AUTOMOBILE MALFUNCTION IN PERSONAL NARRATIVE AND EVERYDAY LIFE

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ABSTRACT

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Critical everyday life scholarship tends to theorize the domain of everyday life as a site of struggle between institutional power, or strategies, and resistance, or tactics. Nevertheless, moments of everyday crisis such as technological malfunction have been largely ignored, and researchers tend to emphasize everyday practices in moments of relative normality. This study has sought to address this gap through analyses of a particular kind of everyday crisis, the automobile malfunction. By analyzing personal narratives of automobile malfunction experiences, I have attempted to highlight the critical potential of these narratives.

I conducted in-depth interviews with eight automobile drivers to gather these personal narratives about automobile malfunctions. The theories used to interpret these stories included those of Marxian critical theorists such as Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre, and folklorists such as Sandra Dolby-Stahl. The application of theory enabled an emphasis on the resistant and propriety-centered elements of my informants’ narratives.

The automobile malfunction stories express implicit and explicit critique of the automobile’s role in everyday life, as my informants described tactics for getting away without repairs, using the malfunction as a way to get out of work, and relying on strangers for automobile assistance, among other things. As everyday discourse, their stories counter the discourse of automobile advertising, which emphasizes freedom, independence, speed, mobility, and safety. Many of my informants seemed to recognize
these utopian promises of capitalism as broken promises, and their stories and comments suggested everyday crises such as automobile malfunctions may fuel the creation and spread of cultural critique in everyday life. However, these critiques tend to remain grounded in the priorities of everyday life, so the maintenance of communal propriety appears to supersede political or critical concerns.
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INTRODUCTION

Got my [AMC] Marlin, which was real bad. It would die every time it hit a mud puddle. Like, the water did something.

And one time I was takin’ Mom to Mt. Pleasant to the polka and I had all her friends in the car and it rained and broke down in Mt. Pleasant. I had no clue where I was. But I hit a puddle. […] Dad came down, hooked a chain on it, and pulled it home.
—Deirdre 2005 (interview)

“[A] whole civilization can come to a halt in the same way as the automobile.”
—Jean Baudrillard (1996:126)

Why write about automobile malfunctions? A reasonable answer to this question would probably say something about finding ways to make automobiles better; comfort, design, convenience, safety, and service can always stand a little critique for the sake of improvement, right? Another reasonable answer might say something about which automobiles are least susceptible to malfunctions so interested consumers can know which makes and models perform up to the standards of their price. The usefulness of such a text is easy to imagine; the “Blue Book” demonstrates as much. Yet another reasonable answer to the question might poke fun at the most malfunction-prone automobiles. Such a text would teach us which automobiles to avoid, and also allow us a little laughter at the industry’s expense. It might be fun to hear about such failures; it might even help us feel a little superior to know even the mighty Ford and GM laid eggs
now and then. Maybe if we could feel superior to such industrial giants, we wouldn’t mind so much when we’re required to purchase their products to become full participants in a culture that calls itself free.

To put it simply, I’m writing about automobile malfunctions because people talk about automobile malfunctions. Personal narratives about automobile malfunctions emerge from conversations in everyday life, and I became curious about what a close look at these narratives might reveal about everyday life in contemporary America. When I began this project, my hunch was that stories about malfunctions might include implicit criticisms of the structures and institutions within which people live. As everyday life becomes increasingly saturated with technology, technological malfunctions become increasingly common. All technological malfunctions interrupt everyday life, but perhaps none so frequently as the automobile malfunction.

As technologies continue to colonize the everyday, automobile manufacturers increase the technological sophistication of their products. As a result, the duties of maintenance and repair tend more often to be transferred from owners to experts. Thus, the kinds of malfunctions drivers experience and the manner in which they experience them depends on the particular historical moment of the malfunction, not to mention the driver’s economic status. That is to say, the experience of an automobile malfunction was different in the 1970’s than it is in the 2000’s, as is the experience of a malfunctioning new automobile compared to a malfunctioning used one. Drivers are not unaware of these circumstances. By revealing the critical discourses that emerge from the everyday, I hope to emphasize the agency of individuals coping with the need to keep their cars running in order to sustain their everyday lives.
By writing in this study, I am approaching what Bruno Latour has called a “matter of concern” (2004). Rather than cultivating a radically skeptical attitude to deconstruct matters of fact (with the dubious goal of undermining “truth”), Latour argues the cultural critic should cultivate a “stubbornly realist” attitude to study of matters of concern (ibid: 157). He invites scholars to try to appreciate the social constitution of “Things”; in particular, he recommends “a multifarious inquiry launched with the tools of anthropology, philosophy, metaphysics, history, sociology to detect how many participants are gathered in a thing to make it exist and to maintain its existence” (ibid: 170, italics in the original). By launching this inquiry, Latour hopes to transform the role of the cultural critic from “one who debunks” to “one who assembles,” or “one who offers the participants [in the thing] arenas in which to gather” (ibid: 171). A “thing” can be a person, an idea, or, obviously, a material artifact. As a perspective with particularly humanizing capabilities, popular culture studies should be at the forefront of this project. As a material artifact, the automobile requires numerous participants in order to exist; it’s impossible to imagine them all, from the corporate CEO to the engineer to the factory worker to the gas station attendant to the consumer to those who obtain the raw materials from the earth. Drivers make up but one small part of the social constitution of automobiles, and the perspective they add with their remarks on these social machines can enhance our own sense of responsibility and meaning in relation to other people. By focusing on things as matters of concern, we can begin to understand in concrete, realistic terms how others in their thing-relationships are situated within the impossibly abstract global economy.

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1 Not to be confused with the “social construction” of things as elaborated in Bijker 1997.
Approaching this topic within popular culture studies requires an interdisciplinary mixture of folklore studies of the personal narrative genre and critical cultural studies of everyday life in neo-liberal capitalist societies. In this context, personal narratives must be viewed as both cultural expressions and empirical data. That is to say, they emerge from their cultural context and comment on the experience of life within this cultural context. Analyses and critiques of everyday life too often tend to adopt a tone and language that abstracts the term “everyday life” from concrete lived experience. While this work is to an extent guilty of the same, my hope is that the narratives I obtained through interviews with my informants will help keep the theory grounded in practical concerns of everyday life. At the same time, reliance on narratives from my informants limits the scope of the study to the kinds of events they discussed. Because of this limitation, this project is necessarily incomplete and exploratory in nature; it is simply intended to raise automobile malfunction in everyday life as a critical issue. There is much more to be said on this topic than is written here.

My methodology follows that applied by Pierre Mayol and Luce Giard in *The Practice of Everyday Life: Volume 2* (de Certeau 1998). Their work emphasizes the practiced lives of individuals as they dwell in neighborhoods and “do cooking,” and it hints at the intimate and complex nature of everyday practice in modern France. The subjects of Mayol and Giard’s studies seem to have carved out particularly human niches within their culture; they implicitly contest perspectives on culture that simplify dominated subjects into a “mindless mass.” In practice, the infrastructures of dominant institutions contain incongruities, interruptions, mistakes, and lacunae. Oversights and
malfunctions occur, and these affect directly the lived experiences of individuals within
the system.

In order to investigate these gaps in the system, I conducted open-ended
interviews with eight automobile users about their experiences with automobile
malfunctions. The ubiquity of automobile use made choosing informants difficult, and
rightly or wrongly I selected for this study four women and four men from my immediate
friends and family. While this method usefully enabled me to talk with informants with
whom I had already established rapport, it slants the perspective toward that of young,
white, lower-middle class Americans. Nevertheless, my hope is that the kinds of
experiences they discuss may appear familiar to a wide range of readers.

The first chapter of this project is intended to provide a theoretical background
from which the analysis of technological malfunction in everyday life may proceed. It
demonstrates how various theoretical perspectives may work together to elucidate these
contingent events and suggest how they may be interpreted with the use of this critical
framework. The second chapter approaches the particular technological system
addressed by this study, the “system of automobility.” This technological system is
approached from an everyday life perspective such that the ordinary experiences of
driving an automobile are described as “elements of everyday automobility” and the
malfunctions described by my informants are distinguished and interpreted in general
terms. The third chapter goes into more precise studies of particular narratives and
reveals how these may be interpreted as critical discourse emergent in everyday life.
Finally, the fourth chapter takes up a particular genre of malfunction narrative, the
accident story, and demonstrates how these kinds of stories can function didactically as
tellers teach and learn methods for managing this risk in everyday life. Following the fourth chapter are general conclusions to be drawn from this study.

It is my hope that further research into everyday life will attempt to take into account the mundane stories of life within it. Admittedly, some of the stories may seem far less interesting than others because of their relevance which is limited to their particular tellers. Nevertheless, I hope these tales, some of which go into detail about minute, mundane, and arguably trivial incidents, can be appreciated for their value as techniques for making sense of the never ending flux of everyday life. As scholars, we will never fully grasp the sheer complexity of “the everyday”; nevertheless, this study attempts to reveal that we can at least approach how people living their everyday lives obtain a modicum of control over their own lives through narrative and make the world into something that can fulfill their ordinary needs and desires.
CHAPTER 1
THEORIZING TECHNOLOGICAL MALFUNCTION IN EVERYDAY LIFE

That things don’t always work is perhaps one of the most frustrating facts of living in a technology-saturated culture. The magnitude of problems that can result from modern malfunctions ranges from a nuclear meltdown to the mundane disappointment of a skipping DVD. More often than not, such malfunctions result in a utopian backlash from the technology user—either she wishes the technology were better or, more radically, she questions her need to rely on technology at all. The user is often powerless, unable to fulfill such utopian desires; she must cope with the malfunction and try to maintain the structured daily life she leads. Sadly, the user’s powerlessness seems to increase as the malfunction becomes more mundane. Activist groups and media organizations can criticize and work to help stave off disastrous malfunctions like nuclear meltdowns. Media discussions of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the horrendous aftermath of 2005’s Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans framed these incidents largely as technological malfunctions—of airport security systems and FEMA, respectively—and calls for investigations and improvements into these technology systems resulted in rigorous re-evaluations. The occurrences of these critical re-evaluations have less to do with the urgency of their subjects than (among other significant political and cultural issues) the extreme visibility and political magnitude of the malfunctions’ repercussions. Broken buildings and broken bodies. The repercussions of the everyday malfunctions of computers, dishwashers, telephones, automobiles, microwave ovens, alarm clocks, and entertainment systems appear far less dire than those of large-scale disasters, and they
seem to generate very little in the way of critical evaluation of technology systems. Their repercussions, while sometimes fatal (particularly in the case of automobiles), remain comparatively invisible. Swear words are uttered, machines are kicked, sighs of resignation exhaled. Life goes on unchanged.

Or does it? Very little seems to be known about how people practice everyday life, let alone how they cope with technological malfunctions. Even if it wanted to, science could never truly apprehend the heterogeneous everyday by virtue of its immanent presence, plurality, and subtlety. As experts apply instrumental rationality to the objects and operations to maintain the structure of contemporary life, the here-and-now culture consisting of practices of everyday life exists as a remainder of such considerations (de Certeau 1984: 6). This is perhaps what makes everyday life at once so fascinating and frustrating, and perhaps why the topic has increasingly generated diverse theoretical models and modes of inquiry. The approach to everyday life advanced by Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and others Michael Gardiner calls the “counter-tradition” (2000: 2) of thinking about everyday life consists of both a perspective and a text, a particular way of looking and a particular object. Before I go into the need for scholars to treat seriously the malfunction that interrupts everyday life, I must sort through the theories and literature in order to clarify what exactly it is that I mean when I talk about everyday life.
Everyday Life and Narrative

Everyday life is a heterogenous and diffuse area of investigation, so the texts explored by critics interested in this common ground of culture are exceedingly diverse. The practices of cooking (de Certeau 1998), shopping (Miller 1998), walking (de Certeau 1984), conversation, and telling personal stories (Abrahams 2005, Stahl 1989, Stahl 1977) are all everyday practices that can be interpreted as cultural texts, and investigations that account for their imbeddedness in daily life as a rich and complicated field provide much insight into micro-politics. While such practices may seem trite and inconsequential to the interests of progressive social science, it is in this field of experience that power relations play out and that individual agents live.

From these concrete practices one can move to the more abstract field of investigation that everyday life research encompasses. Gardiner articulates this more abstract field well in his claim that everyday life scholarship consists of “theorists and approaches concerned with human affect and emotions, bodily experience and practical knowledges, the role played by ‘lived’ time and space in the constitution of social experience, language and intersubjectivity, and interpersonal ethics” (2000: 3). Furthermore, everyday life scholarship is interested in accounting for how these abstract concerns play out in concrete, lived experience and so entails the description and theorization of what de Certeau has called “ways of operating” (1998: xxxv) within the necessarily repetitive and rhythmic nature of day-to-day living (Lefebvre 2004). De Certeau suggests individual actors’ ways of operating add up to a “network of antidiscipline” (1984: xv); this suggestion articulates a challenge to cultural critics who
have tended to overstate the extent to which “the masses” are controlled by imposed institutions and ideologies.

One way of understanding the perspective of everyday life research is to look at it as the application of a critical lens through which the researcher may apprehend particular kinds of social practice. My use of the term “everyday life” follows the scheme set up by folklorists Giovanna Del Negro and Harris Berger (2004). According to this scheme, “everyday life” and “special events” are opposed interpretive frameworks through which researchers can understand practice such that the everyday encompasses the routine practices of daily life. The flexibility of their framework allows for an everyday perspective on special events such as the funeral in order to account for how individuals continually live their daily lives in the midst of such crises (as opposed to a perspective that emphasizes the symbolic, ritualized, or spectacular aspects of funeral practice). That is to say, everyday life is not an ontological domain within which mundane practices fall, but an interpretive perspective that emphasizes practice over performance. As conceptualized by folklorists, performance is set apart from practice—it is “framed” (Goffman 1974) or “keyed” (Bauman 1984) such that the artistic nature of a performed event is evident to the performer and the audience (Kapchan 2003: 131). By emphasizing the perspectival divide between practice and performance, Del Negro and Berger account for the everyday use of the term “everyday life,” a use which is not restricted to a particular class of people but depends on an individual’s perspective on his or her own life. For their methodological approach, Del Negro and Berger advocate “A populist perspective on expressive culture,” “practice orientations,” and “[e]thnographic methods and the concern for non-academic perspectives” (2004: 19). Such methods
emphasize the life in everyday life and work to tease out the more subtle nuances of social experience.

Yet what is the point of understanding these subtle nuances? One could argue that the description and theorization of everyday life represents the ideology of the Enlightenment taken to its logical extreme, and that the above theorists and I presuppose that the increase of knowledge per se into all researchable domains will necessarily “advance” human culture in as yet unimagined ways as human history progresses into the twenty-first century. A project such as this, however, cannot align itself with this Enlightenment ideology without forgetting Foucault’s insight that the act of weaving life into discourse (i.e. academic literature) necessarily colludes with the disciplinary order by revealing the subject, making it speak, and controlling it (1978). Rather, this and other counter-tradition everyday life projects work to oppose the Enlightenment ideology of instrumental rationality by highlighting the extent to which the subjects of contemporary societies resist such control and express utopian desires contrary to the administrative imperatives of structured society. I seek to highlight how the structures do not work and how individuals evade the absolute systematization that would make dominant capitalist institutions function at optimal levels of productivity.

Rather, this project is fueled by the utopian drive that causes de Certeau to celebrate everyday networks of antidiscipline, poaching, and resistance (1984) and takes to heart Kaplan and Ross’ assertion that

The Political…is hidden in the everyday, exactly where it is most obvious:
in the contradictions of lived experience, in the most banal and repetitive gestures of everyday life…It is in the midst of the utterly ordinary, in the
space where the dominant relations of production are tirelessly and relentlessly reproduced, that we must look for utopian and political aspirations to crystallize (1987: 3).

Such aspirations counter the efforts of “political and social activities [that] converge to consolidate, structure, and functionalize [everyday life]” (Lefebvre 1984: 65, italics in the original). Truly, everyday life is the field of experience from which such utopian sentiments emerge. These sentiments may come from the experienced dissonances between linear imposed rhythms of leisure and labor with the cyclical rhythms of the body and nature (Lefebvre 2004) or from awareness of the underappreciated artfulness and experience of non-productive (of capital) activities like visiting friends or making meals (de Certeau et al. 1998). Such critical consciousness that reflects on the nature of structured daily life here-and-now is utopian in that it imagines the possibility of “a better way of living… in a manner that critiques that status quo without projecting a full-blown image of what a future society should look like” (Gardiner 2000: 17). These utopian moments may emerge with particular clarity in times of “everyday crisis.”

In Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature, Susan Stewart analyzes the relationships between common sense and nonsense in cultural texts. From Stewart’s perspective, the common sense perspective is “an organization of the world, …a model of order, integrity, and coherence accomplished in social life” while nonsense is “an activity by which the world is disorganized and reorganized” (1979: vii). While she limits her analyses to literary and isolated folk texts, she allows for further ethnographic applicability of the common sense/nonsense framework. She does this by stressing the textual nature of social life itself, characterizing it as a “phenomenon
emergent in members’ interpretive activities” (ibid: 48), thus echoing Geertz’s assertion that “the culture of a people is an ensemble of texts” (1973: 1278). Her perspective is similar to folklorists who advocate looking at texts as processes rather than looking at texts as inert things whose significance becomes apparent when they are read by the skilled interpreter (Titon 2003: 79).

In the context of particular situations, people have common sense expectations—a pre-text. When those expectations are met, the common sense expectations are reinforced and social life proceeds smoothly; when those expectations are disrupted by nonsense, common sense expectations are, in some instances disturbed, and social life proceeds awkwardly. The social actor must reevaluate his or her common sense pre-text, and during this reevaluation, she may express utopian critiques of the status quo. Just as Surrealist artists sought to juxtapose disparate frames of meaning (as when Salvador Dali famously used a lobster as a telephone) to emphasize the constructedness of contemporary categories of experience, nonsense can be experienced in the everyday as a juxtaposition of disparate frames of meaning (when, for instance, fuel becomes so expensive that the value of maintaining a living that requires a long commute comes into question).

This emphasis on the disruption of expectations presupposes a primary role of narrative in everyday life. In everyday life, the “story” as it appears in the form of personal narrative is only one and the most obvious form, and, because methodological and time-related restrictions, the form emphasized here. Yet the obviousness of personal narratives belies the manner in which they problematize the practice-performance perspectival dichotomy Berger and Del Negro find useful. As “the dominant form of
American folklore in terms of frequency of occurrence in daily life” (Frank 2003), personal experience narrative-events seem simply to occur spontaneously any time two or more somewhat sociable people inhabit the same space for any amount of time. They are the vehicles through which we come to know each other and ourselves. In their analyses of personal experience narratives, folklorists often tend to take a “holistic approach” (Ben-Amos 1976), emphasizing the structural and traditional elements of this form (Frank 2003, Robinson 1981, Stahl 1977). More useful here is a practical approach, the route taken by Roger Abrahams when he claims, for example,

Personal accounts which replay past incidents of disruption have a therapeutic function, drawing upon a shared, retold experience as a way of taking care of the problems they represent…We feel less threatened by the traumatic experience as we relive it, domesticate it, bring it under control.

(2005: 77)

My approach emphasizes the practical side of the practice-performance dichotomy. This is not to say that performances serve no practical purpose; nor is this a claim of priority to forms (either practical or performative) that articulate an instrumental rationality. Rather, my intention is to recognize the personal narrative as an aesthetic form while de-emphasizing the aesthetic (i.e. structural) elements that inform value judgments as to whether or not the story told is a “good” or “bad” story. For the present work, personal narratives will be used to gain insight into what kinds of meanings people attribute to objects (i.e. automobiles) and events (i.e. the malfunctions). That is to say, they will be viewed in a way that follows de Certeau’s designation of everyday practices as an “ensemble of procedures” that “lack the repetitive fixity of rites, customs or reflexes, [as]
kinds of knowledge which are no longer (or not yet) articulated in discourse” (1984: 43, 45). This perspective may appear contradictory. Personal narratives are a form of articulated discourse, right? However, they, like fables and myths, articulate “knowledge [that] is not known” (ibid 71). That is to say, personal narratives tend to be un-reflexive and un-self-conscious; the “meaning” or “lesson” or “moral” of the story is exterior to it. It is open to interpretation. This perspective thus prioritizes what people do with and within the story, or interpretation based on practical and social context.

Additionally, this approach to personal narratives appears useful because the spoken narratives expose fragments of the other forms of everyday narrative to which I alluded earlier. The first of these forms is the individual’s experiential life-narrative that serves as the pre-text that informs expectations in everyday life. By inhabiting life as one inhabits narrative, the individual is able to “live by inference” (Thomas in Goffman 1959: 3) and apply “common sense” as “a set of interpretive procedures used in creating everyday life situations” (Stewart 1979: viii). Essentially, this perspective assumes that people imagine themselves as the protagonists of their own lives. As people imagine themselves as protagonists, they imagine known others with whom they interact in terms of other recognized narrative figures like “best friend” and “arch-nemesis.” Objects, too, obtain meaning via their relationship with the protagonist within the life-narrative so that, for example, a book can connote boringness, a chair can connote comfort, and a car can connote escape. Events that disrupt the protagonist’s common sense understandings of familiar people and objects can be understood as turning points or experiential tropes in the life-narrative. A “best friend” doesn’t just simply transform into an “arch-nemesis.”
In order to maintain life-narrative continuity, this transformation requires a story of betrayal.

The conceptualization of the second para-discursive narrative form relies on de Certeau’s theory of “spatial practices” (1984). According to this theory, the “place” of a city as constituted by the structural regimes of architectural and administrative apparatuses is akin to the “proper meaning” of a word, while the “space” of a city is constituted by individual users’ appropriations and uses of the proper place, akin to vernacular appropriations of words (ibid 100). The practical differences between space and place appear in high relief in instances of dramatic contestation between the strategic administration of place and the tactical uses of space, as when the Le Corbusier’s modernist “machine for living” architectural aesthetic informed the design of the Pruitt-Egge low-income housing development in St. Louis. The strategic value of “efficiency” encouraged the designers to create elevator stops on only some (instead of all) floors; this “efficient” design inadvertently produced opportunities for numerous illegal activities to occur on the marginal, less accessible floors. The award-winning development was eventually “dynamited as an uninhabitable environment” in 1972 (Harvey 1990: 39).

De Certeau extends the analogy of speech to movement such that any kind of travel from one place to another (and back again) can be conceived of as a “spatial story” (1984: 115). He claims,

Certainly walking about and traveling substitute for exits, for going away and coming back, which were formerly made available by a body of legends that places nowadays lack. Physical moving about has the itinerant function of yesterday’s or today’s ‘superstitions.’ Travel (like
walking) is a substitute for the legends that used to open up space to something different.” (ibid: 106)

In contemporary America, however, travelers have become accustomed to practicing space according to administered trajectories; sidewalks, highways, and downloadable maps from the internet are only a handful of the ways these narrative trajectories are administered, making the journey “before or during the time the feet perform it” (ibid: 116). The spatial stories we practice most often are familiar and generic, and whether or not we really want to arrive at our destination, the spatial story reassures and makes us comfortable like a child’s bedtime story.

Even a day’s unfolding with the morning commute, work time, and evening commute home can be read like a mundane Iliad and Odyssey. Interruptions that threaten this (generic) narrative trajectory arrive as points of high anxiety; the “happily ever after” homecoming can seem quite distant when one is stranded at the side of the road. But the resolution following such a conflict makes a new story, a spatial practice that can mire the everyday protagonist in a number of situations that may require struggle with the hostile elements (depending on the weather), exploration of unfamiliar spaces, and interaction with (and assistance from) strangers. Whatever events unfold, the point is that any movement from place to place occurs according to a narrative trajectory, one that may ultimately be realized (and resolved or mastered, following Abrahams) in personal narrative when our stranded protagonist arrives at her destination and is asked, “What took you so long?”
Speed and Technology

Speed and technology have emerged as fundamental concerns for investigations into the everyday, as both constitute significant and relatively unmarked domains of practice. Their interrelationship is fundamental to this study because *technologies mediate the speed-control dynamic in everyday life.* The speed-control dynamic refers to the various ways that increased rapidity in the pace of life is held in check by a mastery over movement, either by the technology-user or by disciplinary administrative apparatuses. Either sense depends on repetition, which results in familiarity with the technologies of speed and control such that their daily operation takes the form of a rite and use becomes rhythmic. Speed up, slow down; turn on, turn off; produce, consume. Like domesticated animals, technology-users are broken and break themselves into the rigorous rhythms of contemporary life (Lefebvre 2004: 39).

In his history of 20th century popular culture, Raymond Betts emphasizes that the most dramatic transformations occurred in the experiential domains of “pace and space” (ix: 2004). As Fredrick W. Taylor’s infamous “scientific management” of industrial production sought to promote a rationalized sense of time that eliminated “unproductive” (i.e. leisure) time from the unskilled laborer’s workday, the ideology of industrialized time infected everyday life (Doane 2002: 5-11). David Harvey argues that these transformations, which he characterizes as a process of “time-space compression” that speeds up life, can be linked to the increasing dominance of capitalism (1990: 240) and is expressed profoundly in the ubiquity of instantaneous services and disposable products (ibid 286). In late capitalist societies, one needn’t stretch one’s imagination too far to see
how time itself becomes a consumable commodity; Guy Debord calls this industrialized form of time “pseudo-cyclical time” (1994: 110). He argues, “The time founded on commodity production is itself a consumable commodity” (ibid 111). That is to say, both the worker’s time exchanged for a paycheck and money spent on time-consuming or time-saving commodities (i.e. televisions and automobiles, respectively) implicate the capitalist society’s subject into an administered and oppressive new experience of time, as its indifference to the rhythms of linear and cyclical human time is surpassed only by its conformity to the instrumental logic of capitalism.

In this context, technological commodities appear as concentrated forms of time-space compression. Appliances save time, but at the cost of the complexity of human practice. They “have now become more complex than human behavior relative to them. Objects are more and more highly differentiated—our gestures less and less so” (Baudrillard 1996: 56, italics in the original). At the time of his writing, Baudrillard’s frustration was directed toward the dreams of technological efficiency in modernity, the hope that all tasks could feasibly be achieved with nothing more than the push of a button, leaving the user to bask in a “wondrous absence of activity” (ibid 111). So technological objects can be imagined as materialized forms of compressed practice; their speed and efficiency surpasses that of any human. As advertisements present these commodities with a rhetoric of liberation, Baudrillard claims the sole freedom they promote is the “freedom to function” (ibid 18). Functionality, in this sense, indicates a thing’s “ability to be adapted into an overall scheme” (ibid 63). When we consume, what we consume is not the functional object, but the notion of “freedom” via its association with the functional object (ibid 181). The association of emotional connotations with this
technological aesthetic of efficiency and functionality justifiably alarms social critics sensitive to fascist tendencies. “Every object claims to be functional, just as every regime claims to be democratic” (ibid 63)—the bald assertion that a thing functions, that it *works* or *does what it is supposed to do*, obscures political and ethical questions into the desirability of functionality in the first place. Pleasure that a thing *works* ignores the implications of what exactly that thing *works for* and *toward*.

These philosophical insights into the nexus of speed-technology-power that highlight disciplinary historic and societal tendencies remain profoundly relevant; however, they overstate the zeal with which the everyday person experiences the realities of life in a contemporary capitalist society. They do not allow for the *negotiated* and *oppositional* readings of cultural texts (Hall 1980: 166), nor do they allow for tactical appropriations (de Certeau 1984). Even when dominant systems run smoothly, everyday users appropriate the technologies and direct them toward their own needs and desires. While many critics argue that the subject of contemporary culture is always-already interpellated within the system (Althusser 1994) and constituted as a subject of the media prior to particular readings (Kellner 1995: 37), their dismissiveness of everyday agency leads them to ignore the contested nature of hegemony (Williams 1991). By dismissing everyday agency, such critics have been able to avoid serious engagement with lived reality. Arguably, much scholarly disdain for research that engages with everyday agency as resistant practices may be rooted in the populist, celebratory tone of much of this ethnographic work; karaoke (Drew 2001), media fandom (Jenkins 1992), surfing (Fiske 1989), and scholarship that celebrate these practices, many ideology-minded scholars argue, are decidedly *not* resistant.
To engage in the debate regarding whether or not particular everyday practices are resistant (in the political sense of passive resistance), however, is to miss the point. The point is to “[expose] the possibilities of conflict between the rational and the irrational in our society and in our time” (Lefebvre 1984: 23, emphasis added)—a conflict that may become increasingly marked as “Man [sic] has become less rational than his own objects, which now run ahead of him…organizing his surroundings and appropriating his actions” (Baudrillard 1996: 50). The challenge for critical everyday life research is to engage with the irrational in both its ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ forms. Telling stories and decorating one’s refrigerator with colorful magnets are instances of the “irrational” emergent in the everyday—while such practices might ‘make sense’ on a symbolic plane, they may appear as extraneous, wasteful, and inefficient from a more “rational” perspective. Likewise, policies that don’t seem to make sense and commodities that don’t do what they’re supposed to are imposed from above on everyday lives—these are the things everyday people must work to make sense of or cite as examples of the irrationality of dominant forces.

Concerning the speed-control dynamic, things may appear as more irrational as things speed out of control. When things malfunction, the speed-control dynamic is thrown into disarray; a malfunctioning technology either does nothing or something that it’s not supposed to. Either case is typified by irrationality and a loss of control and signifies the uncanny fear of crisis emergent in the mundane, things being not as they seem. In a “world got down,” the malfunction, as an experience of “the contingent, the accidental, and the senseless” may be read by dominated subjects as a sign of the “really real” (Stewart 1996: 169). The technological malfunction arrives then as an event, a
crisis that can interrupt the rhythms of daily life and open up an opportunity for the broken-in person to break free from imposed rhythms; the “space on the side of the road” can be practiced as a critical space (ibid).

Malfunction

Narrative, time-space compression, and irrationality come together in the technological malfunction that throws off the speed-control dynamic in everyday life. By “malfunction,” I mean a particular kind of technological nonsense, an event that reverses or inverts a common sense way of understanding the way a particular technology functions. As such, the malfunction represents a particular kind of nonsense, like Tristan Tzara’s “No more manifestoes” manifesto, that “presents a critique and a denial of univocal meaning and the ideology of univocal meaning found in common sense” (Stewart 1979: 77). Nonsense emerges from common sense, just as the malfunctioning thing emerges from the functioning thing by way of an error, a special, perhaps pathological condition of the functioning thing.

While technology seems to be gaining recognition as a significant domain of inquiry for scholars of everyday life (Galloway 2004, Poster 2004, Thrift 2004), their work continues to assume that technological artifacts and systems do what they’re supposed to. Admittedly, such a direction seems to make sense within the parameters of the everyday life perspective, as technologies incorporated into daily life tend to “work” more often than they don’t, and malfunctions seldom occur to the point that they become part of a daily routine (unless one considers the perspective of the repair professional).
However, as an event, the technological malfunction can be understood as an enacted conflict between the rational and the irrational. It seems likely that criticism of dominant technological systems could occur in these moments of disruptive malfunction, at the very least to the extent of criticism of the need to rely on the given malfunctioning technology in the first place. The disorienting quality of the interruption of routine can jar the technology-user into critical awareness of his or her reliance on the particular technology and activate a utopian imaginary, the wish for a better way of life, an idyllic past or a better future. In his work on the significance of rhythms in daily life (2004), Lefebvre claims,

All becoming irregular…of rhythms produces antagonistic effects. It throws out of order and disrupts; it is symptomatic of a disruption that is generally profound, lesional and no longer functional. It can also produce a lacuna, a hole in time, to be filled in by an invention, a creation.

(ibid 44, italics in the original)

Such interruptions become increasingly significant considering the contemporary experience of time as dolled out and structured by dominant institutions. The “inventions” and “creations” people use to fill the “hole in time” have the potential to be read as criticism of the status quo and imaginings of utopian transformations. In these instances, one may find hints of yearning for the transfiguration of everyday life in the here-and-now.

Godfrey Reggio’s film Koyaanisqatsi (1983) juxtaposes images of time-lapsed urban activity to reveal the extent to which the grid of discipline shapes contemporary sociality. Hordes of commuters riding escalators from the subway move like the strings
of hotdogs cascading from the machines that mass produce them. Satellite images of cities are juxtaposed with infrared images of computer chips to reveal the haunting similarities. The rhythms of traffic at red lights seem never to cease. The film ends with a NASA space rocket blastoff. As the rocket climbs into the air, the Philip Glass soundtrack lapses into a repetitive chant: “…Koyaanisqatsi…Koyaanisqatsi…” The word is from the Hopi language, and it means “life out of balance,” “crazy life,” or “a way of life that needs to be changed.” The rocket explodes before it ever leaves the atmosphere; the chant continues as the camera follows its shattered bits plummeting earthward. It is a powerful metaphor for the misdirected desires and ambitions of modernity, and it indicates how the tragic technological malfunction may turn us back toward more human and humane priorities.

