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Mobilities I: Departures

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Abstract

This first report identifies key trends in mobilities research during late 2012 and 2013. Using the 150th anniversary of the London Underground as its launching point, the article explores a number of academic engagements with its history, as well as identifying the lack of research on underground or underwater mobilities. It then examines recent work which might be considered to provide creative or experimental engagements with and meditations on movement, including urban exploration, poetry, art and film. The final section examines recent work on mobility, politics, exclusion, marginalization and privilege, including work on forced, elite and family mobilities.

Keywords

creativity, exclusion, mobility, politics, underground

I Introduction

In his first progress report on mobilities, Cresswell (2011) traced the emergence of this interdisciplinary research field, examining how mobilities research was being advanced not only in geography but across the social sciences and humanities. In this, my first report, I hope to continue Cresswell's multi-disciplinary approach while foregrounding geographical research on mobility and movement. Indeed, while there is no doubt that geographers, sociologists and anthropologists continue to be dominant voices, scholars in many other disciplines and subdisciplines are also engaging with the social science literatures on mobility – whether in literary studies (Berensmeyer and Ehland, 2013; Mathieson, 2012), art theory and practice (Witzgall et al., 2013), contemporary archaeology (Graves-Brown et al., 2013; Merriman, 2013), history (Merriman et al., 2013), theatre and performance studies (Wilkie, 2012) or architecture and film theory (Borden, 2013). Alongside the two

international interdisciplinary mobility journals (*Mobilities* and *Transfers*) and countless books and articles, we now have Routledge's 'Changing mobilities' book series edited by geographer Peter Adey and sociologist Monika Büscher, and *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities*, which features 56 chapters organized into seven sections: Genealogies, philosophies, approaches; Qualities; Spaces, systems and infrastructures; Materialities; Subjects; Events; and Methodologies (Adey et al., 2014). The geographic coverage of research on mobilities is rapidly expanding to cover nearly all parts of the world, while the past year has continued to see a large number of specialist conferences, workshops and sessions on mobility, most recently at the 'Global Conference on Mobility Futures', organized to

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mark the 10th anniversary of the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University.

In this report I focus on three aspects of recent mobilities research. Section II reflects upon the theme of anniversaries, and in particular academic engagements with the 150th anniversary of London's underground railway. In section III, I focus on 'creative movements', tracing some of the diverse creative and experimental ways in which geographers have been practising, thinking about and representing movement, ranging from urban exploration to poetic, filmic and artistic engagements with moving bodies and landscapes. Finally, I review recent research which explores the diverse politics of mobility, from forced migration and the detention of prisoners, to studies of elite and subordinated/marginalized mobilities.

II One hundred and fifty years, and counting . . .

One thing that struck me during 2013 was the large number of anniversaries and commemorative events relating to histories of mobility, ranging from the 50th anniversary of the publication of Lord Beeching's report on 'The Reshaping of British Railways' (Loft, 2013), to the 150th anniversary of the world's first journey by underground railway (in London). The latter event was widely commemorated throughout early 2013 in the UK, with special museum exhibitions, extensive media coverage and a number of academic publications. What is perhaps surprising is that despite the emergence of innovative exploratory academic research on metro travel (Augé, 2002; Maspero, 1994), as well as a broader academic interest in the subterranean and questions of vertical urbanity and social privilege (e.g. Graham and Hewitt, 2013), there has been very little academic research by geographers on underground or underwater mobilities, whether by underground train, urban subway/underpass, tunnel or indeed submarine.

New work over the past year is starting to address this lacuna, including Petr Gibas' explorations of the aesthetics, materialities, rhythms and ghostly remains of Prague's metro (Gibas, 2013) and David Ashford's book-length *London Underground: A Cultural Geography* (2013). Ashford's book is bold in ambition, claiming to be the 'first full account of th[e] spatial history of London's underground' (p. 4), drawing upon the work of a range of familiar urban, social theorists – including Augé, Benjamin and Lefebvre – to write the 'book of the machine' (the title of the introduction). It is important, however, to stress that this 'cultural geography' is more specifically a 'literary geography' or a literary historical geography written by an English-literature scholar, reflecting the spatial turn in literary studies over the past decade or so, and:

setting out to survey the influence a single space has had over a period of almost 150 years on material ranging from poetry, music-hall, literature, journalism, painting, poster art, sculpture, architecture, photography, pop music, mosaic, graffiti art and the internet novel. (Ashford, 2013: 5)

