

Whose Streets? Roadway Protests and Weaponised Automobility

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Abstract: The article examines the role of automobility in US-based anti-racism demonstrations and counter-demonstrations. We contrast the spatial strategies of highway occupations by racial justice activists, with so-called “weaponised car” attacks by the American far right. Analysing online memes and anti-protest legislation, the article explores under-acknowledged links between “automobile supremacy”—the structure of motorists’ privilege as embedded in law, the built environment and the popular imaginary—and the patterns of racial stratification often termed “white supremacy”. We document three ways in which automobility has been enlisted as means of violence against protestors and against wider Black communities in the US: through the use of vehicles, right-of-way conventions, and roadways *as weapons*. The article demonstrates how the imperative to make way for the motorist has long provided cover for racial injustice.

Keywords: protest, automobilities, racial justice, violence

Introduction

On 12 August 2017, a white supremacist in Charlottesville, Virginia, drove a car into a crowd of protesters, killing 32-year-old Heather Heyer and injuring dozens of others. In the months prior to the attack, the man shared a meme on social media: “You have the right to protest, but I’m late for work” (cited in BBC 2019). The number of so-called “weaponised car” attacks in response to antiracist protests have soared in recent years, with hundreds of documented instances in response to the 2020 George Floyd protests alone. This article examines the role of automobility in recent US-based antiracism demonstrations and counterdemonstrations. The article contrasts highway blockades by racial justice activists, with vehicle ramming attacks by the American far right, seeking to contribute to scholarship on protest and “spatial strategies” (e.g. Bjork-James 2018; Cowen 2017; Klein 2014:295–300; Mitchell 2011; Routledge 2017). Such work has emphasised the material leverage blockades grant to activists, compared with orthodox demonstrations—like rallies and marches in conventional public spaces. Yet here we highlight the symbolic resonances of occupying infrastructure normally given

over to traffic, as well as of the counter-tactic, accelerating through protesters in the road (Malm and the Zetkin Collective 2021:435).

Walking onto highways and stopping traffic upends a spatial convention that has especial traction in the US, where the motor vehicle's economic, cultural, and practical significance is hard to overstate. With the advent of mass automobility from the mid-20th century onwards, public street spaces have come to be figured as essentially conduits for private motor traffic, rather than places of pedestrian occupation (Norton 2011). Around the world highway blockades have been employed by a range of activists (for instance in the UK by "Insulate Britain" climate protesters).¹ Yet in the US this form of civil disobedience is most heavily associated with Black Lives Matter (BLM), who have taken to the interstate highway system to protest racist police killings. Whilst seemingly unrelated to protest aims, the act of occupying interstates also works to draw attention to the crucial—but underacknowledged—role of the car-system in entrenching America's stark patterns of territorialised racial injustice (Bullard 2004; Henderson 2006).

Examining the backlash to the roadway protests which initially swept the US following the killing of Michael Brown in 2014, the article explores the links between "automobile supremacy"—the structure of motorists' privilege as embedded in law, the built environment, and the popular imaginary (Shill 2020:502)—and the patterns of racial stratification often termed "white supremacy". Whilst automobility is "comprehensively entangled" (Gilroy 2010:33) in America's patterns of racial hierarchy, this has received comparatively little attention (although see Gilroy 2010; Henderson 2006; Malm and the Zetkin Collective 2021; Seo 2019; Sorin 2020).

We begin by outlining the tactic of blockades and its use by BLM activists, before putting it in the broader context of the relationship between vulnerable road users and the automobile. We then propose three key instances in which automobility has been weaponised against Black communities in the US: firstly, we examine the rise in vehicle ramming attacks as means to break up BLM roadway protests ("weaponised vehicles"); secondly, we discuss proposed legislation which enlists right of way conventions against protesters ("weaponised right of way"); and thirdly, we detail the historical use of highways themselves as "slum clearance" instruments ("weaponised infrastructure"). We demonstrate how the imperative to make way for the motorist—which has animated the wholesale redesign of the built environment—provides cover for racist violence; and we demonstrate how race politics inflect questions regarding use of street space in the US. We therefore contribute to research on a pressing social justice issue: the right of non-vehicular bodies to the public right-of-way (Prytherch 2018).

