Everyday Migrations
Commuters, Commute, Commuting

ABSTRACT
In this essay I perform the banality of everyday migrations: commuting. Commuting is largely an inconsequential everyday experience until it is not. I begin by showing rather than telling a commute, then I far too swiftly discuss the toll the construction of I-75 had on the city of Detroit, MI, and finally I close the essay by connecting the personal with the common particularities of commuting. I explore commuting as a lived space, a something that is both ordinary and uncertain.

KEYWORDS
Everyday migration; Commuting; Ordinary affects; Performance text

COMMUTER

874 TRAFFIC DEATHS IN MICHIGAN THIS YEAR
Nothing says “Good morning” quite like this looming muted orange text on the backdrop of a black electronic billboard. I pass it right before the I-75 and I-94 split. As I do, my fingers re-fold over the black leather steering wheel. My grip contracts a little bit tighter. My eyes dart down at the speedometer, back up through the frost-framed windshield, a furtive glance at the foggy rearview mirror. Then repeat; a constant revolution for the next unnerving 55 minutes. My body travels, without ever moving, just over 30 miles an hour. The radio is turned all the way down, but I never shut it off. My foot hovers over the gas pedal, fast enough. Although I deliberate about just how much slower I could go without being smashed from behind by a true Michigan native with something to prove. My shoulders are rolled upward and forward in a constant brace for potential impact. Every few exits my breath is a deep and slightly obstructed exhale mixed with a small shudder. As I navigate, long mile after long mile, I try to stay calm by assuring myself that “this, this will be my last winter in Michigan. I can’t keep doing this to myself, living this way. It’s not healthy, the stress, it’s...
too much. Plus, my ancestors weren’t built for this shit.” Although I know it’s a lie. I’m not going anywhere. Like most of Michigan’s middle and working class, staying, and complaining, is in the ethos.¹

My tires slide over the roads, which have become camouflaged under layers of snow and ice, making it unnecessary for me to make contact with the gas pedal. The gliding of my wheels is intermittently interrupted by a sashaying of my back tires or the occasional dump of snow onto my windshield by pickup trucks that have to do a double take as their window zooms past mine, my image not matching the story they had angrily constructed in their head about who’s going so slowly in front of them. Go ahead, zoom on by, I will not fold to the pressure of your tailgating, I whisper angrily in my head. I will not fold. I will not fold.

But, maybe I should? Should I at least turn my flashers on? Could I go 35? It is the freeway after all. Maybe I should get off at this exit and take Woodward Avenue all the way up? But will Woodward be as plowed and salted as the freeway? I consider looking up the fastest route on my GPS but quickly squelch the idea, too great a risk. Where is the sun? Does it even exist anymore? Will the grayness of winter ever end? Will my wheels survive these potholes? Am I a better driver than those other 874 (dead) drivers? Were they texting, or not wearing a seat belt, or swiping their eyelashes with mascara; that’s probably it—right? Will I get Lucía’s sloppy “kissies on the lippies” tonight? Am I being too dramatic? Is it dramatic when even the billboards advertise twice as many deaths than days in the year?

I pass cars crashed in snowbanks. Luckier than the other 874.

When I finally see my exit, the roman numerals etched in the skin of my forehead relax a little, gracias a Dios, I made it. I signal my intention to get off, as does the large white SUV that just caught up to me on my left. Together, in too perfect of a union, our cars turn rightward and off the interstate. His speed matches and holds mine. Our windows align and I see an older white man framed by the window, his face seems to be holding a wince. His nearness riles my nervousness, so I slightly, but repeatedly tap on the breaks just as I was taught in driver’s training years ago. Press, hold, release. Press, hold, release. But instead of the car decelerating, the snow seems to creep up and take control of my tires and we start to veer leftward and together like two punch-drunk dancers leaning in to an embrace. As we spin, our cars bounce off one another like hips bumping under disco balls, except it feels a lot slower than disco and a lot less fun. Bump, crash, spin, bump, crash, spin. It’s all steady enough for me to think whole, calming sentences to myself, as if I am already outside of my body: “It’s okay. You’re okay.
It’s okay. You’re fine.” When my spinning car slackens stubbornly to a stop, the front of it faces the forest of naked trees off the exit, erect sticks jaggered every which way. Looking out of my right window, I witness the white-haired man with big, shocked eyes staring at me, mouth mostly open with disbelief. He looks mostly okay. I feel okay.