The book is fairly successful in doing this, but there is clearly a lot more that could be written about the cultural geographies of the London Underground, or transit systems in other cities – examining the history of the design, planning, engineering, labouring, consumption and use of these spaces; drawing upon interviews with users, archival research, ethnography or creative interventions; as well as focusing upon its multiple materialities and affects, or its rhythms, practices, socialities and underlying politics. Indeed, a very different cultural geography of the London underground is mapped out in another new book which I discuss later in this article, namely Bradley Garrett's *Explore Everything* (2013).

In March, Penguin Books celebrated the Tube's 150th anniversary by publishing 12 short popular books 'inspired by each of the

London Underground lines'. Alongside titles by well-known journalists, broadcasters, an artist, a nature writer, a fashion writer and a music critic was an essay about the Central Line by the social and political geographer Danny Dorling, titled *The 32 Stops* (2013). Dorling is not known for his research on mobility, and in many ways *The 32 Stops* is as much about dwelling, rootedness and place as about movement and mobility. But what he does very effectively – reworking traditional ‘urban transect’ techniques – is to show how social and economic data on child poverty, household income, life expectancy, children’s educational attainment and local election results vary along the line, presenting data in a series of simple but effective bar charts in order to demonstrate how, among other things, ‘at the start of the journey life expectancy falls by two months a minute’ (Dorling, 2013: 1). The demographic data relating to each neighbourhood is woven into a series of carefully planned fictional narratives about lives lived along the line, reflecting the challenges, hopes, hobbies, work and political views of a ‘typical’ person living near or using each station. *The 32 Stops* assumes an approach that is not too dissimilar to French anthropologist Marc Augé’s ‘ethno-fictions’, where the author constructs ‘a narrative that evokes a social fact through the subjectivity of a particular individual... created “from scratch” or, in other words, out of the thousand and one details observed in everyday life’ (Augé, 2013: vii). While Augé’s ‘ethno-fictions’ arose from his ethnographic observations of everyday life in France (Augé, 1999, 2005, 2013), Dorling’s ‘socio-fictions’ are based upon fine-grained demographic, social, economic, political and educational data. *The 32 Stops* could also be read as an (unintentional) example of creative mobilities research, and such an approach could be considered alongside other experiments with ‘mobile methods’ by social scientists. Above all, Dorling (2013) has succeeded in writing a ‘popular’ work

of human geography, and this is one of very few human geography paperbacks published by Penguin since the 1960s and 1970s.

III Creative movements

Embodied movements – from walking and driving to writing and painting – are frequently valued for their creative and expressive qualities, with distinctive embodied movements and methods lying at the heart of many aesthetic experiments, whether by artists, performance scholars, writers, dancers, poets or filmmakers. One of the most commonly cited examples is, of course, the work of the Situationists, as well as later generations of scholars, artists and writers who have adopted or been associated with the field of ‘psychogeography’ as a result of their peripatetic wanderings, usually by foot, often in cities. One such writer is the English author, broadcaster and journalist Will Self, who delivered the annual Wreford Watson lecture at the University of Edinburgh in 2012 (Self, 2013). Speaking on ‘Decontaminating the Union: Post-industrial landscapes and the British psyche’, Self discussed the writings of contemporary ‘psychogeographers’ such as Iain Sinclair and Peter Ackroyd, before describing his own wanderings in Scotland. Self’s lecture is striking for its essayistic and peripatetic qualities, but his psychogeographic journeys were not, by and large, undertaken on foot. Indeed, this self-confessed lover of motorways (Self, 1993) peppers his talk with references to views from the A721, M8 and M74, and when ‘driving north from Edinburgh on the M90 to Perth’ (Self, 2013: 62). Here is a Scotland viewed by Scots and Self ‘from the road’, in sharp contrast to the prototypical psychogeographic journey undertaken on foot. Indeed, as Wilkie (2012) has remarked in an insightful essay on ‘site-specific performance and the mobility turn’, theatre and performance studies (like literary studies) have tended to focus on a specific set of mobile figures – including the

