highways on the outskirts of

London: no-one is willing or able to stop to help him. Here, in a reversal of Ballard's urban Crusoe, rough sleepers are deliberately stranding themselves from the city beyond.

When on the island, we struggle to get off. Traffic only needs to rise by a few increments and you will truly be stuck until the tide goes down. Something we realise very quickly about running across national highways: your legs and nerves and muscles need to fire immediately and decisively; there is no room for error. In some of the literature around pedestrian casualties in South Africa, there is the speculation that those who have never been drivers before may actually struggle to conceptualise the speeds at which cars travel: the linear commitments of the fast-moving vehicle, its inhuman inertia. That is: the pedestrian/driver interface may involve a quite technical inability to empathise or think one's way into another body, especially if you have only ever occupied one of those roles: as if we become almost different organisms, different species.

This is compounded by the more general problem of empathy that driving calls forth, one that you (the you who are lucky enough to drive a private vehicle) can probably identify with. It is crystallised in its purest form in that moment when you are cursing a pedestrian (perhaps one trying to cross a South African road within the two or three seconds permitted by the green man) when you know that *you have been in exactly the same position*, perhaps the day before, or just an hour ago. So if you can't even empathise with (an earlier version of) yourself, then what hope for imagining yourself into someone else's body?

Still stuck on the island, crouched on your marks, getting set, waiting to go you are amazed (as you often are) that your soft pudding of a body has made it even this far in the world, given all the hard surfaces everywhere, the field of deadly forces you navigate through each day, the fast-moving torrents of steel and rubber just metres away – and here is your tiny, fragile human infrastructure, perched on the edge of the N2.

Lower down we run across to the plaque commemorating SETTLER'S WAY – and I can finally confirm that it is in the possessive. This old N2 nickname tries to imbue an artefact of mid-twentieth-century modernity with some retro-fitted heritage. This is the 1960s highway as a vector of colonial history, following the ox wagon tracks across the Cape Flats, striking out towards the interior. But we can extend this history further, since these wagon tracks followed much older routes of indigenous peoples who in turn followed herds of game and fat-tailed sheep through the landmass. Virtually the only surviving fragments of the Khoi and San language families in the Western Cape are found in the names of mountain passes. The Gantouw, Tradouw, Kareedouw (the way of the eland, of the women, the karee trees) – they thread their way through the mountains to the north, ranges now outlined through a brown petrochemical haze. The narrow range of geological options through the Cape fold belt funnels together the deep past and the ultra-modern: the concrete stilts and crash barriers touch on ancient ways of moving through the landmass.

There are ghost letters covering this memorial that nobody can stop to see, even after the power hose: MARIKANA. Someone has made a lean-to amid the trees, right in the eye of the traffic storm that breaks against the mountain slopes. Shortly afterwards we see two men who are, I think at first, stripping sugar cane. Sean points out that they are cable thieves, gutting infrastructure for copper. But why in plain sight, I wonder? Before realising that they must be entirely invisible to the passing drivers. The highway landscape is a patchwork of compulsive visibility and total invisibility, a pattern determined by different kinds of highway curve, different speeds. There are some things you can see, some you are compelled to see all the time; then some you just don't, never do.



Figure 11.

11. Crash

My daily commute goes “against traffic,” so I look with a mixture of feelings (smugness, sadness, awe) at the queue in and out of the city each day. According to data aggregated by on-board GPS systems like TomTom, Cape Town is the most congested city in the country, with commuters spending up to 11 days per year sitting in traffic. I had thought of deliberately embedding myself in rush hour one day, timing it to hit afternoon peak so as examine the markings on concrete crash barriers along Hospital Bend. Now I could finally look at them properly: the abstract panels created by tyre, bumper and brake light scraping across the cement.

Here is another reason why highways are so hard to make coherent sense of. They are zones of utter ordinariness, routine, the humdrum; yet also of loss of control, trauma, concussion, blackouts. “The car crash is the most dramatic event in many people’s lives apart from their own deaths,” wrote Ballard in 1971; for many, he added, the two “will coincide” ([1971] 2008, 254).

This High Accident Zone exists in dialogue with the enormous hospital complex just to the left. Fully half of all awaiting surgery hospital beds in the country are given over to road accident victims. The old Groote Schuur hospital, as is well known, was the site of the world’s first heart transplant in 1967. The donor, Denise Darvall, was killed by a speeding police reservist just nearby on Main Road – the old Dutch *wagen pad na t’bos* (wagon route to the forests) now bisected by the modern freeway. An X marks the spot in a photograph that is blown up in the small museum devoted to this great medical breakthrough of the twentieth century, one enabled by a road death virtually in the shadow of the hospital.



Figure 12.

12. Soft estate

As *SETTLER'S WAY* settled down onto the Cape Flats, we watched the speed limits go up: 60, 80, 120 – the engines bolting past us seeming to relax into top gear, a mechanical sighing out as they hit the freeway proper.

