Cartographies of Empire: The Road Novel and American Hegemony
Myka Tucker-Abramson
260 pages, 2025, $30.00 (paperback)
Stanford University Press

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In a hilarious reading of *The Italian Job*, the Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole points to the way Michael Caine's caricature as a swaggering English cockney is matched only by the conflation of the automobiles themselves with an aspirant national identity: "the Minis – cool, sleek, and lithe – trip a light fandango through [Turin's] alleys and malls, across rooftops and even a river, while the Fiats stumble and crash in their wake … [even] the gold bars that are the object of the heist are a Chinese investment in Fiat" (O'Toole, 178). Released in 1969, *The Italian Job* spoke to a post-imperial moment when automobile production had become a key measure of a nation's GDP and cars an audacious symptom of national stereotypes, from the cheeky mischievousness of the English Mini to the tight-lipped efficiency of the German BMW. This was not merely ornamental style but an affect lived by citizens who found two things in the unprecedented autonomy afforded by mass car use: an articulation of national identity after the dissolution of formal empires and a taste of the nascent individualism that would become such an important cultural pillar of the emerging neoliberal world order.

The literature on the parallels between automobiles and nationalism is thorough and extensive, but as O'Toole detects in his reading of *The Italian Job*, this is not the whole story. Myka Tucker-Abramson's new book, *Cartographies of Empire: The Road Novel and American Hegemony*, steps in to provide this wider picture, capturing how the tantalizing promise of the open road mediated not national cultures, but the uneven forcefield of US imperial hegemony throughout the world-system in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It achieves this with an ambitious critique of the road novel, one of the most enduring cultural articulations of motorized autonomy, which for Tucker-Abramson stretches from the "petro-phantasmagorias" of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) to the post-Soviet hitchhiking of Iva Pekárková's *Truck Stop Rainbows* (1992) to the apocalyptic airports of Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014). The road novel may be materially coupled to the New Deal era when oil was cheap, and roads and highways were built to bind together new national identities. But Tucker-Abramson shows that far from "a genre of Americanness," the road novel actually tracks "US hegemony's expansions, crises, reconsolidation, and ultimate decline" as these have powered the world-system for the best part of a century (3).

The "cartographies of empire" in the book title therefore describe thick entanglements of infrastructure and desire, tracking how the US built its cultural hegemony with a promise of individual autonomy in

contexts where such consumerist dreamworlds were "stripped of their charge" (118) by the material realities of extraction, commodification, and racialized violence. This, Tucker-Abramson argues, is the "two-step" movement of the road novel as a genre of empire. On the one hand, it evokes "seductive narratives" of individual fulfilment in a world emptied of meaning by the commodity form; on the other, it registers the "violent and vertiginous processes of capitalist modernisation," compelling readers to confront these with the totalizing force of a car crash head on (93). At root, the study is a refreshing combination of genre analysis with advances in world-literary scholarship that have taken combined and uneven development as an interpretive key for the world-system. But in its doubled reading strategy, which moves with and against the grain of its primary texts, *Cartographies of Empire* is also engaged in the kinds of "contrapuntal reading" (Said, 32) that were once the bread and butter of postcolonial studies. Tucker-Abramson confesses that she read more than one-hundred-and-forty road novels to 'master' the genre, a distancing move that might suggest a methodological influence from studies in world literature. Yet the chapters themselves are composed of intricate close readings and unified by a rigorously political opposition to US empire that equally suggests a persistent postcolonial materialism.

It is important to note that Tucker-Abramson finds American Empire not only beyond the borders of its national territory, but also within the United States itself: in the southern gothic landscapes of William Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), the racialized inner cities coded into Samuel Delany's *Dhalgren* (1975), and the carceral regime of the US-Mexico border in Chris Kraus's *Summer of Hate* (2012). When we move overseas, we find ourselves in the broken post-communist lifeworlds of Zachary Karabashliev's *18% Gray* (2013) or the fragmented territories of occupied Palestine in Adania Shibli's *Minor Detail* (2017). In each case, *Cartographies of Empire* shows how the road novel struggles to break away from material spaces that expose the freedom promised by capital as a lie. If it is this dialectical tension that propels the genre forward, it is also, Tucker-Abramson argues, why rewritings of the road novel can never quite imagine an alternative to the capitalist system they so often inadvertently – and just as often openly – condemn. For that, Tucker-Abramson concludes, "another form is needed" (89), though what that might be is beyond the parameters of this ambitious study.

Tracking the uneven movements of capital through the road novel, *Cartographies of Empire* therefore ricochets back-and-forth with the winds of oil prices and other seismic shifts in the neoliberal world order. It is valuable not merely for its close literary readings, which are many, but also for the way its cognitive mapping of the world-system through a single genre expands our understanding of much larger cultural narratives and social contradictions. For instance, reviewing *The Italian Job* through *Cartographies of Empire* might suggest a prescient reading of postwar English culture as American vassalage. Michael Caine's red-white-and-blue Minis clearly signify an English strain of neoliberal nationalism, but in light of Tucker-Abramson's

readings, we can see that this upstart identity was always also combined with the cross-national projection of US power into Europe and beyond, to its communist enemy in Russia and perhaps even further to the prospect of a rising China.

Cartographies of Empire is therefore one of those books that, much like a good road novel, instils a sense of possibility for further inquiry. Indeed, the immediate relevance of Tucker-Abramson's study is nowhere clearer than in the decline of the US empire we are all now living through, with its binding of military overreach to settler colonialism in Palestine and rocketing fuel prices around the world. As the limits of petromodernity make themselves daily more apparent, one wonders whether the road novel can adapt to a post-Trumpian world of self-driving cars and solar panels made in China. If Tucker-Abramson's materialist thesis is correct, and the road novel is truly tied to US empire, then it should surely now have run its course. And yet, as she also proves, this is a resilient genre: perhaps, like the dwindling American hegemony it still transports around the world, the road novel has some ugly surprises left in store.

Works Cited

O'Toole, Fintan. *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain*, Head of Zeus Ltd., 2018.

Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage Books, 1994.