

Looking Back, Moving On: Suspension and Mobility in Willy Vlautin's *Northline*

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Whereas the U.S. West has frequently been envisioned as a land of opportunity, mobility, open space, and the future, Willy Vlautin's novels and his songs with Richmond Fontaine and The Delines have sided with those who are caught in desperate situations while struggling to survive from day to day. In one of the memorable scenes in his third novel, *Lean on Pete* (2010), a woman says to the protagonist, "I don't know where else to go" (168). The sense of paralysis or immobility that comes from poverty, helplessness, dysfunctional families, or traumatic memories of the past often torments the working-class characters in his fiction, and Vlautin's sympathetic and realistic portraits of people who are stuck in the suffocating present have made him one of the most important writers to come out of the contemporary West. *Northline* (2008), his second novel, is no exception. Its narrative begins and ends in suspension, torn between the past and the future, immobility and mobility, depressive reality and visions of a better life, reaching a point that leaves its protagonist in a state of "fear and hope and uncertainty" at the end (Vlautin, *Northline* 192). While the novel's characters oscillate between the past and the future, the narrative itself, as if undecided in its stance toward the progress of time, moves forward and backward and gradually sheds a broader light on its shady and sometimes brutal world populated by unforgettable people. The tension between motion and stillness shapes Vlautin's novel at multiple levels. Aware of both the necessity and the difficulty of moving on in an increasingly stratified society, Vlautin offers a hopeful yet somber look at the contemporary West. What *Northline* presents, in its style and narrative, is a realistic vision of the region itself as a space suspended in uncertainty.

Mobility has been regarded as one of the most powerful shaping forces in the history of the West and of the United States. In his retrospective construction of "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893), Frederick Jackson Turner looks back at the open space that allegedly disappeared sometime before 1890 and discusses how it produced some distinctive features of U.S. society. People kept moving westward because they found in the West a space for "perennial rebirth," for "continually beginning over again" (2). While the West itself was a fluid geographical entity that had changed its shape with the advancement of the frontier, one of its principal functions,

in history as well as in later cultural products like novels and films, has been to provide opportunities for and visions of physical and social mobility. That space, however, no longer existed. Turner's writing grows increasingly nostalgic as he approaches the end of this well-known paper. For him, mobility is the key for understanding American life: "Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise. But never again will such gifts of free land offer themselves" (37). Since there is no "gate of escape from the bondage of the past" (38), the implicit question is this: where to go next? The vision of the vanishing western frontier might be projected later onto some other location—Alaska, the Pacific Ocean, or the outer space—but for Turner, 1890 meant an irretrievable loss, the end of a period of unrestrained movement.

In an equally classic account published in 1962, George W. Pierson, in turn, looks back at Turner's thesis and offers an alternative idea. Criticizing the frontier thesis for its nationalism, provincialism, and irrelevance to the nation's history after 1890, Pierson expands Turner's thought by claiming that what he calls "the M-Factor"—"the factor of movement, migration, mobility"—has been and remains a dominant characteristic of U.S. society, not only of its western part (278). A concept that applies equally to movement before, after, behind, and away from the frontier, Pierson's M-Factor frees American mobility from the spatial and temporal dead end into which Turner has relegated it. Pierson argues that "[m]ovement means change" and transformation, and that the M-Factor has been, among other things, "the prime source of Optimism in the American atmosphere, a never-failing ozone of hope," and "the Equalizer and Democratizer of social classes" (279, 283). As in Turner, spatial movement is conceived here as a means of escape from the past as well as from one's own position within a social structure. While mobility is repeatedly associated with change and the future, however, Pierson does not forget to add that it is also a way of avoiding change, that mobility can be a manifestation of a yearning for stability: "Flight can be an escape from the future as well as from the past" (284). People can move to a new location not only when they look for a new opportunity, but also when they are afraid of the changes happening in the present. The M-Factor, then, is a notion that is always torn between these two opposite directions. Similarly, Turner's discussion of the fading frontier, which is itself a retrospective look at what used to be a land of the future, is implicitly characterized by a sense of spatiotemporal bidirectionality. People moved westward to escape from the European past, but what the West provided for them was regeneration through a "continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society" (Turner 2–3). It becomes unclear whether people ran away from the past toward the future or just kept moving back and forth between different versions of the past. Both American mobility and the American West begin to seem suspended between the future and the past, progress and regress, freedom and captivity, and linearity and circularity.

