

“Text-as-Means” versus “Text-as-End-in-Itself”

Some Reasons Why Literary Scholars Have Been Slow to Hop on the Mobilities Bus

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Abstract

This article explores three reasons why literary scholars have been slow to engage with both the New Mobilities Paradigm and the New Mobilities Studies promoted by *Transfers*, namely: (1) the residual conservatism of “English studies”; (2) the sort of textual practice associated with “literary criticism” (where the text remains the primary object of study); and (3), the tension between the humanist and/or “subject-centered” nature of most literary scholarship and the posthumanist approaches of mobilities scholars based in the social sciences and other humanities subjects. However, the close reading of literary and other texts has much to contribute to mobilities studies including insight into the temporalities—both personal and social—that shape our long-term understanding of contemporary events such as the current pandemic.

Keywords: literary criticism, literary Studies, mobilities studies, pandemic, posthumanism, temporality

Over the past decade, *Transfers* has done a tremendous job in opening up the fields of mobilities and transport history to new disciplines and new audiences. As recalled by Gijs Mom in his article in this special issue,¹ the founders’ imaginative decision to supplement the traditional journal format with regular film and museum reviews, as well as a section dedicated to the visual arts, sent out a strong signal that this is a publication intended for arts and humanities scholars as well as social scientists. The shorthand used to signal the journal’s interest in exploring mobility, transport, and transnationalism via textual and cultural representations is “media,” and the fluctuating popularity of this approach is captured in the graph (Figure 5) in Mom’s article.² However, looking through the many fascinating back copies that now comprise the *Transfers* archive, I was struck—although by no means surprised—that relatively few of the journal’s contributors are based in literature departments and that only a handful of articles focus specifically on literary texts. Notable exceptions to this include individual articles by Sasha Disko, Frederike Felcht, Heather Joyce, and Sunny Stalter-Pace as well as the Special Section on “Print



Culture, Mobility and the Pacific, 1920–1950.”³ In the short space available here I share some thoughts on why literary scholars have been slow to engage with the theories, concepts, and paradigms developed by mobilities scholars working across other disciplines and end by outlining what their work could contribute to our field were we able to advertise its appeal more effectively.

How I advance this argument nevertheless depends on where I start. As Peter Merriman and I proposed in the Introduction to our special issue on “Mobility and the Humanities,”⁴ and as I have explored elsewhere since,⁵ the explosion of interest in mobilities since the 1990s (which of course includes the naming of the New Mobilities Paradigm [NMP] by Mimi Sheller and John Urry in 2006)⁶ is clearly rooted in the post-structuralist theoretical revolution of the 1980s for which literary scholars were the avant-garde (likewise, the simultaneously burgeoning field of postcolonial studies). In addition, landmark individual studies such as Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes: Travel, Writing and Transculturalism* (1992) and Caren Kaplan’s *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (1996)⁷ made mobility an important thematic for scholars across a wide range of disciplines, as have many of the touchstone literary/cultural studies of Modernism such as Stephen Kern’s *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880–1918* first published in 1983.⁸ Told this way, the story of mobilities studies is silently infused by the insights of literature and literary scholars—which is why it might, at first, seem surprising that there has been relatively little dialogue between our two camps post the NMP.

Before I suggest some of the reasons for this radio silence, I feel the need to be absolutely frank about the extent of the problem. The fact is that the majority of literary scholars working on mobility-related topics have never heard of either the NMP or the sort of New Mobility Studies advanced by *Transfers*; having co-edited two collections on mobility humanities that actively solicited literary contributions,⁹ as well as the new book series, *Palgrave Studies in Mobilities, Literature, and Culture*, it has become clear that our work is not on the reading lists of the authors concerned. In the case of the book series, it has been necessary to alert most prospective contributors to the mobilities publications their own projects could enter into meaningful dialogue with. While a few of these scholars have been aware of Tim Cresswell’s work,¹⁰ as well as iconic travel and transportation volumes such as Wolfgang Schivelbusch’s *The Railway Journey*,¹¹ there is rarely a mention of John Urry or fellow-NMP compatriots’ work until we point them in that direction. Moreover—and perhaps controversially—as editors we have made the decision not to let this ignorance of the NMP stand in the way of what are otherwise fascinating studies on mobility-related themes, reasoning that, extensive as the field now is, NMP-inflected “mobilities” does not own the copyright on “mobility.” Indeed, it could be argued non-NMP approaches to the topic have the potential to broaden, enrich, and revitalize our understanding of the concept—a prospect to which I return at the end of this piece. The titles of

