COMMENT

The Mobile Itineraries of Knowledge-scapes

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Abstract

This special section elucidates intersections between the historiography of mobilities and the interdisciplinary field of mobilities research. The articles highlight relationships between mobilities and stabilization, circulation and place-making, deterritorialization and reterritorialization. This response essay seeks to dispel three myths about mobility studies: (1) that it is purely about the contemporary world, rather than the historical dimensions of mobile processes; (2) that it focuses solely on material phenomenon of physical transport (i.e., of things and people) and ignores the movement of ideas, knowledge, and culture; and (3) that it is purely about "flows" and "circulation" and has little to teach us about friction, resistances, blockages, or uneven power relations. The most important intersections of the histories of mobilities and the field of mobility studies can be found in the ways in which each emphasizes power differentials, blockages, friction, and the relation between mobilities and immobilities.

Keywords: assemblages, boundaries, historiography, immobilities, friction, scapes

This special section brings together an exciting range of historiographic groups and projects that have been working on—or, better yet, working out—ideas of "mobility" as a more flexible approach, and suggestive method, for rethinking received historical concepts, narratives, and periodizations that are relics of Eurocentric socio-spatial knowledge formations. We find reports from the "Moving Crops and the Scales of History" project proposing the fascinating idea of "cropscapes"; the project on "Individual Itineraries and the Circulation of Scientific and Technical Knowledge in China (16th–20th Centuries)" (ICCM); the project "Itineraries of Materials, Recipes, Techniques, and Knowledge in the Early Modern World"; and the work being done on "Migrating Knowledge" at the Minerva Humanities Center. Each group addresses different world regions, wide-ranging periods and scales, and diverse kinds of mobilities and place-making, but they all overlap and intersect in interesting ways with the field of mobilities research.

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In this response essay, I want to elucidate these fruitful intersections between the historiography of mobilities/itineraries and the interdisciplinary field of mobilities research, as suggested by the work reported in this special issue. Above all, I seek to show that these projects are very much aligned, and seek to demonstrate the deep relationship between mobilities and stabilization, between circulation and place-making, and between what others have called "deterritorialization and reterritorialization," or "uprootings and regroundings"—which are not intermittent moments but are simultaneous relational processes. In tracing these connections between these projects, I also want to dispel three myths about mobility studies. The first is the myth that mobility studies is purely about the contemporary world, as a world of fluidity and flows, and that it is somehow categorically set apart from historical dimensions of mobile processes. The second myth is that the field focuses solely on material phenomenon of physical transport (i.e., of things and people) and ignores the movement of ideas, knowledge, and culture. The third myth is that mobility studies is purely about "flows" and "circulation" and has little to teach us about friction, resistances, blockages, or uneven power relations.

In describing the new mobilities paradigm, John Urry and I emphasized that we were interested in "tracking the power of discourses and practices of mobility in creating both movement and stasis. A new mobilities paradigm delineates the context in which both sedentary and nomadic accounts of the social world operate, and it questions how that context is itself mobilized, or performed." We drew on a relational approach that "brings to the fore the movements implicit in identifications, grammars, economies, intensities, and orientations; as people, capital, and things move they form and reform space itself (as well as the subjectivities through which individuals inhabit spaces) through their attachments and detachments, their slippages and 'stickiness.'"[1] We sought to analyze the entangled relations between "mobilities, immobilities and moorings" and how these were shaped by relations of power, and this extended to imaginative mobilities, communicative mobilities, and the mobility of knowledge.[2] The field of mobility studies has from its origins emphasized power differentials, blockages, friction, and the relation between mobilities and immobilities. This is precisely what set it apart from earlier approaches to globalization as a supposedly borderless space of flows.

In this special section, a group of historians addresses similar concerns over the relation between mobility and moorings, and the intersection of different scales of transformation as things and places are reassembled through motion and stabilization. Pamela H. Smith offers a specific way of operationalizing the study of knowledge systems and their transformation of material complexes as they move, suggesting a kind of interplay of mobilities and moorings. Her description of the aforementioned project "Itineraries of Materials" traces the movement of knowledge and the "routes of material complexes" not through the traditional notion of knowledge transfer but instead as

far more mobile "entangled itineraries" that move "across vast distances and long temporal spans" that cross Eurasia. In articulating "a method by which historians might follow routes of knowledge-making" that extend over long distances and/or great spans of time, this project gives us three key concepts: the material complex, the relational field as a kind of hub of convergence, and itineraries as the routing of materials through such nodes of convergence, and in which they may be stabilized and/or transformed. Through the study of the nonlinear itineraries and complex routings of material complexes through relational fields, these methods enable us to "trace the interaction among materials, human making, and the formation of knowledge systems over long spans of distance and time."

