

Life on I-57

Place, Placelessness, and the Commuting Academic

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Construction on I-57 began in earnest in the late 1950s after passage of the Federal-Aid Highway Act. The bill called for the creation of a new highway system that would connect the country in a vast web of concrete corridors. Arguments from engineers, government officials, and boosters abounded as to the advantages of this new system. The roads would ease urban congestion by expanding opportunities for residential development on the outskirts of cities. Military preparedness would be improved—an ever-present concern in the early days of the Cold War. Economies would expand too. No longer burdened by countless small towns and stop signs, people and goods would be able to move freely across the landscape. I-57 was completed in 1971, creating a seamless path that stretched over 350 miles from Chicago, at the northern end of the state, into Missouri after crossing the Mississippi River at Illinois' southern edge. Today, the road is a major throughway in the region, transporting people and commodities across the American Midwest.

These are historical and geographic facts—cold and clinical. Described this way, highways like I-57 are simply representations of high modernism, engineered to ease congestion and maximize efficiencies. They lack humanity. They lack meaning. But throughout history roads and paths were so much more than simply a route between two points. That was the position of geographer J.B. Jackson. During the postwar period of massive infrastructural expansion, Jackson sought to demonstrate that the path *was* the experience. The geographer worried that the arguments of engineers and planners, those prophets of efficiency, too easily paved over the ways in which humans actually related to those roads. Paths were sometimes spaces for religious encounters, sites of danger, or deep personal reflection. In an aptly titled essay “Roads Belong in the

Landscape,” Jackson argued that historically, “the road offered a journey into the unknown that could end up allowing us to discover who we were and where we belonged” (*A Sense of Time, a Sense of Place*, Yale UP, 1994). But while the geographer observed that contemporary planners sought to erase the experiential aspect of the roadway, he ignored the simple truth that even the brutal and hyper-efficient superhighway still offered a “*private* experience.”

That was certainly true for me. From 2019 to 2024, while an Assistant Professor of History at Eastern Illinois University, I spent a great deal of time commuting from my home in Chicago, where my partner worked, to campus in Charleston roughly 180 miles to the south. I-57 was, of course, the defining path of my commute, the road that brought me from point A to point B. Yet the highway also served as an important symbol of my academic experience. It became a consuming symbol of my struggle to find any semblance of balance between my personal life and professional pursuits. I-57 was hardly *just* a road. It had become its own place—a site for reflection on my relationship to academia.

Long commutes have their own way of working on the mind. They are more commonplace than the “road trip”—that canonical cornerstone of American popular culture. It is not a trip into the unknown. Rather, commutes are routine, almost ritual. In knowing the destination and the route, a commuter begins to see a landscape in new light. Driving to Charleston, I would merge onto the highway leaving Chicago. It was a smooth ride—a perk of the perpetual reverse commute. Chicago at rush hour can be hell, but I never knew it that way. As I left the city, I watched the urban landscape turn into a suburban one, then exurban, then rural. One can spend an entire career studying the nuances of Midwest geography, but a drive out of Chicago is its own academic experience.

Moving from Chicagoland into the vast region known as Illinois, I encountered several landmarks notable only to me. These were curios and a set of associations that I had imbued with personal meaning—a little map of my mind. For example, South of Kankakee there is a Love’s Travel Stop. They have clean bathrooms and reliably carry that flavor of Doritos I like (Spicy Sweet Chili). It’s not the cheapest place for fuel, though. That would be in Tuscola. Careful though. One might be tempted to stop at the gas station on the west side of I-57—the one with larger signage and sleeker aesthetics. No, one must go a bit further, past the underpass to the smaller station on the east side. Big oil can’t fool me. At another point I pass an exit for Buckley, Illinois. “Buckley—like William F. Buckley,” I thought to myself. “Fuck *that* guy.”

The geography that surrounds much of I-57 is not an especially beautiful stretch of Earth. It was David Foster Wallace, a native of central

Illinois, who in a 1996 WBUR interview described the landscape as so flat that it “looks ironed.” This reality is the product of nineteenth-century settler colonists and twentieth-century agriculture conglomerates who went to work on the land. They chopped, burned, drained, and plowed. They took a tall-grass prairie ecosystem, once abundant with various flowers, fauna, and vast wetlands, and transformed it into a flat, monotonous, drained, and commodity-rich agricultural landscape. Today, many downstate Illinoisians joke that the region is defined by two main ecosystems: corn and soy. The stretch between Champaign and Charleston is especially treeless. One has not known the horizon until they have driven through this stretch of country. Sometimes, I was convinced that if I squinted hard enough, I could see the top of the Vigo County Courthouse in Terre Haute, Indiana, nearly 80 miles away. After three hours of driving, my back was tight, my sciatica was screaming, and I was mentally drained. This was not ideal because at that exact moment office hours began.

