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## Tandem Travel: Reconsidering Road Narratives and Tactics for Subversive Travel

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NICOLE EMANUEL

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Fig 1. Author (riding in stoker position) and family, aboard mobile home. Photo by author.

The Eureka Lodge on the Glennallen Highway is one of the only places I know of where you can still get a cup of coffee for 25 cents. The coffee is pretty weak, but the pancakes, eggs, hash browns, and cinnamon rolls are all delicious and just as economical, which makes Eureka Lodge an appealing place for hungry travelers to put their journeys on pause for a moment.

The last time I was at the Lodge, I was especially eager for a rest and a big breakfast because I had not used a car, truck, RV, motorcycle, or any kind of motor, in fact, to get there. Instead, my partner and I were pedaling a tandem bicycle attached to a trailer, in which our two canine

companions perched atop dry-bags stuffed with clothing and camping supplies. We had been on the road for about forty days at that point, and our hope was to keep at it for a whole year. We intended to ride from Alaska, where we had been living while my partner and I earned graduate degrees at the University in Fairbanks, to Minnesota, where we could spend a little time visiting my cousin and aunt. Once we reached Minneapolis, we would set another goal to ride toward. We were thinking possibly Texas, where my partner had some family. Maybe then we would go West to visit friends in the Bay Area, or to the Pacific Northwest. We were not sure where our final destination would be. We were just hoping to keep biking and camping together for as long as our bodies, equipment, and savings would hold out.

We were sitting at a picnic table spangled with patriotic designs and lifting forkfuls of maple-drenched nourishment to our mouths when a stranger in spandex approached us. It was evident from his attire that he, too, had ridden his bike to the Lodge. After a bit of chatting, we learned that he had fallen in love with “adventure cycling” (as it is sometimes called) years earlier, and had been on several “bike tours” in far-flung places. He had flown up to Alaska from the Lower 48 and had about ten days off work to complete the route he had planned, before he would catch a flight back. Being on a schedule and all, he eventually said that he had better head into the restaurant to place an order. But before he did, the cycling stranger gave us a piece of parting advice. “You’re honestly doing pretty good for first-time tourers,” he said. “Your one mistake was bringing them.” He gestured toward Pablo and Parka, who were sniffing the ground at our feet, in hopes that an eggy, buttery bite might fall. When we were taking a pause from biking, we usually let the dogs out of the Happy Ride Doggie Bike Trailer, so that they could fully extend their limbs and get comfortable. Some part of me felt an urge to tell the man that his one mistake was thinking he knew anything at all about why we were on a long bike ride. That response would have been rude and unproductive, though, so it was not difficult for me to bite my tongue and smile. But his dismissal—his certainty that bringing our dogs along on our trip was simply a rookie’s “mistake”—revealed the chasm of difference between what “life on the road” meant to this man and what it was to us.

I have a feeling that someone who would understand the nature of the bike journey we were on might be the comics creator Eleanor Davis. In 2016, Davis rode her bicycle over 1,700 miles, across Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, and into Mississippi, before stopping just 600 miles short of her house in Athens, Georgia. Davis’s journey concluded not with a triumphal return home, but with a quiet morning spent resting her tired knees and reading *Middlemarch* at a McDonald’s while waiting for her husband to pick her up. She writes: “It would have felt so good to bike all the way there! But it feels good, too, to let myself stop.”

That value—honoring the impulse to stop when it feels right—informed not only Davis’s actual long-distance bike ride, but also the graphic memoir she created about that trip. In *You & a Bike & a Road*, Davis uses a loose, sketchy aesthetic. She leaves in crossed-out words and eraser marks. Her style is penciled and rough, which creates the impression that these words and images were committed to paper in the present, moving moment, rather than meticulously planned.