Blockades

Goodyear (2014) argues that whilst blocking city streets has long been an urban protest tactic, the deliberate blocking of public highways in the US has been a much rarer occurrence. As Jilani (2017) notes, this tactic is thought to date to the 1990s, when a labour campaign called "Justice for Janitors" stopped traffic in Washington, DC. In 1995 activists blocked part of the Theodore Roosevelt

Memorial Bridge, disrupting the commutes of over 100,000 motorists. The local American Automobile Association called the blockade “transportation terrorism” (Kyriakos 1995). Yet within a year of activists employing the tactic, union representation was won for 90% of the janitorial market in DC (Fithian 2012). In 1999, Black construction workers shut down I-70 in St Louis to protest the lack of Black contractors and construction workers on area highway projects. Again, the tactic seemingly achieved results, with the state of Missouri agreeing to allocate more funding for job training and increasing minority hiring requirements (Vizcarra and Kokinis 2014). However, the highway blockade only really began to “trend” in the US post-2014, when a series of protests in the US blocked infrastructure to bring greater visibility to their cause. Opponents of the Dakota Access Pipeline blocked highways in multiple states in order to block pipeline approval. Opponents to the Trump administration’s proposed “Muslim ban” in 2017 protested at airports across the country. Finally, Black Lives Matter (BLM) protested on the interstate highway system in urban areas across the US.

Black Lives Matter

BLM is an “ideological and political intervention”, in co-founder Alicia Garza’s (2014) words, in a world in which Black lives are “systematically and intentionally targeted for demise”. In contexts where African Americans are “disproportionately viewed as threats by state forces and mainstream institutions”, the movement centres on stories involving *asymmetric encounters*, typically between unarmed Black people and armed police (Bonilla and Rosa 2015:11).

In the US, African Americans are 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police than white people—an uneven exposure to death in which police forces exercise sovereign power in “dictating who may live and who must die” (Mbembe 2003:11). Out of what is likely more than 10,000 fatal shootings by on-duty police officers between 2004 and 2014, just 54 officers had been charged with a crime—and in just a handful of these cases were the officers convicted (Lowery 2017:46). Police officers are consistently more willing to deploy lethal force against unarmed Black people compared with white people (for a statistical breakdown of this disparity, see Nix et al. 2017).

BLM began as a response to the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman, the man who killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. Zimmerman’s acquittal was premised on Florida’s so-called “Stand Your Ground” law (Catalfamo 2007), which enshrines a notional right to not retreat from a felt threat. Crucially such laws effectively restrict “Black movement in public space” (Bonds 2014, cited in Derickson 2017:231), potentially allowing people who feel they are under threat from the presence of Black passersby to fire without consequence (Bledsoe 2021; Butz et al. 2015).

The killing of Michael Brown was a key moment in BLM’s rise. On 9 August 2014, the 18-year-old was fatally shot by 28-year-old white police officer Darren Wilson in the city of Ferguson, Missouri. Like so many victims of racist police violence, Brown was unarmed when killed. Wilson’s subsequent court testimony, which led to his acquittal, emphasised *his* fear of the unarmed teenager. Wilson’s

“reverse logic”, argue Bonilla and Rosa (2015:11), “presents a narrative in which an unarmed teenager is a terrifying aggressor and an armed police officer is an innocent victim”.

Whilst firearms play a noted role in the unequal relations of vulnerability that so often characterise encounters between Black people and the police, the car is another material object, which mirrors the firearm in its form if not its function, that plays an important role in restricting Black mobilities in public space. Crucially, Brown and the companion he was with were initially stopped by police for *walking in the street instead of on the sidewalk*. A subsequent Department of Justice investigation found that 95% of “manner of walking along a roadway” charges in Ferguson were levelled against Black people, despite accounting for only two-thirds of the population (Ehrenfreund 2015). Where it is discussed at all in mainstream discourse, cars’ role in racial injustice often centres around the over-policing of Black motorists—sometimes referred to as “driving whilst Black” (Sorin 2020; Yankah 2019); yet the over-policing of Black pedestrians has witnessed comparatively less attention. So-called “jaywalking” ordinances are but one facet of a key imperative that has fundamentally shaped public and urban space in the US—the requirement to *make way for the motorist*. In this article we show how this logic continues to provide cover for a range of multi-scalar injustices and violence against Black communities in the US, of which the recent rise in vehicle ramming attacks against BLM protesters is only the sharpest instance.