This initiative seems related to other existing currents within transnational history, such as the volume *Cultures in Motion* (2014), edited by Daniel T. Rodgers, Bhavani Raman, and Helmut Reimitz, which arose out of a yearlong seminar at the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton University, and in which both Smith and I were fellows and contributed chapters. The editors note in their introduction that they are part of an emerging field of historical studies of "worlds in motion" in which their focus is not on the transnational movement of people carrying cultural practices with them across borders but rather "on the ways in which, from earliest to most recent times, cultural practices have crossed boundaries of place that human communities have constructed, unsettling social and cultural relations, keeping even spatially rooted cultures in motion."[3] Thus, we see in these studies of "itineraries" and "cultures in motion" interesting efforts to show how places and cultures are both spatially rooted, and unstable or in motion, at one and the same time. They seek to break down the binary opposition of place and motion, showing how worlds in motion are constituted by place, community, and people, and vice versa.

This echoes the arguments made at the origins of "The New Mobilities Paradigm" when Urry and I made the point that "the mobility turn" is not simply about the world being mobile *only* now, but that it concerns historical understandings and practices of mobility, how they have changed over time, and how the very ideas of mobility and immobility, speed and slowness, have been discursively deployed at various moments in time. We specifically cite Fernand Braudel's work on the Mediterranean and Paul Gilroy's work on the Black Atlantic to clarify that the "claim to a 'new mobilities paradigm' is not simply an assertion of the novelty of mobility in the world today . . . nor is it simply a claim that nation-state sovereignty has been replaced by a single system of mobile power." We distinguish our approach from theories of deterritorialization, liquid modernity, and nomadic theory, stating that it instead "suggests a set of questions, theories, and methodologies rather than a totalizing or reductive description of the contemporary world."[4] In other words, the new mobilities paradigm encompasses other historical periods such as

the ship-based mobilities of seafaring; it in no way distinguishes the modern era as the one and only period in which mobilities are significant, nor does it discount place and moorings; and it is not solely concerned with material transport, or even the simple fact of movement, but is equally about complex knowledge formations and relations of power.

Rodgers and colleagues similarly observe the forerunners to their historical project in two places: studies of empire and studies of globalization. Yet, they also set their project apart from the former's emphasis on the one-way logics of imperial domination and the latter's emphasis on concepts of flow, or more poetically rhizomes, fractals, and "watery language." *Cultures in Motion* sought to emphasize uneven terrains of connection and discontinuity, terrains that are "grooved" and "lumpy," not smooth. It refers to earlier efforts such as German historiography in the 1990s that considered *Transfergeschichte* and its social science methodology of *Kulturtransfergeschichte*, or later Michael Werner and Benedicte Zimmermann's "agenda for intermeshed and interwoven histories, or *histoire croisée*," or Alfred Crosby's studies of connected histories of the Atlantic exchange. Above all, the editors seek to emphasize "blockages, mistranslations, impositions, and resistance" and what Anna Tsing called "zones of cultural friction," rather than images of flow. And to do so, they build on an analysis of specific cultural practices, or cultures "as complex amalgams of practices, constantly in reproduction" such that "what moves between sites are never whole systems of values but the semidetachable parts of practice" that are "remade continuously in performances."[5] This leads them to an analysis of "disembeddings and displacements," "routes and itineraries," "fields of contest and collision," "translation and misunderstandings," "power and structures," as potential concepts providing "richer and more adequate language for the displacements of culture."[6]

I believe these kinds of historiographic projects are very much aligned with the efforts of the new mobilities paradigm, and we have much to learn from each other. Rivka Feldhay and Gal Hertz also focus on the "migration" of knowledge, arguing that knowledge in motion consists of four elements that are "in constant motion one in relation to the other": objects of knowledge that are mutually coproduced through the manipulation of both objects and representations; boundaries of knowledge that require some degree of boundary drawing and stabilization; authority, power, and legitimization, which are socially constructed and have a political dimension; and the place of knowledge, which is a kind of bounded heterotopia such as a library or laboratory, which is situated and local but allows knowledge the potential to travel in a new "epistemic constellation." In considering their historical projects in relation to the "mobilities paradigm," they propose it would be more rewarding to talk about mobility not simply as the ever-faster circulation of information, released from place, but rather in terms of the social and historical embedding of knowledge in relation of all four of these elements,

whose relational entanglements underlie the process of elaboration of socio-epistemic meanings.