As spontaneous as it looks, however, the sketchiness of this road memoir can be thought of as an intentional strategy that Davis took up to counter one of her major challenges as a creator. In an interview with Annie Mok at *The Comics Journal*, Davis described herself as “kind of a control freak” and said that if she spends too long obsessing over the details of her comics, she can lose her inspiration. Davis finds that excessive time spent planning and editing “kills the artwork —especially the artwork, but you can also kill the story [...]if I’ve worked on something for too long, I get bored of it, and then the art dies.” In this sense, then, the ability to know when to “let herself stop” is crucial to both how Davis approaches riding a bicycle as well as to her practice as an artist.

Letting yourself stop is a radical act. Perhaps this has always been so, but it is undeniably true for those of us enmeshed in twenty-first century neoliberalism. Jenny Odell articulates the radical dimensions of the act of “stopping” in her 2019 book *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. As Odell says, “In a world where our value is determined by our productivity, many of us find our every last minute captured, optimized, or appropriated as a financial resource by the technologies we use daily” (ix). The daily technologies Odell is referring to are the tools of social media and digital communication. As her book’s subtitle implies, the ideas of “stopping” and “doing nothing” that she is focused on have to do with disconnecting, with unplugging from the ceaseless streams of media and information being broadcast across the world 24/7.

The claim that modern technologies ruthlessly drive a progress-at-all-costs culture that converts time into money applies just as much to technologies associated with transportation as it does to communication platforms. In centuries past, travel infrastructure encompassed everything from ocean-going vessels and pedestrian pathways to railroad stations and horse stables. Today, however, there is a single mode of transportation that dominates the sphere of personal travel in North America: the automobile. And despite the fact that they are so often presented as symbols of freedom and autonomy, automobiles are not very good at letting their users determine when and how to stop. Cars require a wide swath of territory just to slow themselves down to a safe stopping speed after getting off the highway, and then they must be kept somewhere. These may sound like trivial issues, but as books like Donald Shoup’s *The High Cost of Free Parking* and Henry Grabar’s *Paved Paradise: How Parking Explains the World* attest, the necessity of storing motorized vehicles has contributed significantly to America’s housing crisis as well as to the global climate catastrophe.

Perhaps it is tempting to read too much into how changes in modes of personal travel shape changes in culture at large. In a recent article in *The New Yorker*, Adam Gopnik pointed out that “the history of transportation tends to span half-century intervals, marking whole epochs in consciousness” (64). He goes on to suggest that the sweeping nature of such shifts may explain why “transportation histories [...] tend to be highly moralizing: we can be amused by the small gradations in how we eat, but major alterations in how we move must have, we think, some cause or even conspiracy behind them” (64). What’s more, changes in transportation infrastructure are not only comprehensive in scope—they are also imposed upon individuals from the top-down, which likely bears on their tendency to arouse conspiratorial suspicions.

This is especially true of highways and automobiles, which brings me back to my argument that these tools of transportation are particularly bad at letting their users decide when to stop. In contrast to walking, skating, skiing, using a wheelchair, or riding a bike, scooter, or other human-powered device, the car is unwieldy. It is also subject to draconian regulation imposed on the user from outside; the danger that motorized vehicles pose, both to drivers and everyone else, means they are subjected to strict control via laws and surveillance.

This is the paradox at the heart of car culture. Roads are frequently portrayed as spaces that symbolize freedom, despite the fact that they are so tightly monitored. The fundamental tension between autonomy and mobility on the one hand and restrictive regulation on the other makes the road a particularly confused expression of “the commons.” Another contradictory aspect of roads is that they are often understood as atopic—as places that are not really places, but merely a means of conquering time and space to connect a point of origin to a destination.

What does it mean to live one’s daily life in such a liminal common space, especially when that life is already entangled with other species, people, perceptions, and projections? This is the question that I believe is at the heart of Davis’s road memoir. By observing a place that was created for cars from the slant seat of a bicycle, Davis is able to offer readers a unique view of the road, one that would not be possible from the breakneck perspective of an automobile. Her memoir’s probing exploration of the assumptions and conventions that shape long-distance travel as an experience—as well as the genre conventions of road stories—is what makes *You & a Bike & a Road* a prime example of that literary mode that I like to call the Carrier Bag Road Narrative, in reference to Ursula K. LeGuin’s carrier bag theory of fiction. By drawing on LeGuin’s ideas as well as the everyday philosophy of Michel de Certeau, I define the Carrier Bag Road Narrative and argue for its relevance in countering ideas about travel, transportation, and mobility that have become entrenched—both figuratively and literally—in contemporary culture and in the built environments that determine how we move through the world.