Bodies on the Line

Months after the killing of Michael Brown and unrest in the city of Ferguson, protesters walked out onto Atlanta’s Downtown Connector and laid down a banner reading “#BlackLivesMatter” (Gray 2014). Largely young, multi-ethnic demonstrators momentarily blocked traffic along this key commuting artery, managing to get the attention of drivers before police cleared them from the roadway. Such scenes subsequently became a fixture of BLM protests post-2014—occurring in cities across the US and focusing attention on numerous, ongoing incidents of racist police violence.

Major roadways blocked by activists include Lake Shore Drive in Chicago, the Brooklyn Bridge in New York, 14th Street Bridge in Washington, DC, and the on-ramps of the Bay Bridge in San Francisco. Protesters in Minneapolis-St. Paul blocked Interstate 94 for several hours, prompting riot charges against dozens of people (Badger 2016). Another major wave of roadway protests occurred following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020, including I-94 again, I-630 in Little Rock, Arkansas, I-40 in Memphis, Tennessee, and I-75 in Cincinnati, Ohio (Poon 2020).

Conducted without permits or advanced notice, protests drew attention from highway officials, commuters stuck in traffic, and overhead traffic helicopters. Remarkable images, showing narrow lines of bodies blocking multi-lane highways, traffic sometimes snarled for miles as a result, circulated through the media (Figure 1). “It is about disrupting business as usual”, said one BLM activist, acknowledging the material efficacy of this form of civil disobedience. Yet, such

protests also work on the symbolic register, providing “a visual that folks are willing to put their bodies on the line” (cited in Badger 2016). Like iconic images from the 2014 Ferguson protests, where unarmed demonstrators are shown confronting the rifles of dozens of armour-clad police (Bouie 2014), highway blockades depict highly unequal relations of vulnerability. These demonstrations are thereby a form of non-violent resistance that “mobilises vulnerability as part of its own exercise of power” (Butler 2014:118).

“Vulnerable Road Users”

Today’s taken-for-granted understanding of streets as essentially motor thoroughfares tends to be projected back on to pre-automotive streets. But until the 1920s, cars were at best “uninvited guests” on American city streets (Norton 2011:1).

The sudden arrival of large numbers of cars in the early 20th century brought injury and fatality on a scale known previously only on battlefields (Norton 2011:25), forcing cities to face new questions about who belongs in the street and who does not (Norton 2011: Chapter 1). Whilst all movement carries the potential for violence, motor vehicles pose especial risks, due to their mass, speed, and sheer numbers on city streets. These risks, however, are posed primarily not to vehicle drivers or occupants, but to non-motorised road users, who, lacking the protection afforded by the steel car-body, become *vulnerable road users* (Culver 2018:149).

In the early days of the automobile’s introduction, rarely were pedestrians—even when they strolled into the roadway wherever they chose—blamed for collisions with motorists. The automobile bore most of the legal responsibility and popular blame for roadside casualties (Norton 2011:11). Vehicles and their operators, responsible and irresponsible drivers, were not clearly distinguished, but

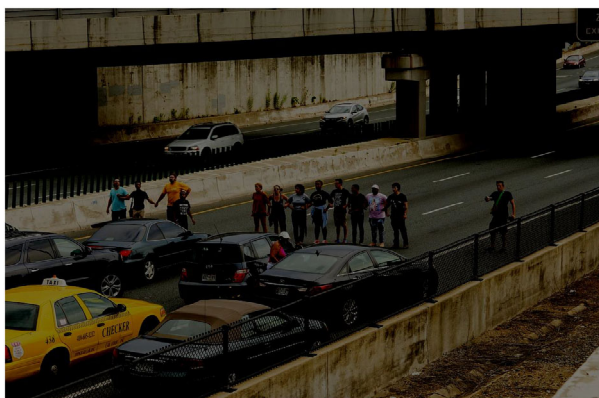


Figure 1: Protesters confront cars on Interstate 83 in Baltimore (source: <https://pxhere.com/> CC0)

especially reckless motorists could be subjected to attacks by angry crowds (Norton 2011:25–27).