The commuting academic is a common feature of modern higher education. I knew many faculty—mostly new hires—who commuted far distances in an attempt to balance their personal life with their professional obligations. One friend has a similar three-hour commute, traveling from his home in Minneapolis to a regional comprehensive university in Wisconsin. Another spent a year driving between New York City to a SLAC in Maine—a mind-boggling six hours on the road. Both of these were quite insignificant commutes compared to another colleague who regularly flew from New York City to Los Angeles for his position. Because of the abysmal job market for Ph.D.s, those few who are offered positions are often obliged to take them regardless of geography. They do this for many reasons. For some, it’s an economic necessity. For others, it’s the professional realization of nearly a decade of academic training. It’s not as if there are an abundance of other options available either. For all the contemporary discourse on “Alt-Ac,” few doctoral programs are adequately equipped to prepare graduates for non-academic work. Regardless of their reasons, new faculty from all over experience commute in ways that reorient themselves to home and work. I-57 was a road with particular value to me. But each commuting academic has their own places of significance. They might be rural backroads, airport terminals, and rail stations. Those roads and routes act as meaningful symbols of their academic identities.

The commuting lifestyle felt like a continuation of a particular “grind” mindset that I had adopted early in graduate school. Intimately aware of the abysmal job market for history Ph.D.s, I spent my entire graduate career taking on increased workloads, pursuing all writing opportunities, and applying to any relevant fellowships that I thought might improve my employability. I hoped to build a CV that required the prestige

junkies to look past the schools that I hadn't attended and force hiring committees to spend a few moments longer with my materials before moving on to the next application. There is no question that I normalized harmful work habits. I worked long hours, withheld sleep, and ate poorly. Worst of all, though, I had convinced myself that a significant degree of suffering was required for an academic career.

Of course, this thinking was wrong. There is no such thing as "bootstrapping" your way into a tenure-track job. And though the contours of academia weren't always visible to the graduate-student version of myself who was singularly focused on "the job," I came to learn them quickly. The job market is more like a lottery; everyone tries to collect as many tickets as possible. Because most academics still value prestige above all, those applicants from a handful of programs begin with more than the rest of us. You might pick up a few more along the way but in reality, the whole thing is a matter of chance. Timing, budgets, and the innumerable biases of hiring committee members have far more of an impact on academic hiring than the countless variables that anxious applicants imagine for themselves. That fact was certainly true in my case. Given the gap between the time that had passed between my interview and the offer, I fully understood that I was not the department's first choice. The only reason I got my job at Eastern Illinois University was because at least one other person did not want it. These aspects of the job market have always existed, to be sure. But in an age dominated by institutionalized austerity and business-brained administrators, such factors are especially pronounced.

Though roads can be a place in and of themselves, their overbearing presence for commuters can have a disorienting effect. This is a sort of dilemma. If the road becomes a central organizing geography of the mind, what does that mean for the other *places*? In my experience, I-57 had reoriented my relationship to both destinations on either end of the commute—my home in Chicago and my place of employment in Charleston. Because my assigned teaching duties would vary from semester to semester, I would spend anywhere from three to five days in Charleston. This meant that during some semesters, I would only spend three nights a week at my home. Does that even qualify as a home? Time away from my partner also made me irritable, depressed, and anxious. My physical health suffered too. I exercised less due to the commute and my consumption of junk food increased (recall the Doritos). I soon experienced intense bouts of insomnia that struck worst on the nights before I would drive south. Similar to the "Sunday scaries," the "central Illinois scaries" occurred with more frequency as the initial enthusiasm of "landing the job" gave away to the more accurate realization that this job was, in fact, a job.

The situation was not much better at the other end of I-57. Though I

worked hard to ingratiate myself into the department, I always worried that my transience would be a mark against me. Unable to schedule meetings on those days when I was in Chicago, I was convinced that my colleagues considered me a flight risk, a new hire constantly on the lookout for a new job (they have not been entirely wrong). I also grew increasingly concerned that my discontent might manifest itself in the classroom. It would have been easy enough to direct that dissatisfaction towards students, an unfortunate route taken by many educators who feel the structural realities of modern academia thumping on their backs. But many students enrolled at institutions similar to Eastern Illinois University already bore the bruises of the twenty-first century. Nearly 40 percent of enrolled students were food insecure and bouts of homelessness were not uncommon. An even larger share of students juggled responsibilities increasingly common to those enrolled at regional comprehensives: tending to sick parents, caring for children, and working multiple jobs. Building a curriculum that is suited for that classroom requires compassion, not a cop. A part of me felt that I couldn't give what was necessary to teach in this environment—at least not while commuting. In an effort to embed myself in this community, I tried several living situations in the hopes that I might find a balance between my life in Chicago while establishing myself within the region. This was not an easy task. One year, I rented a university apartment which also served as a Covid quarantine for sick students. Another year, I rented a room from a colleague who lived in a nearby town. This was hardly an ideal situation as it created a sort of double commute from my home, to work, to rented apartment, to work—more time on that dreaded road.