The issue of mobility, with its strong association with the frontier mythology, has already received some attention from the burgeoning scholarship on Vlautin's fiction. David Río, for instance, looks at Vlautin's realistic portrait of the city of Reno in *Northline* and shows how the novel "calls into question the traditional association in frontier mythology between mobility and regeneration" (228). In his analysis of *The Motel Life* (2006), Vlautin's first novel, William V. Lombardi focuses on its characteristics as a unique postwestern text and suggests how "the western narrative of self-reliance, mobility, and lighting out for the territories ... is merely a leftover—a deflated but durable simulacrum" for the novel's central characters (149). In a similar vein, Neil Campbell discusses *Northline* with a particular emphasis on the novel's juxtaposition of the problematic consequences of the mythic Old West narrative and a more vulnerable and tentative space that emerges as a meshwork formed by the lines of the characters' lives. Vlautin's "scarred" West, Campbell claims, is disassociated from the mythic frontier because "the colonized continent with its narrative of success and abundance, growth and progress, has become instead a fragile breaking space where lives splinter, collapse, and fall apart against this background of myth and expectation" (151). All of these arguments suggest that the M-Factor, in Vlautin's fiction, has lost its power to produce "perennial rebirth" or to function as "the prime source of Optimism in the American atmosphere." Drawing on these studies, the following analysis examines the relationship between the lure of forward motion and the text's suspension of it, a tension that shapes the novel and operates within it at multiple levels. It takes a closer look at Vlautin's language and the way he structures the narrative of *Northline*. Perhaps because of its apparent simplicity, the novelist's careful construction of his narrative has not been discussed by critics as often as it deserves. *Northline*'s treatment of spatiality and temporality, supported by the novel's spare but rich texture, will add a unique and somewhat paradoxical meaning to the significance of (im)mobility in the contemporary U.S. West.

Vlautin's interest in narrative suspension is made manifest from the novel's beginning. Set in the Circus Circus Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, a glamorous city of gambling, tourism, and spectacles, the novel's first chapter immediately plunges the narrative into the city's dark underbelly, while also presenting a literal image of people hanging in the air: "They were above them, the circus people, in costumes, swinging from ropes. A net was below and a small band played lifelessly in the corner, in near darkness. Colored spotlights followed the performers and an announcer introduced them and told the gathering crowd what was to come" (Vlautin, *Northline* 1). This opening paragraph, written in Vlautin's characteristically simple language, is nonetheless dense in its prefiguration of the novel's thematic and stylistic concerns. Thematic contrasts can be observed in the juxtaposition of the circus performers, who are suspended and "swinging from ropes," and the members of "a small band," partially hidden "in the corner." The vertical hierarchy of those who are "above" and

“below” is reinforced by the visual contrast between “[c]olored spotlights” and “near darkness.” The narrator’s description shifts between these realms of light and darkness, thereby pointing at the presence of a social boundary between the visible and the invisible, the privileged and the underprivileged. The florid world of the performers is supported by those hidden and obscured by darkness. The passage introduces a shadowy world that sustains the glittering city of neon lights from below, suggesting that there is something worth telling behind or beneath the city that thrives by selling dreams of gold. Also, the description of the “net” spread beneath the performers seems to imply the likely absence of a metaphorical safety net for those who are below. These contrasts effectively delineate a severely divided society in which the novel’s narrative will unfold.

While the passage swings between these literal and metaphorical meanings, the narrator adds another layer of suspense by opening the story *in medias res*. That the show at Circus Circus has already started is an indication that events have been going on before the beginning proper. Similarly, the narrator’s use of the two pronouns in the first sentence, “[t]hey” and “them,” will be slightly confusing for the first-time reader, since it is not clear what they refer to—or, more precisely, because there is nothing they can refer back to. Signs without referents, these pronouns float in a verbal vacuum for a while until the reader partially fills in the blanks by realizing that the first one refers to “the circus people,” the second one a man named Jimmy Bodie and his girlfriend, here mentioned only as “the girl” (1). Although such a deliberate withholding of information might not be strange in itself, this novel is unusual in that it continues to conceal the name of “the girl,” who is none other than its protagonist, for more than forty pages. Allison Johnson receives her full name for the first time, and thereby begins to take shape as an individual character, only after she abandons her suffocating relationship with Jimmy and meets the first character who treats her with respect and kindness: “If you don’t mind me asking, Allison,” T. J. Watson asks her, “what in the hell are you doing all the way out here?” (45). Until then, no one in the story is really interested in her name or what she is doing. This prolonged effect of suspension could not exist if the first line of the novel was more explicit. Retrospectively, it becomes clear that the narrator has planted a small, empty sign in the first sentence and then waited for a long time before providing its referent. Delayed, piecemeal disclosure of information, a gradual broadening of the realm of light, is one of the most persistent strategies adopted by Vlautin in this novel. A similar pattern will be repeated on a larger scale in the narrator’s slow unveiling of Allison’s traumatic past. In all of these respects, the novel’s suspenseful opening paragraph is indeed an announcement of “what [is] to come.”

The novel expands and develops the visual and verbal suspension in this densely packed opening paragraph in different ways. The first to be considered is the profound sense of paralysis and immobility that torments the novel’s central character. Her predicament has personal and

social dimensions, both of which will be discussed below. The second aspect of the novel's use of suspension is to be observed in its treatment of temporality. Although *Northline*'s narrative inevitably moves forward in more or less chronological order, Vlautin constantly arrests its motion as if to resist the progress of time itself. A close inspection of this process will shed light on the novel's stance towards the past and history. Finally, these temporal aspects of the narrative are deeply intertwined with the novel's conceptions of spatiality and spatial mobility, with what movement means in Vlautin's contemporary West. Although these issues are interrelated, the following argument takes them up one by one.