Walking in the road reserve of a fast highway, you experience a world premised on speeds and scales that are entirely out of kilter with the capabilities and the sensory range of the human being as organism: in this sense it is a post-human world. Yet at the same time, these are often intriguing spaces, in which the whole sensorium changes. There is a kind of excitement and sensory liberation, a giddiness that comes from making your way through these edgelands that are so much bigger and wilder than they seem when glimpsed from a moving vehicle. The elongation of time and space is obvious to mention, but strange to experience and hard to describe.

Here among the parkways and parklands we traversed big lobes of greenery described by the off-ramp curves, SANRAL orchards, vleis full of hyacinth. These were negative spaces, in one sense, buffer zones of apartheid social engineering; but nonetheless full of reeds, birds, biomass. The poisonous oleander shrub is a favourite for dividing highways – apparently because its flowers open at night, drawing the pollinating insects away from headlight beams. A professor of botany tells me that the “soft estate” of highway ecology on the N7 preserves species of fynbos and renosterveld that have all but vanished from the farmlands lapping right up to the road reserve. His PhD student has walked the whole route, logging all indigenous wildflowers from Cape Town to the Namibian border (Nicolson 2009, 2010).

As the distances unspooled on the way to Athlone and Langa, we began to jog, which entirely changed our experience and (we guessed) others' experience of us. When we walked, we were trespassers on a variety of levels. When we jogged, we joined a continuum of other joggers in a pastime that was immediately understood, and one that felt much less intrusive. It was a kind of free pass. People waved at us, waved us on: it made immediate sense to all concerned that we were simply using the hard shoulder to make up distance. But like the lumo bibs, this was just a guise: concealed as joggers, we were still intrusive, curious and out-of-place walkers. And there is no getting away from it: as white bodies on the roadside here, we were in some ways more visible than brown bodies. The Metro police swoop down on stranded motorists within seconds in this stretch, where the VMSs say: HIGH CRIME AREA, DO NOT STOP ON HIGHWAY. So in one sense we were wearing high-visibility jackets to reduce our visibility.

The stretch from Mowbray Golf Club to Athlone produced further paradoxes. On one side of the road we paused to examine the drifts of trash that accumulate on a national highway: industrial piths and rinds of rubber and plastic, some of them hard to make sense of. On the other side, 300 flamingos took off from the Black River, a father holding up his young daughter to see them slowly gaining speed, padding across the water surface with their slack necks flopping out front. Even the flamingos had been politicised though: the Democratic Alliance had tried to claim their return to Cape Town as evidence of superior city management. The flamingos had "voted with their wings," according to one spokesperson, much to the annoyance of the African National Congress.

Haded ibises stalked prehistorically across the fairways to our left, beaks drilling the turf for worms: northern birds that have slowly reached the Cape, moving from golf course to golf course, all the way down the lush N2 corridor.



Figure 13.

13. A geography of air

We pass the open space left after the demolition of the Athlone cooling towers. For anyone who watched these landmarks fall at 11:56 on 22 August 2010 (four minutes earlier than advertised, catching out the photographers) the speed of it was startling. The Two Ladies of Athlone disappeared in seconds, leaving a cloud of dust drifting across Langa and a strange realisation that you can be nostalgic for anything, even pre-cast concrete.

The ease with which these were erased from the urban landscape contrasts with what one might call the persistence of roads. The cooling towers, built in 1962 at the site of Cape Town's main coal burning plant, are of the same era as the N2: black and white photographs show the two projects under construction at the same time. The towers fell in 10 seconds, but how difficult it would be to uproot these things, roads, that are so embedded not just in the earth but also in our language, our figures of speech and cognitive processes. We live in the fast lane, come to a dead end, take detours or embark on the road less travelled. In a lexical field full of dead metaphors, it is a difficult task to be entirely literal, to be really pedestrian about roads – to resist their metaphorical pull.

At Bokmakierie, MAERSK containers barrelled past us one after the other – their length and bulk now apparent, no longer foreshortened as they are from the driver's seat. Near Joe Slovo we saw different kinds of highway fencing that had been trialled then abandoned, and met a man who trawled the verge for recyclable goods. At Bonteheuwel we watched horses drinking from ditches full of highway run-off, and wondered about their livers. Opposite Nyanga we heard the strange clicking buzz of pylons as we passed beneath a major electricity corridor.

The toxicity of the road reserve was steadily rising. Running along the highway on what was now a hot and muggy day, we began to realise how much we were sweating. But also, how acrid our sweat smelled; how, in fact, it smelled like other people's sweat. On a vibracrete wall there is a masterfully stencilled, life-sized picture of a car. Embossed across it are the words: I CAN'T BREATHE. It is figurative or literal, or both?