Yet by the 1930s, the situation was reversed. Through a combination of substantial wealth, effective rhetorical strategies, growing national organisation, favourable political conditions, and the sympathies of a growing minority of motorists—what Norton (2011:17) calls “motordom” had redefined the city street by the 1930s. Whilst motor traffic physically turned city streets into “lethal rivers of kinetic energy” (Roberts 2013:72), streets came to be socially constructed as the rightful domain of the motorist. This was enshrined through the invention of the crime of “jaywalking” (Norton 2011:71–79), laws which “eroded the traditional right of the public to public spaces” (Shill 2020:529) and could be “selectively enforced against unpopular minorities” (Lewyn 2017:1173). Collisions involving vehicles came to be figured as “accidents”, a term that as (Shill 2020:526; see also Jain 2004) argues “implies a break in the chain of causation that would tend to preclude tort or criminal liability”. Drivers seldom face criminal sanction when they injure or kill with their cars (Culver 2018).

The car managed to clear-up its bloody reputation in cities therefore, not by killing fewer people, but “by enlisting others to *share this responsibility for the carnage*” (Norton 2011:17, emphasis added). The result was cities custom-built for private motorists, and a country increasingly enamoured with the car, which came to be a central signifier of “freedom” and the “American Way” (Seiler 2008). Particular affective dispositions are thought to be entrained through driving, most startlingly captured in a quote from Adorno, from the 1950s, but deeply resonant with recent developments: “And which driver is not tempted, merely by the power of his engine, to wipe out the vermin of the street, pedestrians, children, and cyclists?” (Adorno 2005:40; Urry 2004:29).

The next section of the article documents the vehicular violence that followed the wave of BLM and other highway blockades that swept the US post-2014. The following sections then consider less obvious yet more enduring ways in which the car-system might be said to have been employed as a weapon against minority communities in the US.

Weaponised Vehicles

“Run them over” reads a comment posted on an article about a Martin Luther King Jr day march, posted in January 2016 by a police sergeant in St Paul, Minnesota. “Keep traffic flowing and don’t slow down for any of these idiots who try and block the street” (cited in Xiong 2016). The comment is just one of thousands that have been posted in response to highway blockades over the last few years. The phrase “Run them down!” encapsulates the spirit of the backlash, which gained momentum on social media as part of an extensive online right-wing ecosystem. The backlash involved encouraging, “joking” about, justifying, or carrying out real-life vehicle ramming attacks against protesters. The vast majority of participants in both the online and real-world backlash have been white, male motorists. Significantly, elected representatives and members of law enforcement were amongst those sharing anti-blockade

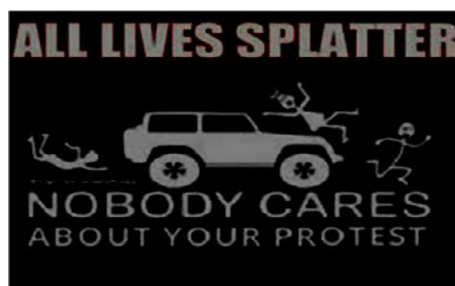


Figure 2: “All lives splatter” meme

memes. A South Dakota state representative posted an “All Lives Splatter” image on Facebook (Figure 2) that depicts a car striking protesters, stating “I think this is a movement we can all support” (May 2017).

Mainstream conservative media, including an offshoot of Fox News’ website, also reproduced the central meme at the heart of the backlash: running over protesters. “Here’s A Reel Of Cars Plowing Through Protesters Trying To Block The Road”—embedded in the article was a minute-and-a-half long video, set to rapper Ludacris’ “Move Bitch”, showing a succession of vehicles driving through protesters (Kasprak 2016).

Social media memes were soon followed by real-world incidents. Many of these incidents were captured in photos or videos shared on social media. In January 2015, a Minneapolis driver accelerated into a Ferguson solidarity rally and ran over a 16-year-old girl. On 8 July 2016, a man drove into a crowd of protesters outside the police department in Ferguson. On 10 July 2016, a South Carolina fire captain threatened to run over BLM protesters who had shut down Interstate 126, and an SUV driver in southern Illinois drove through a group of BLM protesters (Grabar 2017).

On 12 August 2017, during the “Unite the Right” white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, James Fields drove his car into a crowd of protesters, killing 32-year-old Heather Heyer and injuring more than a dozen others. In the months preceding his attack, he had shared anti-blockade memes (BBC 2019). Fields’ legal defence claimed that his actions were an attempt to defend himself from a hostile crowd. Nevertheless, he was convicted in 2019 of hit and run, first-degree murder, and eight counts of malicious wounding (ibid.).