In contrast to the conquering of space and time that is enabled by the private motorized vehicle, Carrier Bag Road Narratives offer a different vision of travel. They subvert the notion that transportation should be fast, efficient, purposeful, convenient, goal-driven, and oriented around the desires of individuals competing for space—all symptoms of the conquering mindset. Timo Müller, borrowing Bakhtin’s notion of the “chronotope,” argues that in twentieth-century American fiction, “the road” as a literary trope is defined by its capacity to obliterate distance and duration. Müller writes:

The road was linear: a straight line that cut through whatever obstacles there were [...] that was clearly demarcated from the environment. [...] The concept of time underlying the road was strictly linear as well, and it was oriented toward the future. [...] Roads were made ever more linear, cars were made ever faster: ideally, “we got there in no time.” (99)

Today, we have also widened lanes and extended on-and off-ramps, so as to maximize both the number of vehicles that can maneuver on our highways and also the speed at which they can do so. In the United States, our government has subsidized the experience of conquering the landscape, and even conquering our own neighborhoods, by building highways right through the hearts of cities.

A road teaches us to devalue all space between destination points and to guard our personal time jealously. It establishes a void that needs to be traversed quickly. In contemporary America's capitalist culture, as poet Elisa Gabbert observes, "Distance is a kind of time, which means distance is also a kind of money" (41). The road—and transportation infrastructure at large—is one of the primary technologies by which the capitalist system influences our relationship to our environment. In justifying the investment in building highways, the government has literally calculated hypothetical time saved by commuters driving fast as earned wages. It instills in us the brutal urgency of getting places as fast as possible—the logical justification for efficiency at whatever cost.

And make no mistake: roads are costly indeed. \$200 billion a year to maintain American roads and an average of \$5,000 per person to use them (Urban Institute; [move.org](https://www.move.org)). That is before considering the 42,915 American automobile-related fatalities that occurred in 2021 (NHTSA). Human fatalities, I must specify, as no administration currently tracks the lives of American armadillos, deer, foxes, opossums, salamanders, cats, dogs, or other nonhuman creatures who are destroyed yearly—daily—every second—on our highways. The very term "roadkill" itself normalizes this death, making loss of life that is the direct product of infrastructure which humans have intentionally created seem natural, inevitable, and unpreventable. It displaces blame away from drivers and their vehicles and onto land that we have roped into this system of conquering space and time.

The top-down mode of control embedded in transportation infrastructure makes it a classic example of what Michel de Certeau calls a strategy. He describes strategies as methods used by forces with authority in order to establish normative rules. Strategies exist in dynamic tension with tactics, which are modes of resistance to the status quo practiced by those with relatively less power. In de Certeau's words: "A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance" (xix). To use a modern road tactically, then, means subverting this tool which has been strategized for fast, purposeful, autonomous transportation and instead engaging in travel that is slow, low-cost, low-consumption, open-ended, not bound by time or direction, and deeply engaged with the surroundings and beings that occupy the place where one is traveling.

This tactical mode of travel resonates profoundly with the type of story LeGuin was seeking to tell when she announced her support for narratives that are "full of beginnings without ends, of initiations, of losses, of transformations and translations, and far more tricks than conflicts, far fewer triumphs than snares and delusions" (169). LeGuin contrasted this "carrier bag" form of storytelling with the "linear, progressive, Time's-(killing)-arrow mode of the Techno-Heroic," as she termed it—what I'm calling the Conquest Narrative (169). LeGuin questions the

preeminence that Conquest Narratives accord to weapons and to accounts of human history in which our species is set apart from other creatures by masculine technologies of destruction, by “all the sticks and spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things” (167). Instead, she redirects our attention toward another class of tools that *Homo sapiens* have been experimenting with for at least as great a portion of our history, namely, objects designed to hold other objects: “A leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container. A holder. A recipient” (166).

