

Mobilities III: Arrivals

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Abstract:

In this final report on mobilities, I discuss research published between late 2014 and early 2016, focussing upon three key themes. I examine how recent work on medical bodies and race advances long-standing concerns with the mobile body. I then trace emerging philosophical and political writings on the themes of speed and 'accelerationism', before examining the contributions of mobility historians and transport historians to academic work on mobility. I conclude with some thoughts about the multi-disciplinary nature of contemporary mobilities research and the current state of the field.

Keywords: mobility; bodies; history; accelerationism; politics; race

I Introduction

We are nearly there, having departed in my first report (Merriman, 2015a), cruised along in my second (Merriman, 2016), and succeeded in not breaking down, crashing, or otherwise faltering along the way. We are approaching our final destination, ready to disembark or transfer at the end of this – my final – progress report. The past year has seen the publication of a broad, multi-disciplinary and, at times, inter-disciplinary body of research on mobilities.

Edited books and journal special issues have addressed Arctic mobilities (Habeck & Broz, 2015), family mobilities (Docherty et al, 2015), Italian mobilities (Ben-Ghiat & Malia Hom, 2015), sacred mobilities (Maddrell et al, 2015), citizenship and everyday mobilities (Spinney et al., 2015), race and mobility (Nicholson & Sheller, 2016), and individuals with high levels of personal mobility (Ravalet et al., 2014; Viry & Kaufmann, 2015; Kannisto, 2016).

Scholars in disciplines such as literary studies (Gavin & Humphries, 2015; Mathieson, 2015; Pearce, 2016), dance and performance (Schiller & Rubidge, 2014; Hunter, 2015) and history (Divall, 2015; Mom, 2015a, 2015b) have demonstrated an increasing engagement with the concept and theories of mobility. The past year has seen the publication of exciting new work on habit (Bissell, 2015a), darkness (Edensor & Lorimer, 2015), and mobile methods (Bissell, 2015b; Bissell & Overend, 2015; Sheller, 2015; Spinney, 2015; Vannini, 2015), as well as the first volume in Berghahn's new 'Explorations in Mobility' book series edited by Georgine Clarsen, Gijss Mom, and Mimi Sheller (see Mom, 2015a).

One of my favourite publications was the important book *Slices of (Mobile) Life*, written by Emmanuel Ravalet, Stéphanie Vincent-Geslin and Vincent Kaufmann, featuring beautiful drawings by Jean Leveugle, and published as a product of research funded by the SNCF's Mobile Lives Forum (Ravalet et al., 2014). This engaging and colourful book is 'somewhere between a graphic novel, a sociological study and a political manifesto' (Ravalet et al., 2014: rear cover), featuring biographical 'day-in-the-life' portraits of six highly mobile individuals with different backgrounds – from a train driver to a business executive – which are followed by contextual essays examining the sociological and demographic characteristics of the 7220 people surveyed, and the forty people engaged in interviews. The book's novel format demonstrates the power of visual images and composite caricatures to convey accounts of mobile lives, and it will be of interest to any geographer interested in alternative media for communicating academic research (Ravalet et al., 2014).

In this final report I focus upon three broad themes which have preoccupied mobility scholars over the past year or so, including important research on the mobilities of racialized and medicalised bodies, novel philosophical and political writings on acceleration, and debates surrounding the future direction of transport and mobility history.

II Bodies

Geographers and mobility scholars have held a long-standing concern with studying mobile and immobile bodies and embodied experiences of movement and stasis, from David Seamon's (1979, 1980) writings on bodily movements and place-ballets, to more recent ethnographic and participative studies of mobile practices such as cycling, dance and rail travel. Trained, pained, exhausted, active, passive, included and excluded bodies appear in recent studies of cycling, walking, running, air travel and driving, not to mention migration and people-trafficking, and the past year has seen the publication of some important new studies of mobile bodies.

Firstly, there was the publication of an edited book examining the movements of *Bodies Across Borders* (Parry et al., 2015). At a glance, the title might suggest a book on a familiar topic, but the distinctive contribution to this collection becomes clear as soon as one reads the sub-title, for it traces 'the global circulation of body parts, medical tourists and professionals' in the contemporary era. Chapters on patients who travel internationally for treatment or care, healthcare professionals who migrate for work, and the movements of body-parts (e.g. organs) or bodily-fluids (e.g. blood and sperm) highlight the complex social, cultural, political, economic, legal and ethical issues which surround such mobilities, and the volume includes contributions from scholars working in and across geography, bioethics,

employment relations, law, and the history of science (Parry et al., 2015; see also Ormond, 2015).

