

PERSPECTIVES

Micro-Mobilities in Lockdown

Peter Merriman

Abstract

In this paper I reflect upon my own micro-mobilities and embodied mobile practices living and working under COVID-19 government restrictions in Wales in mid-2020. I use the opportunity to reflect upon the past ten years of *Transfers* and to think about future research in the field of mobility studies, arguing that an attention to seemingly ordinary embodied movements and mobilities provides one avenue by which mobility scholars could move beyond the mobility/immobility binary and approach mobility as being more than transport, migration, and communication. Mobility is, I suggest, ubiquitous—even during government lockdowns—and I explain how Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of the “molar” and “molecular” can be useful for understanding how some movements become perceptible and others imperceptible, and why scholars frequently draw a clear distinction between mobility and immobility.

Keywords: Coronavirus, everyday mobility, Great Britain, mobility/immobility, molar, molecular, pandemic, the body

In this short article I provide a personal reflection on my own micro-mobilities and embodied mobile practices living and working under COVID-19 restrictions in Wales, using this opportunity to reflect upon the past ten years of *Transfers* and think about future research in the field of mobility studies. What I want to argue is that if we take seriously the suggestion that mobility and mobility studies is more than simply about the physical movements of people involved in transport and migration, then it is difficult (indeed, arbitrary) to try and draw a clear distinction between the transportation or transfer of commuters, migrants, infected citizens or tourists, on the one hand, and the embodied micro-movements of dancing, walking, hand-washing, or virus transmission and mutation, on the other. Vital and lively practices and movements may involve human bodies (or not), and they may occur at different scales, but they are all productive, power-laden, interlinked, enabled, and regulated in different ways. Some of these mobilities may be imperceptible and “molecular” in a particular instance, while others may be perceptible and “molar”—or rather, some mobilities are in the process of becoming molar, while others are in the process of becoming molecular.¹ Mobility is, I



would argue, ubiquitous—even during government lockdowns²—but this is not to say that movements are uniform, uncontrollable, or purposeless.³ Different movements and mobilities possess different qualities, speeds, and are impelled by different actions and forces, while perceptions or effects of immobility and stasis (as well as movement) are clearly important for how we make sense of the world.

Trepidation

When I was invited to contribute to this tenth anniversary issue of *Transfers* I was pleased to have the opportunity to celebrate the growth of an important journal in the growing field of mobility studies, but I held major reservations about reflecting, so soon, on the mobilities and immobilities of the COVID-19 global pandemic. On the one hand, my training as a historical geographer urged me to stand back from rapidly moving events, to try not to react too soon, and to try to see the bigger picture. On the other hand, this pandemic seemed too live and close-to-home to write about, with several friends becoming quite ill with the virus, and several friends of friends dying from the virus. Within a few weeks of the UK lockdown starting, I received invitations to write about mobility and COVID-19 for a special issue and an edited book, but it did not feel right *for me* to reflect on the pandemic *at that time*. As a relatively privileged academic who had retained their job, could work from home, and remained healthy, writing about the pandemic seemed to be the wrong thing to do. I also knew that many other scholars would be reflecting upon the radical changes to local and global mobilities as a result of government lockdown, quarantine, and social/physical distancing measures.⁴ As Mimi Sheller reflects in her article in this issue, as a multi-disciplinary or transdisciplinary journal, *Transfers* is well-placed to include studies that can capture the diverse mobilities and immobilities of the COVID-19 pandemic: from the global mobilities and immobilities of the virus, people, goods, medicine, and personal protective equipment (PPE), and the environmental consequences of decreases in local pollution and global emissions, to the economic impact of lockdowns on the transport, tourism, and communications sectors, the diverse impacts of the virus on different social, economic, and ethnic groups, and geopolitical decisions relating to the closure of national borders and the opening up of “corridors” between countries. Of course, it is not just global, regional, and local transport and mobility that have been impacted by COVID-19 and subsequent lockdowns and social/physical distancing regulations, but also the “micro-mobilities” of embodied practices and movements. While many transport and mobility scholars choose not to discuss such bodily actions and movements, I want to focus here on these micro-mobilities, drawing upon a few personal anecdotes of my life in lockdown in Wales.