By aligning the ongoing life stories of carrier bag fiction with transformations, translations, and tricks, LeGuin is also speaking a language that is highly compatible with de Certeau’s conception of tactics, those “clever tricks of the ‘weak’ within the order established by the ‘strong,’” as he says (40). Indeed, one of the reasons I am drawn to both LeGuin and de Certeau is for the resilient flexibility their frameworks both offer. LeGuin’s “Carrier Bag” essay does not simply reinscribe a binary between masculine story-telling tools on the one hand and feminine forms on the other. The weapon and the carrier bag are not to be understood as opposites, completely closed off and separate, but as categories with permeable boundaries. Like de Certeau’s tactics and strategies, they imbricate and exist in dynamic friction.

This makes me wonder: how should we categorize the technology that our strategized, capitalistic system of modern transportation infrastructure was designed around, namely, the automobile? Does the technology of the car function like a carrier bag? Or like a weapon? Or can it possibly both?

Cars can undeniably be weapons. They can be wielded with deadly intent, as they were in Waukesha, Charlottesville, Toronto, and elsewhere, but they kill much more frequently than that, as the statistics on traffic “accidents” I cited earlier can attest. On the other hand, a car is, after all, a vehicle, and vehicles are used for carrying. They hold something as it is ferried somewhere. Cars always carry at least a driver, or they did, although the engineers of autonomous vehicles have been working hard to change that. But perhaps the fact that cars can be made sense of simultaneously as tools for carrying and for killing is why it matters so much how we narrate stories of travel.

I first encountered LeGuin’s carrier bag essay while I was in the midst of experiencing my own road narrative firsthand, which brings me back to that picnic table in front of the Eureka Lodge. What the stranger in spandex who called our dogs a mistake did not see about our ride was that for us, and in true carrier bag fashion, the physical distance we managed to cover in a day and the destinations we were aiming for mattered less than the fact that we had a whole year to experiment with new forms of experiencing home, mobility, and the tactics of daily life in ways that are not generally prescribed in contemporary North American culture. We were cultivating capacities like the ones that Davis strengthened on her road trip too—skills such as letting yourself stop. Tuning into the present moment. Moving through a new environment with humility and curiosity. The tandem bicycle was, for us, the perfect tool for enacting a mode of travel that allowed us to hone this sort of open awareness. When we were riding, we were two human bodies moving in sync in order to propel a multispecies team of four bodies

across a landscape. The cooperation and distributed agency that this motion naturally creates allowed us riders to learn a lot about ourselves, about each other, and about the entanglement between activity and passivity.

I spent a lot of my life growing up exposed to stories of adventure that made road trips look exciting, meaningful, spiritually fulfilling, and inaccessible. These stories felt exclusive because they emphasized some combination of factors such as strength, power, physical ability, extravagant resource use, sometimes a very masculine sense of invulnerability, even if the hero embodying that fortitude were not gendered male. Encountering stories like Davis's and LeGuin's helped me to imagine the possible tactics by which a road built for speed could be repurposed in order to travel more slowly and intentionally.

Looking at travels, whether real or imagined, through this lens of the carrier bag helps to clarify the impacts of travel narratives that emphasize some details or edit out others. When we tell stories about life on the road, are we leaving out the mundane while highlighting the scenic view? Are we deemphasizing dependencies in favor of ruggedly individualistic accomplishment? Are we glossing over mishaps, foibles, or failures so as to tell a story that is more streamlined, more familiar?