walker, *flâneur* and *dérivist* – with less attention paid to ‘the refugee, the migrant, the driver, the busker, the travelling salesperson, the vagrant, the commuter, the terrorist and the exile’ (Wilkie, 2012: 207). This is particularly evident in other literatures on mobility in theatre and performance studies (Hancox, 2012; Heddon and Turner, 2012; Lavery and Whybrow, 2012), as well as in recent research on urban exploration, where experimental and sometimes transgressive pedestrian wanderings appear to be valued above other kinds of embodied mobilities – a tendency that can be traced back to Walter Benjamin, Michel de Certeau, academic obsessions with *flânerie* and of course the Situationists. That said, performative approaches to the choreographing of mobilities are being examined by mobility scholars, whether in cultural histories of such practices (Merriman, 2010, 2011) or the incorporation of dramaturgical metaphors of staging to understand the design and planning of mobilities (Jensen, 2013).

Urban exploration has a long and distinguished lineage, as research on the Detroit geographical expeditions, urban walking, creative artistic practices, activities such as Parkour and skateboarding, and other experimental and exploratory mobilities has shown. Nevertheless, there has been a renewed interest in urban exploration among geographers and in the media over the past few years (Bennett, 2011, 2013; Garrett, 2013, 2014). Extensive UK media coverage has gathered around the doctoral research and explorations of cultural geographer Bradley L. Garrett, whose book *Explore Everything: Place Hacking the City* has received widespread publicity on academic forums and in the popular press, as well as being promoted in public discussions at Tate Modern between Garrett and Iain Borden, and at the Barbican between Garrett and Will Self (Garrett, 2013). His accessible writing and striking photography combine to lend the book a popular ‘coffee-table’ feel, with

tales of adventure, transgression and arrest accompanied with colour photographs of city panoramas, underground tunnels and abandoned buildings – reflecting the fascination some cultural geographers have with everyday practices, non-representational theories, transgressive experimentation and reflexive ethnography. Garrett’s approach to urban exploration has been criticized for its inherent masculinism (Mott and Roberts, 2014), and it could be read as a contemporary manifestation of earlier accounts of heroic exploration – with mountains and ‘the poles’ being replaced with the marginal, secret, secured and underground spaces of the contemporary city. ‘Unconquered Everest’ finds its parallel in the unconquered, unopened Shard Building; national and imperial celebration is replaced by the adulation of avant-garde counter-cultural communities. While I enjoyed the stories and experimentalism, and I value the importance of semi-popular accessible academic geographies, I was left wondering what comparatively transgressive, contemporary, rural exploratory cultures might look like, and whether they would generate the same level of media interest. Of course, urban explorers do venture into military and former industrial sites in rural and semi-rural areas, but they do appear to be drawn specifically to the urbanity of the spaces and practices they explore, whether that is something to do with their verticality, subterranean conduits, security systems, capitalist networks, proprietorial control or visual spectacle.

Movement and mobility lie at the heart of a range of creative movements and moments within geography. This includes research by geographers which draws upon creative and experimental methods and techniques, as well as geographical imaginations and engagements which have resulted in more creative forms of writing, or artistic and filmic experiments. Different styles of writing and creative expression *move* (us) differently – generating distinctive rhythms, movements, affects and atmospheres,

providing new ways to express, articulate and visualize movements. In Cresswell's (2013a, 2013b) poetry, rhyme, rhythm and metre impel us onwards, at different tempos, and it is not just the form which expresses or encapsulates a movement. Cresswell ruminates on walks, airports, the movement of soil and the circulation of fluids. 'Metaphors' provides a witty reflection on urban transport in Athens (the *metaphorai*) (Cresswell, 2013a: 69), perhaps inspired by Michel de Certeau's essay on spatial stories, while the poems 'Human Geography I', '...II', '...III' and '...IV' evoke travels and journeys away from home, on foot, by plane, by taxi, and animated by the rhythms of streets, immigration lines, security checks and caravans. In a separate essay, Cresswell (2014) explains 'the process of becoming a poet as a geographer', as well as the more creative spaces and experimental narrative styles which have and can be forged in between academic prose and creative writing.

