



‘Please Let Me Off This Bus’: Socio-Spatial Mobility in Mid-Century Automotive Cities and African American Popular Song

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**'PLEASE LET ME OFF THIS BUS':
SOCIO-SPATIAL MOBILITY IN MID-CENTURY
AUTOMOTIVE CITIES AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN
POPULAR SONG**

MICHAEL DOCHERTY

I'll get deep down in this connection
Keep on tanglin' with your wires
And when I mash down on your starter
Your spark plug will give me fire.

Robert Johnson, 'Terraplane Blues' (1937)¹

After World War II a marked shift occurred in the way rhythm and blues music incorporated automotive imagery in its lyrical content, a shift that can be interpreted as a response to a rapidly changing urban landscape and its effects on African-Americans in this period. As the car became an economic and social necessity in many American cities, African-Americans faced far greater barriers to automobility and its benefits than did white Americans. I will argue that this development correlates significantly with the way in which musicians from the very communities it most injuriously affected began to figure the car less as a direct cipher for sex than in its more quotidian capacity as transportation tool and technological solution. The car continued to

¹ All lyrics quoted have been transcribed from the original recordings by the author.

be associated with eroticism and sexual exchange in post-war rhythm and blues, but no longer only symbolised sex in and of itself. Rather, any access the car granted to a sexual economy would be depicted as a secondary consequence of its essential function as the sole means of achieving spatial and economic mobility in the new American city.

In 1922, only 135,000 homes in suburban areas of sixty U.S cities were inaccessible by public transportation; by 1940, it was 13 million.² Between 1948 and 1963, employment in the twenty-five largest American metropolitan areas grew fastest outside the central city, and in many cases both population and employment in central cities went into sustained decline.³ As early as 1940, the great urban planner Harland Bartholomew observed that 'the disintegration of the American city is taking place. [...] Decentralization [...] has now reached the point where the main central city is in great jeopardy'.⁴

The relationship between the spreading, increasingly decentralized city, the growth of car usage and the demise of public transit is hard to parse with any certainty into straightforward causes and effects. The motoring boom of the twenties not only drew people away from public transport but in so doing also made public transport still less attractive by creating traffic-filled streets which impeded streetcars.⁵ As ridership and

² Peter E.S. Freund and George T. Martin, *The Ecology of the Automobile* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1993), p.113.

³ Scott L. Bottles, *Los Angeles and the Automobile: The Making of the Modern City* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), p. 201; Robert A. Beauregard, *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of US Cities* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p.153; Bottles, p.208.

⁴ Harland Bartholomew, 'The American City: Disintegration is Taking Place', *Vital Speeches*, 1 (1940), p. 61.

⁵ Bottles, p.107, 169.

revenue declined, mass transit networks without the requisite financial resources to meet the needs of their expanding cities, further drove more people to the private automobile over public transit. After World War II, car ownership surged, doubling nationwide in ten years, while the percentage of urban journeys made by car also skyrocketed and streetcar use continued to decline.⁶

The buses that replaced the streetcars were smelly, dirty, slower than the streetcars, less frequent, and less reliable. Public transit ridership predictably declined still further, fuelling more car sales and car journeys. This happened earliest and most radically in Los Angeles, but similar patterns were repeated across the country.⁷ Between 1932 and 1949, 100 streetcar-type systems in 45 US cities were scrapped.⁸ This already self-perpetuating force was turbocharged by the advent of the intra-urban freeway and other auto-centric amenities that had been created to facilitate longer journeys by more cars in geographically expanding cities. Such developments included Los Angeles' Arroyo Seco Parkway in 1940, Boston's Beltway in 1947, inner-city parking garages in Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and Detroit in 1948, and the construction in the 1950s of Chicago's Circle Interchange on the site where Daniel Burnham had in 1909 proposed a grand civic and cultural centre.⁹

⁶ Jane Holtz Kay, *Asphalt Nation: How the Automobile Took Over America, and How We Can Take It Back* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), p.226; Beauregard, p.139.

⁷ Joe R. Feagin and Robert Parker, *Building American Cities: The Urban Real Estate Game* (Washington, DC: Beard Books, 2002), pp.157-158.