The police killing of George Floyd in May 2020 in Minneapolis triggered possibly the largest protests in US history. After a pause, the vehicular violence against roadway protesters resumed, with over 100 recorded incidents of drivers hitting protesters, and numbers of incidents spiking in the period June–July 2020 (Hauck 2020). For example, in Lakeside, Virginia, an “avowed Klansman” drove through a crowd, wounding one person (Domingo 2020); in Visalia, California, occupants of a Jeep displaying a “Keep America Great” flag hit two protesters in the road (Haas 2020); a vehicle drove into a crowd of demonstrators in Minneapolis protesting the killing of Winston Boogie Smith, killing a woman, Deona Knajdek, and injuring three others (Walsh and Xiong 2021); and in July a motorist

in Austin, Texas, crashed through an intersection filled with protesters and then shot and killed a protester who confronted him (Danner 2020).

Whilst many everyday objects can be weaponised, motor vehicles are alone in providing a readily accessible, although oddly (in most places) neglected way of achieving casualty rates comparable with explosives or firearms. Cars and trucks are the best way of getting “bang for your buck” in the absence of such firepower. Even more so than the car-bomb, the favoured weapon of low-tech insurgents (Davis 2007), motor vehicles “democratise” destructive capacity, empowering the spontaneously acting “lone wolf”, who becomes concealed in urban traffic flow. The motor vehicle—which Gilroy (2010:13) describes as the “ur-commodity” of US capitalism—a technology premised on (literally) empowering individuals through their automobilisation—finds practical application in the violence of the lone wolf killer, who provides a startling image of the underside of “American automotive utopianism” (Gilroy 2010:16).

Essentially, as cycling advocate Aaron Naparstek observes, “every motorist is rolling down the street with a loaded gun” (cited in Bliss 2017). This is not just a metaphor; for the automobile can itself be considered a form of *firepower*. It is a product, ultimately, of innovation in the ability to harness the power of fire (Dalby 2018), and resembles the firearm as much as it does its predecessor, the horse-drawn carriage. Both share the principle of internal combustion—the capture of usable mechanical energy from controlled explosions—of gunpowder or fuel—in confined spaces. This “shared thermophysical logic” (Clark 2018) was apprehended by both Lewis Mumford (2010:88) in his characterisation of the gun as a “one-cylinder internal combustion engine”, and by Joseph Needham (cited in Clark 2018) in his description of the car’s piston rod as a “tethered cannonball”.

“When encountering such mobs remember”, read a tweet posted by an Oregon police officer, the week Alton Sterling and Philando Castile were shot and killed by police, “there are 3 pedals on your floor. Push the right one [the accelerator] all the way down” (Salinger 2016). Again, in an echo of the “reverse logic” at the heart of so many infamous cases of racist police violence, the accelerator pedal here functions analogously to the policeman’s trigger; both are responses to unexpected or threatening encounters with Black bodies. Protesters are framed as the true threat—“mobs” warranting a pre-emptive push of the pedal in lieu of a pull of the trigger. In contrast with the gun, however, the vehicle’s prosaic use as means of transport makes it possible to disguise its violence as *accidental*.

Weaponised Right-of-Way

If you want to kill someone and not get punished, use a car. (Saffron 2016)

In numerous states legislation has been proposed to address the spread of road-way protests. Although it is already illegal in nearly all US states to be a pedestrian on limited-access highways, there have been successive waves of proposed anti-protest legislation (Cidell 2020). In 2017, 21 bills were introduced in 17 states, all but one of which experienced a highway protest, to further punish or criminalise

protesters occupying road space. Thirteen of the bills either increased penalties for existing laws or increased the severity of the violation. Seven of the bills created new violations, from “maliciously impeding traffic” (Mississippi) to “mass traffic obstruction” (Indiana), to “economic terrorism” (North Carolina and Washington). At the extreme, eight states introduced legislation that would indemnify drivers who “exercised due caution” but hit a protester in the road. While most of these bills were never turned into law, at least 93 similar bills have been proposed in 35 states since George Floyd was killed in 2020 (Abdollah 2021). Two were signed into law in Oklahoma and Florida, indemnifying drivers who hit protesters (Pahwa 2021).