A second important strand in recent work on mobility and embodiment focuses upon race. Racialised bodies have already received attention from a number of mobility scholars, whether in work on race and immigration (Cresswell, 2006), aboriginal and settler mobilities (Clarsen, 2015), ‘driving while black’ (Gilroy, 2001), or transport in Apartheid era South Africa (Pirie, 2015). The fiftieth anniversary of the 1964 US Civil Rights Act generated a number of reflections on the legacies of the Act for the geographies of race in the USA, including important accounts of the ways in which racist policies have consistently limited the rights of black Americans to move, as was markedly demonstrated through practices of resistance on Montgomery’s buses in the mid-1950s and with the Selma to Montgomery voting marches of 1965 (Nagel et al., 2015; Stalter-Pace & Mom, 2015; Parks, 2016). As Inwood and Alderman very succinctly argue, these historic events and ongoing struggles reveal the complex ‘biopolitics of mobility’ at work in the USA and elsewhere, as racialized bodies are categorised, mobilised, immobilised, included and/or excluded in distinctive ways (Nagel et al., 2015: 161). A recent special issue of *Transfers* on ‘Race and mobility’ (edited by Judith Nicholson and Mimi Sheller) examines such themes more broadly (Nicholson & Sheller, 2016). In the opening article, Tim Cresswell (2016) examines the ‘mutual constitution’ of blackness, mobility and masculinity in the USA, while subsequent articles examine the production of race in bus-tours of Black and Latino gang areas in Los Angeles (Sharma & Towns, 2016), the racial politics of white and South Asian truckers in British Columbia (McLean, 2016), race and the micro-politics of mobility on Cape Town buses (Rink, 2016), and race and border controls between the USA and Canada (Vukov, 2016). What these and other important writings on embodiment and mobility individually and collectively reveal is the ways in which mobile subjects are constructed, differentiated,

classified, and at times excluded according to social, cultural and physical markers of difference, with such constructions and exclusions operating along lines of gender, age, sexuality, class, nationality and bodily ability, as well as race and ethnicity. The journal *Transfers* has established an editorial policy of encouraging studies which illuminate such marginalised, excluded and non-Western experiences of mobility (see Merriman, 2015a), and recent work – including that discussed here on race – is pushing academic scholarship beyond established studies of white, middle-class and often male experiences of travel by train, car and aeroplane.

III Accelerationism

Speed and acceleration have long been leitmotifs in both academic and popular writings on the modern world. All-too-often, scholars have got caught up in a rather hyperbolic language of acceleration, speed, liquidity, and flow which suggests a future of instantaneous communication and ultra-smooth flows. Artists, theorists and fictional characters such as Marinetti, JG Ballard, *Toad of Toad Hall*, Baudrillard, Virilio and Deleuze and Guattari have been mobilised in distinctive and highly diverse cultural histories and theoretical musings on speed and acceleration (Millar & Schwarz, 1998; Tomlinson, 2007; Duffy, 2009; Schnapp, 2009). However, the past few years have also seen the emergence of a distinctive strain of political writing around speed and acceleration which can in part be associated with broader changes in the capitalist economy and global politics (Rosa & Scheuerman, 2009; Noys, 2010, 2014; Glezos, 2012; Rosa, 2013; Mackay & Avanesian, 2014a; Cunningham, 2015; Shaviro, 2015). Writing in 2010, Benjamin Noys identified what he termed an ‘accelerationist’ tendency in contemporary French social theory, tracing how left-leaning scholars such as Lyotard, Deleuze, and Guattari – writing in the wake of May 1968 – saw an

acceleration of capitalist forces and processes as the only way to ‘break the fetters of capital itself’ (Noys, 2010: 5). In sharp contrast to those anti-capitalists who critique the excesses, waste, productive drives and consumptive practices associated with capitalism, and argue for a deceleration and slowing-down, ‘*accelerationism* is best defined – in political, aesthetic, and philosophical terms – as the argument that the only way out is the way through’ (Shaviro, 2015: 2).

In their edited collection *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader* Robin MacKay and Armen Avanesian (2014a) trace its long and complex conceptual genealogy, from writings by Marx, Fedorov and Veblen, to 1970s philosophical writings by Lyotard and Deleuze and Guattari, 1990s cyber-culture texts by Nick Land, Sadie Plant and the CCRU, to the recent ‘Manifesto for an accelerationist politics’ (2013) produced by Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, published alongside critical responses from Antoni Negri, Tiziana Terranova, Luciana Parisi, Reza Negarestani and Ray Brassier (see MacKay & Avanesian, 2014a). As MacKay and Avanesian explain in their introduction to the Reader, accelerationist principles have at various times been worked into both left and right-wing political philosophies, although they do seem to emerge ‘at moments when powers of capitalism appear to be in crisis and alternatives appear thin on the ground’ (MacKay & Avanesian, 2014b: 43).

Whereas some mobility scholars have perhaps rightly been criticised for ignoring the differential politics of mobility when they assert that everything is moving and nothing is fixed (see Cresswell, 2014; cf. Merriman, 2016), some accelerationist thinkers have been guilty of the opposite, i.e. tracing the political economies of acceleration and speed while failing to actually outline what they and their research subjects mean by speed and acceleration. It is with this in mind that a few scholars have attempted to provide a more systematic outlining and definition of ‘social acceleration’ and the changing tempo of modern life, with the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa drawing attention to three quite different

processes: ‘technological acceleration’, ‘the acceleration of social life’, and ‘the acceleration of the pace of life’ (Rosa, 2013: 23). Rosa (2013: 23) claims that ‘acceleration constitutes an independent basic principle of modernity’, and it will be interesting to see how geographers and mobility scholars respond to these emerging philosophical, political, and sociological discourses of mobility, acceleration and modernity. Indeed, in philosophical terms it might appear easy to advance an argument that further acceleration could break capitalism, paving the way for a post-capitalist world, but for scholars who focus upon resource depletion, climate change, sustainable mobility and the messy realities of how a mobility transition might come about, such utopian claims might well lack realism or practical solutions.