⁸ Kay, p.213.

⁹ Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), p.70; Freund and Martin, p.119; Kay, p.225; Harold M. Mayer, Glen E. Holt, and Richard C. Wade, *Chicago: Growth of a Metropolis* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p.442.

The Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 took intra-urban highway-building to yet greater lengths.¹⁰ The rise of the urban freeway in the fifties and sixties made mass transit even less viable in many American cities, imposing boundaries and restricting movement, proscribing some routes while blocking others. '[W]hile mass transit as a whole declined', as Jane Holtz Kay writes, 'the ring road choked the heart of urban America'.¹¹

These trends in post-war American urban development had a vastly disproportionate effect on minority populations, not least African-Americans. New freeways were being built straight through central areas, further depressing the value of neighbourhoods where African-Americans, unable to access the suburbs for reasons either economic or more directly discriminatory, lived.¹² By the 1960s, 50,000 people a year were being displaced by highway-building — disproportionately so in areas with high minority populations.¹³ Thus a key protest in the civil rights movement was summarised as 'white men's roads through black men's homes'.¹⁴

Even for those not displaced, the advent of the urban freeways further depressed central districts and spurred still greater decentralization, making it more likely that African-Americans would face longer and more freeway-dependent journeys.¹⁵ Moreover, African-Americans, who were already more restricted than white Americans

¹⁰ Bottles, p.234; Freund and Martin, p.117.

¹¹ Kay, p.239, 233.

¹² Bottles, pp.181-2; Kay, p.49.

¹³ Freund and Martin, p.19, 47.

¹⁴ Brian Ladd, *Autophobia: Love and Hate in the Automotive Age* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p.106.

¹⁵ Freund and Martin, p.47, 117.

in the employment choices available to them, and thus had less freedom in *where* they could work, were also less likely to have a driver's licence, or to own or have access to a car. The first U.S. *Nationwide Personal Transportation Study* (conducted in 1969-70) recorded that white people made 52% of their journeys as car drivers, while those in the 'Negro and other races' category made only 37% of their journeys as car drivers. Including journeys made as a passenger in private automobiles, car journeys accounted for 86% of white journeys, but only 69% in the 'Negro and other races' group. Equally, 16% of journeys by 'Negro and other races' were made using buses, elevated rail or subway systems. The equivalent figure for white journeys was only 3%.¹⁶ Another study conducted in 1968-9 makes these socioeconomic consequences even clearer. A group of African-American and Latino men enrolled in an employment-training programme, but the commute was impossible to make by public transport. They were compelled to purchase cars, but could only buy vehicles in such poor condition that they became more conspicuous to police in the unfamiliar neighbourhoods to which they commuted, with the ultimate effect that employment markedly increased arrest rates among the group.¹⁷

It is clear that for African-Americans the impact of this decentralization, the dominance of urban freeways, and the consequent increasing necessity of car ownership

¹⁶ Helen Greenhalgh, Alice Randill, and Elizabeth Samson, *Nationwide Personal Transportation Study: Mode of Transportation and Personal Characteristics of Tripmakers: Report No. 9* (U.S. Department of Transportation/Federal Highway Administration, 1973) <<https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/ohim/1969/v.pdf>> [accessed 8 March 2017], p.14, 18. Whilst this survey slightly postdates the period on which I focus in this paper, it unfortunately represents the earliest-available reliable, large-scale set of demographic figures of this nature for US automobile use.

¹⁷ Harland Padfield and Roy Williams, *Stay Where You Were: A Study of Unemployables in Industry* (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott, 1973), p.130.

was particularly great. When cities decentralise, when public transit has either atrophied or cannot adequately serve a road network dominated by limited-access freeways, and when adequate automotive transport is out of economic reach, these interlinked vectors of urban development come to entrap African-American populations spatially, socially, and economically. As Kay puts it, the disproportionately African-American 'urban poor' becomes 'a population immobilized by the car'.¹⁸

It was thus in this period that the car, more than ever before and more so for African-Americans than for any other group, ceased to exist primarily in the realms of social and cultural capital, moving instead into that of economic capital, becoming something without which one cannot 'get along' in life — in a literal, spatial sense upon which the figurative is, in the automotive city, entirely conditional. This was reflected in post-war rhythm and blues songs, in an insistence therein on the car venerated in its finest details and most precise specifications; their references to sex and women and to the car's 'pulling power' are a thin disguise applied to give macho lustre to a mechanical main event that in truth is far less racy. In this sense, their engagement in the automotive discourse diverges significantly from that of pre-war blues.