The everyday malfunction is a ubiquitous event, one that haunts the everyday with anxieties and terrors until it manifests itself. Ulrich Beck’s notions of risk society and reflexive modernity usefully highlight the implications of large-scale malfunctions in contemporary society. His premise is that “[i]n advanced modernity the social production of wealth is systematically accompanied by the social production of risks” (1992: 19, italics in the original), causing political, economic, and cultural institutions to participate in risk management to the point that limiting the distribution of “bads” begins to take priority over maximizing the distribution of “goods” (ibid 3). The distribution of risks is necessarily reflexive as the hazards of modernity are, predominantly, hazards produced by modernity. For example, BSE or “mad cow disease” is a risk created by cow feeding techniques developed for the mass production of edible beef products, and media coverage of risky beef-production requires the industry to reflexively act upon
itself to limit the risk of consumer contamination. The reflexivity necessary for the management risks like BSE requires a future-oriented “risk consciousness” that can attempt to imagine and thwart potential catastrophes (ibid 34). However, because consumers and subjects remain unable to manage such risks themselves, popular attitudes frequently shift from hysteria to indifference and back again (ibid 36); a person victimized by the risky conditions of modernity can only maintain so much rage. More often, the wide distribution of risks encourages the fatalism expressed in the everyday phrase “everything [i.e. microwave ovens, tobacco products, cellular phones, television sets, polluted air, cosmetics] causes cancer.” When indifference makes enduring the invisible hazards of modernity easier for those who feel they have no agency to keep themselves safe, Beck asks, “Is it at all possible to create and maintain critical distance towards things one cannot escape?” (ibid 41). In wealthy contemporary society, “[t]he commonality of anxiety takes the place of the commonality of need” (ibid 49, italics in the original). In such circumstances, the class-based distribution of anxieties should surprise no one. Despite Beck’s claims that “smog is democratic” (ibid 36) and “everything which threatens life on this Earth also threatens the property and commercial interests of those who live from the commodification of life and its requisites” (ibid 39), the distribution of health care, insurance, and other preventative measures in America is hardly egalitarian: “wealth accumulates at the top, risk at the bottom” (ibid 35). At “the bottom,” one might expect to find everyday risk-management tactics that prepare the consciousness or imagined life-narrative (as opposed to preparing finances) for hazardous events (Tulloch and Lupton 2003).
In Kathleen Stewart’s ethnography of a “hard-core Appalachian coal-mining region of southwestern West Virginia” (1996: 3), some of the ways those at “the bottom” cope with the anxieties of ubiquitous risk become clear in her chapter titled “The Accident” (ibid 165-177). This chapter describes the fallout within a small community following a crash between three cars that killed five children. This event became the subject of numerous narratives as locals fashioned a story of drunk driver villains and innocent victims. Many of these narratives expressed ideas of fate, as the occurrence of a terrible event foretold, something that was bound to happen. In her reading, fate “[rises] to address the order in disorder…[and] everything that happens stands as evidence of encompassing forces that lurk behind the choices of the ordinary and the everyday” (ibid 167). Following the accident, the narratives made sense of the “big meanings” involved; they achieved mythic proportions, signifying a “struggle of ideals and ways” (ibid 168).

In this case, the immanent dangers of the everyday emerged as meaningful events when actualized, and came to be used within the community as moral tales about fateful events and fleeting life.

True, many people experience technological malfunctions as a tragic events; they can disappoint and kill. Their increased significance among the lower classes cannot be ignored either; for people less able to afford replacements or repairs, the malfunction will have particular significance. Despite the misery and tragedy sometimes caught up with the idea of malfunctions, they contain special significance as critical events. The disruptiveness, suddenness, and narrativity of malfunctions mark these everyday crises as opportunities for the emergence of a utopian yearning. I view the “hole in time” created by the malfunction as a moment for the technology user to yearn for the transfiguration of
everyday life, for something akin to Lefebvre’s *Festival* (1984). Gardiner reads the
Lefebvrian Festival as a representation of “an overcoming of the conflict between play
and everyday life, a transcendence of human alienation and a reawakening of the spirit of
popular celebration” (2000: 98). Lefebvre imagines a new kind of everyday life free of
drudgery and domination in which “the antithesis between the quotidian and the
Festival... will no longer be a basis for society (1984: 36-37) and the “experience values”
of “place and time” will gain priority over exchangeable “trade value” (ibid 191).
Malfunctions contain these dormant utopian qualities of life; from the perspective of
contemporary capitalist society, they *waste* time, *interrupt* work and daily rhythms, and
*short-circuit* mediated experience—only to force the technology user to confront his or
her real existential conditions in time and space.

Reality Check: Propriety and Priorities in Everyday Life

As I argue that technology users may express critical sentiments in their malfunction
narratives, I also want to emphasize that the critical sentiments given voice in these
narratives remain largely implicit and subtle. Their subtlety belies their tactical nature,
and keeps these kinds of stories grounded in and primarily concerned with the everyday.
As such, Pierre Mayol’s notion of *propriety* in everyday life becomes useful when one
considers the question of why such critical sentiments seldom incite outright verbal
assaults on institutions that dominate everyday life. According to Mayol,

> Propriety is the symbolic management of the public facet of each of us as
soon as we enter the street. Propriety is simultaneously the manner in
which one is perceived and the means constraining one to remain
submitted to it; fundamentally, it requires the avoidance of all dissonance
in the game of behaviors and all qualitative disruption in the perception of
the social environment. (de Certeau 1998: 17)

Certainly, personal narratives are one method through which individuals symbolically
manage their public facets, and the telling of stories about things that go wrong is one
particular practice applied directly to the avoidance of dissonance. In this sense, all
malfunction narratives promote “ideological” thought—they aim symbolically to re-
establish the status-quo. However, the notion of propriety can be seen as a useful
reminder that the stability of some relationships in everyday life are more important than
are others. In particular, propriety emphasizes maintaining the status quo of relationships
with family members, friends, co-workers, and neighbors, and places far less priority on
maintaining an administered status-quo. Maintaining propriety is a practice of solidarity.

In everyday life, propriety involves imposing normative parameters oneself; these
parameters are hardly fixed. One may enact “minitransgressions” and keep oneself in
check via “miniscule repressions” (de Certeau 1998: 16-17). One technique people for
negotiating these parameters and practicing solidarity is “chatting.” The practice of
chatting, Mayol claims, “[nourishes] the motivation for neighbor relations” and
“constantly [tries] to abolish the strangeness contained by the neighborhood” (ibid: 19).

As a sense-making practice, Mayol describes chatting as “a repeated exorcism against the
alteration of the social space of the neighborhood by unpredictable events that might
cross it” (ibid). Chatting, of course, is exactly the “natural context” of personal
experience narratives, and malfunctions certainly constitute a kind of unpredictable event
to be made sense of. And even as the maintenance of certain status-quo attitudes is one of the aims of the telling of personal experience narratives propriety necessitates, propriety has symbolic benefits, including continued solidarity among intimate others.

In contemporary capitalist societies, and America in particular, outright criticism of capitalism and its institutional accoutrements seldom falls within the boundaries of everyday propriety. Rather, propriety seeks to normalize events within their cultural contexts; in conversation, this normalization can occur by relating events to common attitudes, values, and beliefs, often in terms of proverbs or popular wisdom (de Certeau 1998: 79). As such, criticism of consumed goods, from produce to the technological objects that concern this study, tends to be expressed in terms of critique of a particular brand or seller. Few who grow up in capitalist societies are unfamiliar with tales of being ripped off or swindled, and individuals’ very inundation with hyperbolic and idealistic advertisements promote cynicism and mistrust of businesses and salespeople offering “essential” products. In contemporary America, “buyer beware” and “a sucker is born every ten seconds” are familiar expressions. Yet the unequal economic structure remains beyond the scope of such chatter in everyday life, and these critical expressions still seem to hold out a glimmer of hope that the market can at least satisfy the savvy consumer—and justifies the supposedly savvy consumer’s contempt for the dissatisfied.

Even in the context of the grocery store that Mayol discusses, “buying is a public action that binds” (de Certeau 1998:81). Ones choices are interpreted by one’s intimate others, and poor choices require serious tactical identity-negotiation. When one confronts a malfunctioning technological object that one has purchased, one may adopt one of several attitudes. The technology user may grimly accept her lot, acquiesce, and
adapt to her less-than-satisfactory circumstances; she may laugh, and in doing so flaunt the absurdity of her situation; she may complain and criticize the representatives of the market that offered the object; she may accept responsibility for the malfunction, blaming herself; or she may adopt any number of other potentially conflicting attitudes. The point is that whatever attitude she adopts, it is never merely a private attitude. It may be expressed to others in any number of ways, including narrative. Stahl argues personal experience narratives are “items that serve primarily to express and maintain the stability of and individual personality, rather than an entire culture” (de Certeau 1989:21); however, as propriety bounds the form of an individual personality’s public self and elements of that public self are expressed through narrative, attitudes are shared, spread, and made available through the stories people tell about themselves. By making critical attitudes familiar, narratives of negative experiences of purchased products promote criticism, even if that criticism is often restricted by conventional propriety.

Propriety, personal narratives, attitudes, and ideals can never be fully fixed, functionalized, or understood as absolute determinants of everyday action. While these concepts may fit together nicely as a theoretical construct, their here-and-now referents make for a rich, if confusing milieu. There is a danger here of dismissing the cultural critique emergent in the everyday as “mere” chatter, polluted with status-quo ideologies and concerned only with maintaining propriety. Yet all these elements of everyday life remain fundamentally emergent, contingent, and dynamic—the status-quo never really stays the same, and allegiances shift from person to person and from belief to belief. Things become far, far more complicated when one moves from discussing “the everyday life” to the particular narratives that have emerged from the everyday lives of particular
people (de Certeau 1998:8). It is with these particular people in mind that this general theoretical discussion of malfunction in everyday life moves on to focus on the specific technological system my informants address with their stories: the system of automobility.
CHAPTER 2
EVERYDAY AUTOMOBILITY AND AUTOMOBILE MALFUNCTION

The car is just a, an escape. […] It’s just something you can mold to whatever you need…

—Dirk 2005 (interview)

According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, there were 231,389,998 automobiles registered in the United States as of 2003; the 2000 census counted 281,421,906 citizens. Given this car-saturated context, it seems surprising that anthropologists, sociologists, and cultural studies scholars have only recently begun paying serious attention to the cultural aspects of the automobile. Noteworthy exceptions include semiotic analyses of automobile advertising (Wernick 1989), other studies that emphasize automobile-related discourses in policy and popular media (Lewis and Goldstein 1980, Thoms, Holden, and Claydon 1998), and cursory treatment by French critics of modernity (Baudrillard 1996, Lefebvre 1984). Nevertheless, the experiential aspect of the automobile remains relatively obscure. This gap has recently been recognized, and notable attempts to redress the automobile issue include the Car Cultures anthology edited by Daniel Miller (2001) and the special “automobility” issue of the journal Theory, Culture & Society (2004).

Henri Lefebvre’s remarks on the impact of the automobile on everyday life (1984) may have been brief, but their relevance to this study demand recognition. Writing in 1971, he considered the automobile the “Leading-Object” of modernity, one which “has
not conquered society so much as *everyday life* on which it imposes its laws” (italics in the original, 1984:100-101). Considering the various “sub-systems” of everyday life that impose ideologies of instrumental rationality and “program” how people live, he says, “nothing can beat the motor-car” (ibid: 100). Yet the very matter-of-fact nature and perceived necessity of automobile use has enabled these mundane objects to remain largely above analysis.

While scholarly discourse has seldom paid due attention to the automobile’s role in everyday life, from my experience, the automobile is a regular topic of “chatter.” For my eight informants, talking about cars did not seem strange. While the interview sessions may have reminded them of incidents they hadn’t thought about for years or invited them to think about their experiences more deeply than perhaps they would have without my questions, their stories seldom seemed forced². Furthermore, because I chose close friends and family members as informants, I recognized some of the stories they told during the interviews as stories they had told me before in the “natural” context of casual conversation, and I could request particular stories from their repertoires.

When I visit my hometown in Pennsylvania, my parents and grandparents always seem to ask, “How’s your car running?” This question occurs in the context of other general questions and conversational topics about our everyday lives, such as work and school, and can be understood as an opportunity for sharing personal narratives. Through these conversations, we come to know one another more intimately and demonstrate our story-telling skills, sharing experiences and practicing solidarity. In conversations with

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² It would be interesting to contrast the ease of storytelling about the topic of automobiles compared with storytelling about other technologies: toilets, for example. My assumption is that “toilet stories” might seem more forced, as the toilet remains a relatively taboo subject in everyday conversation, so toilet-users would tend not to experience toilet malfunctions as story-worthy events.
friends and colleagues, stories about how cars are running sometimes emerge—usually when a car isn’t running well. Not only are these events opportunities to come to know one another more intimately and tell stories, they may also invite the listener to offer help, usually by offering a ride if the teller needs one. In other conversational contexts, stories about how the car’s running come up at times when people are getting to know one another. The car may become an obvious topic of conversation when people travel together inside of them. And if they don’t know one another well, the automobile is a relatively “safe” topic as a familiar cultural reference that lacks the potential impropriety of more highly charged topics like politics, religion and other social taboos. Yet by talking about cars, people inevitably express attitudes and values above and beyond the practical matter of the automobile.

Nevertheless, personal narratives about automobiles express something about individuals’ attitudes toward aspects of what John Urry has called “the system of automobility.” According to Urry, the system of automobility includes “cars, car-drivers, roads, petroleum suppliers and many novel objects, technologies and signs” (2004:27)—i.e., the smooth running system that perpetuates and ensures automobile dominance with all its accoutrements. Urry accounts for automobility’s contemporary significance and (relative) invisibility as the result of its ability to “generate the preconditions for its own self-expansion” and radically “remake time-space” (ibid), so elements of automobility like the highway system appear natural and timeless. Automobility coerces people into freedom and flexibility by enabling rapid movement from place to place in exchange for the adoption of rigorous self-monitoring and the paradoxical immobility of the strapped-in driver (ibid: 28-31). The freedom and flexibility automobility affords drivers has
contributed to the fundamental re-structuring of everyday life, as it has transformed the arrangements of towns and cities, not to mention rural areas where the distance between people and markets require them to drive in order to sustain their way of life.

Because of its obscurity and increased removal from everyday life, the historical and economic elements of automobility seem seldom mentioned in personal narratives, at least by younger drivers who haven’t witnessed the results of these transformations. Yet advanced capitalism has brought with it increasingly advanced modes of automobile production and consumption, so the nature of the system of automobility has transformed profoundly since Ford began mass-producing Model-Ts in the 1930’s. David Gartman argues the common impulse running through the history of automobility is “the search for individual identity within a capitalist society that holds out the promise of autonomy but simultaneously denies it in the heteronomy of the economy” (2004: 170). In his “Three Ages of the Automobile,” Gartman explains the automobile’s history in terms of class distinction (the earliest era, when only the upper-class could afford cars), mass individuality (the Fordist era typified by mass production and standardization, when the middle-class became expected to own cars), and subcultural difference (the contemporary era of niche markets and customization). In this contemporary era, automobiles are “produced, purchased and used…as the mark of identity in one of a multitude of lifestyle groups, none of which is necessarily superior to another” (ibid: 191). Essentially, the automobile in this postmodern formulation becomes another accessory to identity construction, as drivers use their vehicles, be they Humvees or Volkswagen Beetles, as forms of expression. At the same time, the automobile market’s attempts to meet the desires of such postmodern identity-constructing consumers have driven them to decrease
the numbers of specific types of cars they produce while decreasing their labor costs by shifting production to flexible third-world economies.

Lefebvre claims that democratic capitalist societies are the first kinds of societies to encourage the desire for happiness among their general citizens, though the fulfillment these societies offer (i.e. commodities) remains false and ultimately unfulfilling (Gardiner 200:93). Stories about automobile malfunctions provide insight into the frustrating experience of trying to satiate the desires for freedom, independence, mobility, and speed with the automobile, a technology that ultimately denies these desires or directs them to its own ends. For my informants, the automobile is, largely, a technology for performing the everyday tasks of getting to and from work, the grocery store, and the laundromat. Of course, they also use their automobiles to fulfill social desires such as visiting family and friends, and they allow for the performance of more “liberating” activities such as going on trips or simply driving around. For many, particularly those who reside in sparse rural and suburban neighborhoods well away from town centers, the automobile works to mediate private and public space in all forms, so the meaning of its use cannot be oversimplified as purely ideological or purely resistant. While the system of automobility appears as an immense disciplinary apparatus that determines the nature of movement from place to place in contemporary everyday life, drivers try to use this system to meet their desires and needs—they make do.
Elements of Everyday Automobility

To emphasize everyday automobility is to focus on the elements of automobility closest to the driver and to try to consider these elements in a concrete sense from the driver’s perspective. These elements are among the themes common to my informants’ narratives about automobile malfunctions, so recognition of their everyday significance is crucial. None of my informants identified themselves as automobile enthusiasts, unlike, for example, Brenda Jo Bright’s informants in her article on the culture of Los Angeles low-riders (1995). This exclusion was not intentional, but it does usefully de-emphasize the potentially spectacular and performative elements of automobile use. This is not to say that my informants disliked automobiles (a few expressed that they “liked” or “loved” driving), nor that their manner of automobile use lacked spectacular or performative elements (two drove vehicles decorated by dozens of bumper stickers). Rather, my informants can be seen as individuals who understand automobiles simply as a fact of life in contemporary America; to them, automobile ownership and use seems to appear inevitable and natural, or at least necessary. That is to say, little of their identities seemed to be at stake in their automobiles—they aren’t automobile fans.

