

Queering the Line

Dominic Davies

Introduction

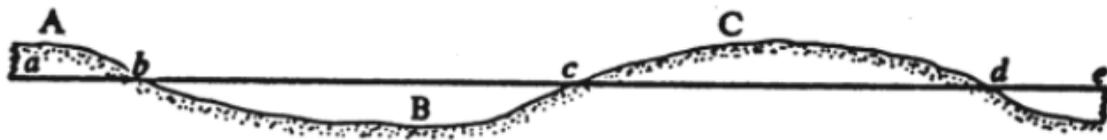
Under capitalist modernity, the straight line emerged as the ideal against which all kinds of mobility infrastructures were measured, from railways and roads to flightpaths and pipelines. Providing the quickest route from point A to point B, the straight line presents the most time-efficient direction of travel, maximizing profits and accumulated capital. But from the levelled tracks of the railways through to masculine fantasies of the open road, there are also thickly gendered imaginaries folded into this line.

This essay argues that capital's economic ideal of the 'straight' infrastructural line does not simply echo heteronormative and patriarchal ideals, but actively concretizes them into the world. It produces and reproduces social relations, contends Tim Ingold (2007: 4), its "straightness" epitomizing "not only rational thought and disputation but also the values of civility and moral rectitude." By queering the straight line, I refute this 'rational' ideal and show instead how it blends together systems of patriarchy and accumulation. To avoid straightness in my own line of argumentation, I approach this topic from three different directions. Each section begins with an image and

statement about the straight line, which it then deconstructs and disorganizes. The aim is to weave together a cross-hatched argument, rather than marching a masculine line through the empty page.

1. Smooth, Level, Hard, Straight

Capital's ideal infrastructure runs in a straight line.



In his much-celebrated 1836 book, *The Steam Engine*, the Victorian writer Dionysius Lardner praised the new railways for surpassing in mobility and comfort what were then Britain's unmetalled roads. "A perfect road should be smooth, level, hard, and straight," wrote Lardner. "Were it possible to construct a road between two places, absolutely smooth, absolutely level, absolutely hard, and absolutely straight, then a carriage put in motion from one end of this road would move to the other end without any tractive force at all" (Lardner 1851: 315–16; see also Schivelbusch 2014).

An illustration of a straight railway line carved through an undulating landscape.
Source: Wood 1838: 136.

Where roads and canals wound around undulating landscapes, the railway blasted through mountains and bridged over ravines, ploughing a direct corridor through the countryside. Its straight rails necessitated the labor-intensive levelling up and levelling down of hills; the new speeds it facilitated made this economically worthwhile. Indeed, because it hastened the annihilation of space by time (Marx 1993 [1939]), the railroad's straight line presented itself to Lardner as an infrastructural ideal, maximizing the imperatives of accumulation. By speeding up the circulation of goods without requiring additional labor time, the perfectly straight line promised to resolve one of capital's most acute spatial contradictions.

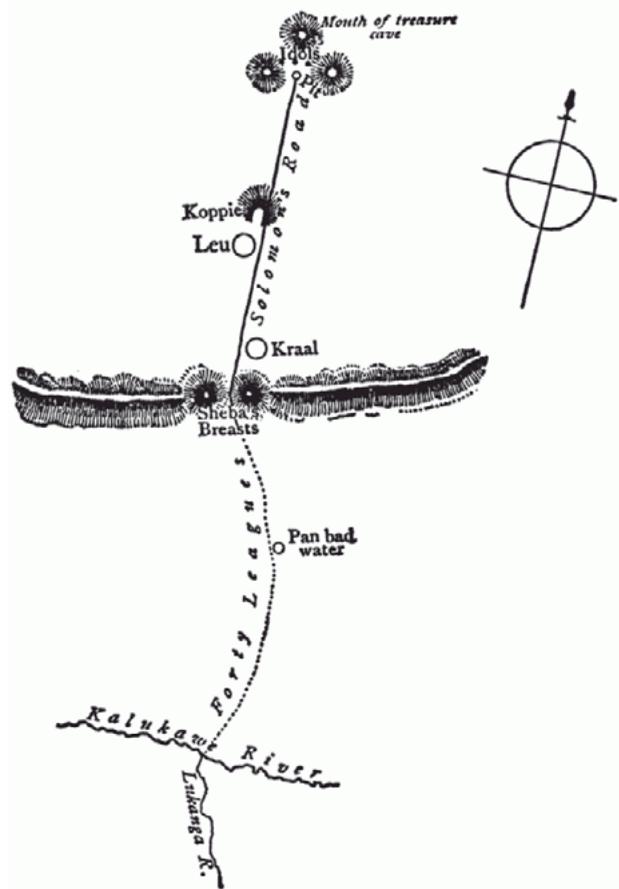
For Lardner, the truly "perfect" road would produce movement without any input at all. It would be so "smooth, level, hard, and straight" that it would remove all friction from the world, allowing an object to move as though in an abstract plane. Lardner therefore saw the railway as step toward the material realization of Isaac Newton's mathematical laws. "Every body perseveres in its state of being at rest or of moving uniformly straight forward," wrote Newton (1999 [1687]: 62) in his first law of inertia. In this frictionless world, capital would circulate and profit accumulate without any contradiction, crisis or diminishing of resources, sustaining the fantasy of endless growth.