Northline deals with Allison's life in two Nevada cities, Las Vegas and Reno, starting in the former and ending in the latter. More than anything else, Las Vegas represents something she has to escape from. As has been seen in the contrast between light and darkness in the novel's first paragraph, Las Vegas, "the adult playground of Sin City," is a city that has embraced two opposite cultural meanings: utopian "promise" and dystopian "anxiety" (Lewis and Tatum 2, 10). The city might embody an excessively commercialized version of the West's utopian promise for outsiders and tourists, but for Allison, a high school dropout from a dysfunctional working-class family who has worked as a waitress in casinos, it is only a place of nightmarish entrapment. At the novel's beginning, she is living with her abusive boyfriend, Jimmy Bodie. She occasionally stays at the house of her unnamed mother, who works as a dealer in a casino, and her younger sister, Evelyn, a high school student thinking about dropping out and moving away to Mexico with her own abusive boyfriend, thereby repeating what Allison now feels was a serious mistake she made in the past. It is important to note that Allison has no place of her own in this city. Moving back and forth between Jimmy's apartment—"his apartment," the narrator says—and "[h]er mother's house" located in North Las Vegas, she is virtually homeless in what is supposed to be her hometown (Vlautin, *Northline* 7, 10). While her life is suspended between these places, Evelyn, too, seems to spend most of her time at her boyfriend's "mother's apartment," probably because her mother often has to work on the night shift at the casino (21). With the three female family members living at separate locations in the same city, the novel evokes a sense of loss and displacement when the mother says to Allison, "We could eat in front of the TV and watch Paul Newman, like a real family" (13). When she is alone, Allison uses "the old barbecue" at the mother's house to burn a short letter to herself that she has just written, a letter full of words of self-loathing and self-reproach (22). The barbecue grill, a symbolic equipment of family life in the U.S., contains "nothing in it except a deep pile of ash from at least a hundred notes she'd let burn there" (22). Along with the mother's words, this suggestive detail shows that the Johnsons cannot function as "a real family" any more. The absence of home and family life foregrounds Allison's profound isolation and precarious existence in Las Vegas.

The novel's portrait of this disintegrating working-class family is haunted by another absence, that of the father and husband. Characteristically, the narrator waits for a long time before providing the first and only substantial information about the missing father. Near the novel's end, Allison says to Dan Mahony, "I haven't seen him in years, not since I was a little kid. He cheated on my mom with a cocktail waitress and left town with her. The last we heard he was in Atlantic City working at a casino there" (166–67). The disappearance of the father and/or husband has a long history in American literature, with Rip Van Winkle in Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" (1819), Wakefield and Roger Chillingworth in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Wakefield" (1835) and *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Captain Ahab in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), and Flitcraft in Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) as some of the earlier examples. On the one hand, like these precursors, the behavior of Allison's father emphasizes how "gender often acts as a force structuring mobility" (Scharff 161). The irresponsible husband escapes from his own family to begin a new life with a new partner in a new city, while the now single mother has to struggle alone to support their two daughters, her working conditions eventually alienating the daughters from herself. On the other hand, moving away from the biggest gambling city in the West to another city of gambling on the East Coast, the father's flight implies that mobility does not necessarily mean change. The ironic transformation of flight into repetition is exactly the point of the Flitcraft parable in *The Maltese Falcon*. After telling the story of a man who runs away from his family in Tacoma, moves south to San Francisco, goes back north, and settles in Spokane to start a new family life, Sam Spade says, "His second wife didn't look like the first, but they were more alike than they were different. ... I don't think he even knew he had settled back naturally into the same groove he had jumped out of in Tacoma" (Hammett 64). Flitcraft's parabolic journey indicates that what appears to be a linear movement might turn out to be an almost circular return to the beginning. Although Vlautin's novel does not say much about Allison's father, both the gendered association of mobility with masculinity and the paradoxical equation of mobility and immobility will shed light on Jimmy, probably the most problematic male character in this novel.

Jimmy's oppressive presence is the direct reason behind Allison's escape from Las Vegas. The couple's relationship can be regarded as an example of what is called codependency, a relationship of mutual entrapment from which it is extremely hard to move away. Jimmy's amphetamine addiction, his extremely cruel violence against her body and mind, his complete lack of self-reflection, and the occasional softening of his attitude toward her simultaneously repel and entrap the protagonist in a stifling relationship that becomes an endless downward spiral. In the novel's first chapter, Jimmy rapes the drunken Allison in a casino restroom and kicks her "as hard as he could, with his steel-toed boots," when she temporarily loses consciousness (6). His one-way violation

of her body is also manifested in the two ominous tattoos imposed on her skin, “a silver-dollar-sized black swastika” and “the World Church of the Creator emblem”; his own “white skin,” in contrast, remains clean with “no tattoos” (5, 159). Jimmy’s illusory superiority as a white male is dependent on the exploitation of her body. While the novel does not condone this character’s extreme misogyny or his racist rant against Mexican immigrants and African Americans, he is also presented here as a victim of childhood abuse “who actively grapples with his demons” (St. Clair 96). Jimmy despises Allison’s alcoholism and weakness, but sometimes he literally cannot stand up without her assistance: “She held out her hand to help him stand,” the narrator says at one point, “and he reached for it” (Vlautin, *Northline* 33). Conversely, his constant physical and verbal abuse certainly aggravates Allison’s self-loathing, but his occasional moments of helplessness make it all the more difficult for her to leave him. Taking care of this abusive boyfriend has already become an essential part of her everyday life in the city. The claustrophobic nature of their relationship is further emphasized by the location of Jimmy’s apartment, “a studio that had been built in the basement of an old house,” where the naked Allison is left handcuffed to a bed frame for ten hours (7). A captive without any place of her own, Allison in Las Vegas is a literal embodiment of immobility.