recent books in our series—such as Emma Short’s *Mobility and the Hotel in Modern Literature* (2019), Elsa Court’s *The American Roadside in Emigre Literature, Film and Photography 1955–1975* (2020), and Erica Durante’s *Air Travel Fiction and Film: Cloud People* (2020)—certainly capture the imagination and will, we hope, serve as useful supplementary reading for scholars approaching mobilities from social-science perspectives.¹²

Meanwhile, the first of the *reasons* I wish to present for the current lack of dialogue between literary and mobilities scholarship lies with the sometimes infuriatingly insular and traditionalist nature of the former as a discipline. Here I point my finger especially at the literature departments that still cling to the prefix “English,” even though a good deal of “world literature” is now widely taught on their syllabuses. Although some universities have moved with the times and adopted more progressive and/or inclusive titles, others have continued to advertise the “Englishness” of English, and perhaps with good reason; in the UK, the past two decades have seen the closure of numerous cultural studies departments (most notoriously the world-famous Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham), while the English departments of Russell Group universities (e.g., the Universities of Durham and Bristol) have expanded massively. These new super-departments of 70+ staff members do, admittedly, offer a much more varied syllabus than they used to (including an expanding canon on non-white, postcolonial and world literature), but the discipline in general remains deeply conservative and historicist in the way in which it is conceptualized and taught. This, in turn, has major implications for research assessment exercises—such as the British “REF” [Research Excellence Framework]—as well as for Research Council funding where contemporary and interdisciplinary projects continue to fall through the cracks. Furthermore, the ongoing carve-up of specialisms and syllabuses into historical periods—Medieval, Renaissance, Romantic, Victorian, Modernist, Twentieth-Century, and Contemporary—stands in the way of scholars developing more niche and/or cross-disciplinary profiles. No one would ever be appointed to a more traditional literature department because of their specialism in mobilities alone, for example; their appointment would remain, in the first instance, period-based. A corollary of this is that the disciplinary reach of English is so vast that scholars have been forced to orientate themselves intellectually vis-à-vis the *-ism* associated with their historical period (e.g., Romanticism, Modernism) with the consequence that these frameworks substitute for the fields, paradigms, and debates that lead scholarship in the social sciences and other humanities subjects. Little wonder, then, that the authors who send their mobility-themed proposals to the *Mobilities, Literature, and Culture* book series often know very little about the mobility debates in cognate disciplines.

The second—and closely related—reason for the lack of dialogue between literary scholarship and mobilities theorizing is the type of textual practice

that has been traditionally associated with the former. Even today, many (though by no means all) scholars in English departments remain committed to a form of *literary criticism* whose key objective is to analyze, elucidate, and evaluate the author and/or text(s) on which they are working. Although, since the 1980s, such practice has depended on an increasingly wide range of theoretical perspectives ranging from psychoanalysis and Marxism to deconstruction and queer theory, it is the text itself that continues to hold center stage. The implications of this are: (1) that the analysis in question has remained humanistically subject-centered, typically focused on textual characters and textual form; and (2) that the scholarship that informs the research is that which can help with the analysis of the text rather than the recent debates with which the text might engage. As a consequence, literary scholars tend to engage less with journal publications than social scientists and their (much shorter) reference lists will focus mostly on primary sources, other critics who have written on those sources, and the theorists whose work has informed their textual practice. Even where mobilities and/or spatial theory does figure it is typically as an analytical tool rather than an object for discussion, as flagged in all those conference papers and publications that style themselves as an "exploration of x 'in' the work of y ."