Motorists’ fear of pedestrian protesters—despite the vulnerability of the latter to the former—was appealed to in order to justify new legislation. For example, North Carolina state representative Justin Burr said, “As we’ve seen, time and time again, folks run out in the middle of the streets and the interstates in Charlotte and attempt to block traffic”. The Republican commented that he wants to ensure that “*drivers* don’t have to fear driving through Charlotte or anywhere in North Carolina” (Jensen 2017, emphasis added). This legislation thereby represents a particularly stark instance of a broad range of sociolegal interventions which not only reflect, but also reproduce “one of the greatest yet most naturalised power asymmetries within the built environment: that between the mass, and speed, and spatial extensiveness of the automobile against the smallness, slowness, and compactness of the pedestrian and bicyclist” (Prytherch 2012:310).

In effect, such measures would further remove the burden of liability for death and injury from drivers. This would effectively provide the means to disguise the deliberate killing of roadway protesters as “accidents”—with attributions of “intent” increasingly murky. In testimony to the Tennessee state legislature, where one such bill was proposed, activist Justin Jones put it thusly: “already you have cars at every protest revving their engines ... this bill is a license to hunt and a license to kill” (cited in ICNL 2021).

The justification for the killing or “letting die” of roadway protesters—or the removal of criminal sanction against those who hit them—ultimately rests on the idea that demonstrators are “where they shouldn’t be” (Cresswell 1996). Such laws might therefore be thought of as the transportation equivalent of the so-called “Stand Your Ground” laws, which inspired the acquittal of the killer of Trayvon Martin, George Zimmerman. This legislation provides that people may use deadly force when they reasonably believe it to be necessary to defend against a threat of death or serious bodily harm (Catalfamo 2007). Under such a law, people have no duty to retreat before using deadly force in self-defence, so long as they are deemed to be in a place where they are lawfully present. Such laws empower “everyday citizens to act upon their unquestioned racism with violent impunity”. Here the “mere presence of a racialised body can constitute a perceived threat that can justify the use of lethal force” (Derickson 2017:231). The right to move by car—whatever the cost—mirrors and complements the right to stand your ground—whatever the cost.

Through naturalising the highway’s function as traffic-only space, it becomes possible to hold the reckless protester herself as culpable for resulting bodily

harm, rather than the driver who hits her. “You need to obey the laws of the freeway”, said Minnesota state representative Kathy Lohmer, a Republican from Stillwater. “They are there for a purpose. Freeways are not really public spaces, like parks and places like that. You need a license to drive on the freeway. You can’t walk on the freeway” (CBS Minnesota 2017). However, what such pronouncements fail to grasp is that the “very public character of the space is being disputed, and even fought over, when these crowds gather” (Butler 2018:7). This point is especially pertinent when we consider the history of the US interstate roadway system.

Weaponised Roadways

The most expensive public infrastructure project in US history, the interstate highway system, expresses perfectly what one commentator called “the intense dedication of our age to motion” (cited in Seiler 2008:71). The Interstate Highway Act of 1956 implemented a national roadway system both within and between major metropolitan areas. The federal government shouldered nine-tenths of the cost of construction, but local officials often had influence over the routing of these new roads (Avila 2014:19–20).

City officials and private sector partners saw these new routeways as both growth generators and “slum” destroyers. In most US cities in the decades after WWII, these new roads were steered along paths that bulldozed through “blighted neighbourhoods”, where the poorest residents—almost always racial minorities—were housed (Kruse 2019). The routing of highways to necessitate the destruction of poor communities of colour was commonplace across the US; from cities in the South like Jacksonville, Miami, Nashville, and New Orleans, to metropolises across the rest of the country, including Los Angeles, Detroit, Chicago, Pittsburgh, St Louis, and Washington, DC (Kruse 2019; Seiler 2008:25–26). At its peak between 1956 and 1966, highway construction demolished an estimated 37,000 urban housing units per year (Avila 2014:20). Marshall Berman proffered that the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway, which displaced as many as 50,000 New York residents, should be seen in a similar light to the all-out or guerrilla warfare of Belfast or Beirut (cited in Graham 2010:43). Indeed, as historian Nathan Connolly argues, if the goal was to clear slums, “the best way to get bang for your buck was to use the highway as slum clearance instrument” (cited in Badger 2016; Connolly 2014).