Shopping

Throughout the lockdown period, every two weeks or so, it would be my turn to drive the eight miles to my local supermarket in order to purchase essential supplies. I enjoyed these opportunities to get away for legitimate reasons, leaving my village, and experiencing the “joys” and “freedom” of the open road in order to occupy a different space. During my early visits to the supermarket, I could see the rapid modifications being undertaken to minimize the risks of virus transmission and transfer. I quickly became habituated into the new practices of queuing, spacing, cleaning hands, sanitizing trolley handles, and moving around in a “distanced” manner, trying to keep two meters from shoppers seemingly coming at me from all directions. Some shoppers wore masks, others did not, and the wearing of masks indoors became compulsory relatively late in Wales (on 14 September 2020) compared with other nations. A few shoppers would hesitate if they came too close to me, others would boldly and carelessly move into my personal “bubble”—seemingly oblivious to, or caring little about, the regulations or my feelings—and I would then shuffle off, grumbling under my breath.⁵ Perspex screens appeared at tills. Card payments were preferred in order to minimize the mobility of cash (a potential carrier of the virus) between hands. One-way systems, lanes, two-meter floor markings, and special signage appeared in supermarkets in order to separate and space pedestrian traffic. In the UK, it was widely reported that a team of experts in Finland—including physicists, biomedical engineers, ventilation specialists, and experts in fluid dynamics—had used a supercomputer to simulate how someone coughing, sneezing, or talking in a supermarket aisle could emit viral aerosol particles that would be carried much further than previously thought, taking account of how air conditioning systems might circulate the virus.⁶ Air circulations, physical proximity, architectural design and different bodily movements (including touching, sneezing, coughing, talking) became ever-more entangled in scientific and political debate, and as a result, such micro-movements (and attempts to regulate them) appeared central to government policy, corporate risk analysis, and individual habits.

Exercising

UK and Welsh government restrictions on travel and mobility were designed to cut out all “non-essential” travel, which meant that—for me—the pleasures or anxieties of travel were reserved for “essential” food-shopping trips or the exercise that was permitted in one’s local area. Living in a fairly large house with a garden, in a rural location, I felt lucky. I could move around my house and garden to my heart’s content. I could also walk or cycle out from our home for “essential exercise,” just as friends living in London walked around

the city, documenting their journeys with Facebook photo-diaries that captured the quiet and apparent immobility of a global city in lockdown. My desire to “move” myself for exercise (and pleasure, and a change of scene) led to an intensified knowledge of local routes and landscapes. Using my local Ordnance Survey “leisure” map, I traversed little-used footpaths whose presence had been partially erased on the ground, and I reported the absence of stiles and signs to the local footpath officer in my county council. This was not immobilization, but a new form of intensively local mobility and dwelling, moving around my house, garden, and through the landscape in different ways, following old and new paths and tracing new lines.⁷

Swabbing and Testing

For the five years prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, I had participated in a large annual government social and economic survey. My presence on their database meant that early in the pandemic I was chosen to be part of a new government COVID-19 survey. After completing that one-off survey, my household was then selected to form part of a large government-funded “COVID-19 infection study” undertaken by a major university working with government agencies and social research organizations. Weekly and then monthly visits to my house by an interviewer would see them ask me questions from outside my door at a two meter distance in order to find out about my current health and potential contacts with others. Swab equipment would then be handed over, and I would then have to swab my throat and nose, placing the swab in a vial of preserving liquid, placing this in a bag, then returning this to the interviewer to transport over forty miles to the nearest drop point. The sample would then be transported to the NIHR National Biosample Centre in Milton Keynes for testing and storage, and the results would be categorized, enumerated, and statistically analyzed. My bodily samples have amassed many more road miles this year than I have. They have not been subject to the restrictions on mobility that my body has. They have been enrolled by a consortium of universities and state agencies for the national and global COVID-19 “effort.” In many ways I feel lucky to be healthy, rather than suffering like so many others, whether those immobilized and advised to “shield” due to underlying health conditions, or those immobilized in different ways by the virus itself. For some of those most adversely affected, the vital mobilities sustaining life—including the circulation of air, blood, and nutrients around the body—has had to be “supported” with mechanical machines. Others have died, being transported to temporary mortuaries, and, in some countries, mass graves.