A new collection on *New Mobilities Regimes in Art and Social Sciences* positions the work of well-known artists and art theorists alongside that of social scientists in order to explore contemporary global mobilities (Witzgall et al., 2013), while *Transfers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Mobility Studies* publishes regular sections on 'Mobility and art' (Domschke and Bambozzi, 2013), and 'film reviews' (Stalter-Pace, 2013), alongside peer-reviewed articles. Geographers are no longer simply writing about art, film or poetry; they are also experimenting with these techniques, or collaborating with practitioners and scholars of such aesthetic techniques – inspired by calls to collaborate and co-produce research (Craggs et al., 2013; Rogers et al., 2014).

One example of such a collaboration is between the film-maker Patrick Keiller, geographer Doreen Massey and historian Patrick Wright, which emerged from the 'Landscape and Environment' programme funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council.

As part of the project titled 'The future of landscape and the moving image', Keiller wrote and filmed *Robinson in Ruins* (British Film Institute, 2010) – the third of his 'Robinson' films after *London* (1994) and *Robinson in Space* (1997) – as well as curating an installation for Tate Britain, and most recently compiling his essays on film, architecture, place and landscape into a book titled *The View from the Train: Cities and Other Landscapes* (Keiller, 2013). Keiller's films have long appealed to cultural and urban geographers, whether for his on-screen references to Henri Lefebvre and Doreen Massey, the filmic echoes of situationist approaches and methods, or his depictions of and reflections on the contemporary British landscape. What *The View from the Train* does is to refract the development of Keiller's approach to 'films as some kind of spatial research' and of 'exploratory film-making as a method of research' over the past 35 years (Keiller, 2013: 6), while movement and mobility are central themes of his work – whether in the circulations of global commodities and capital, slow movements of natural forms in rural landscapes, or stories of the journeys of his fictional researcher Robinson.

IV Politics and plural mobilities

Entanglements of movement, power and politics have consistently been examined and unravelled in mobilities research, pushed forward by Cresswell's (2010) work over the past decade or so. As a result, human and non-human movements and mobilities – in all of their different guises and gaits – whether mundane, extraordinary, privileged, marginalized, excluded or encouraged – have drawn the attention of academics, and over the past year there has been a range of informative new studies which further our understanding of the relationship between mobility and power.

Two recent edited collections focus on the topic of forced mobilities. In *Carceral Spaces:*

Mobility and Agency in Imprisonment and Migrant Detention (2013), Dominique Moran, Nick Gill and Deirdre Conlon have assembled a series of essays on the incarceration, immobilizing and mobilizing of prisoners and migrant detainees, including some insightful chapters on attempts to regulate and control the mobilities of detainees. Topics such as prisoner transportation and electronic tagging have received little or no attention among mobility scholars, and this collection provides an effective counterpoint to research highlighting the freedoms of mobile subjects and the assumed joys of travel. Likewise, in an edited collection on *Mobilities and Forced Migration*, Nick Gill, Javier Caletrío and Victoria Mason have assembled seven articles and an introduction – previously published as a special issue of *Mobilities* in 2011 – which trace the forced mobilities associated with a range of processes, events and subjects (Gill et al., 2013).

What both of these edited collections very effectively do is to move beyond a Euro-American focus and the dominant transport modes covered in mainstream mobilities research. There is no doubt that many scholars do focus on planes, trains, automobiles, walking and cycling in western contexts (Rieger, 2013; Vannini et al., 2012), but many different cultures of mobility, transport and travel exist throughout the world, and globalized and standardized consumer products such as cars and bicycles are consumed, modified and used differently in different cultures. In contrast to long-standing studies of the production and consumption of the western automobile, recent studies have focused their attention on the production and consumption of the motor car in Soviet Russia and the Eastern Bloc (Siegelbaum, 2008, 2011), as well as the expansion of automobility in Asian countries such as China and India (Seiler, 2012). Alongside this there has also emerged a burgeoning literature on mobility practices, spaces and technologies in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle

East (Akyelken, 2013; Benson, 2013; Crang and Zhang, 2012; Freire-Medeiros and Name, 2013; Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013; Roy and Hannam, 2013; Sheller, 2013; Vannini et al., 2012). In a recent ‘Asia’ special issue of the journal *Transfers*, Gijs Mom and Nanny Kim present a challenge for mobility scholars to meaningfully engage with Asian scholarship on mobility, as well as to broaden their approach and take account of non-western research and case studies. *Transfers* has set itself the laudable task of publishing ‘trans-disciplinary and transnational research that opens up global perspectives’ and to ‘deliberately reach beyond Western experiences and paradigms, and actively foster exchanges between scholars across the globe’ (Mom and Kim, 2013: 1). In one of their first attempts to generate such a dialogue, the editors of *Transfers* have published a special issue on ‘rickshaws’, a form of transport which has a long history of use in many non-western cities, as well as being adopted in western cities such as London and Paris.