In winter, a form of atmospheric pollution called the Brown Haze develops over greater Cape Town. In the mornings you can see a dirty brown smudge over the large, flat urban area between Indian and Atlantic Oceans. Folk wisdom in the wealthy southern suburbs sometimes puts this down to "cooking fires" or paraffin heating in the poorer parts of the city. But the Brown Haze Study of 1997 (Wicking-Baird, Dutkiewicz, and De Villiers 1997) reveals that the majority of the atmospheric pollutants (66%) consist of sulphur dioxides from vehicle emissions. The oil refinery to the west of the city also contributes a significant portion. Leaving town on the N1/N7, you see it: one of those guarded modern installations where the crude oil brought over sea by tankers undergoes fractional distillation. From coolest boiling point to hottest, the petrochemical products that sustain and envelop the global economy are drawn off one by one: bottled gas for households; gasoline for cars; naptha for chemical production; kerosene for aircraft fuel; diesel oil for lorries and buses; fuel oil for ships and power stations. And finally the bitumen residue of the process, used in the asphalt and tarmac of roofs and roads. From fuel to shelter to heating to plastics to infrastructure – the petro-economy of the twentieth century permeates every component of our lives.

The Brown Haze, however, is also the result of a naturally occurring phenomenon known as atmospheric inversion, one related to the coastal geography of the city. In the months

between May and September, cold air from the ocean slides over the metro at night. During the morning rush hour, this cold atmospheric band is prevented from dissipating by warmer air above it, which presses down like a lid and keeps the pollutants in place. Eventually the sun warms the layer of cold air and the haze is diluted into the global commons.

The haze in other words, is a telling example of how physical and social geography inflect each other in the Anthropocene: how planetary environments merge with the infrastructure of globalisation in ways that challenge our received ideas of thinking and narrating. It also outlines what Jenny Price (writing about Los Angeles) calls “the social geography of air” (2006, 6): how different people experience nature very differently, even within the same urban area. Rates of asthma and respiratory illness can be mapped directly onto geographies of race and class in the twenty-first-century world city. When the summer southeasters stop blowing in Cape Town, the low level inversions of Brown Haze reveal that even something as universal as air becomes stratified in complex ways. The highway is a site of continual waste products; its pollutions are (eventually) common but (immediately) differentiated, (sometimes) visible but (largely) invisible – and for reasons that span the human, the non-human and the inhuman. I can’t breathe – the last words of Eric Garner, an asthma-sufferer choked to death by police in North America. The phrase is now taken up by student activists in South Africa, intent on dismantling and “decolonising” the inherited structures they find themselves living, working, thinking in.

The difficult, vulnerable work of linking social justice and environmental justice – of showing that they are the same thing, or that they have become so – is only just beginning here.



Figure 14.

14. The end

We draw towards our destination, Cape Town International Airport, with its incoming traffic queued in holding patterns above the city. A realignment of the runways has been proposed, and its acoustic consequences for those under the flight paths must now be explored: another airborne geography.

The long perimeter fence of airport industria generates relatively quiet, peaceful spaces in the road reserve. Next to a vlei we meet members of St John's Apostolic Church: women (only women) who have come over the footbridge from Nyanga with plastic buckets of hot water – they tell us they will be drinking it as a kind of purgative, and seem to be seeking some respite in a non-space wedged between the highway and the runway. As with the Xhosa initiates who take refuge in the Port Jackson scrub as part of their passage into manhood, the road reserve has become a space where “traditional” practices resurface in and adapt to the contemporary city.

Our outbound journey ends at the airport fence, in a patch of open ground where cattle are grazing against long blank facades. A post-pastoral scene: Logistics Warehouse with Cows. Two different transport systems – air-based and land-based – touch each other here, quite literally. A huge floodlight perches at the side of the N2, covered in razor wire and protective fences, angled up at the air traffic.

We stop to watch the planes swoop down, and I think of a small news item in the *Cape Times* of 24 August 2012 that I have never forgotten. Following a British Airways flight to London, the body of an unidentified man was discovered in the landing gear of a Boeing 747 at Heathrow airport. He had frozen to death after attempting to stow away from Cape Town International. I think of this man, dwarfed by the machinery of the wheel-bay, deafened by engines, ascending at such speed into the freezing, thinning air. The story struck me with the force of a myth, but such wheel-well stowaway flights (I have since learned) happen all over the world; they are not uncommon.

We bend towards the airport terminal, hot and tired now. Near the BP garage is a stand of bluegums and below it a collection of smart sedans – Chevrolets, Toyotas, Hyundais – with men (only men) chatting, smoking, leaning against them. For a minute the scene confuses us: what are all these shiny new cars doing in no-mans land? Then we realise that this is the sign of another, very recent road culture. These are Uber drivers, who are not permitted to wait in the airport complex proper, but sit here in the soft estate, listening for an electronic summons from International and Domestic Arrivals. We ask a driver if he can function like an old-fashioned taxi, and take us back to town. Sure, he says.

We get in and begin moving back along the road we have walked, hundreds of hard-won metres eaten up in seconds. It is different to us now; marked by a thousand impressions. Every section I now have some sensory history of, some of it meaningful, much of it meaningless. There is where I brushed through a cobweb strung between a speed limit sign and a crash barrier. There is I CAN'T BREATHE. There is the shattered TV set, still lying where we left it, face down on the hard shoulder, not far from where a father held up his daughter to watch flamingos taking flight from the Black River.

“How much are you willing to pay?” our driver asks, “Praat vir my gentlemen. Talk to me.”

“R150?”

“R150?”

“R200?”

“R200. Done. We're done talking. We're done.”

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