

# Editorial

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The recent wave of refugees into Europe is—apart from a heartrending drama of human suffering—a lesson in mobility. We increasingly find that current forms of mobility are difficult to analyze without taking such public dramas into account: it seems that more than ever the *politics of mobility* are crying out for the mobility student's attention. While in Europe a gulf of ambiguous empathy was triggered by the ultimate expression of immobility (a shocking image that so quickly moved around the world of a little Syrian boy called Aylan Kurdi lying facedown on the beach, his head pointing toward the sea, as if his last wish had been to go back), the flows, the streams, the “swarms” of refugees were nothing less than the very embodiment of movement. Swarms, in this context is not meant to be a pejorative term or invoked in the service of nationalist agendas, but refers to the insight that certain forms of collective mobility seem to follow a kind of inherent behavioral logic, the group acting as if it is organized but without an actual leader.<sup>1</sup>

The refugees had come by boats and crossed borders on foot. They got through only as long as local authorities had not yet raised a barrier. The spectacle showed how certain forms of mobility—especially those connected to nonsexuality—are viewed with distrust by authorities and their “citizens,” those whose privilege is at that moment characterized by “sessility.”<sup>2</sup>

And when they had made it to Germany, in buses, on trains, and in an occasional passenger car driven by private benefactors (whom the media routinely called “smugglers”), they were joined by fellow refugees who managed to cross the border between Russia and Norway on bicycles, literally using a loophole in local transborder rules. When they reached their destination, affluent northern Europe, newspapers greeted them with a curious mix of philanthropy and racism, humanitarianism and xenophobia. They were placed in emergency housing, often far away from the big cities. Though some of them were later picked up by the police as they cycled along Dutch freeways, their mobility seemed to recede to the background again, except in discourses of containment: how could Europe reinforce the outer borders of the continent?

Mobility students can no longer deny the urgency of a political analysis of worldwide mobilities.<sup>3</sup> The population of the Middle East (the next location of the clash of world powers) exploded from 76 million in 1950 to 360 million in 2010. Half of that population (in the case of Egypt, for example) is under the age of twenty-four. With some 60 million refugees currently on the move worldwide (the statistics vary widely), and with the journey at least as



important as the destination or place of origin,<sup>4</sup> we must find ways to bring migration and refugee studies into closer conversation with critical mobility studies. To that end, and true to our mission to have historical studies of mobility intersect more closely with current-day questions, this journal will open its pages to historical and contemporary research into the mobility of migration and refuge. We intend to foster more nuanced and useful conversations in this field, interventions that take us beyond populist declarations like that of the right-wing leader in the Netherlands who declared, “We want to make the protest against migrants as large and vehement as possible.” Maps that present streams of refugees as large invading arrows into Europe, published beside newspaper features on the revival of xenophobe populism and the extreme right, cry out for mobility studies that venture far beyond the gaze upon the vehicle, or indeed the nation-state.

In this special issue of *Transfers*, we have explicitly put racism and mobility into dialogue. Such is the importance of this topic that we have again, following both our special issues on China,<sup>5</sup> decided to dedicate all our editorial content to this topic, including our museum, art, and film sections, and most of our book reviews, as well as our open forum, “Ideas in Motion.” We consider this to be the start of a new strand in our journal, a call to those of you who can help us to further develop this topic. The guest editors of this issue, Judith Nicholson and Mimi Sheller, the latter a member of our editorial team, introduce the set of five dedicated research articles. Historian Cotten Seiler provides a closing commentary, a view from another discipline we always include after a special section to help readers place the articles into an interdisciplinary perspective. Spanning sociology, ethnography, human geography, and communication studies, the articles examine how the unequal relations of power inherent in both mobility and race have shaped a racialized mobility politics in three white-settler countries: the United States, Canada, and South Africa. We hope that the articles, which contribute to the burgeoning literature on mobility, race, and settler colonialism, will inspire more scholars to examine the topic in other cultural contexts and from the multidisciplinary perspectives that are the hallmark of *Transfers*.

At the start of the sixth volume, we can look back on the many successes of our journal. Last year we (you!) produced nearly 500 pages with 17 main articles and 40 smaller texts. One-third of the former presented “nonwestern” content, and one-fifth was written by authors stemming from nonwestern parts of the globe. As pleased as we are to announce this, it is not enough. We would like to further increase these percentages (they were higher in the previous year) and sustain them into the future. We call on readers from “beyond the west” to submit material that speaks to issues that are of concern to them. Help us to “rethink mobility from the perspective of the humanities,” as our mission states.

Looking back at the topic areas in volume 5, we have never dealt with such a variegated palette of mobility modes (cars and roads, shipping, walking, railways, aviation, cycling, animal mobility, children's mobility, and migration). Only three articles dealt with what one could call "traditional" transport history. We can now claim to have carved out scholarly space for the broad field that we call "new mobility studies."

We also have some personnel changes to report. During the previous year our museum review editor, Anne-Katrien Ebert, was replaced by a team of two: veteran Deborah Breen and newcomer Chia-ling Lai, an art theorist from Taiwan. We also had to say good-bye to Heike Weber, an editorial team member from the start of our journal, whose scholarly energy, which was so much appreciated by her fellow team members, will now be spent on fields beyond mobility. We welcome David Bissell as a new member of our editorial board, who will assist our editorial team member Peter Merriman in assessing the increasing stream of submissions from sociology, geography, anthropology, and related fields, before they enter into our double-blind refereeing process. We are currently working on producing a more detailed outline of the criteria by which we select our articles, which will make it easier to filter out those submissions that better fit other journals. For now, please feel welcome to submit your cutting-edge scholarship that helps us to rethink mobility, preferably with a long-term or historical "flavor."

## Notes

1. On the concept of swarms in mobility history, see Gijs Mom, *Atlantic Automobility; Emergence and Persistence of the Car, 1895-1940* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 565-566.
2. See Tim Cresswell, *On the Move; Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
3. Paul Scheffer, "De exodus en ons geweten" [The exodus and our consciousness], *NRC Weekend* (24 and 25 October 2015), *Opinie en Debat* [Opinion and debate]: 4-7, here: 4.
4. Hugh Eakin, "The Terrible Flight from the Killing," *New York Review of Books* (22 October 2015): 18-22, here: 18.
5. See *Transfers* 3, no. 3 (Winter 2013) and 4, no. 3 (Winter 2014).