In addition to these personal relationships that immobilize Allison, social and economic factors have to be considered as well. Like Vlautin’s other novels, *Northline* almost exclusively focuses on the world of its working-class characters. But it provides a few glimpses of what lies outside, directing the reader’s attention to class issues and social mobility in the contemporary West. Telling the story of an ex-coworker named Turquoise to Allison, Jimmy says, “He’d done maybe fifteen years with Circus Circus, and they didn’t give him shit. Not a thanks or nothing, and that guy could fix anything” (3). After moving to Reno, Allison talks to Penny Pearson, her new boss and friend, about her part-time job at a Baskin Robbins shop in Las Vegas. She explains how the shop’s owner, who “had investments all over, a tanning salon and a card store and two Baskin Robbins,” harassed her on a busy day and caused her to panic and hyperventilate, probably because the owner “hadn’t worked that hard in a long time” (133, 134). The novel suggests that this event marks the beginning of her physical and mental condition that has forced her to drop out of school (136), a choice that, in turn, is at least partially responsible for her present predicament. Both Jimmy and Allison are aware that they are being exploited as low-wage service workers in the city, that they are made to live “lifelessly in the corner, in near darkness,” beneath the “[c]olored spotlights” of the Las Vegas entertainment industry (1).¹⁾ What Vlautin portrays here is a rigidly stratified society that continually reproduces itself, a West of social immobility in which the realms of light and darkness rarely mingle with each other. The rich circumscribe themselves within a world of their own, while those who have fallen through the

safety net are condemned to pass on poverty and hard working conditions from generation to generation. With her lack of education and a deep-rooted sense of self-loathing, Allison, in particular, seems resigned to her station of life within this stifling social structure.

And one's social status, in turn, apparently determines the possibility of spatial movement. At a later point in the narrative, in one of the novel's flashback scenes, Jimmy talks about the changing neighborhoods in Las Vegas and delivers one of his racist tirades:

I'd move like every other white motherfucker, but everything in this goddamn city is too expensive. We can't all move, and why should we? Anyway, how many fucking times does a person have to move? I mean, are we gonna have to go to one of those gated communities like all the other pussies who are scared? This is my fucking neighborhood and I'm not gonna give it to some wetback motherfucker who comes here illegally. ... The politicians don't give a shit 'cause they're getting their fucking houses cleaned and their lawns done by a bunch of illegal border jumpers. (168–69)

The shifting demographics of the city's central area have divided its white residents into two groups: those who can escape elsewhere and those who cannot. Jimmy's reaction to this new process of social segregation suggests that mobility is a privilege reserved for the wealthy, who are feminized and vilified as cowards in his masculinist rhetoric. What Turner's West represented was spatial mobility as a path to social mobility, but this novel rejects such a formulation by presenting a contemporary urban West that is constituted by both social and spatial immobility. Jimmy's hatred towards wealthier people "who can afford to resort to inner city mobility in order to avoid mixing with the newcomers" can certainly be observed here (Río 227), but his attention soon veers away from the economic and political system that has exploited the city's laborers. Instead, the rage is directed against groups of nonwhite residents, immigrants from Mexico in particular, many of whom are forced to live in precarious conditions and work in the low-wage service sector like himself. Jimmy's misdirected antagonism—which is shared by Turquoise, who "wouldn't even eat Mexican food, not even Taco Bell," a restaurant chain founded by an Anglo entrepreneur (Vlautin, *Northline 2*)—foregrounds his own inability to move. Surrounded by those who can afford to move away from the neighborhoods and those who are forced to move into the area for economic reasons, Jimmy can only rail against the newcomers and talk about what he calls the "Northline": a dream of moving up north, "[a]way from all the weirdos and freaks and Mexicans and Niggers" (98; italics removed from original). His imaginary northward flight, which is never actualized in the novel and therefore remains an escapist fantasy, ironically repeats the direction of movement followed by the very people he disparages (Larson 152).

Allison and Jimmy are trapped not only by each other, but also by social forces outside of their control. In these ways, *Northline*'s West, particularly the shadowy urban space of Las Vegas, is marked by a strong sense of immobility and paralysis.