The automotive imagery of Robert Johnson's 'Terraplane Blues' is typical of the many references to cars that appear in pre-war popular song: a lyric purporting to be about an automobile in fact makes clear to its listenership (with more than a wink and a nudge) that its real subject is far more corporeal. Throughout the song, it is evident that

¹⁸ Kay, p.49.

the Johnson's real subject is biology rather than mechanics. Clear as the sexual metaphors are, they are also remarkably complex in their function. Freund and Martin have noted that '[t]he auto is more than a purely masculine symbol; it is unusual in its capacity to project both feminine and masculine imagery'.¹⁹ Johnson was certainly one of many songwriters who found particular potency in this sexual dualism. The car can stand for the phallic and penetrative, and/or as an entity that the male singer can penetrate by climbing inside to drive or ride. Thus in the first verse, exploiting the blues stanza convention of a second line that repeats or very slightly alters the first, Johnson is able to re-orient completely the gendered subjectivity of the song's metaphoric automobile: 'your lights' and 'your horn' become '*my* lights' and '*this* horn' [italics mine].²⁰

Whilst Johnson's 'Terraplane Blues' is a particularly nuanced example of the 'sexualised car' blues form, there are numerous others, including Roosevelt Sykes' 'Henry Ford Blues', Blind Boy Fuller's 'Worn Out Engine Blues' (1940), Blind Lemon Jefferson's 'Booger Rooger Blues' (1926), and his 'D.B. Blues' (1928).²¹ These, and many other examples of pre-war blues, articulate the car's value as a sexual symbol at both the linguistic level (i.e. as a spur for innuendo and metaphor), and, relatedly, at the social level (i.e. as a supposed arbiter of a man's eligibility or desirability to women). After World War II, as the automotive city became America's dominant urban form, cars

¹⁹ Freund and Martin, p.91.

²⁰ Robert Johnson, 'Terraplane Blues' (Vocalion, 03416, 1937).

²¹ Roosevelt Sykes, 'Henry Ford Blues' (Okeh OK 8742, 1929); Blind Boy Fuller, 'Worn Out Engine Blues' (Vocalion, 05575, 1940); Blind Lemon Jefferson, 'Booger Rooger Blues' (Paramount, 12425, 1926); 'D.B. Blues' (Paramount, 12712A, 1928).

became no less popular as subjects, nor did their association with sex disappear.

However, the way cars function in later songs, including the role they play both socially and imaginatively, undergoes a fundamental shift.

In May 1948, Jimmy Liggins and his Drops of Joy released a song they had recorded on November 26, 1947, for Art Rupe's Specialty Records in Los Angeles. The song is called 'Cadillac Boogie'. Significantly, whereas the pre-war car blues tradition was exemplified by songs about sex dressed up as songs about cars, 'Cadillac Boogie' verges upon the opposite. Liggins does advocate the Cadillac as a choice of car guaranteed to make its male driver a 'hep cat daddy' (a hit with the opposite sex) but almost as an afterthought. It's over half way into the song, in the penultimate verse following an instrumental break, that Liggins finally makes mention of a direct and explicit relationship between cars and women. 'Gals'll start jumping, your money'll be green', he sings, suggesting that the Cadillac-aphrodisiac functions indirectly, signifying the driver's wealth (the real source of his apparent attractiveness), rather than as a more explicitly physical manifestation of male sexual potential. Perhaps the closest Liggins gets to the kind of innuendo that characterises the pre-war songs is when he sings that 'that cat's purring, got eight kittens crying'.²² This, however, could equally be taken at face value, without the double entendre and without losing any sense or cogency, read as merely a reference to the noise of the V8 engine. Indeed, I would argue that such an exclusively automotive interpretation of the metaphor, with no recourse to cultural associations

²² Jimmy Liggins, 'Cadillac Boogie' (Specialty, SP 521 A, 1948).

between the feline and female sexuality, is most in keeping with the context of the rest of Liggins' lyrics, which could almost be advertising copy in its rich detailing of the car's features.