Readers of this commentary maybe forgiven for wondering why I have undertaken such a lengthy personal excursion to outline some of the rather ordinary embodied micro-mobilities of the social, political, and economic worlds

I have inhabited during the COVID-19 pandemic. Returning to my opening words, I would suggest that if we are serious about trying to understand the significance of mobility and movement in people's everyday lives, if we want to problematize the mobility/immobility binary, and if we want to understand the related role of different forms of movement and mobility in social, economic, and political life, then we must expand mobility studies beyond the large-scale bodily mobilities entailed in transport and migration. In doing this, mobility scholars should also focus on the myriad bodily movements and mobile embodied practices involved in all manner of actions, events, and systems, from the bodily movements involved in walking, driving, and flying, to the embodied movements involved in virus transmission and infection control. Of course, important research has already been undertaken in this regard—both in *Transfers*, and beyond—whether by sociologists and geographers focusing on post-human mobilities and different scales of movement,⁸ to historians of science, technology, and medicine who have focused on particular aspects of mobility.⁹

What is apparent to me is that COVID-19 has highlighted the need for cooperative research programs and government committees involving infectious disease specialists, epidemiologists, statisticians, social scientists, policy experts, behavioral scientists, and others, as well as more detailed, specialist studies in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. With its trans-disciplinary focus, a journal like *Transfers* could showcase the diversity of approaches that may help to investigate the mobilities of this terrible virus, ranging from work in the history, philosophy, and sociology of science, technology, medicine, and disease, to work in anthropology, human geography, sociology, communication studies, history, design, politics, literary studies, and transport studies. There is a lot of work to do, and I think there are a number of areas where *Transfers* can forge new ground. While the journal may aspire to be transdisciplinary, I think many studies inevitably remain “disciplinary” in feel, and hence the journal is perhaps more of a multidisciplinary one, in which articles with different approaches and methodologies sit alongside one another but do not necessarily intersect. This is both inevitable and in some ways desirable. While novel theoretical approaches have appeared in *Transfers*, I would like to see the journal publish more ambitious theoretical or conceptual studies, and not just studies that apply existing theoretical ideas in particular thematic, temporal, and spatial settings. This may help the amorphous field of mobility studies to—on occasion—“speak back” to the broader disciplines of history, sociology, and human geography, directing key arguments back to these fields. If this is not undertaken, then mobility studies may run the risk of falling between camps, and of being pigeonholed as a rather obscure backwater, which may spell the death knell of the field in a higher education system such as the UK's, where research is audited on its originality, excellence, and rigor in a “home” discipline (even if interdisciplinarity is

explicitly valued). While it is important to include accounts of mobility from beyond the West, there are clear dangers to an “area studies” approach, and it might be best to include this diversity of geographic representation within thematic special issues. Indeed, *Transfers* has been exemplary in this regard, including landmark issues on themes such as cultural appropriation,¹⁰ media,¹¹ colonial and settler mobilities,¹² travel writing and knowledge transfer,¹³ race,¹⁴ print culture,¹⁵ postcolonialism,¹⁶ and mobility in dangerous worlds.¹⁷ I hope the editors continue to commission such distinctive and important theme issues, helping to forge new ground in “mobility studies” over future decades.

Peter Merriman is Professor of Geography at Aberystwyth University and was an Associate Editor of *Transfers* between 2012 and 2019. He is the author of *Mobility, Space and Culture* (2012) and *Driving Spaces* (2007), and has edited or co-edited five books, including *Empire and Mobility in the Long Nineteenth Century* (2020), *Mobility and the Humanities* (2018), and *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities* (2014).