Allison Johnson's move from Las Vegas to Reno is an attempt to leave behind everything associated with her hometown. Here the issue of spatial mobility becomes inseparable from that of temporality. Whereas Las Vegas is about to be abandoned as a part of her past, Reno looms on the horizon as a location of her future life. The narrative, however, does not unfold in a straightforward manner. On the one hand, as mentioned above, it is significant that her full name appears for the first time just after she determines to sever her suffocating ties to Jimmy Bodie, signaling a gradual recovery of her sense of selfhood. The truck driver T. J. Watson, a minor but unforgettable character to whom she reveals her name, lives outside Reno with his wife. Although Allison wonders for a while where she should go next—possible destinations include other western cities such as “Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Boise, Houston, Reno”—her chance encounter with the driver leads to her decision to move to Reno (Vlautin, *Northline* 65). With one event leading to another, these developments seem to suggest her slow progress toward freedom and independence, that she is coming out of a claustrophobic situation with no way out. On the other hand, Allison discloses to T. J. Watson not only her name but also her pregnancy, another surprising piece of information that has been kept secret from the reader up to this point. It turns out that Allison's move to Reno has two objectives: to escape from Jimmy and to give birth to their baby and give up the newborn son for adoption. Either way, she continues to be haunted by Jimmy's presence.

The seemingly forward movement of the narrative is therefore constantly pulled back into the past, and the tension between these two forces manifests itself at various levels within the text. The first third of the novel, the part set in Las Vegas, has covered only three days in Allison's life, but the narrative accelerates itself after her arrival in Reno and tells the story of the last months of her pregnancy in one chapter titled “Three Months.” The novel's sudden gear shift from three days to three months emphasizes the contrast between the stagnant situation in Las Vegas and the rapid changes that Allison goes through during her first months in Reno. In this chapter, she meets the prospective parents of the baby at an adoption agency, finds a room in an apartment complex for young pregnant girls like herself, gets a job as a waitress at a casino, and prepares herself for the baby's birth. The sheer amount of activities compressed into this chapter, which functions like a fast-paced montage sequence in a film, marks a striking difference from the slowness of the preceding chapters. In addition, Allison asks for “a high school reading list” at a local library and reads classic and contemporary novels by herself: “One by one she read *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *Ethan Frome* by Edith Wharton. She read John Steinbeck and Ernest Hemingway. Pearl S. Buck and Charles Dickens, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Walter Van Tilburg Clark” (73).

Allison's poignant yearning for self-education can be read as an indication of her determination to improve herself, to recover what she has lost in the past.²⁾ Apparently, her move to Reno has yielded only positive results so far. Of course, this does not last for a long time. After the birth of the son, who is soon taken away by the new family, she lapses into severe depression due to a sense of guilt, and the narrative slows down its pace. Once again, she is seized by an impulse to move and leave the past behind: "She had hoped to move again, to put Reno and what had happened there behind her. For days she went to the bus station staring at the rows of destinations they had posted, but in the end she knew she could never leave. She felt she had to be in the same city as her baby even if she could never see him" (76). Hoping to "move again" but knowing that "she could never leave," she is again suspended between immobility and mobility, the past and the future, here and elsewhere. Choosing to remain in the city, however, she already seems to be aware that she cannot escape from the past by moving to another location, that the past will always catch up with her, that spatial mobility does not guarantee any progress or "perennial rebirth." The act of giving up the newborn child has already become one more unforgettable episode in her overloaded memories. Her body and mind are so packed with painful memories that it is no wonder a man says in a later scene, while trying to carry the body of the drunken Allison, "Jesus, you wouldn't think she'd be this heavy. She looks skinny but I swear she's made of fucking rocks" (142). Determined not to move any further, she rents a dilapidated apartment in downtown Reno—the first place that she can call her own—and once again begins a new life in the city.³⁾

The rest of the novel repeats similar patterns. While the entire novel is ordered chronologically, unfolding in accordance with the passing of time, this more or less linear flow of narrative is constantly interrupted by the intrusion of the past. Not only does the novel's narrator continue the piecemeal disclosure of the protagonist's painful memories, but the past also returns to haunt the present in different forms. Correspondingly, Allison Johnson is in the process of recovering a sense of confidence and self-respect for the most part, but she often goes through moments of severe depression, finding herself on the verge of self-destruction. Allison's depression is usually triggered by clearly identifiable causes, but in at least one scene it apparently happens without any direct cause.⁴⁾ Sometimes the novel feels almost sadistic in what appears to be its deliberate prolongation of the protagonist's suffering. Torn between the past and the future, progress and regress, and recovery and relapse, Vlautin's text tries to resist or at least delay the inevitable development of narrative temporality, as if holding off the very notion of progress itself. This resistance to the flow of time, a principle that might be called a poetics of suspension, is what constitutes the texture of *Northline*.