The automobile and its driver are the primary and most obvious elements of everyday automobility. The term “automobile” signifies cars, trucks, vans, and numerous other vehicles of various ages (i.e. “new” versus “used,” not to mention qualitative associations with particular years), makes (i.e. Ford, Nissan, Saturn, Buick, Toyota, etc.) and models (i.e. Bug, Sonata, F-150, Eagle, etc.). When drivers speak of their experiences of automobile use in everyday life, they refer to the specific automobiles they
drive or have driven regularly and know intimately. Like any living space, even an individual, immoveable car is a semiotically rich environment ripe with personal associations and practical knowledge. Particular aspects of the driver that may affect the automobile’s meaning include identity factors such as driver’s gender, race, age, class, and occupation, and specific automobile-related factors such as the extent of the driver’s knowledge about his or her car, experiences had in and with the car, and the driver’s most frequent uses of the car.

To illustrate, I have mixed feelings about my own car. It’s a gold Saturn sedan that was handed down to me from my mother almost two years ago. While I enjoy the good gas mileage (about thirty-five miles per gallon) and its consistent reliability (it hasn’t broken down on me yet), I hate the color. It has a “standard” gear shift, which my mother taught me how to use before she gave it to me. While I take pride in being able to drive it, it’s a nuisance when it might be useful for somebody else to drive it and that somebody else doesn’t know how to use the clutch. Recently, a chip in the windshield began turning into a sizeable crack, and I’m annoyed by the inevitable cost of the repair every time I see it. There’s an empty can of iced tea in the beverage cozy (it’s been there for about two weeks), and the back seat is cluttered with books, CDs, maps, and other items.

The next elements of everyday automobility are the road and the drive. The road is the setting of automobile practice, and the drive is the practice of traversing the road with an automobile. Drivers associate ideas of familiarity or strangeness, ease or difficulty, largeness (highway) or smallness (back road), distance, and speed with these interdependent terms. When I asked Marie why she said she loved driving, she explained
that driving fulfilled her need to “space out and relax,” and that depending on her mood she enjoyed both driving “someplace new” or driving “someplace really familiar” where she could “be really happy with the way that I maneuver my curves and what I know is coming up.” When one drives, one encounters the world of driving with all its particular pleasures, hassles, and dangers; this world includes traffic, signs, scenery, highway police, and all the maneuvers the savvy driver uses to negotiate between them. When considering stories about automobile malfunctions, one quickly realizes that the physical place the malfunction occurs will alter the narrative’s symbolic context. Breaking down along a highway is different from breaking down along a back road, and breaking down “someplace new” is different from breaking down “someplace familiar.”

Closely related to the road and the drive are the task and the destination. The task is the purpose of the drive, and the destination is its physical setting with its varying degrees of punctuality-expectations. Together, these elements of everyday automobility determine the trajectory of the drive. Where one is driving and the expectations of the others one drives toward tend to alter one’s attitude toward the drive. The workplace, a vacation spot, the grocery store, or the home of a friend are all distinct destinations and involve varying degrees of task-orientation. Likewise, the different kinds of tasks accomplished at the different destinations demand different styles of driving. One may need to rush to work or make an appointment, but one may assume a far more relaxed attitude when driving to a park or when on the way home, the locus of everyday life and the place where one keeps the automobile.

Dirk relates a story that involves a change in destination and task that illustrates this point. It was the last day before his girlfriend was to move to California. He had
stayed with her during the night, and he had to be at work at the bank at 9:00 a.m. the next morning. He disliked his job, calling it “unfulfilling,” and he often made it a point to stay up late at night or sleep in mornings to “savor everything…of the outside world before going into this job.” On that day, he says, “I was driving to work and all of a sudden my car […] would start lurching, like whenever you first learn how to drive a clutch.” While one might expect this kind of malfunction to frustrate him, he used it to his advantage. He called the bank and told his manager he couldn’t come in because of car trouble. Then, he says, “[I]t took me awhile before I really sought help with my car because I naturally tried to get my car back to where [my girlfriend] was and spend the rest of my time with her.” For him, this malfunction was a “total bonus” because it allowed him to change his trajectory. Instead of going to work, he would get to see his girlfriend. This change in destination radically transformed the nature of the task as well: he was much more determined to get back to see his girlfriend than he was to get to work as he was more willing to risk the car breaking down on his way to see her than he was willing to risk the same to get to work.

The significance of relationships to everyday automobility introduces the next element, *people*. These include those at the destination, other drivers, passengers, and strangers one may encounter while traveling. In *The System of Objects*, Baudrillard claims, “the automobile no longer removes obstacles between men [sic]; on the contrary, men now invest the automobile with that which separates them” (1996: 127). This may be true in the context of events such as rush hour traffic jams, which demonstrate a paradigmatic example of the “lonely crowd” (Reisman 2001) but automobiles more often facilitate relationships between people by making accessible more distant people. With
an automobile, one may more easily access distant social cites and involve oneself in
social networks that span dozens, even hundreds, of miles. The significance of
passengers should not be understated either; depending on who is riding with the driver,
the driver may drive more or less cautiously. In either case, driving with passengers can
become an opportunity for social bonding, as people driving together either have the
same destination and task in mind, or the driver has offered the passenger a ride.
Strangers, as potential friends or foes, emerge as paradoxical figures, and in narrative
they seem to appear as stand-ins for “society.” In stories about automobile malfunction,
strangers frequently enter as friendly helpers. However, as all the helpful strangers
mentioned by my informants were men, women quite justifiably seem more fearful of
these figures and question whether they have “ulterior motives” for their helpfulness.

Judging from my informants’ stories, the role of “friendly stranger” has been
largely usurped by professional representatives of the final element of everyday
automobility, the institutions of automobility. These institutions tend to remain in the
background of everyday life except during maintenance and moments of malfunction;
unsurprisingly, representatives of these institutions appear frequently in stories about
automobile malfunction. In these stories, the prominent figures are automobile
salespeople, tow truck drivers, repair and maintenance professionals, the American
Automobile Association (AAA), and, more recently, OnStar\textsuperscript{3}. Generally, these figures
are either celebrated or criticized regarding their ability to correct a problem related to the
automobile. When these figures disappointed them, my informants were often intensely
critical. These drivers had no illusions about their vulnerability with respect to

\textsuperscript{3} This is the most radical “safety” automobile technology to date. Automobiles with OnStar come with
factory-installed global positioning systems, so if you have an “emergency,” they have little difficulty
locating you and alerting the necessary institutions or authorities.
mechanics and salespeople, and the swindling mechanic who charges for unnecessary repairs remains a popular folk devil for contemporary parents to warn their children against. With so much of everyday life dependent on the automobile, drivers with a malfunction may express resistance or resentment toward reliance on these institutions. This resistance can appear particularly pointed in stories from older drivers who reflect romantically on their childhood, when they remember “neighborhood mechanics” assisting with problems. In our discussion about the changes in automobile repair, Deirdre, 52, remarks,

Back then, you didn’t ever take your car to the garage. You took it home. ‘Cause, y’know, Joe Blow that lives next door will come over, take a look at it. “Oh you need this, you need a belt.” Dad would go get a belt, then put it on. Everybody was their own mechanics.

As witnesses of history, drivers of Deirdre’s generation realize that the benefits of increasingly sophisticated automobile technologies also have their costs. As the technologies become more sophisticated, maintenance and repair become increasingly professionalized so “Joe Blow” can’t do much except change your oil. Problems with transmissions, alternators, and radiators become paired with problems with oxygen sensors, and the repair professionals rely increasingly on diagnostic tests and computer technologies in order to do their jobs. The inequality of power distribution becomes apparent to drivers when they must rely on these institutions, and frustrating experiences with them provide the opportunity for cultural critique.
Automobile Malfunctions

Up to this point, I have used the term “malfunction” in a general theoretical sense. In this section, I articulate more specifically some of the kinds of automobile malfunctions my informants talked about in their narratives and the elements of everyday automobility they address. This list is hardly exhaustive, and includes only the distinct kinds of malfunctions my informants addressed. The labels are my own, and are intended to connote the pseudo-generic status of each malfunction. Each kind of malfunction seems to carry with it common or potential cultural themes and associations, and I have tried to make these explicit. Notable absences are fatal malfunctions, malfunctions that resulted from modifications the driver made to the automobile, or the kinds of intentional malfunctions that could occur at a festive event, such as a demolition derby.

The breakdown may be the paradigmatic automobile malfunction; it is a surprising automobile malfunction that halts the car before it arrives at its destination, interrupting the task and leaving the driver stranded. Breakdowns occur at home or at the destination, but the most dramatic breakdowns happen on the road. These may leave the driver in unfamiliar terrain, or in somewhat familiar terrain where one has only driven, but never walked, through. Specific malfunctions my informants discussed that fall under this category include transmission failures, major engine malfunctions, tire blowouts, and running out of gas. AAA tow-truck drivers often enter such stories to save the stranded driver and restore order to everyday life. However, some use breakdowns as opportunities to “save themselves,” usually when the malfunction is a flat tire, an empty gas tank, or some similar problem that the driver recognized and found relatively easy to
repair. In other instances, the stranded driver may call on friends or family members for assistance. In any case, these malfunctions tend to be most feared, and those of my informants who owned cellular phones cited the possibility of a breakdown as one reason for purchasing the phone.

Rachel’s narrative illustrates how the elements of everyday automobility can come together as themes in a story of breakdown. She lived and went to college in Bowling Green, Ohio, and she was driving to her hometown, about an hour away, to visit friends. She says,

…I’m driving home. I got the music all loud and it’s like really loud. And I was probably driving with a flat tire for like a while. ‘Cause I had my music so loud that like…But then I was hearing this noise, and it was probably like on the rim or whatever, because the car was actually moving like from side to side.

And I’m like, “Something is definitely very wrong!” […] It was makin’ this horrible noise. So I pulled over and there was this dude on a bike. He was just ridin’ around on his bike. And he sees me and he come up to me and he’s like, “Oh, you got a flat.” And I did. My, I was like almost on the rim, like it was bad.

And so I had a flat tire and um here was this guy. I was in Stryker, which is that tiny little place that’s pretty much, like it’s within ten miles of my parents’ house. But uh he recognized me from when I worked at the diner.
After realizing that something was wrong and pulling over, she had the fortune of encountering a somewhat familiar stranger. After she talked with him, he offered to help her change the tire. During the event, she remained suspicious of his motives, wondering, “Man, why is he helping me…” Nevertheless, she says the familiar stranger “put the donut on and I called my dad and my dad came. And like it was fine.” Once she got back to her parents’ house, they told her, “You have to have a cell phone.” Since she didn’t have any phone at all at the time, she says, she agreed.

Breakdowns seem to be the kind of malfunction that most frequently inhabits the popular imagination. They can easily be manipulated into dramatic narratives, as they involve a rhetorical “turn” of events that shifts from the safe, familiar world of automobile use to the world outside, which many storytellers (women in particular) perceive to be dangerous. In contemporary America, which so strongly values the notion of “independence,” people seem unaccustomed to and uncomfortable with the idea of relying on strangers. When informants such as Rachel perceived themselves as vulnerable, they tended to express this feeling of vulnerability in terms of suspicion towards those who offer assistance. Hence the popularity of AAA, which has an obvious stake in helping the victim of a breakdown: capital. Drivers feel more powerful with respect to tow-truck drivers representing AAA because they have paid for this service, and the service AAA offers is how its representatives make a living. However, Dirk takes a more altruistic attitude when he remarks that helpful strangers can “restore faith” in others. These differences may have as much to do with attitudes learned from experience as they do with the different discourses regarding strangers offered to men and women. Because the discourses of roadside rape and murder seem more frequently
directed to women, most of my female informants admitted to using their cars to get to places more safely than they could by walking. As Rachel put it, it’s safer to be a driver than a walker because when you’re driving, “you’re in an enclosed environment and it’s a lot less likely people will fuck with you.”

Similar to the breakdown is the wear out, which occurs when one recognizes the symptoms of a malfunction such as the “check engine light,” odd noises, or erratic functioning like Dirk’s “lurching” car, but the malfunction doesn’t force the driver to stop on the side of the road. The main distinction between a breakdown and a wear out, for this study, is the driver’s experienced sense of urgency of the malfunction and the diminished likelihood that the malfunction will prevent the driver from accomplishing her task. While the distinction between a breakdown and a wear out seems purely subjective when considering a flat tire (which one could drive on for a small amount of time or quickly repair if one knows how), it becomes clearer when one considers the numerous dashboard technologies in an automobile that a driver can do without, at least for a time. These dashboard technologies include the speedometer, a headlight, the radio, the windshield wipers, the air conditioner or heater, and rearview mirrors.

Because a wear out is considerably less urgent than a breakdown, it appears in narrative less frequently, and then seldom as a dramatic turn. For example, Tom told me of his experience with the check engine light on his old car. While he admits his thought upon noticing the check engine light on was “Oh crap!” because “it could be any number of things if your car’s running ok,” he didn’t take it to a repair shop for “a couple of days.” When he did finally take it to the shop recommended by his campus pastor, he explains, the repairman
showed me that on Chrysler cars you can flip your ignition three times before turning it over, and you can read your check engine light as a series of flashes. […] And so what you can do is you can sit there and read how it flashes and how it pauses, and you can figure out the two-digit code for what’s wrong. And so that’s what he did, and it said “oxygen sensor.” And so it took him maybe like less than five minutes to figure out what was wrong.

In Tom’s narrative, the dramatic turn occurs when the repairman opens up to him to reveal what may be considered a “trade secret,” as reading these codes is something other mechanics might charge “like thirty or thirty-five dollars” to do. As such, wear outs seldom constitute the “point” of the narrative, as they tend to be easily repaired and constitute very little in the way of an interruption. At their worst, they can be a kind of mundane hassle, something that costs time and money, but not so much as to provoke much criticism if the repair shop meets the driver’s expectations and practices of everyday automobility can resume within a reasonable amount of time.

Time and money are central critical concerns when automobile parts wear out or when less sudden malfunctions must be serviced. Conflict may occur when the scarcity of the driver’s time and money come up against the amount of time the repair will take or the repair’s cost. As George and Deirdre informed me, drivers of new cars may have the advantage of warranties that allow them to return their automobile to the dealership for free repairs, offer shuttle services to nearby shopping centers to distract the driver while the car is repaired, or provide the driver with a rental car for the duration of repair time. Drivers of used cars, who tend to be more economically and temporally strained to begin
with, seldom have such advantages. They may, as Dirk does, express frustration with perceptions of “planned obsolescence” that fuels the economic arm of the system of automobility by selling sub-standard parts that wear out quickly so drivers must continue to purchase them. These frustrated, less affluent drivers may resign themselves to doing without “ideal” functionality.

Those who resign themselves to doing without ideal functionality cope with a *chronic malfunction*. These malfunctions are problems that go on for indefinite lengths of time; they are familiar to the driver, and some form of relatively inexpensive maintenance or doing-without tactics may allow for the malfunction’s lack of repair. These kinds of malfunctions include the dashboard malfunctions mentioned previously; cosmetic problems such as dents, rust, and cracked windows; and persistent fluid problems such as burning oil or leaky transmission. Given their persistence, my informants commented on these malfunctions more than they employed the rhetorical techniques implied by narrative form. Nevertheless, I read their comments as “narrative” in the sense that talk about these malfunctions does involve some amount of rhetorical maneuvering and narrative imagination, as do the writings of counter-tradition avant-garde novelists who avoid the standard story structure of “rising action”—“conflict”—“resolution.”

Tabitha, who commutes a half hour to work daily in her van, 1991 Plymouth Voyager, copes with the chronic malfunction of a speedometer that sticks. She first noticed it on her way back to Bowling Green, Ohio, from Cleveland, Ohio, approximately a two-hour drive, when she would hit the brakes and the speedometer continued to read at seventy miles per hour. Of the malfunction, she says, “that’s not
really something that can be easily fixed, ‘cause they would have to take the whole thing apart. So it’s not even something I’ve ever really considered getting fixed.” Instead of fixing it, she says, “usually I would just sort of pound on the console in order to un-stick it.” However, after years of driving with this malfunction, now she doesn’t bother to try to “un-stick” it. She has other ways of figuring out her speed; she says,

I think I have a better feel for it, and also I just kind of follow the rest of traffic to gauge. And like, I also have a tachometer, so I actually have an idea of like where my engine R.P.M.s are at particular speeds. So I just sort of judge it by looking at the tachometer, and of course following the speed of traffic. But actually now I don’t even, like sometimes I don’t even pay attention to it at all and I tend to drive very slowly because of that. And I get paranoid.