He hails the joys of a car that is 'solid streamlined', with 'air foam cushions and modern design | V8 motor, body Fleetwood line', referring to the company responsible for the coachwork on this particular model. Liggins is so precise that listeners know exactly which model he is singing about, because only one car in the Cadillac range bore the name of Fleetwood in the model year of the song's composition — the Sixty Special. The amount of detail Liggins goes into when describing the features of his car, right down to the foam in the seats, appears comically at odds with his hipster slang — 'solid', 'hep cat daddy', 'it's all reet'.²³ Liggins' primary aim is neither to sexualise the car as a woman nor to hail its aphrodisiac properties (though neither of these senses is entirely absent); his abiding concern is to fetishize the car as a commodity and a feat of engineering.

When Liggins claims that his car will ensure that he is 'makin' time', his choice of phrase epitomises the way 'Cadillac Boogie' complicates the role of the automotive symbol within an economy of sexual exchange. To 'make time' has long had currency as a slang term meaning to 'court or flirt with; to have or succeed in having sex with', and certainly this sense is present in Liggins' line.²⁴ It would not be accurate to say, however,

²³ Liggins.

²⁴ John Ayto and John Simpson, *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) <dx.doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780199543700.001.0001>.

that this phrase was understood solely as a sexual euphemism during the period in which ‘Cadillac Boogie’ was written and recorded; its literal meaning persisted alongside the innuendo. In James M. Cain’s *Double Indemnity* (1943), the author, who did not shy away from sexual innuendo in his notorious fiction, uses the phrase in a context completely bereft of sexual implications, as merely a straightforward reference to completing a journey ahead of schedule: ‘I got in the car and drove straight to Griffith Park. That time of night I could make time’.²⁵

‘Cadillac Boogie’ seems to play on precisely the dual valence of the phrase ‘making time’: as crucial as the presence of the slang meaning is the fact that in contemporary parlance, the slang meaning *had not* entirely subsumed or occluded the phrase’s literal import. Double-entendres like those of Robert Johnson operate via the inextricability of an implied risqué meaning from its superficial, literal sense; they can subsist only on the *illusion* of semantic ambiguity, the tacit conspiracy with the listener that we understand that the more lubricious meaning is the ‘real’ one. Crucial to Liggins’ song, by contrast, in both his description of the engine’s cylinders and in his praise of the Cadillac’s assistance in ‘makin’ time’, is the deployment of genuine ambiguity, the song’s ability to retain its narrative and semantic unity regardless of whether the salacious or straightforward reading is apprehended by the listener.

This lyrical dualism in Liggins’ boogie suggests that the car has a critical role in a sexual economy, but neither simply because of its valence as an erotic symbol nor

²⁵ James M. Cain, *Double Indemnity* (London: Orion, 2005), p.111.

because of the private space it may afford two lovers. Rather, its most significant role is more prosaic, as a functional tool of personal mobility with which to negotiate the challenges of the urban landscape. Liggins' car allows him to 'make time' (sexually) precisely because it first enables him to 'make time' (across town). The two senses of the phrase are able to articulate each other in this way precisely because they retain their individual semantic integrity, the twin meanings standing discretely alongside each other within the same utterance. It is therein implied that the relationship between automobility and sex is no longer primarily or solely one of euphemism but one of economic and socio-geographic access. For the 'travellin' man' of Liggins' song the Cadillac provides an assurance that he will always arrive on time, never missing opportunities for romance through lack of a rapid and reliable means of conveyance.²⁶ Perhaps tellingly, Liggins lived, worked, and recorded this song in Los Angeles, the US city that has most insistently conferred upon its residents a reliance on the automobile.