During my final year at Eastern Illinois University, I rented a dorm room on campus. Due to declining enrollments, university administration had dedicated an entire floor to traveling faculty and potential conference attendees in an effort to offset lost revenue. The dorm room was the most affordable option—complete with two desks and twin XL beds outfitted with sheets provided by a colleague's teenage son who had attended band camp in the same building the previous summer. I was a 35-year-old academic with hand-me-downs from a thirteen-year-old. Because I wasn't eager to be *that* faculty member who was seen hanging around the dorm when most students were present, I squirreled myself away in my office for long hours until campus fell silent. Only then would I go to my room. In the meantime, I would continue those unhealthy work habits that I had established during graduate school: read more; write more; apply more; work more. The reorientation to work that I should have embraced by landing one of the few tenure-track jobs in the country never occurred. Instead, I just kept grinding. I am not entirely sure what I had imagined

out of a career in academia when I started graduate school in 2012, but I know it wasn't whatever I was doing at Eastern Illinois University. Something had to give.

A faculty strike in Spring 2023 did not help things. In the months leading up to the collective action, it became clear that university administrators were pursuing the well-worn path of all bosses: seek to compel employees to work more hours for less pay. Hoping that faculty at Eastern Illinois University were already beaten down by the realities of higher education, the administrators imagined that faculty would eventually cave. We didn't. The strike was both the high point and low point of my time at Eastern Illinois University. As a committed leftie, I was happy to march alongside colleagues as a means of democratizing the workplace. A union, as far as I can tell, is the only form of "shared governance" that works on a modern college campus. It is also the best place to meet colleagues. A young faculty member can spend three years trying to find community by attending orientation, faculty meetings, and fulfilling ever-increasing committee-service requirements. But you will never meet as many like-minded co-workers until you go on strike. A picket line is a joyous, anxious, upsetting, and loving place. It's where you meet comrades; it's also where you learn how little your boss thinks of you. In my case, it also served as a break from the commute. Six days on the picket line saved me, if only for a few days, from that abysmal stretch of road.

After a few years at Eastern Illinois University, I adopted the idea of eventually leaving. My initial plan—concocted while driving on I-57—was to step away from my position after receiving tenure. The milestone would be mostly a symbolic gesture, a final CV line and capstone to my academic career. At that point, I would find other work. Perhaps some administration-adjacent position somewhere in Chicago? K-12 education? Insurance sales? Whatever. It's not exactly as if I would be leaving behind large sums of money by stepping away from a position at a regional comprehensive university. Despite working with pleasant colleagues, I had come to realize that the position was not worth the mental, emotional, physical, and familial stress. The plan represented a dwindling enthusiasm for academia that was undoubtedly shaped by my long-distance lifestyle.

But that moment of departure never arrived. In winter of 2023 I won the lottery, again, and started a new position at Clemson University a few months later. Upstate South Carolina offered a variety of opportunities that my partner and I would never find in rural Illinois: professional prospects, hills, water, and, most importantly, the chance to live together. I still have a commute, but nothing compared to that I-57 drive.

Though no mid-twentieth century planner ever imagined my particular commute in their initial plans for I-57, I find myself thinking of them

and their road often. Not because I appreciated their efforts. Whereas they saw a seamless road as the pinnacle of efficiency, I saw it as drudgery. I never embraced their faith in high modernism, a quasi-religious outlook that could transform a concrete path into a symbol of progress. I found no providence in their pavement. No, I-57 stuck with me because it was a site of intense personal reckoning. It is exactly what Jackson meant when he described the "private experience" that countless individuals attached to paths and roadways—even those brutalist superhighways crisscrossing the American landscape. I-57 was more than a simple north-south road stretching the length of Illinois. It was a place where I grappled with the nature of academia and its impact on my personal relationships. It was a space that, for the first time since graduate school, forced me to contend with the blunt realities of a career in higher education.

"Roads no longer merely lead to places," Jackson wrote decisively, "they *are* places." Perhaps this is a fact lost on many, but not the commuting academic. They are all too aware that the road—their I-57—is a defining aspect of their place and placelessness in higher education.