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Notes

1. Peter Merriman, “Molar And Molecular Mobilities: The Politics of Perceptible and Imperceptible Movements,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 37, no. 1 (2019): 65–82; Peter Merriman, *Mobility, Space and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2012). I take the concepts of the “molar” and “molecular,” and the notion of “becoming,” from the processual philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Athlone, 1988).
2. In the UK, lockdown periods have seen reductions in car, bus, rail, and air travel, but they have also witnessed huge growths in internet shopping, supermarket deliveries, as well as an increased popularity of video gaming and TV watching.
3. Merriman, *Mobility, Space and Culture*, 7.
4. The UK government (and devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland) use the phrase “social distancing” to denote the physical distancing of individuals for social purposes. This phrasing appears to assume that all social contact is face-to-face, rather than being enabled through a wide range of technologies from the telephone, letters and social media, to video calls through packages like Skype, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams. As one person pointed out on social media, the policy was really about “physical distancing” and the regulation of mobility, with many social and economic interactions being undertaken through more virtual means. Similar problems have emerged with contested terms like “essential worker” and “essential travel.”
5. On the cultural significance of these personal bubbles/spaces, see Robert Sommer, *Personal Space: The Behavioral Basis of Design* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969).

6. Ville Vuorinen, Mia Aarnio, Mikko Alava, Ville Alopaeus, Nina Atanasova, Mikko Auvinen, Nick Hayward, et al. "Modelling Aerosol Transport and Virus Exposure with Numerical Simulations in Relation to SARS-CoV-2 Transmission by Inhalation Indoors," *Safety Science* 130, no. 104866 (2020): 1–23.
7. Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2007); Tim Ingold, *The Life of Lines* (London: Routledge, 2015).
8. Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (London: Routledge, 2006); Peter Merriman, "Mobilities II: Cruising," *Progress in Human Geography* 40, no. 4 (2016): 555–564; Mimi Sheller, *Aluminum Dreams: The Making of Light Modernity* (London: MIT Press, 2014); Stephanie Lavau, "Viruses," in *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities*, ed. Peter Adey, David Bissell, Kevin Hannam, Peter Merriman and Mimi Sheller (London: Routledge, 2014), 318–325; Peter Adey, *Air: Nature and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014); David Lambert and Peter Merriman, eds., *Empire and Mobility in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).
9. See, for example, Clapperton C. Mavhunga, "Organic Vehicles and Passengers: The Tsetse Fly as Transient Analytical Workspace," *Transfers* 6, no. 2 (2016): 74–93; Clapperton C. Mavhunga, *The Mobile Workshop: The Tsetse Fly and African Knowledge Production* (London: MIT Press, 2018); Markku Hokkanen, *Medicine, Mobility and the Empire: Nyasaland Networks, 1859–1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).
10. Christian Huck, "Introduction: Mobility, Transfers, and Cultural Appropriation," *Transfers* 2, no. 3 (2012): 76–80.
11. Dorit Müller and Heike Weber, "'Traffic': On the Historical Alignment of Media and Mobility," *Transfers* 3, no. 1 (2013): 65–74.
12. Georgine Clarsen, "Introduction: Special Section on Settler-Colonial Mobilities," *Transfers* 5, no. 3 (2015): 41.
13. Florian Krobb and Dorit Müller, "Itinerant Knowledge Production in European Travel Writing: Introduction," *Transfers* 6, no. 3 (2016): 41–48.
14. Judith Nicholson and Mimi Sheller, "Introduction: Race and the Politics of Mobility," *Transfers* 6, no. 1 (2016): 4–11.
15. Victoria Kuttainen and Susann Liebich, "Introduction: Print Culture, Mobility, and the Pacific, 1920–1950," *Transfers* 7, no. 1 (2017): 26–33.
16. Mayurakshi Chaudhuri and Viola Thimm, "Introduction: Postcolonial Intersections: Asia on the Move," *Transfers* 8, no. 3 (2018): 28–35.
17. Gail Adams-Hutcheson, Holly Thorpe, and Catharine Coleborne, "Introduction: Understanding Mobilities in a Dangerous World," *Transfers* 7, no. 3 (2017): 1–5.