As soon as we collectively come to this realization, out of my peripheral vision, I notice a car sliding off the exit, also threatening not to stop. Seemingly much faster than our crash, the white Oldsmobile slams, hard, into the back end of the white SUV. I hadn’t even had time or thought to warn him. I begin to relax my face from the grimace I thought would protect me, just in time to see the white Oldsmobile sputter away, bumper dragging. When the police officer shows up, she asks us both a few questions from our rolled-down windows and gives me a ticket because, “sometimes, you know, when you try to prevent a crash, you overcompensate, causing the crash . . .”

Still luckier than the other 874, I shrug, powerlessly.

Winter is filled with ominous, gratuitous news reports that drone on sensationaly and recurrently, “. . . Major storm: destructive winds, five to seven inches of predicted snowfall, a winter advisory warning, stay home unless it’s an emergency . . .”

In January, when class reconvenes after winter recess, I pick up a copy of The Post with a headline that states that Oakland University lost three students that winter. We lost one to illness, one to suicide, and one to the winter commute. The photo features a 19-year-old girl who so perfectly embodies the image of “all-American girl”—white, thin, perfectly horizontal teeth, long blonde hair. Do you think when she woke up that morning that she just kind of intuitively knew? That as she climbed into her vehicle and autonomously strapped on her seat belt, she deliberately paused and took an extra moment to watch the snow crystals sparkle as they fell and awed about all the things that she had been given by life?

She probably did not have a clue.

COMMUTING

An estimated 103,000 to 174,000 vehicles travel every day along I-75. On a hot summer’s day, when you’re stalled in traffic, windows down, exhaust and heat wafting up from the road, you rarely observe more than one head per car. That’s Detroit—the birthplace that revolutionized transportation. Our bread and butter is the automobile industry. You either work the line yourself, or have an aunt who is as an “auto exec,” a cousin who unpacks pistons in the plant, or a
brother who is studying—ill-advisedly—to be a mechanical engineer. We are all three or less degrees away from the “Big Three.” People here scoff at the mention of carpooling or biking and relentlessly deride you if you “buy foreign.” Cars are in our blood and the freeways are our veins.

I-75 was built in the 1960s, at the height of white flight, which was expedited by the 1967 resistance (or riots; your word choice all depends on which side of the city you’re on). The development of the freeway—specifically a stretch called I-375 that connects the suburbanites to their headquarters—decimated the heart of a black middle-class neighborhood in Detroit. Its design and execution wiped out a neighborhood remembered as “Black Bottom” and “Paradise Valley.” The freeway enabled white folks to drive down into the city to extract resources and then go home to their redlined suburbs to expend those resources without ever acknowledging what that dynamic created.

The architecture of the freeway clearly exposes the malevolence of its engineering; the exit ramps are short and impossible in the city, and the on-ramps are long and welcoming in the suburbs. The freeway designed the conditions of displacement that continue as a result of unregulated economic colonization of downtown Detroit. It seems every month there’s a little old lady in a property manager’s office begging some hipster with oversized plastic rimmed glasses, dark Levi’s, and a yellow road bike parked behind the desk, not to raise her rent by $300 a month. With her income, which has been fixed for the past ten years, the next time you see her she’ll be propping herself up with her cane on the freight elevator with her great-nephew who’s kind enough to help her move. They will chop up her apartment and turn it into three separate apartments and jack up the rent to $1,000 a month so that another white millennial can move downtown to experiment with living like a minimalist. Preparation for him and his life in a refurbished shipping container on a plot of land that a third-generation Detroiter lost in foreclosure. The irony is, she can’t afford to stay in her apartment and he could afford to buy a whole house.