In *Reading for the Plot*, his influential book on narrative theory, Peter Brooks calls for a

dynamic model of narrative plot that can explain “the movement of plot and its motor force in human desire, its peculiar relation to beginnings and ends, its apparent claim to rescue meaning from temporal flux” (90). He creates his model for narrative through a close reading of Sigmund Freud’s writings. In the process, Brooks turns his attention to the role played by repetition in the construction of the narrative middle, “the space of retard, postponement, error, and partial revelation” (92):

[T]he concept of repetition hovers ambiguously between the idea of reproduction and that of change, forward and backward movement Repetition creates a *return* in the text, a doubling back. We cannot say whether this return is a return *to* or a return *of*: for instance, a return to origins or a return of the repressed. Repetition through this ambiguity appears to suspend temporal process, or rather, to subject it to an indeterminate shuttling or oscillation that binds different moments together as a middle that might turn forward or back. This inescapable middle is suggestive of the demonic: repetition and return are perverse and difficult, interrupting simple movement forward. (100)

Brooks goes on to discuss the function of the narrative middle as a prolonged detour before the end, a detour necessary to reach the final moment properly, in his somewhat ominous words, “to die the right death” (107). His model of plot, on the whole, is probably more attuned to the workings of novels with more or less explicitly goal-oriented plots—marriage plots, *Bildung* plots, mystery plots, and perhaps Western plots. With its profound interest in narrative suspension even at its beginning and end, Vlautin’s novel is in a sense an extended narrative middle without beginning or end. Therefore, it might be possible to read *Northline* as a counterargument against Brooks’s essentially teleological model of narrative plot. But at the same time the passage quoted above can be appropriated as an effective explanation of Vlautin’s poetics of suspension. *Northline*, while moving forward, constantly doubles back on itself. Allison’s and the novel’s repeated return to the past, or the repeated return of the repressed past to the present, resists the forward progress of time and forms a Janus-faced narrative that “might turn forward or back” at any time. The entire novel, both in its narrative and in its structure, emphasizes that the past can never be left behind.

The frequent intrusion of the past into the present is then an indication not only of Allison’s prolonged suffering from traumatic memories, but also of an awareness that the past cannot be transformed into something that has passed. Indeed, the chapters set in Reno trace the process through which she slowly learns to live with her painful past. Two sequences in the novel can be contrasted with each other in this context. The first one, almost labyrinthine in its complexity, is

formed by four chapters: “The Busboys at the Horseshoe Casino,” “The Letter from Las Vegas,” “Doc Holiday’s,” and “The Bottom.” The darkest moment in Allison’s life in Reno occurs in the aptly titled chapter “The Bottom,” placed almost exactly in the middle of the book. Here she is saved from the verge of self-destruction by the actor Paul Newman, who functions in this novel as her “imaginary friend and a stand-in for her absent father” (St. Clair 99–100), as well as the voice of her own conscience. In this chapter, she confronts the impossibility of escaping from the past again: “As she sat with the knife she saw nothing but the facts. Her past and the things she had done. They were with her, sitting next to her. They didn’t haunt her right then, they were just there and they wanted her to take the knife and cut her wrists” (Vlautin, *Northline* 103). The past comes back to her in this passage with a tangible materiality, not just as something ghostly and immaterial. The gradual development or downfall towards this dismal “bottom” displays, to repeat Brooks’s wording, both the novel’s return to the past and the return of the repressed. Allison’s downfall begins two chapters earlier. As if to mark a new beginning and progress in the protagonist’s life, “The Letter from Las Vegas” begins with the image of the sun “coming up over the mountains and beginning to lay down upon the city” (96). But the apparently forward motion of time is soon suspended by a letter from Jimmy, who repeats his idea of the Northline and tells her to return to him: “I still want you back, and will see you in a week or so” (98; italics removed from original). By this point in the narrative, Jimmy Bodie has become a double embodiment of the past: Allison’s personal past, from which she wants to escape, and the past of the West itself with its “terrible cartography of masculine power and mythic fantasy” (Campbell 152), a mythic space of regeneration through progress, mobility, and violence against which Vlautin’s novel constructs its poetics of suspension. The arrival of this letter from the past serves as a warning that the past might return to torment her at any time. Apparently, this realization is what leads to her strange behavior in the subsequent chapter, “Doc Holiday’s,” which takes place in a bar named after one of the legendary figures of the Old West, John Henry “Doc” Holliday. In this place associated with the mythic West, feeling that “[s]he had nothing left,” she lets herself be seduced by two strangers, Red and Marty, who take her to “a house in a part of town she [doesn’t] recognize” to violate her (Vlautin, *Northline* 100). This disturbing event, in turn, can be interpreted as another example of the return of the past. Allison’s desperate behavior is in fact a self-inflicted repetition of one of her most painful memories, the one that has been told as a flashback in an earlier chapter, the experience of being raped by two Mexican busboys while working at a casino in Las Vegas.⁵ Significantly, the narrator describes this past experience as another “bottom” in Allison’s life (81). It is as if she is deliberately trying to repeat the traumatic past after becoming aware of the impossibility of escaping from it.⁶ Totally paralyzed by these returns and repetitions, the tangled threads of indelible memories, she falls through darkness and then hits “The Bottom” again, where she shuts herself

in the bathroom of her apartment and tries to cut her wrists. In this complex sequence of events, the narrative repeatedly doubles back on itself and retraces the path that it has traveled. Even in Reno, her effort to move on with her life is constantly cut short.