Of course, steam engines did not glide from point A to point B along a perfect road. They required unprecedented levels of energy, millions of years of solar power released through the burning of fossil fuels mined by vast labor reserves. This would place limits

on the accumulation of profits, from the emergence of class warfare and industrial action to the pressures of the climate crisis. But the straight line has nevertheless sustained capitalism imaginatively, projecting a fantasy of abstract movement and endless growth by denying the labor required to produce material infrastructures – from pipelines in the twentieth century to flightpaths in the twenty-first.

2. The Open Road

The straight line concretizes patriarchal and heteronormative relations into the world.



The hand-drawn map included in H. Rider Haggard's imperial romance, *King Solomon's Mines*.

Source: Haggard 2008: 21.

While the straight line enacts the capitalist fantasy of frictionless movement by erasing the conditions of its own production, it nevertheless requires empty space through which to move. Implicitly constructed as male, the straight line feminizes this space, sublimating the gendered work of biological reproduction, domestic labor and care into its abstract field. As Henri Lefebvre put it, “the space of modernity ... is an unreservedly visualized space, a dictatorship of the eye – and of the phallus” (1991 [1974]: 302). Masculinity defines itself through the straight line as productive, temporal and mobile; meanwhile, the reproductive space that throws this line into relief is presented as static, feminized and often racialized (see Massey 1994: 182–83).

This is particularly evident in the imperialist portrayal of colonial landscapes as feminized and fertile spaces emptied of inhabitants. Feminist critics have pointed to the hand-drawn map that fronts H. Rider Haggard's 1884 romance, *King Solomon's Mines*, as a stark example of this heteronormative projection (Stott 1989). This image figures the colonial landscape as an inverted female body through which the novel's male protagonists then move, penetrating the landscape and following the straight line of the plot. "Haggard's map thereby hints at a hidden order underlying industrial modernity," writes Anne McClintock (1995: 3): "the conquest of the sexual and labor power of colonized women."

The straight line on this map is an infrastructure, Solomon's Road, which runs exactly parallel to the compass pointing due North and links the mountains to the treasure cave by the most direct route. Though not visible on the two-dimensional map, the road's construction has physically levelled the landscape through which it moves. "At one place we came to a great ravine three hundred feet broad and at least a hundred deep," remarks Haggard's narrator. "This vast gulf was actually filled in, apparently with huge blocks of dressed stone, with arches pierced at the bottom for a waterway, over which the road went sublimely on" (2008: 69). The protagonists assume the road must be left over from a lost white civilization in the centre of Africa; they are unable to believe a Black population could build such infrastructure, despite the material evidence in front of them. With the straight line, a white, heteronormative masculinity monopolizes temporal movement, while gendered, racialized and environmental labor is expelled to static space and exiled from the progress of history.

The straight line has sustained these ideals by reproducing them everywhere, from the plots of adventure fictions to extraction pipelines to intoxicating fantasies of the open road (Sheller 2018). Countless advertisements for 4x4s and episodes of the popular TV series *Top Gear* use a strip of black tarmac cutting through 'virginal' landscapes to project the straight line as a sexualized fantasy. They sell their implied male viewer private access to Lardner's ideal of effortless mobility. On the perfectly smooth and straight road, movement is rest. By erasing the labor that makes automobility possible, the straight line produces serenity, sexual gratification and even death. For instance, in J.G. Ballard's *Crash*, a 1973 novel in which the protagonist gets off on car crashes before eventually dying in one himself, the heteronormative fantasy of frictionless mobility reaches its demise in the dead end of a concrete bollard.

3. Queering the Line

Queering the line produces the freedom of place.

Queering the straight line reveals how systems of heteropatriarchy and capitalist accumulation are concretized both into one another and the world. But we should not do without lines altogether. If the first step is to reveal the straight line's violence, the second is to conceptualize different kinds of line.

To do so, we might look to 'orts', or 'old ratty threads', which knit together multiple intersecting lines into a dense fabric to produce a textured surface. The plane of orts

are not abstract but responsive to the bumpy topographies of the world, significantly made from recycled scraps and remainders of thread. Rather than concealing the labor that goes into its manufacture, it pushes that work to the fore. The weaving of orts is a project of collaborative repair, turning leftovers and spares into solid ground.



*Fluorescent ort loom
(weaving detail).*
Artist: [Nic McPhee, 2013.](#)

Searching for the origins of straight lines, Ingold shifts attention from their intellectual genealogy to their everyday use: exercise books, floorboards, brick walls, pavements. These lines “ruled surfaces, but did not seem to connect anything with anything else. Their source lay not in the geometry – literally ‘earth measurement’ – of Euclid, but in the taut warp-threads of the weaver’s loom” (Ingold 2007: 4). Rather than abstracting the world into capitalist fantasies of unlimited accumulation, these straight lines return us to the world by knitting it together. As individual lines they may be inexact, but through the collective overlapping of the weave, they realize a surface that is situated and secure.

“The promise of a queer engagement,” writes Deborah Cowen (2014: 223) in her queer reading of infrastructure, resides “in its potential for transforming relations of rule through the desire and occupation of those relations differently.” This essay has sought to queer the idea of the perfect infrastructure as a straight line passing through frictionless terrain. In the terms of abolitionist geographers such as Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2022: 227), this frictionless movement conceals the far more enduring freedom of place. Against the straight line’s abstraction of space for capital accumulation and heteropatriarchal norms, the woven surface creates a foundational plane on which different ideas of freedom might be built. Surely these futures are what infrastructure is for; when we queer the straight line, they come into reach.

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