Key to the interstate project was the removal of highways from their geographical and social context and the creation of enclosed, standardised, and limited access zones. “The interstate highways and their ancillary built environments enervated what we would call ‘place’ by traumatically reconfiguring a range of landscapes and communities”, argues Cotton Seiler (2008:125). While interstate routes were routinely employed to destroy Black neighbourhoods, they were also enlisted to keep Black and white neighbourhoods separate. The Atlanta Downtown Connector (I-75 and I-20)—scene of highway protests in August 2014—provides an illustrative example. Conceived as a means of addressing chronic traffic congestion, this “Connector” also served as a convenient means through which

to buttress racial segregation. I-75 ran to the north and south and afforded the annexation of the white northern suburbs, allowing a white majority to be maintained. I-20 dissected the city from east to west, enabling the expansion of the Downtown area—whilst in the process destroying once thriving Black business districts and communities (Bayor 1996:73–74). The route of Interstate 20, the corridor linking I-75 and I-85 in Atlanta’s centre, was deliberately plotted to serve as “the boundary between the White and Negro communities” on the west side of town, in the words of Mayor Bill Hartsfield (cited in Kruse 2019).

As it provided a means for high-speed travel between downtown areas and suburbs, the interstate highway system also enabled forms of “white flight”, wherein largely white and affluent inner-city residents relocated to the suburbs, commuting by car to work, eroding the tax base of many inner-city areas and contributing to their dilapidation. Roughly 60,000 white residents left Atlanta in the 1960s, many of them relocating to suburbs along the northern rim (Kruse 2019). The resulting exclusion of Black people from housing and labour markets led to huge wealth disparities, and effectively produced “the suburbs as ‘white’ and the ‘inner city’ as Black” (Derickson 2017:233; McKittrick 2011; Wilson 2007). In cities across the US, traffic arteries continue to function as dividing lines separating predominantly Black and white districts. While high-speed routes were opened from the suburbs to city centres, in predominantly Black districts there were often a notable lack of freeway entrances. West Baltimore—where major protests occurred in 2015 after the police killing of Freddie Gray—provides an illustrative example, effectively sealing off one side of the city from the other (Miller 2018).

The interstate highway network, in summary, was built by demolishing Black homes and neighbourhoods, and worked to separate Black and white residents. The imperative to make way for the motorist, sanctioned a programme of racist slum clearance, infrastructural violence whose deliberate character was concealed in the functional requirements of city planning and the euphemistic language of “urban renewal”. The latter, in writer James Baldwin’s words, effectively meant “Negro removal” (see Graham 2015). Along with practices such as redlining and the systematic denial of services to Black communities, weaponised roadway infrastructure has enabled practical forms of segregation to persist long after its formal abolition in states across the US. The movement of whites to outer suburban areas in North American cities (and other cities around the world) is enabled by automobility, which also enables travel through spaces inhabited by Blacks or other minorities without having to interact with them (Henderson 2006).

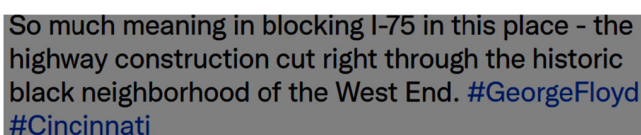
Driving through bodies protesting racial injustice echoes the historic violence involved in the weaponisation of highways themselves against communities of colour in America. These two forms of injustice—one interpersonal, a matter of ramming vehicles into bodies on streets; the other infrastructural, the routing of streets through the heart of communities as enacted through bulldozers demolishing houses—work together, the latter literally laying the ground for the former. As Mimi Sheller (2018: 68) observes, the inequities of the automobility system “range across all scales of spatial formation, from bodily harm, community decay and urban failure, to global pollution and economic injustice”. In auto-centric

cities, as Robert Bullard and others have shown, people of colour constitute a disproportionate percentage of pedestrian fatalities, and generally pay the highest social, economic, and environmental costs, and receive the fewest benefits from a car-dominated transport system (Bullard et al. 2007; Schmitt 2020). Nevertheless, the US—like much of the rest of the world following it—is deeply car-dependent and continues to “envision personal mobility as a freedom and individual right” (Sheller 2018:74). As new laws in some US states argue, that includes the right to keep moving no matter who might be in your path.

Conclusion: Whose Streets?