Instead of fixing the problem, Tabitha has made the broken speedometer familiar and has adapted her driving techniques in order to compensate for its unreliability. For her, the chronic malfunction has become a problem she has resigned herself to deal with, but she seems confident in her ability to do without this technology most would deem essential to safe driving practice.

Chronic malfunctions like Tabitha’s provide an opportunity to illustrate how de Certeau’s notion of “making do” with tactics applies to everyday automobility. According to de Certeau, tactics are the ways consumers in contemporary capitalist societies artfully manipulate time, space, and commodities to meet their own needs (1984). “Doing without” a supposedly essential commodity as Tabitha does by not having her speedometer repaired can certainly be theorized as a kind of tactical making
do. Her adaptations of her driving practice constitute an everyday artfulness, a
demonstration of “practical wit” that allows her to continue everyday life without paying
for products she knows she doesn’t really need. In contemporary America where the
capitalist culture paradoxically values both luxury and thrift, the practice of “doing
without” is neither strictly resistant (as *AdBusters* writers might suggest⁴) or ideological
(“A penny saved is a penny earned”). Rather, it is often an economic necessity shaped by
particular desires and cultural obligations. For Tabitha, doing without seems like
something she does for herself, if only to preserve her scarce funds for more “necessary”
expenses like food and rent.

The *poltergeist* is a kind of automobile malfunction that seems nonsensical or
absurd; it may not interrupt tasks, but the driver may be afraid and aware something is
wrong. Experiences of these kinds of malfunctions occur when the automobile or some
part of it seems to have a will of its own, and the driver loses control of the
malfunctioning aspect, though the car remains drivable. Often, poltergeist malfunctions
are manifestations of electrical problems, such as loose fuses or wires. Two of my
informants, Deirdre and Marie, experienced almost identical poltergeist malfunctions: in
both cases, various dashboard technologies like the lights, radio, power windows, and
horn went on and off, apparently at will. Both expressed fear when the malfunction
began, and both said that their cars seemed “haunted” or “possessed.” The introduction
of such outright absurdity into the world of everyday life is certainly disorienting, as I

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⁴ *Adbusters* magazine promotes anti-consumerist activities like the annual “Buy Nothing Day,” when people living in consumer-driven societies are encouraged to go a full day without purchasing anything. Buy Nothing Day occurs annually on the first Friday after Thanksgiving—the biggest consumption day of the year in America.
experienced myself years ago when the horn in my Ford Tempo started blowing in an erratic manner, apparently all by itself.

While Deirdre’s fear didn’t subside until the mechanics solved the poltergeist malfunction in her new Volkswagen Bug, Marie realized that rain water getting into her van through her broken headlight was probably causing the problem. She says,

Like, at first I was really scared when the light went on. When the windows went down, I was just like, “My car is possessed! There is something very wrong. It’s running just fine. But everything like, keeps going on and off, I don’t know what’s going on…”

And then like, I started to think maybe it’s got something to do with the headlight going out. I started to realize…Then the windows went back up. And I was like, “Ok.” And then they went back down. And then I just started laughing, because like, rain was coming in at me, the windows were down, the lights kept going on and off, and so like, I just parked the car and went over to my friend’s house and was like, “Check this out! Get in the car!” So we went for like a demon drive where the car was like possessed.

This vivid scene Marie describes reveals the potential for a malfunction to let fun and festival enter into the world of everyday life. However, her passenger, she later remarked, “didn’t think it was half as funny as I did”; he thought it was “really creepy” and didn’t really believe that Marie wasn’t in control and simply playing a joke on him.

He wasn’t entirely wrong. Marie at least had an idea of the cause of the poltergeist malfunction (the broken headlight), so she had already recognized the
relatively benign nature of this nonsensical malfunction. Like a Halloween-season haunted house where actors dressed as zombies menace visitors who are in no real danger, the “demon drive” in this “possessed” car provided Marie and her friend with a relatively risk-free thrill. Nevertheless, this amusement emerged from the mundane process of driving and may represent something of the festive elements Lefebvre claims remain repressed by “bureaucratized” everyday life. That festival can emerge from malfunction is well worth noting, as such events may work to “re-enchant” everyday life.

Technically, one could argue that an accident is not a malfunction, as accidents result more from unsafe driving conditions or the “irresponsibility” of the driver or other drivers than from the automobile itself. Nevertheless, accidents usually result in some kind of damage to the automobile, and they seriously affect the driver’s relationship with elements of everyday automobility. Furthermore, my informants offered accident narratives when I asked them for stories about automobile malfunctions, so this kind of story must be considered important to them. Accidents can produce experiences similar to breakdowns and wear outs, leaving the driver stranded or having to cope with costly repairs. However, breakdowns and wear outs are largely solitary experiences unless the driver happens to be accompanied by a passenger. The accident narratives my informants told tended to involve other drivers, though a few mentioned accidents with deer and inanimate objects that damaged their cars in ways such that their stories were similar to the wear out narratives. As such, accidents with other drivers are profoundly social malfunctions, and stories about them include unique roles for strangers (others involved in the accident and onlookers) and representatives of institutions of automobility (in particular, insurance agencies and traffic police). As some of the more spectacular
accident narratives my informants told reveal, drivers frequently experience panic and fear following an accident. Marie and Tom both tell particularly dramatic accident narratives that involve their cars being “totaled,” and they express amazement that they even survived. This joy of survival was undercut by both of them when friends and family members seriously questioned their sense of responsibility, which they would have to prove through ordeals of altogether “doing without” an automobile or, at the very least, suffering extensive verbal reprimands.

Compared to their stories, Bill’s is significantly less dramatic. However, his story highlights how different drivers respond to the social collision that comes with an accident. He says,

Um, like I was sitting at a stoplight and somebody in front of me creeped forward and I creeped forward and she… Apparently like at the moment that I, she saw my brake lights come off, her baby started crying. So she let off the brake, looked in the backseat to see what was wrong with the baby, and then hit my car, and then panicked, and then put her foot apparently on what she thought was the brake but was in fact the gas. And then pushed me into the next car, and in turn pushed that car into the next car […]

Bill apparently heard this woman explaining why she’d hit him to the police officer that arrived shortly after the accident. Nobody was hurt, and the accident, he says, “just fucked up my trunk. My bumper was fine.” However, when the police checked the insurance of the several drivers involved, Bill says,
They get to her right after they check mine, and she’s like, “I don’t have insurance.” And she’s like, “I was on my way to work. I was droppin’ my kid off at the sitter’s”—like she’s like seventeen, maybe. And y’know, she’s just like single mom, like fucked, like gonna go wait some tables. And so I’m like, “Alright, well I’m not gonna press any charges, so you have a good day and I’ll try to push this dent out.” I never did fix it.

Others didn’t respond to the accident with as much chivalry. When I ask Bill how the other drivers were reacting, he says,

They were pissed. […] They were like, “Fuck! My shit is broken.”

Except that like it wasn’t. […] Y’know, and like my front bumper was fine. Like it may have like had little bits of stress, y’know, in it. But everybody else was like, “Oh, well it’s scratched here and…,” y’know, “You’re paying for this!” And freaking out and like…I’m just like, “Ok, bye.”

Granted, Bill’s casual attitude toward his dent may be atypical in contemporary America, where privately owned commodities seem often to accumulate an aura of sacredness and significance to identity. However, his indifference to the dent constitutes a significant act of goodwill toward the “single mom,” especially considering his car at the time was his first new car, a 2001 Kia, on which he was still making payments.

Because Bill emphasizes his difference in attitude with respect to the other drivers, the story he tells about this accident may be read as a way of asserting of his unique identity. Significantly, he refuses to identify with either the other drivers or the
police officer. Given the circumstances of being hit by an uninsured driver, it would be perfectly legal for him to sue the woman for the cost of the damage to his vehicle. The way he presents the other drivers, who claim “You’re paying for this!,” suggests they intend to hold her financially responsible for the damage, which he describes as insignificant scratches. According to Sandra Dolby-Stahl, identity maintenance and value assertion are fundamental reasons why people tell personal narratives at all, as a “storyteller chooses the specific situation…that aptly expresses a covertly held value” (1989:19). By telling this story, Bill asserts that he is the kind of person who values selflessness and who gives priority to people over commodities. As a social collision, it makes sense that accident narratives would allow their tellers an opportunity to highlight aspects of their identities. An automobile collision is a conflict between people, and how they negotiate the situation may provide material for a story that distinguishes the teller from the others involved.

The sabotage is the final kind of automobile malfunction narrative form my informants provided. As one may assume, the sabotage narrative involves a person who intentionally and maliciously does something to the driver’s automobile to make it malfunction. Like many accident malfunctions, the sabotage malfunctions resemble the kinds of problems experienced during breakdowns and wear outs. Also like the accident malfunction, the sabotage is a distinctly social malfunction. However, the intentionality of the sabotage makes it distinct as a kind of attack or vandalism intended to make the driver immobile, vulnerable, angry, or injured. Sabotage malfunctions include acts of vandalism such as “keying” and smashing windshields and more malicious acts such as slashing tires. In any case, the driver becomes self-conscious as a target for malicious
activity, and usually has no way of determining with much certainty regarding who performed the sabotage. The automobile sabotage is an act of everyday terrorism, and the saboteur may target an automobile for numerous reasons, not the least of which is the literally paralyzing effects of automobile immobility.

Tom and Rachel both tell sabotage narratives about their tires being slashed. While they interpret their respective saboteurs’ motives very differently, both incidents resulted in feelings of fear and powerlessness coupled with an inability to “get back” at their saboteurs. In his sabotage narrative, Tom explains he didn’t realize the intentionality of the malfunction until after a mechanic told him. At Ball State University, he had lived in the “Baptist House,” which had been previously a vandalism target. One night, apparently, his tire was stabbed. The next day, it “shredded,” he says, “just like a semi truck tire shreds” when he was on the highway “going seventy-five miles an hour.” He was able to safely pull his car to the side of the road, replace the shredded tire with the “donut,” and drive to a repair shop, where they told him they noticed marks from a jagged cut “in the well of the tire.”

Unlike Tom, Rachel was well aware her car was “being fucked with,” and it happened “a couple of different times,” not just once. Sometimes, she says, “I would be noticing things that were like stuck behind my tires. Like things that would make my, that would rip my car tires. Like cans or broken glass or nails.” After having a single tire slashed on different occasions, she says, the scariest moment was when,

I was gonna get up to go to work and […] I go to go outside…all four of my car tires are flat. Somebody let the air out of my tires. I was bawlin’, I was like, I was so upset. Because I knew it was that person.
“That person” was a man who lived close to her, knew where she worked, and whom she had told she “didn’t want to talk to” because “he was scary” and “wasn’t getting that [she] didn’t want to be his girlfriend.” Nothing more ever came of the incident, though she did warn the police, who said they couldn’t do anything without proof to link that person to the vandalism. Of this, she says, “It was a really depressing thing because I just felt so powerless,” though she did feel good that “all [her] guy friends wanted to beat this guy’s ass.”

Tom and Rachel’s narratives reveal the vulnerability of automobiles and their drivers to violence. The violence committed by the automobile saboteur is violence against the driver’s everyday life, and it acts to reinforce feelings of powerlessness in people marginalized, in these cases, by their respective religion or gender. These sabotage narratives involve particular social conflicts, and those who assist the protagonists either by repairing the damage or by providing rides (as Rachel’s roommate did, she mentions later) practice propriety by aiding in the reestablishment of everyday automobility. Paul Virilio writes, “The essential aim of throwing ancient weapons or of shooting off new ones has never been to kill the enemy or destroy his [sic] means, but to deter him, in other words, to force him to interrupt his movement” (italics in the original, 1986:145). In everyday life, the interruption of movement remains a powerful means of control. Nevertheless, when one perceives oneself as the target of an attack with the intention of interrupting movement, one seriously considers taking action. Malicious sabotages are only one obvious way people impede movement to make others feel powerless; the sabotage is a malfunction with a face. In narrative, they call to mind the
dramatic one-on-one showdown, and such narratives remind the audience how dangerous others can be.

Yet the violence of institutional acts of sabotage like the planned obsolescence of technologies, the manufacture of flawed vehicles that endanger their drivers, and subtle denial of repair expertise to all but professionals remain, by comparison, relatively faceless. The facelessness of institutional violence makes outright critique more difficult for everyday actors caught up in the more urgent and intimate concerns of their everyday lives; the problems they face, they appear to face in solitude. However, the stories they tell about automobile malfunctions may express resentment toward the institutions responsible for perpetuating the system of automobility. They may express disappointment, dissatisfaction, alienation, frustration, and anger toward the institutional elements of everyday automobility. Rather than representing freedom, independence, movement, and escape, the automobile in the malfunction narrative may come to represent the broken promises of capitalism. Abandoned automobiles by the side of the road seem to signify tragic biographies, as so many abandoned factories signify the tragic stories of whole communities dependent on their functioning to maintain their way of life. With no obvious method of retaliation, unemployed workers and dissatisfied drivers may simply tell their stories, and these stories, as they emerge from casual conversations among friends, families, and neighbors, may stoke the fires of brooding discontent. They may encourage people to imagine a better way of life.

The elements of everyday automobility and the kinds of automobile malfunctions, both experienced by particular people with particular life circumstances and shaped into narratives, constitute a complex, often repressed discourse that may express a critique of
contemporary everyday life. The automobile, a technology people use to mediate time and space, may be directed to diverse ends depending on its use, both practically and rhetorically. In Dirk’s quote that began this chapter, he said that a car is “an escape” and that it’s “just something you can mold to whatever you need.” This quote seems to echo the media discourse of automobile advertising, and it corroborates Andrew Wernick’s remark that “[t]he history of [the automobile’s] received meaning has always been bound up…with that of its manufactured meaning as a promotionally designed product” (1989: 203). However, Dirk’s statement occurred in the context of his discussion of his enthusiasm for driving an “unreliable” car, which has frequently afforded him the opportunity to “escape” work at the bank when it malfunctions, or when he decides to tell them that it isn’t working. Indeed, Dirk did buy into the “manufactured meaning” of the automobile: “escape.” However, his resistant use of the automobile and its meaning suggests this escape from alienated labor to a more “satisfying” everyday life reveals that cars have the potential to mean much more than media discourse would allow. As such, the automobile malfunction narrative appears as a useful element of analysis considering everyday attitudes toward the broken promises of capitalism.
CHAPTER 3
AUTOMOBILE MALFUNCTION NARRATIVES AS CRITICAL DISCOURSE

The manufactured discourse of automobile meaning operates according to the logic of a single aim: to sell automobiles. Advertisements on television, in magazines, and, increasingly, on the internet, dominate this discourse. While some critical discourse may be voiced in the media through news reports concerned with environmental factors, industry lay-offs and globalization, and scandalous reports of fatal automobile flaws, the frustrations that come with everyday automobile use remain largely unvoiced in public discourse. Personal narratives of malfunction experiences like those of my informants may express critical attitudes toward everyday automobility. Marie may “love driving” and Rachel may “buy in to that automobile American dream thing,” but, to reference an ideological platitude, they and my other informants are well aware the freedoms afforded by everyday automobility aren’t free. Malfunctions provide a topical context from which narratives critical of the system of automobility may emerge and spread to constitute a domain of critical “common knowledge.”

Familiar automobile advertisement clichés include photographs of automobiles with blurred backgrounds to signify speed, footage of automobiles traveling across vast swaths of desert and rough terrain to signify rugged independence and freedom, and images of families in automobile interiors to signify familiarity and safety. True, American consumers may well be aware of the misleading nature of these clichéd advertisements. Whether this skepticism has at its source the utterly banal familiarity of automobiles, the equally familiar negative consequences of unswerving technophilia, or
the general rejection of ad copy as misleading utopian rhetoric is beyond the scope of this study.

Increasingly, the automobile industry has responded to this skepticism with advertisements that seek to encourage consumers to identity with their products on a personal level. The implicit assumption seems to be that any automobile may offer speed, independence, freedom, etc., but not just any automobile has the right meaning for you. For example, Volkswagen’s “force of good” campaign emphasizes the unique individuality of Volkswagen drivers in a way one might not imagine, say, Humvee drivers to embrace. The “force of good” website includes colorful flash animation games in which the player uses a Volkswagen Beetle to conquer forces of “bad” such as “socks with sandals” and “mullets,” and also features profiles of “Beetle People” such as Tiffany, a “greeting card illustrator/designer” whose “special powers” include “Drawing, making pretty paper, kickboxing, [and] befriending goats” (www.forceofgood.com). In *Rolling Stone* magazine, Acura hails the lover of the latest music technology, the iPod. The ad depicts a young man in the foreground with an MP3 player cord extending from his ears to the car in the background, and the bold text reads, “Your Life. Your Car. Connected.” These ad campaigns corroborate Gartman’s description of the contemporary automobile market as one based on subcultural difference and directed toward niche markets (2004)—Volkswagens are for “unique” people and Acuras are for “technology-savvy music lovers”. While these advertisements express the value of personal identification over mass-market appeal, they continue to promote the idea that the purpose of an automobile is to allow you (and only you) to do the things you want to do. These advertisements juxtapose the automobility myths of freedom and mobility with
myths of individuality. In any case, consumer desire for freedom, mobility, and individuality are assumed, and automobiles are offered as fulfillment.