It is fascinating how fields of knowledge move, travel, and intersect through various processes of interpositioning, contrastive comparison, resistance, and friction. The field of "mobility studies" itself has been mobilized in various ways, and historians have engaged with it in multiple ways, including many whose work is published in the volumes of *Transfers*. There are, indeed, rich transfers of knowledge-in-motion happening across the boundaries of disciplines, generating new epistemic constellations. While we all may struggle for authority, power and legitimization within our academic fields, the mission of this journal is to create a temporary place of knowledge in which we might situate our own heterotopia that lies outside existing disciplinary fields and hence generates new forms of knowing, new scales for thinking, and new tools for assembling what we know and how we mobilize that assemblage in the world. This was also the promise of the new mobilities paradigm.

Catherine Jami's description of the ICCM project on mapping science, technology, and medicine in and around late imperial China similarly emphasizes "the spatial dynamics of knowledge" as a complex process. Rather than using ideas of knowledge transfer or circulation, this project also describes an unstable complex relation in which

> human mobility comes out as a prerequisite for the construction of knowledge, with its circulation being indissociable from its reshaping, which is in itself a process of production. This is what prompted us to consider a notion broader than circulation, namely spatial dynamics. Thinking in terms of spatial dynamics has enabled us, among other things, to better envisage the multiple implications of location: space is structured not only by topography and climate but also politically, socially, and culturally.

Here, too, there is a clear intersection with mobility studies, which also emphasizes the social construction of space and scale, and brings into play aspects of actor-network theory, which also considers spatial dynamics and the social, political, and cultural shaping of space (and movement). For me, these are moments where our fields could be learning from each other by extending not only the timeframes and spatial extent of our studies of mobility, but also the epistemic frames through which we communicate.

Actor-network approaches are most visible in the project by Francesca Bray, Barbara Hahn, John Bosco Lourdusamy, and Tiago Saraiva on "Moving Crops and the Scales of History." Their idea of "cropscapes" is a wonderful conceptualization of movement involving not just moving entities (such as crop plants) but also the movement of entire contexts in which they are embedded, or what they describe as "ever-mutating ecologies or matrices, comprising assemblages of nonhumans and humans." I want to ricochet off their

analysis by returning to some of my own work, which brings together aspects of the cropscapes approach with the knowledge-in-motion approach of the prior projects, articulated through a kind of actor-network theory philosophy, but also inflected with a (post)colonial historical perspective.

In my book *Consuming the Caribbean*, which came at a foundational moment within mobility studies and was published in the International Library of Sociology, a series edited by John Urry, I attempted a five-hundred-year study of transatlantic relations of mobile consumption that included the mobilities of edible plants and stimulants, human bodies and labor, cultural products such as texts and images, knowledge collections such as botany and ethnology, and even the movement of entire "natures" and landscapes through representations and practices. "In tracing movements of many kinds into and out of the Caribbean," I wrote, "this book will contribute to a more complicated history and theory of 'travel,' linking together the colonial and postcolonial, the scientific and the aesthetic, the material and the symbolic." Specifically, it was interested "both in the 'biographies of objects' which track different forms of material mobility, and in the biographies of people who move (or who cannot move), which indicate forms of human and cultural mobility." I describe the chapters as "dealing with different 'sites of agency' through which multiplex material and symbolic social practices and fantasies of proximity and distance together constitute an organized field whose effect is what we call 'the Caribbean.'" Rather than privileging narratives of flow or circulation, however, I sought to "emphasise in each chapter that the linkages, ties, and attachments between different sites of agency are as significant as the mobilities and flows through which the Caribbean is produced." The book culminated in "a self-reflexive analysis of the production of academic knowledge about the Caribbean from particular locations and within the context of particular theoretical itineraries."[7]

I see this effort as very much in line with the kinds of historiographic projects described in this special section, with their interest in long-distance itineraries, material complexes and nodal points, stabilizations and boundaries of moving assemblages, and multiple sites of agency. I especially appreciate the efforts here to intervene in mobility studies with a deeper interpretation of the mobility of ideas and the migration of knowledge, as well as adding a far wider temporal and geographical scope that challenges Eurocentrism. Many other historically minded mobility scholars have traced the mobility of ideas and knowledge systems as sets of practices across time and space, including the very idea of "mobility" itself. Thus, there are many productive intersections between mobility studies and historical studies of the mobility of knowledge, cultures, and material assemblages such as cropscapes.