Equally important is the question of audience. Robert Johnson was evidently singing about, and at times to, a woman, real or imagined — but to whom is Liggins singing? He celebrates his own positive experience of Cadillac ownership, but is also passing on advice to another man or other men (the subject of his address is always gendered as male), imploring them to follow his example. That dynamic of an implied male listener intersects with Liggins' obsessive boasting about the minutiae of his car's specifications — an interest which, rightly or wrongly, is associated overwhelmingly in

²⁶ Liggins.

the popular imagination with men. The song claims a context and projects a reception culture that is not heterosexually erotic but rather intensely homosocial. A song that purports to be about how cars will help men get closer to women turns out to be one from which women are strikingly absent. If there is a romantic goal in ‘Cadillac Boogie’, it is the car itself; any access it may grant to women is purely an added benefit, another extra chosen from the specification sheet.

This dynamic recurs throughout the electric blues, jump blues, rhythm and blues, boogie-woogie and proto-rock and roll that represented African-American popular song in the post-war years. Precisely defining and demarcating the boundaries between these various genre labels is perhaps an impossible task, and to some extent a moot point, such is the fluidity between them. Bill Malone offered an accurate if un-descriptive umbrella term when he referred simply to a ‘composite of styles aimed almost exclusively at black audiences’.²⁷ Although my primary focus is on lyrical content, it is worth emphasising in general terms just how far these songs also depart sonically from their pre-war predecessors in their sonic template. As opposed to Johnson’s introspective, acoustic sound, the hallmarks of the post-war songs are strident vocals (not for nothing were singers like Big Joe Turner referred to as ‘blues shouters’), horn sections derived from jazz and swing, a propulsive drumbeat, and in some cases the presence of early electric guitars.

²⁷ Bill C. Malone, *Southern Music / American Music (New Perspectives on the South)* (Lexington, KY: Kentucky University Press, 1979), p.98.

All of these features are present in '50 Dyna-Flow', recorded in Chicago for the Master label by the now-forgotten Jack Cooley. Cooley devotes the vast majority of the vocal portions of the song to describing in schematic detail the prosaic business of purchasing a car: going to the dealer, money in hand, looking around in the showroom for the right salesman, making his selection, having the car rolled out of the dealership and onto the street ready to drive away, then handing over his cash.²⁸ It is only in the final line that Cooley exclaims, 'come on baby, 'cause Daddy's bound to go' — a surprising volta in a song that has thus far recounted a seemingly unaccompanied automotive shopping trip.²⁹ Given the singer's excitement at buying his vehicle, this line might plausibly refer to the car itself, the driver addressing a word of affection to his new ride, gendering and sexualising it in the process, before speeding away. With the next line, however, Cooley launches into a mantra-like refrain: 'Come on baby let's ride, come on baby and ride in my Dyna-Flow'.³⁰ So, 'baby' is confirmed to be a passenger; she cannot be the car, yet there has been no woman present in any of the carefully detailed scenes of car buying. It is as if in this very last line before his concluding vamp Cooley misdirects the listener from the car to a hurriedly remembered and inserted female figure. She seems suddenly to be projected at this moment to look upon the purchase with favourable judgment, and thus to justify retrospectively through sexual assent the man's much more extensively articulated infatuation with his automobile.

²⁸ 'Dyna-Flow' refers to brand-name for a popular early form automatic transmission; like Liggins, Cooley is concerned with technical detail.

²⁹ Jack Cooley, '50 Dyna-Flow' (Master Record Co., UB50-476, 1950).

³⁰ Cooley.

A more complex articulation of the same quality occurs in 'Every Woman I Know', written and recorded by Billy 'The Kid' Emerson, released on Chicago's Vee-Jay label in 1956. At one level, Emerson's song attests that the use of the car as sexual symbol, a vehicle for innuendo as well as passengers, does not disappear entirely in post-war African-American pop. This is clear in his immortal observation that 'some like Cadillacs, some like Fords, and some like anything as long as it roars'. Some lines contain suggestive imagery that recalls pre-war car blues, with Emerson suggesting that a female passenger can 'shift your gears' while the radio and heater get 'turned on' before you 'start rolling just as fast as you can'.³¹ As in Liggins' 'Cadillac Boogie', however, Emerson is singing neither to, nor about, a woman whom he hopes to seduce either in, and/or with, his car. Rather, like Liggins, he is singing to an implied male, passing on his apparent knowledge of women's preference for men with automobiles and bemoaning his own lack of one. In doing so, he creates a paradox. The singer claims expert knowledge of women's automotive peccadilloes and the sexual pleasures that can be enjoyed in a car, all the while making clear that he has no access to such a vehicle and thus no access to women:

Every woman he knows wants a man with a fancy car but as a result of his lack of the same he no longer knows that many women. One is already beginning to lose any sense of the singer proving an expert witness in support of his case.³²

³¹ William Emerson, 'Every Woman I Know' (Vee-Jay, 219, 1956).

³² Duncan Heining, 'Cars and Girls – The Car, Masculinity and Pop Music', in *The Motor Car and Popular Culture in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David Thoms, Len Holden, and Tim Claydon (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), pp.96–119 (96).

'*They say* riding and loving just can't be beat', we are told [italics mine].³³ Slyly, the singer admits that his wisdom is second-hand at best. Again, a song that purports to schematise a triangle of man, woman and car proves to be one from which women are conspicuously absent. All knowledge of women's supposed love of cars, enjoyment of sex in cars, and judgement of men's automotive status, turns out to be hearsay or speculation, imagined or assumed. His testament to the effects cars have upon women contains the self-betraying implication that he has not had sufficient experience of women to know whereof he speaks. The song functions as a display not of the singer's knowledge of women but rather of the extent of his *disconnection* from any real knowledge of women's wants and desires. This suggests through the flimsiness of sexual knowledge and the projected quality of the female role in 'Every Woman I Know', that the song is, like 'Cadillac Boogie', less about a man's car as a means to satisfy women, than it is about a man's desire for a car for a car's own sake.

The image of car-obsessed female sexuality, looking at and judging men by their motors, is, as in '50 Dyna-Flow', projected by the male singer to rationalise his own preoccupation with owning a car, in the inverse of the pre-war songs. Emerson in 1956 veils his desire to sing about cars beneath a crudely sketched sexuality, whereas his pre-war predecessors cloaked discussion of sex in the lexicon of motoring. Moreover, in this context it must also be remembered that women in this period were even less likely to

³³ Emerson.

have access to cars than men and black women still less so.³⁴ Thus, whilst many of these songs certainly do retain some sense of the car as a tool with which to impress women, in the post-war era the car's desirability (and by extension the man's), need no longer be imputed to some symbolic connotations of virility or phallic imagery. The car's much more mundane, literal qualities of mobility, speed, and reliability, given their newfound importance in the successful navigation of socioeconomic geography, might be impressive enough in themselves.

This possibility, with its inevitably attendant suggestion of male fears about independent female automobility, receives perhaps its ultimate expression in Chuck Berry's 'Nadine'. 'Nadine' was recorded in 1963 and released in 1964, by which time the new freeway programme was in full swing, public transit had been gutted in many places, and a new generation of white groups, like the Beach Boys, were beginning to write a different kind of car song for a different culture.³⁵ I have thus far omitted Berry from my arguments despite his role in writing many of the archetypal post-war car songs, including 'Maybellene', 'No Money Down', 'You Can't Catch Me', 'Jaguar and the Thunderbird', and 'No Particular Place to Go' in order to address lesser-known and less singular figures.³⁶ 'Nadine', however, bears particular analysis because it schematises an African-American man's emasculating and alienating experience of *not* having access to

³⁴ Michael Sivak, 'Female Drivers in the United States, 1963–2010: From a Minority to a Majority?', *Traffic Injury Prevention*, 14 (2013), 259–60 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15389588.2012.755736>> [accessed 21 November 2016] (259); Kay, p.42.

³⁵ Chuck Berry, 'Nadine' (Chess, 1883, 1964).