IV Histories

In his opening polemic in the 2015 Yearbook of T2M (the International Association for the History of Transport, Traffic and Mobility) Gijss Mom addressed what he termed ‘The crisis of transport history’, referring to ‘the ongoing fragmentation of the mobility *history* field’ and an ‘inability or unwillingness to formulate a set of common questions that drive mobility historians’ research, their teaching, and their publication agendas’ (Mom, 2015b: 7). As a leading scholar in the field, Mom was and is not afraid to court controversy, having actively sought to reshape transport history into a broader field of mobility history, and having criticised transport historians for becoming ‘prisoners of a national and “modal parochialism”’ (Mom, 2006: iii). Mom has argued quite firmly that mobility historians should be trans-national, trans-modal, and trans-disciplinary in focus (Mom, 2015b), although there is a danger that such a singular vision closes down the idea of a plural transport and mobility history which incorporates a diverse range of approaches (Merriman, 2015b). Mom is one of a number of scholars who are exploring the productive interface between mobility history and

more sociologically-inspired studies of contemporary mobility (see Mom, 2015a; Divall, 2015), and a key moment in this evolving relationship was the election of Mimi Sheller as President of T2M in 2014, since when the Association have collaborated with the European Cosmopolitanities network on their annual conference.

Transport and mobility historians are not only looking outwards to disciplines such as sociology and geography. The railway historian Colin Divall has been keen to explore the ways in which transport and mobility histories may hold lessons for contemporary policy-makers and practitioners (Divall et al., 2016), while others have explored the interface between mobility history and urban history (e.g. Law, 2014). Another sub-discipline where scholars have advanced thinking around mobility history is colonial and imperial history. Here, scholars have not only examined the role of particular modes of transport in colonial and imperial relations, but they have also drawn upon theoretical writings on mobility to trace imperial circulations and mobilities (e.g. Pietsch, 2013; Coleborne, 2015). What is clear is that scholarly research on mobility in both the humanities and social sciences has ‘shaken up’ fields such as transport history, as historians have had to acknowledge (if not engage with) the fast-moving debates on mobility in disciplines such as human geography, sociology and anthropology.

V Arrivals, and New Departures

In the three years that I have been writing these progress reports, the diverse field of mobility studies has continued to flourish and develop, and all three strands of work discussed here – on bodies, accelerationism, and histories – demonstrate a multi-disciplinary focus, philosophical breadth and methodological pluralism which is revitalising work in this area. In 2015 the journal *Mobilities* expanded to five issues a year, while 2016 will see the publication

of its tenth anniversary special issue (see Faulconbridge & Hui, 2016) and a special issue of the *Annals* on 'geographies of mobility' (Kwan & Schwanen, 2016). In 2015 we saw the launch of a new open access journal, *Mobile Culture Studies: The Journal*, while in 2016 we are promised the launch of *Applied Mobilities*, which will focus on interdisciplinary, applied and practice-oriented research that examines the link between mobilities and themes such as design, planning, technology, the environment, and the arts. Mobility scholars now have four journals to choose from, or more if we include journals in transport studies, transport geography, transport history, migration studies and related fields where cross-disciplinary debates have emerged. Journals, handbooks, monographs and edited collections have also been joined by the first major reference work on mobilities, a four-volume collection of previously published pieces, edited by Ole Jensen for Routledge's 'Critical Concepts in Built Environment' series (Jensen, 2015).

Jensen's work includes volumes on 'foundations and overviews', 'everyday practices, cultures and territories', 'design, technologies and the environment', and 'power, politics and tourism', prefaced with a short introductory chapter. The volumes include at least 22 texts by geographers, but of the 84 pieces reproduced in the collection only four were originally published before 2000, with only two (by Simmel and Lefebvre) written before 1990. There is scope for future reference works to journey in two wider directions. First would be to include writings by early theorists and practitioners of movement such as Donald Appleyard, Henri Bergson, Stephen Kern, Rudolph Laban, Filippo Marinetti, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Pitirim Sorokin, or Wolfgang Schivelbusch. These theorists and practitioners are frequently referenced in contemporary studies of movement and mobility, but their distinctive writings are not reproduced in Jensen's text. As a result, the 'new mobilities paradigm' is presented as conspicuously new, not just in its multi-disciplinary formulation, but in its scholarly foundations. Second it is important that scholars recognise that the broad field of mobility

studies extends beyond the recent (though important) seam of social science scholarship which has flourished since Sheller and Urry's (2006) labelling of a 'new mobilities paradigm'. Mobility scholarship also includes important work by humanities scholars such as historians, literary scholars, archaeologists, philosophers, poets, arts practitioners, and performance scholars, as well as social scientists working in human geography, sociology, anthropology, transport studies, and business studies. Long may such diversity continue!

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