Except that consumers don’t always want to go, and the tasks and destinations facilitated by automobiles are not always desirable. Automobile advertisements seldom if ever reference the most everyday use of cars for Americans, particularly those in rural and suburban towns: to commute to work at urban centers and other areas where jobs are concentrated. The scholarly work on this topic appears rather scarce as well, as comments on commuting and everyday life tend to emphasize urban life in metropolises like New York City (de Certeau 1984: 91-114), Paris (Augé 2002, Lefebvre 2004), and London (Moran 2005: 29-93). Only Moran’s analysis of traffic in London emphasizes automobile commuting, while the others concentrate on walking and train or subway commuting, respectively. Outside of these urban metropolises, and in especially in America, public transportation is presently a nonexistent, if not impractical, method of moving from place to place, at least if one intends to arrive punctually. The unavailability of public transportation combined with the influence of automobility on the engineering of public space (such that workplaces and consumption centers like malls and supermarkets are built along highways and not within neighborhoods) results in a compulsively mobile populace. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 87.9 percent of all workers commuted to work in a “car, truck, or van,” and the duration of the average commute (including non-automotive commuting) was 25.5 minutes (Journey 2000). Given these circumstances, traffic congestion is familiar in rural and suburban locales, and its increase is notable during the daily “rush” hours. However, the quantity is nothing compared to that of large cities and frustrating delays have more to do with the
time of year when state departments of transportation close lanes to repair roads than with the time of day. As such, the significance of congested traffic in everyday automobility is often overstated by scholars emphasizing urban experience.

Traffic, from my perspective, is merely one particularly spectacular symptom of compulsive automobility. Because so many people are engaged in the activity, morning and evening commutes appear as ‘natural’ facts of everyday life, as self-evident and unquestionable as the sunrise and sunset. The duress that drives the commute remains largely invisible and unacknowledged, belying its existence as the result of specific power relations and ideological values that compel workers from bed to participate in a day of productivity. Perhaps the most important ‘skill’ contemporary American school children learn is the self-discipline to get out of bed and catch the bus to go to the place they don’t want to go. In Lefebvre’s terms, the result is commuter dressage, the process of being broken-in to the military rhythms of everyday life, just as a circus animal is broken-in, through repetition (2004: 39). Once the society’s citizens are broken-in, “everybody does more or less the same thing at more or less the same times, but each person is really alone in doing it” (ibid: 75). That rising at dawn to drive to work seems “natural” should make the practice all the more ideologically suspect—such social rhythms have much to do with inculcating young subjects with exchange-valued attributes like punctuality and productivity. Compared to the elementary and middle-school students too young to drive, high school students affluent enough to get a driver’s license and an automobile to drive themselves to school may feel far freer than their bus-riding classmates. After a decade or so of having been broken-in to the workday rhythms of contemporary American life, such “freedom” appears merely as a gesture of faith that
the student has adopted the compulsion to commute. Having proven herself to be “responsible,” the commuting student demonstrates her synchrony with the expected rhythms of daily life. Her freedom affords her the freedom to arrive where she’s expected, when she’s expected.

Lefebvre describes what he calls a “terrorist society” as one in which “compulsion and the illusion of freedom converge” and “unacknowledged compulsions besiege the lives of communities (and of their individual members) and organize them according to a general strategy” (1984:147). It is an ascetic society, one which benefits from the Protestant tradition of self-repression so the ideological justice of existent power structures becomes internalized (ibid: 145). Such assertions raise the question: don’t workers choose to wake up to their alarms, eat breakfast, and drive themselves to work? Perhaps. *Dressage* and other disciplinary techniques cannot take away an individual’s agency, although they may attempt to deny the individual the belief in her agency, which results in almost the same thing. The “proper” direction for agency in such a society is toward the pursuit of profit, i.e. toward the goal of the “general strategy;” the commonness or popularity of pursuing this goal gives the society the advantageous appearance of coherence. Nevertheless, the underlying contradictions within a society of compulsive practices and libratory ideals remain a fundamental instability.

In these unstable circumstances, crisis becomes a critical point, and as events such as the attacks on September 11, 2001 and the 2005 devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina demonstrate, official interpretations direct general strategies of response (Lefebvre 1984:147). When such extraordinary crises occur, the broken-in populace listens to the voices of officialdom for explanations; those without direct
experience of the crisis (i.e. those outside of the directly afflicted locale) know to assume particularly deferential attitudes towards these interpreters, who “know best.” In everyday crises such as automobile malfunctions, however, everyday actors must construct their own stabilizing interpretations ad hoc, and their interests remain distinct from official interpreters, who have much more invested in maintaining compulsive mobility.

While the need to maintain propriety may limit a person’s freedom to criticize institutions of labor and automobility, propriety may bind people to one another, to friends and relatives, more firmly than it binds them to institutional allegiances. The interruption of a compulsive everyday practice such as the commute, then, can occur as an opportunity to solidify and reaffirm social allegiances over institutional allegiances. Furthermore, such crises may even reveal the contradictory obligations of maintaining these distinct allegiances. Ulrich Beck argues that the labor market demands individualization and mobility, and that willing workers meet these demands by abandoning “traditional,” localized patterns of everyday life for the non-local network mobility of the market (1992:94). This compulsive mobility of the market exacerbates social bonds (ibid) and leaves individual actors to attempt to reconcile this systemic problem in their everyday lives (ibid: 89). While regret may color the time at work away from friends and family, the everyday crisis may occur as a serendipitous solution to the problem. Incidental immobility can seem more like “freedom” than compulsive automobility.
Personal Narrative as Critical Discourse

Personal narratives about automobile malfunctions can provide insight into what it’s like to live within the culture of compulsive automobility. Telling stories is one way people achieve symbolic resolution to the problems represented by the story (Abrahams 2005:77), and the particular ways the storytellers go about this symbolic resolution reveal the tellers’ attitudes about elements of their everyday lives. These attitudes form the “core” of the personal narrative, and help constitute an individual’s “nonverbalized, tacit knowledge that [make] up [one’s] worldview” (Stahl 1989:19). A story one tells about one’s own experience works as a literary demonstration of action and consequences, just like any novel or film. However, the personal quality of the personal narrative binds the form to propriety more firmly than less personal, mediated genres. The practice of exchanging stories in conversation is one way people enjoy one another’s company, so the teller will tend not to express attitudes radically contrary to what he or she imagines the listener to hold. Granted, tellers engaged in heated discussions, friendly arguments, and debates may exchange personal narratives to express conflicting attitudes. Nevertheless, the attitudes expressed will tend toward the familiar and “proper” frames of reference within the group.

Given this context, personal narratives that reveal critical attitudes are particularly significant. They suggest suspicion, resentment, and even anger toward dominant institutions and emphasize that recognition of these institutions’ indifference to affected individuals is a necessary substitute for the naïve attitude that institutions act according to individuals’ best interests. Furthermore, the implicit veracity of these narratives
enhances their critical function. For their audience, they express an actual experience of the teller and how he or she really acted and felt in response to the experience. As such, personal narratives may express explicit critiques by relating frustrating experiences with institutions or implicit critiques by relating attitudes that de-value the symbolic importance of institutional allegiances. Additionally, such narratives may valorize attitudes and actions that resist institutional authority and reveal the savvy “ways of operating” everyday actors have adopted to make do within imposed systems.

Explicit Critique of the Signal

I spoke with George about his struggle with a check engine light in his truck that refused to turn off, even though the mechanics he took it to couldn’t find anything wrong with the truck. His narrative is explicitly critical of institutions of automobility, as nobody seemed able to find or fix the malfunction, nothing seemed to be wrong, and yet state inspections required the light to be off. He says,

If [the check engine light] would burn out, [the inspectors] wouldn’t know the difference. […] Took it to the foreign car specialist up there in Greensburg. He’s supposed to be the guru of all the Toyotas and Nissans. He said, ‘I don’t know what to do.’

Generally, the purpose of the check engine light is to warn the driver of a malfunction that doesn’t noticeably impact the immediate functioning of the car. When no malfunction can be found to correspond to the light, it appears as nonsensical. Nevertheless, the incessant warning of the check engine light, even when mechanics
claim nothing seems to be wrong, can be disturbing. I asked him if the light made him anxious, and he replied,

Yeah. Then I get more anxious because they can’t do anything about it and they’re the mechanics. So what am I gonna do about it? I mean I gotta live with it until the next inspection. Then [the inspectors] tell me again, ‘Your light’s on.’ Yeah, I know. […] It won’t pass the emission inspection with that light on. No matter what they do, that light has to be out.

This frustration is compounded by the times when mechanics have claimed to have repaired his truck, and after he picks it up from the repair shop the light comes “right back on” during the drive home. Other times, when the mechanics don’t figure out what’s wrong, they continue to charge for the time they spend trying to understand the problem. George expressed particular frustration toward one repair shop to which he’d taken his truck three times. He says,

That last time, I wasn’t gonna pay ‘em, I was so pissed off. Y’know, I said, “You didn’t do anything!” “Well, it’s our time.” “Yeah, but you didn’t fix it.” Y’know, I don’t care if it’s your time or not. Your time’s to fix it. I’m the customer. I’m paying to get it fixed. You didn’t do that. He didn’t get it. “It’s my time, whether I get it or not.” Well, that’s not the way I look at it. I paid him. I’ll never go back there.

The final assertion of “I’ll never go back there” arrives as the critical punch-line. The refusal of patronage is one of the few powers a “customer” has against businesses in contemporary America, as is the implied suggestion that the listener would be wise to
take his or her business elsewhere as well. George’s story seems most explicitly critical of the repair shop that charges for labor time even if the malfunction isn’t successfully repaired. Nevertheless, his frustration with the absurdity of the whole situation, the check engine light in particular, is marked. He’s spending time and money trying to repair a “problem” that appears only to be a problem with the problem-signaling technology, yet it’s a problem that the state (of Pennsylvania) requires him to solve.

One way institutions encourage compulsive activities, Lefebvre argues, is by introducing *signals* into everyday life. Signals reproduce monologic authority, acting as *commands* that *compel* their recipients to act. In this manner, signals are distinct from *signs*, the meanings of which emerge from the meaning-recipient’s interpretation of the meaning-sender’s message. In Joe Moran’s discussion of traffic lights, he explains the power of signals comes from the arbitrary and one-sided relationship between what they state or command and the signalled individual, who seldom has the opportunity to question the signal’s meaning (2005: 73). For Lefebvre, “The perfect signal is perfectly impersonal,” and it “always [reiterates] its imperious command or interdiction, never beginning, never ending” (in Moran 2005: 74). The check engine light is one such signal, one which compels its recipient to repair the automobile. It refuses to be questioned or reasoned with, as does the state which requires the malfunction’s repair. Yet the nonsensical nature of George’s frustrating experience works to criticize the encroachment of these signals into everyday life. His narrative undermines the authority of this signal, leading him perhaps to ignore the compulsion.

In an aside during the same conversation with George, Deirdre mentioned her brother-in-law’s active response to a similar situation with a check engine light that
refused to go out: “He took his dash apart and put black electrical tape over the service
engine soon light. Put his dash back together. He was tired of seeing it.” This simple act
of covering the light is paradigmatic of de Certeau’s micro-political notion of *resistance*,
and it is worth emphasizing as a tactic employed to make do with the tools and
circumstances at hand. Granted, this brother-in-law works as a mechanic, so perhaps his
understanding of how the check engine light works (or doesn’t work) affords him the
confidence to take this brash measure against the signal. George claims relatively less
knowledge about automobiles, so he may be inclined to take the warning more seriously.
At any rate, the addition of the brief narrative of Deirdre’s brother-in-law’s silencing of
the signal implicitly criticizes the authority of automotive engineers and the technology
that speaks in their behalf. The act represents a “hit” against the signal and its
corresponding compulsion; it reveals disbelief in the “truth” of the signal’s message.

Breakdown as Break

Dirk doesn’t pretend to have liked any of the jobs he has had. For him, work at WalMart,
a telemarketing company, a small bank, and, currently, a “plastic injection molding
facility” were especially alienating experiences. His difficulty appears to be negotiating
the tension between the work he does to pay his bills and the work he does for personal
fulfillment. He says,

[T]he problems with a lot of these jobs is, I end up taking them because of
the low responsibility and low possibility of personal failure […]. I mean
I’m not going to be devoting any real part of myself or my being into
projects so if something goes wrong I won’t be able to take it personally because I wasn’t really attached to it from the very beginning. Um, so ultimately, jobs that aren’t really fulfilling and so of course these jobs end up becoming more of a burden than anything.

Outside of work, it is worth noting that Dirk participates in an artist collective, The Rocket Guild, in which the group members participate in numerous creative projects such as film production, photography, and exhibits of two-dimensional work (paintings, drawings, etc.). The work of this group, which consists of a tight-knit network of friends, is the work to which he tends to devote a “real part” of himself or his “being.” Nevertheless, this more “fulfilling” work remains largely unpaid, so it doesn’t provide him with the means to make a living. He must do this work in addition to his full-time job. Regardless of his employment status, if he’s not involved in some kind of creative endeavor, he has said that he feels “unproductive.” In order to compensate for this feeling of unproductivity, Dirk has attempted to bring elements of his fulfilling labor into the world of unfulfilling work; at the bank, his supervisor reprimanded him numerous times for making detailed drawings on post-it notes. His employers viewed such activity as wasteful and inefficient, thus de-valuing the social, creative work most meaningful to him.

Because of the alienating nature of such work, the effort it takes him to get to his places of employment sometimes seems excessive. Since he must drive to his place of employment, the simple act of filling up his car’s gas tank is part of the effort of getting to work. This chore, he says, is one he sometimes overlooks:
I’m usually absorbed in much other activities than the fruitless jobs I have to do in order to survive or whatever. So often I will overlook the fact that I do need to get gas for my car, or at least I’ll put it off until I’m going somewhere that I really want to go to. Um, so work really would never be a top priority in that. So I would put it off. If I had to go to work, it would just not, the thought would not occur to me. ‘Cause like I don’t want to do this. Whatever might stand in my way, that ends up becoming a bonus more than a setback.

The idea of immobility as “bonus” may seem strange, especially when that immobility leaves one stranded along the side of the road. While work may be alienating, being stranded leaves one vulnerable. Furthermore, frequent absences from one’s work may endanger one’s job security. Of my informants, only Bill expressed a similar “breakdown as break” attitude. In his situation, his car had broken down just as he was leaving a friend’s house to go to work. When I asked him how he felt about his inability to go to work that day, he said,

I was stoked. I mean really like, I just wanted an excuse to not go to work. Like, I mean, yeah it sucked that my car was broken. But I was gonna get a new one anyways. Y’know, it was frustrating at the moment. But like, y’know after about an hour I was, and I wasn’t at work, I was like, “Yeah, this is great. Let’s play video games.”

Unlike Dirk, Bill was stranded at a friend’s house. This provided for an obvious opportunity to transform time for what was supposed to be work into time for play. However, Bill’s time for play had also to be tinged with the work of resuming everyday
automobility. This proved to be a frustrating process, as it required that he hire a towing service to take his broken car away and, since he’d been planning on getting a new car soon anyway, orchestrating the purchase of this new car. Dirk, by contrast, had only to walk to a nearby gas station, purchase fuel, and refuel his car. In this situation, the cost, in terms of time and money, would be far less than the cost of a new car; however, in terms of vulnerability, his situation can be read as a far more “risky” situation.

The significance of the experience of this walk as a spatial practice is distinct from a drive. Running out of gas for his car interrupts the compulsive act of driving to work and transforms the task into a quest to reestablish everyday automobility. The pace of this kind of task is notably slower than the pace of a compulsive task, and the decrease in speed disturbs the sense of productive urgency. Dirk explains,

Um, as far as me running out of gas and being stranded on the side of the road. There is, as far as, I usually end up rushing from here to another place most of the time. And when something is out of your control and you get that break, sort of like, y’know… It sucks, it’s an inconvenience sometimes, but sometimes it’s nice just to be like, “No matter what, I have to take this break.”