What can be contrasted with this sequence is one more episode from Allison's past, told in a later chapter titled "The House." Walking on a street in downtown Reno, she sees "two fire trucks" and hears "[t]heir sirens," which takes her back to "the thought of the burning house" (168). The narrator then tells how she was involved in an arson planned by Jimmy, a hate crime against new immigrants from Mexico in his neighborhood in Las Vegas. This episode appears as another shocking piece of information about Allison's past, all the more so because it presents her not as a victim but as an accomplice in a serious crime. The novel does not excuse her act: "Look, that wasn't the best move I've seen you make," Paul Newman tells her later, "Neither were those tattoos. I can't believe you'd put signs like that on you. I got to say I was pretty ashamed of you for that one. But that's what being weak gets you. You're gonna have to live with that" (183).⁷ What is striking about the episode told in "The House," however, is that it does not trigger depression or an attempt at self-destruction. The recalled experience is as disturbing and painful as the ones revealed in the preceding chapters, but it seems that she has somehow learned "to live with that," with her weakness and with her past. In short, she can now simultaneously look back at the past and move on into an uncertain future in Reno. The suspension between these two temporal directions is no longer a source of paralysis for her.

After her decision to leave Jimmy, Allison encounters a series of major and minor characters who are associated with painful memories of the past. The first is T. J. Watson, who has lost his son in a traffic accident but has learned to live with his grief (47–48). The second is Penny Pearson, who appears for the first time in the chapter following "The Bottom," thereby literally marking a new chapter in Allison's life. She tells the story of her unhappy marriage to her ex-husband and how she has learned to accept herself (121). The third are the bartender and his wife at the Last Dollar Saloon, an old couple who seem to have been estranged from someone named "Carol," probably their daughter or granddaughter—the novel does not specify the relationship (139, 142). Finally, Dan Mahony, who becomes Allison's new boyfriend in Reno, has been assaulted and damaged, both mentally and physically, by four (apocalyptic) young men in the past, an act of gratuitous violence reminiscent of Allison's rape by the two busboys (163–64). The presence of these scarred characters provides a faint source of light in Vlautin's extremely dark fictional world, forming a "net" or meshwork of relationships that saves Allison from "the bottom" of despair and thereby enables her to start over and take care of others in turn. Also, their ways of life tell Allison that it is possible to live with the past without forgetting or erasing it, however painful it might be. The novel's treatment of temporality, while tormenting its protagonist

in an almost sadistic manner, simultaneously represents a slow process through which she comes to terms with the past.

While the tension between forward motion and backward motion constitutes *Northline's* conceptions of the past and history, spatiality and temporality become inseparable again when Dan suggests that a move to another location is not necessary to move on with one's life: "I've never lived anywhere else," he tells Allison in one scene, "I've driven around a lot—you know, road trips and vacations and things like that—but I've never lived anywhere else" (145). Driving to and from various locations, he nevertheless remains in one place, Reno. His relationship to home and other places, to roots and routes, is similar to that of the truck driver T. J. Watson, who has quit a "long haul job" and switched to his current job after the death of his son in order to be close to his wife in "a house ten miles away in the town of Verdi" (48, 49). What might be called stationary mobility, a somewhat self-contradictory state of moving and not moving at the same time, is another form of spatiotemporal suspension that the novel presents, one that might resemble but is differentiated from moments of paralytic immobility.

The state of paralytic immobility has already been observed in Allison's life in Las Vegas—the description of which begins with Jimmy's brutal violation of her in a stall inside a casino bathroom and her prolonged confinement in his basement apartment—as well as in the narrative sequence set in Reno that traces her downfall toward an attempt at suicide inside her apartment's bathroom in "The Bottom." The repeated appearance of these claustrophobic spaces not only foregrounds Allison's state of entrapment but also establishes a contrast between the novel's narrative space and the wide open spaces of mobility and possibility that have traditionally been associated with the U.S. West. The novel also offers some more unforgettable images of spatial immobility. One day, looking out of the window of Penny Pearson's office at the street below, Allison sees a man "trying to push a car, an early 1980s Honda Civic, down First Street. Cars were lined up behind him unable to pass. They started honking. The man wouldn't move the car to the side of the road. He just kept going the best he could down the center of the lane" (130). The strange mixture of mobility and immobility in this description of a man pushing a broken car and blocking traffic on the street is then repeated and augmented by Penny's story of a certain family she encountered "in the parking lot of Home Depot" on a hot summer day (130).⁸ Penny tells Allison how she and her ex-husband offered to help the husband of the family, who was trying to push-start their car in the lot. While he struggled, the man's wife and their children were "stuck" inside the vehicle and drenched with sweat (131). The vehicle would not start, but the man was very obstinate and did not heed the advice from Penny's partner. Exasperated by the man's stubbornness, Penny and the partner walked away, while "[t]he guy stood there and screamed at his wife, and then his kids started crying" (131). Penny's portrayal of the family,

particularly that of the wife and children, is sympathetic and suggests that the encounter has become one of her unforgettable memories. Vlautin's juxtaposition of these brief episodes constitutes one of the strangest moments in the novel, and it is significant in its spatiotemporal implications. Apparently having nothing to do with the novel's central plot, the episodes function as a short detour and interrupt the flow of the narrative, forcing the novel to stand still. This suspension of narrative temporality is accompanied by a sense of spatial immobility: two men trying to push their immobile automobiles and people stuck on a street or a parking lot without going anywhere. Furthermore, the second episode adds a psychological dimension to this sense of immobility by showing a family falling apart; along with their vehicle, their relationship seems to be "stuck." And one last point of the episodes is their association of masculinity with (auto)mobility, which is ironically turned into immobility in both of these cases. In this context, it is important to note that Allison says to Penny that she "hate[s] cars" (130). As has been observed in the case of Allison's father, the male characters' restlessness, their compulsion to move, often causes a paralytic effect on those around them and is therefore represented in a negative manner in this novel.