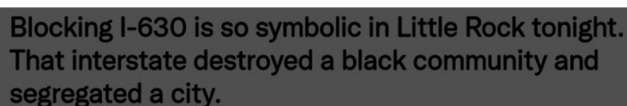
For the roadway protests that have come to be so heavily associated with BLM, the main goal was to bring attention to the epidemic of police violence affecting communities of colour across the US. While calling attention to the long-standing role of highways and cars in racial injustice might not be an explicit aim of such protests, there is evidence that at least some roadway protesters were aware of the highway’s history (see Figures 3 and 4). Nevertheless, these events testify to Judith Butler’s (2018:8) argument that such protests “signify in excess of what is said” and “apart from, any particular demands they make”. For the reasons detailed in this article, the embodied act of occupying highway space resonates in ways that deviate from, but are also profoundly complementary to, the aims of protest organisers. Moreover, the “meaning” of such protests cannot be defined in advance, but emerges, along with the unfolding dynamics of protest and counter-protest. Through the deadly backlash they engender, roadway protests effectively force into the open the “hidden racial imperatives” concealed within the mundane infrastructures and settings that compose everyday life (Lipsitz 2011:15). The relationship between (auto)mobility and race in the United States is, for Bullard (2004:9), “the nation’s dirty secret”.

Cars, highways, and the rules that surround them are much more than just an inert background on or against which processes of racial contestation play themselves out. Making way for the motorist has long sanctioned racist violence, whose character as such is cloaked in a functional requirement to maintain traffic flow. Our account thereby resonates with Sarah Seo’s (2019:15) recent intervention, in which she argues that “the policing of cars facilitated the build-up of



So much meaning in blocking I-75 in this place - the highway construction cut right through the historic black neighborhood of the West End. #GeorgeFloyd #Cincinnati

Figure 3: Tweet posted by activist, 20 May 2020



Blocking I-630 is so symbolic in Little Rock tonight. That interstate destroyed a black community and segregated a city.

Figure 4: Tweet posted by activist, 31 May 2020

police governance throughout the United States". In contrast to the account presented here, Seo (2019:20) details how the authority to *stop* cars for minor traffic offences, combined with the authority to detain people for questioning, empowered police to "take advantage of the thicket of procedures to exercise their power in discretionary, even discriminatory, ways". Again in contrast with our account, Seo (2019:7) argues that the over-policing of minorities was a kind of unintended consequence of the motor vehicle's ascendance. In this article, however, we have stressed practices involving the deliberate weaponising of vehicles, roads, and traffic rules in "the reproduction of racial hierarchy" (Gilroy 2010:14) and in direct response to anti-racist protests.

Highway blockades challenge a spatial convention that has especial traction: that the function of public street space should be to move private motor traffic, rather than support the assembly of pedestrians or protesters. The vehicle-as-weapon attacks that have been carried out by counter-protesters embody a murderous reaffirmation of the motorist's right to the road, supporting what Sheller (2018:84) describes as "racialised white ethno-nationalism-on-wheels". Killing in the act of moving, or as part of a routine action such as commuting to work, might be said to reaffirm a power relation in which protesters' lives do not matter—instead becoming mere matter—reduced to the status of "roadkill" for drivers' convenience. In contrast to roadway protesters' mobilisation of bodily vulnerability, the act of driving through protesters gleefully exploits the asymmetry that characterises the encounter between body and vehicle; these practices can be thought of therefore as exemplary instances of the compensatory violence Cara Daggett (2018:25) associates with "petro-masculinity", a term which denotes "the historic role of fossil fuel systems in buttressing white patriarchal rule" (see also Malm and the Zetkin Collective 2021).

Historian Rod Clare (2016:124) observes that the Black Lives Matter movement is just the latest chapter in a struggle over black mobility in the United States: "Implicit in the rise of BLM and its attendant demands and concerns is the long-standing issue of black mobility. That is, where can black people go and when can they go there?" This question is deeply linked, as we have attempted to show, to the question of who can occupy the roadways, and how. Despite civil rights era decisions which conferred free mobility for all Americans, "latent white privilege often means that connections between mobility, citizenship, and whiteness persist, shaping contemporary black geographies" (Hague 2010:343). Conditions of injustice are deeply engrained in the built environment of the street, from the codification of unfairness in statutory and case law, to their manifestation through auto-centric design. This injustice is only furthered through the backlash to highway protests that once again privileges drivers above people on foot and intensifies the vehicular violence that has been part of the US urban landscape from the start of the automobile era.

Endnote

¹ We here focus on the pedestrian occupation of highways in acts of political protest. The use of truck convoys to shut-down entire cities – as in the 2022 blockades of Ottawa by

truckers in response to anti-Covid measures – represents a novel tactic deserving of its own treatment; contrasting starkly with protests involving the pedestrian occupation of traffic infrastructure, these blockades involve the out-and-out occupation of road space by vehicle traffic itself.

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