Because he sees the interruption as out of his control, the “break” is a moment of relief from compulsion. The breakdown, as it affords him the opportunity to “slow down” is, in this sense, liberating. Walking along the side of the road, he says, allows him to “appreciate” the space. He says,

Just on these sides of the road that go by in the blink of an eye that you don’t really get to appreciate. And then all of a sudden you’re stuck there
and you actually have to walk the length of the road and, uh, it’s interesting. It’s fun. I don’t know if anyone really observes it in such a manner or to such a degree, but it can be pretty refreshing sometimes. Because often I forget how enjoyable it can be just to walk from one place to another.

In a culture of compulsive automobility, perhaps the enjoyment of walking has as much to with an aesthetic preference for “immediate” or “authentic” experience as it has to do with the freedom afforded by its interruption. The perceived scarcity of such experiences may increase their value to those who experience them in contemporary America, a place where, Dirk asserts, “Everything is so instant.” Romantic yearning for such “real” experience notwithstanding, the nature of the task of reestablishing everyday automobility provides not only an opportunity to experience the ground beneath one’s feet, but also the opportunity to reaffirm social allegiances by seeking help from others.

Increasingly, cellular phones provide the means for stranded drivers to seek help, either from friends and family or from an institution of automobility like AAA. Dirk, however, doesn’t own a cellular phone (nor does he, for that matter, subscribe to AAA). This prevents him from simply calling for assistance and waiting for it to arrive, and perhaps adds to his vulnerability as a stranded person walking to find help. However, this increased vulnerability also seems to increase his sense of social solidarity when he does manage to find help, or simply interact with friendly strangers. Dirk explains,

> [E]ven if it’s an inconvenience, there’s still something I can enjoy about the walk, of going to seek help. And even just, for one human being to seek help […] [W]hen you’re forced to interact with strangers at that
point, it helps renew my faith in just talking to strangers. Not even asking for help, just saying “hello” and “how about this weather” or whatever.

By claiming that the breakdown experience has the potential to renew his “faith in talking to strangers,” Dirk implicitly expresses an attitude particularly critical of compulsive automobility. His sentiment is utopian, in that he seems to express a desire to live in a community of social solidarity and freedom, and he catches a glimpse of what it might be like to live in such a community when his car breaks down.

From Dirk’s story, it becomes clear that the maintenance of everyday life is necessarily social, as people will inevitably encounter circumstances in which they will need to assist one another. Would a more “individualist” or “independent” response to his situation involve relying on AAA or another institution of automobility? Or does that response involve an ideological slight of hand, as relying on “one’s own means” means simply relying on an exchange of cash to an institution of automobility instead of investing belief in the capacity of others to help? In American culture, vulnerability is a sign of weakness, and a supplicant’s reliance on others appears as an invitation to be “ripped off.” Clearly, divisions between genders, races, classes, and other social groups foster this culture of distrust, and businesses happily stand in for helpful strangers. In the context of such a culture, Dirk’s positive experiences with strangers may foster social allegiances within his community, and his story may spread the desirability of nurturing such allegiances over the institutional allegiances that keep the flow of people and traffic moving too quickly to enable face-to-face encounters.
Reliability and Propriety Maintenance

Dirk’s conceptualization of the “breakdown” as a “break” complements Lefebvre’s argument that disruptions of rhythmic compulsions in everyday life may open a “hole in time, to be filled in by an invention, a creation” (2004:44), revealing the utopian potential of everyday crises. Nevertheless, it’s important to note that other circumstances specific to his life afford him the freedom to narrate his experiences in this way. Dirk is a young white male with relatively little responsibility to others. The consequences of his action or inaction only had potential to affect him, as he has no children or dependents, and his absence from his job would not drastically alter his employers’ ability to function. His utopian malfunction narratives contrast greatly with the way Deirdre describes her experience. As a lab technician at a hospital and, for several years, as a single mother, an automobile malfunction that interrupted her ability to get from one place to another understandably left Deirdre feeling distraught. A malfunction, for her, is something that “totally, totally ruins your plans, your day…” because, she says, “I mean there’s like people counting on me. Like when I worked at the hospital. It’s not just a car breaking down. It’s a whole life-changing event.” She emphasizes this distress is especially profound when the automobile malfunction left her “stuck at work” and she had her latchkey kid at home alone. For Deirdre, the line between institutional allegiances and social allegiances is blurred, and her compulsion to meet institutional expectations may have much to do with maintaining social obligations. “Work,” for her, means helping sick people at a hospital and earning a stable income to help her raise her son. These
aspects of her job give it a particularly social significance, so for her the maintenance of institutional allegiances goes hand-in-hand with the maintenance of social allegiances.

While for Deirdre a “breakdown” seldom seems like much of a “break,” her frustration with automobile malfunctions appears particularly pointed because she has so many responsibilities that everyday automobility enables her to fulfill. She relies on her automobile so that others can rely on her, so an unreliable automobile can exacerbate the social tensions she negotiates. Her implicitly critical narrative involves the transformation of her “dream car,” a Z-28 Chevrolet Lumina, into a nightmare, as a factory error forced her into a position where expensive repairs could have become a necessary part of the routine of maintaining her car. This expensive car (about “$20,000” in 1990) which she says was “beautiful,” had a “big engine” (Deirdre enjoys driving fast), and had “power everything” (i.e. automatic windows), had a serious drawback: she says, “[E]very two thousand miles the brakes needed replaced” and “It was over a hundred dollars for two brake shoes” to get them replaced by the dealer. Because regular car use wears out brake shoes, though usually not nearly so quickly, the warranty didn’t cover their replacement.

Deirdre’s narrative appears as one of disappointment, and it may to this point be read as a cautionary tale against putting too much faith in the reliability of a new, expensive automobile. It undermines the dominant discourse of automobility by emphasizing the flawed reality, one in which the automobile manufacturer and dealer may be understood as incompetent, at best, and the promise of “freedom” undermined by unexpected compulsions of maintenance. Her story could have ended here, with Deirdre
suffering the expensive consequences of her unfortunate purchase. However, her story turns at this point into one of triumph over these institutions. She says,

So the next time [I needed to replace the brake shoes] I went back to Meineke, ‘cause they had lifetime warranty. Well, they didn’t like me. I was back there every two months and they had to do it for free, because that’s what the warranty said. They have since altered their warranties.

Significantly, she does not describe Meineke’s lifetime warranty as a policy created out of this business’s kindness. Rather, their warranty is something of which she took advantage, regardless of whether or not the business managers approved. Her awareness of this gap in their policy allowed her to make this tactical “hit” against this institution, one she seems aware could be just as willing as Chevrolet to overcharge for incompetent service. While Meineke may have since altered their warranties, this alteration can be read as a sign of her success, if not also of the limits of such success. Deirdre’s story highlights how an individual may struggle with institutions of automobility, and how the everyday priorities of people such as her remain fundamentally disconnected from the priorities of profit-driven institutions. Furthermore, her narrative can be read as a “trickster” folktale in which the “weak” character “gets one over on” the “strong” character, much to the strong character’s dismay. Such tales encourage an attitude of suspicion toward dominant power structures and provide examples of action that restore agency to dominated peoples.

For Deirdre, the maintenance of everyday automobility is caught up in her responsibility to meet specific social obligations. As such, her way of life depends on the reliability of her automobile, and by extension, the reliability of institutions of
automobility. When the dealer disappointed Deirdre by selling her a car with a built-in malfunction, this institution offended conventions of propriety. Maintaining propriety “requires the avoidance of all dissonance in the game of behaviors” (de Certeau 1998:17), and business transactions are events that require particular attention to the avoidance of such dissonance. Consumers like Deirdre have reasonably high expectations when they commit to purchase a “new” and “expensive” car, especially considering conditions of everyday automobility that associate the automobile’s reliability with the driver’s reliability. Driving a less (functionally) reliable car makes the driver less (practically) reliable. An institution, such as the dealer that sold her the car, that introduces unreliability into a driver’s life by selling her an unreliable car has thus violated business transaction propriety and has undermined the driver’s ability to maintain propriety with social and institutional allegiances. When institutions reveal their capacity to violate the tacit rules in these “games of behavior,” they may generate opposition from offended actors. Because the offended actor seldom wields nearly as much power as the offensive institution, this opposition may prove elusive. Deirdre’s story reveals how acts of opposition do occur as she “makes do” to maintain social allegiances in spite of unreliable institutions of automobility.

The complexity of Deirdre’s story and her negotiations between institutional and social allegiances also reveal how deeply compulsive automobility impacts the most intimate aspects of individuals’ lives. While driving affords drivers the “freedom” of mobility, it also introduces a sense of urgency to the maintenance of these allegiances. Surely, the hospital patients and her son benefited from her punctual appearance at work or at home, and such allegiances remain less easily dismissed than those solely based on
profit-centered strategies. Compulsive automobility may explain the structure of Deirdre’s everyday life inasmuch as she had to keep her rhythms in synch with the institutional rhythms that organized her routine, but her devotion to maintaining the stability of this structure cannot be dismissed as a mere byproduct of her internalization of the culture’s ascetic values. Rather, her experience reveals that everyday actors have much at stake in the maintenance of everyday automobility. While the automobile’s promise to provide “freedom” and “independence” remains a broken promise, the mobility and flexibility afforded by the automobile has been built-in to contemporary American life. The advantages of automobility are undeniable, and the mobility automobiles afford is not simply spatial, but social as well. Finding and keeping a job in order to maintain a stable everyday life requires reliable transportation, and individuals without reliable transportation will encounter tremendous difficulty. Of course, the familiar double bind is that “one needs a car to get a job, but one needs a job to get a car.” While automobile malfunctions may provide opportunities for utopian yearning for an “im-automobile” society, the urgent needs of here-and-now everyday life curtail such yearning, encouraging drivers to repair and resume everyday automobility.

George, Dirk, and Deirdre offer automobile malfunction narratives that express attitudes critical of structures of everyday life and automobility. While they may be bound to this system, they can hardly be seen to embrace it. They express their skepticism toward the automobile’s promise of freedom and independence through their stories, which undermine the advertising discourse of automobility. Nevertheless, much remains at stake in the maintenance of everyday automobility. Examination of the processes of breaking-in that promote compulsive automobility, the negotiation of social
and institutional allegiances, and the frustrations and disappointments that result when drivers must confront disruptive malfunctions reveal paradoxical obligations and irrational conflicts in everyday life. Drivers must choose between docility and limited agency as they enact and maintain the practices everyday automobility.
“[T]he motor-car with its retinue of wounded and dead, its trail of blood, is all that remains of adventure in everyday life, its paltry ration of excitement and hazard.”

—Henri Lefebvre (1984:101)

Long before I ever sat behind the wheel of a car, I had been the audience to automobile malfunction narratives. I heard stories about accidents and breakdowns as a child, and as I approached the age of sixteen, I began to hear them more and more. Their relevance and significance became increasingly clear as I grew aware that I could use the knowledge of other peoples’ automobile malfunctions to help me once I began driving. My father seemed especially insistent about providing me with these stories. An enthusiastic driver with extensive automobile repair and maintenance experience and the luck to have survived an accident or two that “should’ve killed him,” he has some authority on this subject. I remember him quizzing me on what I should do if my gas pedal became stuck. A friend of his, he said, had this happen, and he did the wrong thing: he crouched down to pry the pedal away from the floor. When he did this, he took his eyes off the road, thereby providing the opportunity for all kinds of accidents. What he should have done, my father said, was turn off the ignition and pull the emergency brake. That way, even a car stuck in acceleration can be stopped. Thinking about this as I sat in the passenger seat of his car made the significance of this knowledge seem even more important, and I was thankful to know about how to act in this frightening situation.
As a personal narrative, this story of my father’s friend served as an exemplum. My father told of a “foolish” response to an event, and he contrasted this with the “proper” response. The value at the core of this story is preparedness. It expresses how knowledge informs action, and how ignorance of how to act may result in improper action with potentially terrible consequences. In the narrative, the consequences of such ignorance remain hazy, although I can say as an adolescent beginning to think about driving I read the implicit meaning of the consequences of highway carelessness as death or physical harm. Of course, my father’s friend had survived to talk about what he’d done. But by then I’d learned luck and chance are unsafe ground to stand on. The foolish driver was lucky; I might not be. In order to increase my chances of survival, I had to know what to do.

In their studies of personal narratives, folklorists have tended to emphasize the values and attitudes at the core of these narratives, as these elements constitute the traditional aspect of the genre. The content, Sandra Dolby-Stahl argues, is non-traditional, and reveals the ingenuity of tellers who form experienced events into new stories (1977, 1989). The knowledge we gain from personal narratives, from this perspective, is knowledge about one another’s identities. However, my father’s story (and my remembrance of it) leads me to consider how personal narratives work to convey practical knowledge. My father’s story about the foolish driver didn’t simply convey the value of preparedness—it provided me with an idea of the kinds of things that can go wrong while driving and informed me about how to act when this kind of malfunction occurs.
In *Talking Trauma* (1998), folklorist Timothy Tangherlini addresses this didactic function of personal narrative in stories told among paramedics. These medics, Tangherlini argues, use narrative to gain some sense of control over the chaotic and sometimes gruesome accident scenes where they do their work (ibid: xxvi). By telling stories among themselves during downtime, they enculturate new medics to the kinds of experiences they may have to deal with (ibid: 60). Because providing assistance at automobile accident scenes constitutes a large part of the paramedics’ profession, only the most outstanding, interesting, and gruesome incidents tend to be deemed worthy of formation into a story. One accident story in this study goes into detail about the sorry condition of two men whose faces had been scraped off, leaving red marks on the road “like you would if you dragged a pencil eraser across a desk” (ibid: 63); another talks about an accident where a baby’s head was “squashed like a grape” (ibid: 66).

Tangherlini suggests such metaphors allow the medics to elevate themselves above the situation as stoic experts and obtain control over the gory reality by likening the mangled bodies to everyday objects like pencil erasers and grapes (ibid: 71-72). While paramedics’ perspective on accident stories is decidedly different from those who experience (and survive) the accident, their stories can be seen as a technique for the management of everyday risk. Bear in mind the paramedics’ risk in these situations is not the risk of driving, however, but the psychological risks of coping with accident scenes. Through the stories they tell one another, they learn how to properly cope with these stressful situations well enough for them to achieve the tasks of their profession.

Just as paramedics stories help enculturate new members of the profession to its risks, stories are part of how new drivers learn about the risks of driving. While personal
narratives are perhaps more mundane and certainly less vivid than the driving “safety” videos with all their gruesome, frightening images of broken bodies and smashed cars, personal narratives involve the intimacy of one person with first-hand experience talking to another. One could interpret highway regulations, institutionalized driver’s education, and automobile insurers as instruments of the system of automobility, and their concern with accidents and malfunctions has much to do with perpetuating this system and keeping commerce and the work force moving smoothly according to the strategies of capitalism (see Packer 2003). When relatives and friends relate personal narratives of automobile malfunctions, part of what they’re doing is relating how one may successfully (or unsuccessfully) handle these risky situations. For the teller, concern with how the listener handles these risky situations is based on intimate concern with the listener’s future well-being. By making known the risks of driving in everyday life, tellers promote consciousness of these risks. According to this logic, once one becomes aware of a risk, one is more likely to avoid or at least lessen the danger the risk presents. From this perspective, a teller of these kinds of automobile malfunction narratives is one who provides knowledge about how best to make do in risky situations.

The risks of death, physical harm, financial costs, and interruptions to everyday life become plain in automobile malfunction narratives. From a historical perspective, the risks of everyday automobility have emerged relatively recently, though travel has always borne a certain amount of risk. Nevertheless, the risks inherent to everyday automobility differ importantly from Ulrich Beck’s use of the term “risk,” which he argues is typical to the emerging historical paradigm of “risk society” (1992). Beck claims “the risks of civilization today typically escape perception and are localized in the
sphere of *physical and chemical formulas*” (ibid: 21, italics in the original), meaning the most significant risks of modernity include “invisible,” global crises like environmental destruction, nuclear war, and contaminated food. “Risk,” as Beck uses it, means “a *systemic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself*” (ibid, italics in the original). Because the process of modernization produces risk in addition to wealth, risk becomes politicized as particular populations become more exposed to particular risks and public outrage demands accountability from these industrial, military, and agricultural risk producers (ibid: 24). From this perspective, the system of automobility can be viewed as another one of these risk producers; the risks this system produces include all kinds of malfunctions including engineering flaws and planned obsolescence, the increased sophistication of technology that prevents all but experts from repairing automobiles, and the risks to physical and mental health that may result from compulsive automobility, to name only just a few touched upon in previous chapters. Importantly, these are “macro” risks, and critique of them from Beck’s perspective would require a “macro” critique of the institutions responsible for their production. What Beck’s “risk society” perspective seems to understate are the “micro” risks within everyday life. Granted, Beck does claim individuals living within risk society will feel the consequences of macro-risks produced by modernity. He says, “[H]ow one lives becomes the *biographical solution of systemic contradictions*” (ibid: 137, italics in the original), meaning citizens of risk society will need to confront and resolve systemic dissonances on an individual basis. However, this perspective obscures acknowledged, accepted everyday risks like those of driving (and
the riskiness of crossing the street that comes with it) and fails to imagine how individuals might cope with them.