I live in a fishbowl-style apartment with floor-to-ceiling windows with a “measly” fifth-floor view of downtown and white carpets, walls, and furniture; I am also part of the problem. In consenting to pay $1,500 a month in rent, it’s jerks like me who displace little old ladies like her. So, what makes me any different, any better than Mr. Shipping Container? Nothing. I reconcile my co-conspiring by frequenting black- and brown-owned businesses and volunteering with organizations that prioritize black and brown youth. Weak, yes, but something is better than nothing.
COMMUTE

The sound of Stephen Henderson’s modulated voice fills my car. I equivocate between just driving with the windshield iced over with frost, anxiously hoping it melts before I get anywhere consequential, or wind-burning my gloveless hands by inanely scraping the windshield. Should I just take my chances by craning my neck to see through the small visible space right above the wipers? The beautiful blonde’s image from the memorial in the newspaper triggers me, but I decide to risk it anyway. If I pump the gas pedal and then the brake, the gas pedal and then the brake, all while still in the parking lot, my engine will heat up faster and defrost the windshield before I get beyond the security house and onto Jefferson Avenue. Yes, I live in a gated community in Detroit. I would write justifications for why, but none of them are convincing when read aloud.

I only have a six-minute drive down Jefferson until I reach the freeway. When I leave sufficiently early to go to the gym before work, which is less and less often, I witness high school kids waiting for the DDOT bus, their bodies exposed to the wind. Where are the bus shelters? Why are there no shelters wherever there are bus signs on Jefferson? Could it be that this is a strategy to discourage poor people from standing within sight of the General Motors headquarters? If you travel east on Jefferson, away from the freeway, out of the city, and just beyond a cement wall—which physically demarcates the city from the suburbs, the good from the bad, the black from the white—you will run into the opulent homes of these motor industry executives. That’s the tension of gentrification—millennials can’t wait to get downtown while their parents want out before sundown, not being able to let go of the “dangerous Detroit” of their youth. But at 5 a.m. you will only see what is largely unseen: high schoolers who care enough about their education to expose their bodies to the merciless cold to commute out of the city to a school where they are permitted to take their books home in order to study and they don’t have to bring their own toilet paper. I assume they are high school kids because they look young and their necks and ears are bare, and I can see, from the other side of my windshield, their breath swirling up from their mouths. The heavy backpacks are also a tell. Student or no student—these young people migrate, upward and outward from a city that systematically displaces them by allowing sharp raises in rent with a school system that doesn’t inherit those sharp raises.

In a rare winter instance, but mostly because the snow has not fallen just yet, I get to school early. I pull out the crumpled stack of papers from my dingy blue JanSport and flip the cover-page to grade. I hesitate on the pen choice because last semester one of my students told me that the red ink all over his page made him want to “off [him]self” and that haunts me. Purple ink
seems less endangering. The first paper was boring, so I had to re-focus by attending to the grammar flaws and counting whether or not the student had the correct number of citations. The second one began a bit like the first, “In today’s society,” which accosts me every time I see it, although you would think I would be immune to these writerly clichés by now. But as my eyes flit to the second paragraph, I notice the words “deep loss” and “wounded,” and I have to go back to the top of the page and read the words once again, but slower this time. The paper assignment tasks students to reflect on what has shaped their cultural identities. Typically, I read about their baptisms in a lake or about their all-white worlds—but this time it is about inconceivable, sudden loss. The pretty, quiet blonde who sat front and center every other day this past semester, with a slight close-lipped smile and soft, short fly-aways that marked her temples when she wore her hair in a ponytail, wrote about the day her “whole world flipped upside down.” She received a call from her mom that her sister had been in an accident. Knowing how clumsy her sister was, she wasn’t alarmed. When she finally got to the address her mother had texted her—a hospital—she realized her one and only sister and sibling hadn’t tripped and fallen as she imagined. Instead of a bumped head that needed stitches, her sister had just died in a car crash. The sister, who was just like the girl who sat front and center in my classroom, was the beautiful 19-year-old blonde who attended Oakland University, the girl whose image is frozen in my mind and exacerbates my fret at the first sight of snow. In the front row of my class this entire past semester, sat the mourning sister of the girl who symbolized for me the cautionary tales I am reminded of every time I pass that electronic billboard. A number that clocks upward every other morning. The affect of her real loss should quell my manufactured anxiety, but it does not.