³⁶ Chuck Berry, 'Maybellene' (Chess, 1604, 1955); 'No Money Down' (Chess, 1615, 1955); 'You Can't Catch Me' (Chess, 1645, 1956); 'Jaguar and the Thunderbird' (Chess, 1767, 1960); 'No Particular Place to Go' (Chess, 1898, 1964).

his own car. Slipping between past and present tense throughout the song, Berry relates a tale of riding the city bus and catching sight of Nadine (or a girl he believes to be Nadine — her identity is never certain), on the sidewalk. Nadine has apparently rebuffed some previous advances. However, the bus, as we might expect in this car-centric city, isn't going the right way to follow her, so Berry must implore the driver to let him dismount. Then he must push through the city crowd, as sees her get into a car. It may belong to her or to another man; we never find out. Berry, still carless, flags down a taxi that already has passengers in, pays off their fares and sets off once more in search of Nadine.³⁷

'Nadine' was among the first songs Berry recorded in 1963 after he was released from prison, having served time for violating the Mann Act, which prohibited transporting a woman or girl across state lines for immoral purposes.³⁸ After he was acquitted in one trial, he was found guilty by a white jury but won retrial due to racially prejudicial remarks made by the trial judge.³⁹ He was nevertheless convicted and jailed at the retrial.⁴⁰ The Mann Act has a long-held reputation of being deployed for political purposes.⁴¹ Ever since its spurious use against the boxer Jack Johnson in 1912, it has

³⁷ Berry, 'Nadine'.

³⁸ Bruce Pegg, *Brown-Eyed Handsome Man: The Life and Hard Times of Chuck Berry: An Unauthorized Biography* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), pp.164-5.

³⁹ John E. Mason., 'Chuck Berry', in *African-American Lives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp.71–73 (p. 72); Pegg p.126, 143.

⁴⁰ Pegg, p.157.

⁴¹ Christopher Lobanov-Rostovsky and Andrew J. Harris, 'Reconciling Sexual Offender Management Policy, Research, and Practice', in *Sexual Offending*, ed. Amy Phenix and Harry M. Hoberman (New York, NY: Springer, 2016), pp. 843–59 <http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-4939-2416-5_37> [accessed 21 November 2016] (p. 844); David J. Langum, *Crossing Over the Line: Legislating Morality and the Mann Act* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p.254.

been seen as a law deployed to restrict the independent mobility of successful black men, and the perception that Berry's prosecution was racially-motivated remains widespread and well-supported.⁴²

It is significant, then, that Chuck Berry marked his release from prison with a song about an experience of a black man without a car, stripped of mobility, in early 1960s America. The song's narrator cannot navigate the city; it is closed off to him and he is shorn of his independence and his agency is restricted. A writer whose earlier work exemplifies what Brian Ward has termed a 'fetishistic delight' not simply in cars (or, indeed, trains and planes) but in 'the thrill of sheer motion' is reduced in his lyrical persona to begging bus conductors for favours and pleading with taxi passengers to let him take their ride.⁴³ That thrill of motion is here frustrated and denied; he no longer moves freely but rather is circumscribed by the city's networks and structures. Lost in the crowd, Berry barely even sees Nadine; he has only disconnected, disjunctive flashes. 'Is that you?', he asks, as she and he switch between one mode of navigating the automotive city to another. The question never receives an answer—this may not even be Nadine.⁴⁴

Nadine's invisibility (despite inspiring the chase's marathon effort she is never physically described by a writer whose descriptive powers were arguably the finest of all the rock and roll lyricists) creates a sense that, as with the other post-war songs I have

⁴² Langum, pp.181-3, 186.

⁴³ Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race* (Berkeley, C.A.: University of California Press, 1998), p.213.

⁴⁴ Berry, 'Nadine'.

discussed, who Nadine is, and what she is — a woman — might not be as important as the singer claims. ‘Nadine’ ends with a tantalising fade out: the chase hasn’t been successful, but nor has it failed; it merely continues, as if never to be resolved. It is a perpetual chase to nowhere, a hunt with an absence where its quarry should be. What Berry is really searching for, just like Billy Emerson, Jimmy Liggins, or Jack Cooley, despite their boasts and projections, is not a woman, not sexual conquest but his own elusive, frustrated mobility — as a black man, lost, without a car in the American city.

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