In *Risk and Everyday Life* (2003), sociologists John Tulloch and Deborah Lupton address this everyday perspective on risk society by documenting “lay knowledges of risk” in Australia and Great Britain (8). Unlike the broad systemic risks Beck addressed, the risks that most concerned Tulloch and Lupton’s informants tended to be “highly contextual, localized and individualized” (ibid: 8). These included “embodied risks” (related to physical harm), “financial risks” (related to employment, income, etc.) and “intimate risks” (related to interpersonal relationships), all deeply embedded within the context of informants’ everyday lives (ibid: 25). Some of these informants conceptualized risk as the potential for negative consequences associated with “uncertainty” or “the unknown,” while others discussed risk as a “gamble,” that is, an action that may result in either benefit or harm (ibid: 17-18). In addition to the paradigmatic associations with risk Beck claims are typical of “late modernity” like “responsibility, blame, and control,” Tulloch and Lupton found characteristically “pre-modern” associations with risk like “fate and lack of control” informing their informants’ perspectives (ibid: 32).

Such mixtures of science and superstition, of empirical “truth” and belief, of fact and symbolism appear at their very messiest when articulated and embodied in the practices of everyday life. Personal narratives blend the symbolic and empirical meanings of risks like automobile malfunctions in ways that enable tellers and listeners to shape worldviews consistent with and coherent within contemporary regimes of living. Driving, everyone seems to agree, is a risky activity—but it’s a risky activity in which
most people participate. Automobile malfunction narratives, then, can be viewed as a tactic for familiarizing the everyday risks of driving, enabling initiants into the system to make do within it. Telling a malfunction narrative may provide symbolic resolution to an actual problem, and listening to a malfunction narrative may provide practical knowledge about how to resolve problems as they arise. In addition, this practical knowledge about how to deal with the risks of driving always come packaged with the expression of appropriate attitudes to assume toward these risks. Depending on the context, these attitudes may range from fear and concern regarding the potentially fatal consequences of risk to strength and empowerment at having overcome the risk. The “lay” perspectives reveal risk as not simply something “risk-distributing” institutions impose from above, but as something managed from within everyday life.

Narrative Management of Risk and Propriety

Tom, a humanities graduate student at Bowling Green State University, tells a story about the risk he took by attempting the 120 mile drive from Ball State University to his home in Brazil, Indiana during a snow storm. Throughout the narrative, he criticizes this attempt as “dumb” and “stupid,” making clear the lesson to be learned from his story. He begins,

I, it was the coldest day of that year. Um, it was like minus five outside or something insane like that. And there was a lot of ice on the roads. And I was in Muncie, but I wanted to go home anyway, which was stupid. Just
incredibly stupid on my part. And so I got stubborn and decide I’m gonna go home.

He continues with his description of the drive. As he describes the drive, he reflexively criticizes his decision to continue. He says,

And I was driving home on I-69, towards Indianapolis, and it was just not safe to drive at all. I mean, absolutely not. And I was going too fast too, which made things worse. I was just an idiot. And I spun out once, actually. And my car slid off the road and I had to get it towed out. I think it was like thirty-five dollars to get it out. The tow-trucks were busy.

Still undaunted by having to get his car towed once, he continues the story. One can speculate he imagined his trajectory as concluding at his intended destination, home, and the symbolic associations of safety, familiarity, and intimacy along with it. In retrospect, however, he dismisses his determination as “monumentally dumb.” The reason for this seemingly excessive self-criticism becomes clear when he describes the accident that followed. Significantly, he bases this particularly detailed climax of his narrative on what a witness told him. He continues,

The witness basically told me this… Like, I don’t remember very well. But I was in the right hand lane, and apparently the semi in the left-hand lane was passing me and wanted to get over in my lane and started to before realizing I was there. So he pulled back, but by that point I started losing control in my lane. My car wobbled, and I just, I slid. […] I mean I lost my rear end going to the right, essentially, so the front of my car was sliding left in a counter-clockwise motion. And my um, my front left
fender hit his tire, like one of his rear right tires, which spun me around. Like tore off my front, everything. It spun me around and then I scraped up against the, the witness, the third person’s car. I scraped up against her driver’s-side door as I was spinning around. 

Left and right, back and forth, wobbling and spinning—the climax of Tom’s narrative describes from a distance the experience of losing control, something he experienced as a frantic blur and could scarcely recollect after the accident had happened. The witness’s perspective is the only one that could begin to make sense of this confusion. By explaining what happened by using the witness’s more distant perspective, Tom uses narrative to help bring the chaotic event under control.

A clear explanation of what happened still doesn’t quite articulate the meaning of the event and Tom’s experience of risk. On this matter, his words following the climax are especially insightful: “[I]t was one of those things where if I had spun earlier, or if I had been like, y’know a foot over too far, then it would’ve been a completely different story. And thankfully it wasn’t.” This notion that different events make different stories is common, as is the reflexive awareness of the diversity of consequences to particular actions, decisions, and events. In the context of Tom’s narrative, details like when he spun and the placement of his car could have made his into a “different story,” which in his case signifies one that ended in death. Tom devalues his actions as “stupid,” so his survival, the way he tells the story, seems to be a result chance or fate; he seems to have survived despite his foolish decisions. The primary risk in Tom’s narrative was the embodied risk of death, and his emphasis on the incidental nature of its avoidance makes this story one to share about the importance of using caution during snowy or icy
weather. Additionally, this story expresses the value of human life over financial costs. Nobody involved in the accident was seriously injured, though it “totaled” Tom’s car so “it was completely worthless after that.” Nevertheless, he says he was thankful for the story’s outcome, and seemed only to mention the condition of his car to emphasize the small chance of his survival.

That Tom takes responsibility for the consequences of his risky drive and the accident positions him as a person capable of appropriate self-regulation when he encounters similar situations in the future. This capacity for appropriate self-regulation arguably makes him a less risk-prone individual. In an article about how insurance policies affect the social construction of responsibility, Tom Baker claims, “The identification of a new risk of harm is unlikely to be experienced…as an occasion for building character, but rather as an added burden” (2002: 33). According to his argument, insurance institutions accept some of this burden of risks while defining responsible behavior by imposing the obligation to act responsibly onto the insured (ibid: 42). In this context, individual self-regulation becomes essential as the imposition of responsibility transforms mistakes into faults (Ewald 2002: 275). Without dismissing these assertions of insurance policy discourse analysis, I have to argue that such claims overstate the disciplinary role of insurance institutions in imposing responsibility and self-governance. For Tom, his experience instilled in him some measure of the need to exercise prudence on the highway, and those who listen to his story and similar stories of others acquire similar knowledge about cautious driving. From this perspective, practices of self-regulation while driving seem more proprietary than disciplinary. By assuring friends and family of his ability to drive safely, Tom can alleviate their reasonable
concern that he might get himself killed by engaging in risks. Furthermore, the narration of the risky experience presents it as exactly what Baker says the identification of risk is not—an occasion for building character.

After Tom told me this story, I asked him about his friends and family’s reactions to the accident. His response reveals how the embodied risk of physical harm or death is also a profoundly intimate risk, and thus a proprietary concern. He says,

[D]ad was pretty calm about it. Um, I mean mom was just scared. Like I mean she wasn’t so much up—well, she was upset later that I tried to drive home. [...] And my girlfriend especially was really, really mad at me. And she had every right to be, ‘cause I was, yeah, it wasn’t a good idea. Um, mom was really upset. [...] Well, she’s a cautious person anyway. She’s definitely the, y’know, “Be very careful, you’re my only son” sort of mom. And so yeah, I mean, especially after that point, with cold weather situations, she’s always been, y’know, “Be careful.” I think it shook her up pretty badly. Which, I don’t blame her I guess.

These reactions demonstrate the importance of maintaining the unharmed self among those with whom Tom had intimate relationships. By endangering himself, he had offended the proprietary renunciation of impulse and damaged his ability to draw the symbolic benefits of being perceived as a properly responsible member of his group (de Certeau 1998:8). Calling his risky action “stupid” or “dumb” renounces it, thereby demonstrating to the concerned audience of his narrative that his experience taught him to make wiser decisions in the future. In this way, his story enables him in some measure to reassert his ability to practice propriety and makes the symbolic benefits of intimacy
more accessible. By forming his experience into a narrative, he turns it into an event his audience can understand as one which worked to build his character. The offense is lessened via its built-in didacticism; more than an apology, Tom uses the story to express that he now “knows better.”

Everyday Risk and Empowerment

Tabitha’s story differs from Tom’s most obviously in that her experience of risk did not involve an accident, though she explains that it certainly could have. Rather than emphasizing her foolishness, Tabitha remarks on her emotional strength with respect to the incident. She begins,

Ok, so I’ve never had a car accident. Where’s some wood to knock on? [knocks on dashboard] Knock on my dashboard. Um, but the closest I came, I used to go to Big Boy a lot at night, and I would always um come home some time between three and four in the morning, or later. So all of the stop lights along Wooster Street would be flashing yellow. So I’d just, you know, not think about it and go through these lights. And this one night, I think I left a little bit earlier than I usually did, so the light at Thurston-Manville and Wooster was red. And I wasn’t thinking about it, ‘cause I was expecting it to be flashing. And it was rainy and wet.

This beginning sets the stage as a risk context, involving a change in routine, an unexpected red light, and less than ideal driving conditions. Nevertheless, the terrain is familiar and her trajectory is short, only a few miles. She continues,
So once I realize this light is red and I’m actually going to have to stop, I slam on my brakes, and I’m y’know maybe a hundred feet from the stop light. And my car uh starts skidding. I don’t even know what’s going through my head at this time. I was thinking, I was thinking um like “Turn into the swerve.” Like when you’re on icy roads and you’re like slipping one way or the other, you’re supposed to turn your wheel in the direction that you’re like the back of your car’s fishtailing. So that’s what’s going through my head at this point, but my car made a complete 180 turn so when I realized what had just happened, I’m facing the opposite direction in the next lane, still in drive.

Like Tom, Tabitha describes the chaotic climax of her story in precise detail. Interestingly, her explanation of this disruptive trajectory includes her thoughts of what she believes one is “supposed” to do when one loses control of one’s automobile. I have previously heard the “turn into the swerve” belief expressed. Whether or not it works to stabilize a swerving car, in practice it appears as an interesting folk belief, one which may owe its popularity to its counter-intuitiveness (Boyer 1994). In Tabitha’s situation, the intended effect of turning into the swerve was probably not the 180 turn into the opposite lane. However, her knowledge of and belief in the “turn into the swerve” practice may have enhanced her confidence that she had acted properly in the context of the situation.

This confidence also may have positively affected Tabitha’s attitude following the incident. Immediately after she’d spun into the other lane, she says,

I just drove off and turned around to continue going home. Like my heart didn’t race, there was no adrenaline rush like, I was just, I was so calm.

5 Meaning one’s intuitive response to swerving might more likely be to turn against the swerve.
Like, I was thinking about this and how weird that was that like nothing like that had ever happened to me before, and I was totally unfazed.

Like absolutely, completely calm.

Not only did the incident not result in any physical or financial damage, but it didn’t result in any emotional damage either. Ending her story in this way, it becomes one of surprising strength in a risky situation I commented I imagined probably would have been at least somewhat upsetting. Though turning into the swerve placed her in the opposite direction in the opposite lane, she and her automobile came out of the situation unharmed. Later, she attributed her survival to good fortune, saying, “if it had been like thirty seconds later, there would have been a university shuttle bus that would’ve plowed into me.” This comment resembles Tom’s “it could’ve been a completely different story” remark, and Tabitha’s tactical use of narrative to make sense of a confusing event is similar. However, Tabitha’s story tells of a far less traumatic event which remarkably left her feeling “absolutely, completely calm.”

With this narrative, Tabitha shapes her identity with respect to risk in an empowering manner. Rather than renouncing the risk, she appears not to embrace it, but to express relative indifference to it. What surprised her was not so much the risk itself but her calm reaction to it. Reasonably, one might expect her to maintain such composure in future risky situations, as she can think back to this event as one that taught her how to react to risk. Granted, the notion of maintaining composure remains easily associable with the concepts of discipline, self-governance, and others paradigmatic of neo-liberal conceptions of the self. Once could also dismiss the value of such composure as the adoption of an overly masculine ideal, one which devalues “emotional” responses
to risk in favor of “rational” responses. From these perspectives, composure in the face of risk may hardly seem empowering. Yet composure in response to risk is hardly less favorable than the fear of harm that may work to immobilize, restrict, and otherwise impede freedom in everyday life. Regardless of the social construction of risks by disciplinary apparatuses like the law, insurance, and institutions of automobility, everyday life has its risks to be confronted and managed from within.

Tom and Tabitha’s accident narratives clarify some of the tactics of risk management in everyday life. These tactics include the use of narrative to understand and bring under control chaotic moments, to imagine how events could have unfolded to produce worse consequences, and to share personal experiences with others. They also include tactics of propriety and identity-construction tailored to make sense and make do with contingent events. Unsurprisingly, these narratives can also be seen to have a didactic function, making of the events something those who experienced them can learn from. Narratives emergent in everyday life have a stake in the maintenance of everyday life. They inform and possibly influence future ways of operating. Unlike the discourses of safety and risk promoted by dominant institutions such as insurance companies, personal accident narratives retain intimacy and concern with the well-being of the audience. In this way, they show how the maintenance of the everyday lives of others is a matter of propriety. Life binds concerned individuals to one another, and their concern encourages them to make each other aware of the risks in everyday life.
CONCLUSION

Personal narratives provide insight into how people negotiate various tensions in their everyday lives. Automobile malfunctions, as events, provide the opportunity for people to actively work to resume their everyday lives and comment on this need to maintain their way of life. The stories that emerge from these events reveal the everyday priorities of the storytellers, and they sometimes comment on the dissonance between their own priorities and the priorities of the capitalist systems they inhabit. Other stories emphasize obligations to friends and family members and the sometimes stressful work of maintaining these social allegiances. They can be used didactically, for self-criticism and for empowerment, among innumerable other uses. Generally, they provide insight into how people think about the world in which they live and their relationship to it.

No matter how mundane their subject, stories participate in a struggle with meaning. Like the events that precede their formation, personal narratives are subject to many, many interpretations, both by tellers and by audiences. Everyday stories, like all everyday practices, can never be lauded as purely radical or dismissed as purely ideological. Nevertheless, they remain political. The meanings of stories seized by tellers and audiences circulate within and around the culture. Not all of these meanings would be considered appropriate from the perspective of dominant institutions. Individuals recognize their own priorities with respect to these institutions, but not necessarily in line with them.

As a dominant institution with particularly profound impact on everyday life, the system of automobility isn’t going anywhere any time soon. The times and spaces of our
lives are structured according to its logic, and our culture has colonized it nearly as much as it has colonized our culture. Broadly speaking, automobiles are tricky—they are commodities in a global market that require a global market for their maintenance, and they are tools that facilitate routine and escape in everyday life. They damage the environment and make much of that environment more accessible to more people. They save time and waste time. Drivers are disengaged from discussions that make automobiles and the system of automobility the way they are; their needs and desires are only a small part of what contributes to making the system work. They are aware it doesn’t always work for them.

There is an agenda that calls for the maintenance of everyday life; it is a political position that criticizes both existent and emergent structures that endanger its continuity. It is an agenda of solidarity, claiming that no matter what “we” are in, “we’re in it together.” Stories forge and perpetuate this togetherness. Its bonds cross social and institutional lines, and its critical teeth are sharpened to attack processes of alienation. Be they the broken promises of capitalism or individuals’ singular mistakes and misdeeds, processes of alienation lead to solitary disaffection and feelings of powerlessness amid the flux and flow of industrialized time. Together, individuals fend off these processes of alienation; their politics is the politics of making do.

Malfunctions sometimes interrupt this current of the everyday. They are risky, strange, and pregnant with possibilities. Once everyday life is interrupted, the unknown is introduced. Does the everyday actor restore order to the way things were? Or does she use this interruption as an opportunity to introduce something new, cast off something old, or move on in an entirely different direction? What about an interrupted culture?
Stories and interpretations of this interruption facilitate both the restoring of order and an increase of knowledge on the storyteller’s behalf. The transformation may be as subtle—or as radical—as one from innocence to experience. But while the malfunction may interrupt everyday life, everyday life never stops. Cycles, repetitions, continuities—structures—emerge and crumble in the process of living. The malfunctions build up and break down. What is made of these malfunctions becomes what we make of what we have.

And we make do.


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