The novel's paradoxical transformation of mobility into immobility, of immobility into mobility, is a key to understanding the contrasts between Allison and Jimmy. She has certainly moved from Las Vegas to Reno, but she determines not to escape any further. Distancing herself from automobility, Allison becomes an inveterate walker in Reno, which is differentiated from Las Vegas in this novel by "its pedestrian condition" (Río 229). Her pedestrianism, her stationery mobility, is the ground from which she develops new meaningful relationships in her newly adopted city. Meanwhile, Jimmy remains trapped in Las Vegas and his illusory vision of a racially pure, sparsely populated North. At the end of the novel, he is still talking about "moving to Montana or somewhere up there. ... I'm drawing that line North like I said. I always do what I say. I might move to Washing[t]on" (179; italics removed from original). But the novel has made it clear that he never does what he says, being stuck in the same groove and repeating the same harmful mistakes over and over again. What he calls the Northline is a product of his racist imagination and an imaginary line of flight into an imaginary place that will forever remain out of reach. He is only replacing the exhausted "dream of the West" with "the dream of the North" (Río 227). And as Pierson has argued, "[f]light can be an escape from the future as well as from the past" (284). Never confronting the past, the present, or the future, he can only dream of moving to a nonexistent place. Significantly, after Allison's departure from Las Vegas, he wrecks his "Cadillac," breaks his "collar bone," and is made immobile "for a couple months," as if being punished for his obsession with the American Dream of escaping from change (Vlautin, *Northline* 98; italics removed from original). Jimmy's pernicious masculine yearning for spatial mobility is the reason why he can never move on with his life. When he appears for the last time in the novel, Paul Newman tells

Allison that “there ain’t no place where you can escape to. ... You head up to Wyoming or Montana and you’ll run into the same things as you do in Vegas or New Orleans. You’ll run into yourself” (185). The direction one chooses does not make any difference as long as one tries to run away from the past. In *Northline*, somewhat paradoxically, the beginning of a new life is only proffered to those who are determined not to escape any more.

Willy Vlautin’s poetics of suspension thus constitutes the texture of *Northline* at multiple levels. No longer a space of unrestrained mobility, the novel’s West can easily turn into a space of claustrophobic confinement. At the same time, however, it can be transformed into a geography of stationery mobility as well. The tension between mobility and immobility becomes the ground from which the novel constructs its unique conceptions of temporality and spatiality. Treading the narrow path between utopian promise and dystopian anxiety, *Northline* presents a realistic vision of the contemporary West, a space suspended between its past and future, a space of “fear and hope and uncertainty” (192).

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Notes

- 1) Neil Campbell, too, interprets the novel’s opening paragraph in relation to class issues (151).
- 2) At the same time, the first item in this list, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), seems to prefigure a part of Allison’s future life, since both Morrison’s Sethe and Vlautin’s Allison are mothers haunted by the memories of their absent children. The traumatic past will form one of the thematic connections between the two texts.
- 3) David Río makes a similar point while also paying attention to the locations of Las Vegas and Reno and connecting Allison’s movement to Jimmy’s illusory dream of the Northline: “The main protagonist’s journey to Reno, only 440 miles northwards from Las Vegas, will not bring her an instant solution to her economic and spiritual desolation. She will become aware that her problems do not vanish just by moving northwards ...” (228–29).
- 4) This happens at the beginning of the chapter titled “The Last Drunk,” in which an old bartender notices that Allison’s “eyes were puffy and bloodshot,” that “she’d been crying” (138). She swallows glass after glass and soon blacks out. Unlike in other similar cases, the novel does not provide any explanation here.
- 5) This experience, the novel implies, was what led to the beginning of her relationship with the right-wing

racist Jimmy, who would rape and abuse her later himself, as was described in the novel's first chapters. Along with the existence of a rigidly stratified society, these manifestations of toxic masculinity continue to torment and immobilize her.

- 6) Brooks's reconstruction of Freud's argument in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) sheds light on Allison's "repetition compulsion": "[T]he repetition of traumatic experiences in the dreams of neurotics can be seen to have the function of seeking retrospectively to master the flood of stimuli, to perform a mastery or binding of mobile energy through developing that anxiety which earlier was lacking—a lack which permitted the breach and thus caused the traumatic neurosis" (Brooks 100).
- 7) In the chapter in which Paul Newman utters these words, the narrator refers to him only as "he" (182), a pronoun and not a proper name. The disappearance of his name is paired with the treatment of Allison's name in the novel's first chapters, suggesting that she can now move on without the assistance of this imaginary friend.
- 8) I owe this insight to a class presentation prepared by four students for my course on the novel in the spring 2021 semester.

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