As scholars have sought to unravel the intricate relationship between mobility and questions of privilege, politics and exclusion, so they have sought to understand the diverse experiences particular social groups may have of mobility. Elite travellers are one group who have been receiving increasing attention within mobility studies, tourism and business studies, in part fuelled by research on geographies of the super-rich (Hay, 2013). In the inaugural volume of the ‘Changing mobilities’ book series, Birtchnell and Caletrío (2014) have assembled an impressive range of chapters on *Elite Mobilities*, including essays on private business aviation, luxury tourism, offshoring and secrecy, labour in luxury tourism, and identity politics. Elites may be an under-researched minority – for reasons of access, secrecy, discretion and academic politics – but they are undoubtedly a powerful and influential minority. Of course, elite and influential individuals with social and economic capital are not necessarily rich or

super-rich, and other research focuses on the mobilities of groups such as international students (Brooks and Waters, 2013; Holloway et al., 2012; Waters, 2012), scientists and international academic travellers (Fontes et al., 2013; Leung, 2013).

Elites and the super-rich frequently move in extraordinary, secretive and unorthodox ways, but so too do marginalized groups, and there is a broad range of research on the inequalities and exclusion of global mobility practices and spaces (Andrijasevic et al., 2012; Yea, 2013). The mobilities of children, students and young people are another area where there has been a flourishing of activity. In *Family and Intimate Mobilities*, Clare Holdsworth seeks to challenge 'sweeping generalizations about the intensification of mobility at the expense of family' by examining the importance of movement and mobility in simultaneously 'maintaining, sustaining and dissolving family' through the life-course in the West (Holdsworth, 2013: 1, 3). Family mobilities are complex, varied and multiple, ranging from the mobilities involved in establishing and maintaining intimate relations, moving house, commuting, attending educational establishments and balancing multiple activities in our personal and family lives, but such mobilities are not simply destructive, erosive or unsettling, and have become accepted and taken-for-granted techniques and means for sustaining familial and intimate relationships in the 21st century (Holdsworth, 2013). Young people, especially children, are frequently marginalized or excluded within dominant mobility discourses, relying upon public transport or lifts by family and friends. For many western teenagers, increased social freedoms and economic capital are accompanied by frustration at barriers to their mobility, and it is perhaps unsurprising that a desire for convenient movement is reproduced as a desire to learn to drive or to own a motor car. Youth-oriented car cultures have become a key focus for academic

researchers, and in *Boy Racer Culture: Youth, Masculinity and Desire*, the sociologist and criminologist Karen Lumsden presents a detailed ethnography of a group of young car enthusiasts in Aberdeen (Lumsden, 2013).

V Conclusions

Over the past year, mobilities research has continued to develop in exciting ways, advancing thinking on a vast array of new *and* familiar topics, and influencing debates in disciplines as diverse as migration studies, literary studies, performance and art. A few scholars have worked hard to overcome the Euro-American focus of much mobilities research, while others have experimented with new methodologies, representational techniques, philosophical approaches and aesthetic strategies. Scholars researching mobility and migration (Gill et al., 2013; Moran et al., 2012, 2013) and mobility history (Merriman et al., 2013) have attempted to bridge the divide between mobility studies and long-established multi-disciplinary traditions such as migration studies, transport studies and transport history, but, though fruitful, such dialogues have not always been easy. Some transport geographers, transport historians and migration scholars remain unconvinced about the novelty or usefulness of work on the geographies and sociologies of mobility, while mobility scholars continue to overlook important work within other more established domains. My plea is for geographers to further existing dialogues with scholars working on movement and mobility in a broad range of disciplines, raising the profile of geographical approaches while also bridging divides between scholars working in and across the arts, humanities *and* social sciences.

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