I email the living sister a poem by Maya Angelou that articulates for me the wildness of Mother Nature, which I recite in my head from time to time, winter to winter, on my way to work or home. A part of the poem reads:

Snow falls upon snow, falls upon snow to avalanche
Over unprotected villages.
The sky slips low and grey and threatening.

We question ourselves.
What have we done to so affront nature?
We worry God.
Are you there? Are you there really?
Does the covenant you made with us still hold?12
I send the poem to her because that is what I’ve been trained to do as an academic; literature helps reconcile with the seemingly senseless, and, of course, knowledge is power. But I never hear back from her after I email her the poem. The paper I graded, which connected the imagined beautiful blonde to the real, was turned in on the last day of class. I question the way she interprets the poem, what she infers about my act of sending it to her, whether or not she thinks I deserve a reply, and whether or not I am worthy of her reply.

Two winters pass. No word.

This past summer we moved. Not southward as I long, but directly west. No escape from the winter’s shuttle. The reality of my husband’s new earning potential denotes my inability to object to a longer commute, understanding that doing so might compromise my child’s future possibilities. My salary often calls me to question (my) choices. Presently my commute is twice as long as my last. Back and forth; back and forth; back and forth; indefinitely passing along I-75. Nine hours of my week spent traveling without ever moving. Daily doses of the “shock of near collisions and the desperation of being trapped.” Commuting is an ordinary something that can rarely be avoided. A something that is lived and shared, but largely uncertain.

Yesterday, eight weeks in to this route, I noticed a sign that interrupted and sobered the monotony of that day’s drive. In that familiar muted orange font flashed on an electronic billboard, a threat of the winter that might lie ahead:

TRAFFIC DEATHS
THIS YEAR: 487
UP 19%

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NOTES

1. I suspect this is a shared “public feeling” through my experience living in Michigan, on and off, most of my life. I approach this essay with “a close ethnographic attention to pressure points and forms of attention and attachment,” an approach informed by my close reading of Kathleen Stewart, Ordinary Affects (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 2–5. I also try to write in a fashion that is both personal and performative much like Devika Chawla, “The Migration of a Smile,” Departures in Critical Qualitative Research 6, no. 2 (2017): 4–15.


4. Thompson, Whose Detroit?

5. For more about the bulldozing effect that I-375 (also known as the Chrysler Freeway) had on “Black Bottom” and “Paradise Valley,” see Herb Boyd, Black Detroit: A People’s History of Self-Determination (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 187.


8. John Joe Schlichtman, Jason Patch, and Marc Lamont Hill, Gentrifier (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), examines the often-unwanted migration of young people to inner-city neighborhoods. While they do not specifically investigate Detroit, some of the explanations offered can be extrapolated to the case of Detroit. Beyond the research about gentrification, this story is also informed by situations I’ve seen unfold living in two different high-rises in Detroit.

9. Local journalist and host of a local National Public Radio show, Detroit Today.

10. I use “witness” here in the specific ways that Maria Lugones explains: “a collaborator witnesses on the side of power, while a faithful witness witnesses against the grain of power, on the side of resistance” (Pilgrimages/peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions [New York: Rowman & Littlefield], 7). As a Detroiter, I “witness” to oppose the ways Detroiter have been represented as Other and Detroit as an Othered space in the United States. See Rebecca Mercado Thornton, “Motown Magic and/in Haunted Hollers: From One Othered America to Another,” in Stories of Home: Place, Identity, Exile, ed. Devika Chawla and Stacey Holman Jones (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press, 2015), 85–103.

11. One can see evidence of this phenomenon unfold through the individual narratives explored in Schlichtman, Patch, and Hill’s Gentrifier. But I also witness this “something” happening through my own “attending to,” as someone who works in a suburb north of Detroit. See Stewart, Ordinary Affects, 5.