Let me, then, conclude, with one further example from a book edited by Nigel Thrift, Adam Tickell, Steve Woolgar, and William H. Rupp, *Globalization in Practice*, which sought to analyze globalization through the "mundane

means" by which it is achieved—not as vast extraterrestrial forces but as everyday practices, infrastructures, and concrete moments. The book has sections on Travel, Tourism and Mobility; Infrastructure and Transport; Finance and Business; Media, Consumption and Leisure; Health and Nature; Order and Control; and Classifications. Thus, it ranges from world maps and passports to pipes, cables, and containers; from credit rating agencies, accounting, and barcodes to sex workers, flowers, and Bollywood. My own short chapter in this book concerns bananas and their mobilities, and it very closely relates to some of the arguments about cropscapes, relating such cropscapes to mobilities of other kinds of cultural objects all situated within a complex global actor network of both human and nonhuman actors. In it, I ask:

> How is a soft yellow fruit produced via complex interconnecting systems of global transportation, migration, communication, politics and regulation culture and media? These global systems do not simply move the banana, but instigate it as material intertwining of commodity markets, living plants, and fungal diseases; as a fruitful yet fragile relation between infrastructures, landscapes, and migrants; and as a compelling object of popular cultures, performing arts, and comedic routines . . . What we call the banana is materially heterogeneous, and therefore unstable and potentially unsustainable: talk, bodies, texts, trucks, architectures, pesticides, markets, boxes, and jokes—all of these and many more are implicated in and perform the banana.[8]

Spanning from the mobility of Asian fungal diseases *Fusarium oxysporum* and Black Sigatoka (*Cercosporae musae*) into Central American banana plantations, to the music of Chiquita banana advertising jingles, to World Trade Organization rules and the struggle for Fair Trade bananas, this study was very much in line with the aims of the "Moving Crops" project, yet it arises directly from my engagement in mobility studies.

What is so valuable to me about this collection of contributions to this special section is what they have to teach us about much earlier periods than most modern social science (including mobility studies) deals with, and with geographical regions that many Euro-American-trained scholars are not well versed in. In provincializing Europe and transcending Eurocentric temporal frameworks of modernity, these projects open exciting theoretical perspectives about the relation between movement and staying in place, fixity and change, and more complex constellations of mobility. They teach us important lessons about the value of careful, deep, case studies, in which these historians are so skilled, for helping analyze failures, unintended consequences, routes not taken, and alternative possibilities. Yet, we might also consider how theoretical projects themselves travel freighted with baggage, and how new knowledge is produced through frictions with other knowledge projects. There is no simple "transfer" of ideas from one field to another, but rather a complex interplay of shifting ideas and situated actors, each on their own trajectories and with their own itineraries and agencies. It

is through such moves, and the frictions between them, that we create new knowledge-scapes.

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Notes

1. Mimi Sheller and John Urry, "The New Mobilities Paradigm," *Environment and Planning A*, 'Materialities and Mobilities,' 38 (2006): 207–226, here 211, 216.
2. Kevin Hannam, Mimi Sheller, and John Urry, "Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings," *Mobilities* 1, no. 1 (2006): 1–22.
3. Daniel T. Rodgers, Bhavani Raman, and Helmut Reimitz, eds., *Cultures in Motion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 3.
4. Sheller and Urry, "New Mobilities Paradigm," 209, 210.
5. Rodgers et al., *Cultures in Motion*, 9–11.
6. Ibid., 15.
7. Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (London: Routledge, 2003), 5 (first two quotes), 6, 7, 9.
8. Mimi Sheller, "Globalizing of Bananas: Of Rhizomes, Fungi, and Mobility Systems," in *Globalization in Practice*, ed. Nigel Thrift, Adam Tickell, Steve Woolgar, and William H. Rupp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 223–228, here 223–224.