Any trip could be told in a way that emphasizes the aspects of it that fit the carrier bag form, so it's not a matter of "being" a Carrier Bag Road Narrative or not. It's a matter of celebrating the confusion, the everyday, the multitude of diverse and completely commonplace sights you see and people you meet on the road. It's about revealing the tactics you employ that make your trip accessible to you, whether that means bringing your children or pets on the road, using an eBike because you need the electric assist, or finding ways to travel frugally, maybe by stealth camping, supplementing your snack budget with foraged foods, getting by with the aid of apps such as Couchsurfing and Warmshowers, which are sustained by gift economies. Telling the story of your travel as a Carrier Bag Road Narrative means revealing the mistakes you made and the difficulties of your travel, even as it also shows the fun you are having, and invites audiences to think: "Even I could do that. Maybe I will do that!" In the end, the Carrier Bag Road Narrative does not strive to impress people with an achievement but to impress them with the ordinariness of travel. Eleanor Davis closes her biking memoir with these simple words that say it all: "Wake up. Move through space. Mind a clear pane of glass, and this bright world."



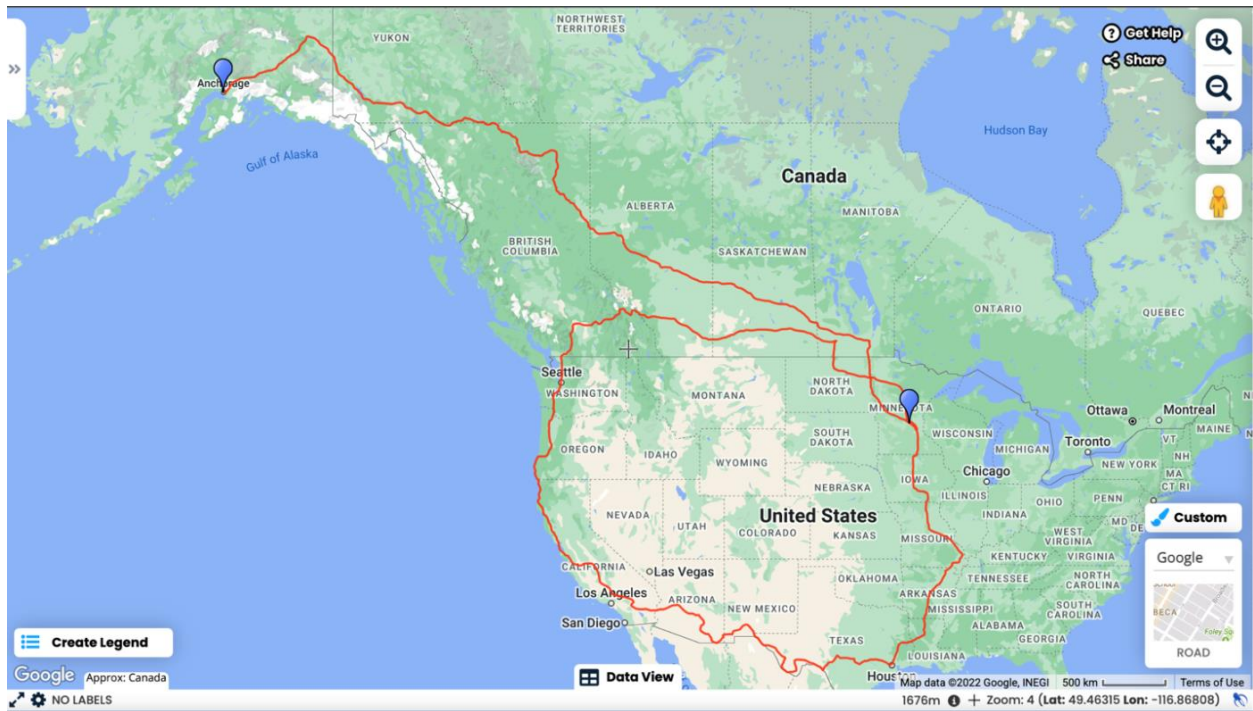


Fig. 2: Route traveled from summer 2021 (starting in Alaska) to June 30, 2022 (Minneapolis, MN). Image from Google Maps.

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