While there are colleagues who will undoubtedly challenge this characterization—perhaps caricature—of mainstream literary criticism and point to how "contextual" so much literary research now is, it is nevertheless a useful pole to set other modes of textual engagement against. Indeed, I have long argued that the key distinction that needs to be grasped in this regard is, and remains, one of the research objective: between the literary scholarship that remains focused on the explication/evaluation of the text as an end-in-itself (even if it brings social, historical, and other contextual factors to bear upon it) and that which draws upon texts in order to explore a social or cultural phenomenon outside of them. Despite the sophistication of so much of the textual analysis that is now undertaken under the banner of literary studies, there is still a tendency to overlook this fundamental methodological distinction—which is of particular consequence for research that slips, unwittingly, from one objective to the other. Needless to say, the second mode of textual practice described here—which makes use of texts of all kinds to explore a social cultural phenomenon such as automobility (e.g., work by Georgine Clarsen, Gijs Mom, Lynne Pearce, and Stéphanie Ponsavady) or on mobility and migration (Marian Aguiar, Catharine Coleborne)¹³—can locate itself within a field like mobilities much more productively than the work of the literary critic for whom our theories and paradigms will only ever serve as a window onto the text. Nevertheless, there remains the issue that scholars (myself included) who prefer to work *with* texts rather than *on* them may be disregarded or misunderstood by more traditional "English" subject specialists. Indeed, I have had the phrase "merely sociological" used to describe one

of my own (unsuccessful) grant applications in the past, with the change of focus from text to culture being mistaken for a dumbing-down or disregard of the texts themselves. This, I would argue, is to overlook the fact that “readings” of texts in pursuit of the deeper understanding of a cultural phenomenon can be every bit as rigorous and sophisticated as those associated with traditional literary criticism: the principles and practices of “close reading” still apply, and can be used to considerable effect—often as a means of challenging or nuancing more abstract theorizing. I therefore feel strongly that a wider understanding of this methodological distinction at the heart of literary studies would help colleagues better target their research.

The third and final explanation I would like to offer for why literary scholarship—including the “text-as-means” model outlined above—sits somewhat uncomfortably alongside a good deal of post-NMP research is the latter’s avowed posthumanist standpoint. While posthumanism also figures as an important theoretical concept within literature departments (especially in the context of recent work on biopolitics), its radical demoting of the human subject in order to foreground the systemic nature of agency and power is at odds with the literary scholars’ traditional focus on character and psychology. Although literary scholars have been working with a poststructuralist model of subjectivity for over thirty years—one that eschews essentialism, autonomy, unity, and more—this does not mean that they have stopped writing *about* subjects. The personalities who populate our texts continue to fascinate, no matter how sophisticated we have become at not confusing them or their motives with “real” people. By contrast, the ascendancy of assemblage theory, Actor Network Theory, and non-representational theory¹⁴ in sociology and the geographical sciences from the late 1990s has resulted in a massive shift away from individualistic subject-centered theorizing in those disciplines. These new standpoints have resulted in some hugely impressive studies of the geographical, social, and cultural world, not least because the authors concerned (many of them also mobilities scholars) have adopted a descriptive textual practice that has enabled them to capture, in often dazzling detail, the complex actors and systems at play in a given environment. However, as I have observed elsewhere,¹⁵ this is arguably at the cost of an appreciation of certain *temporalities*, such as (personal) memory, which we can only access through our engagement with individual subjects. While a posthumanist approach might enable us to register, or speculate upon, the contingency of certain histories and affects upon anonymous (or collective) subjects, this is manifestly not the same as grappling with the full complexity with which the present is mediated through the past for each and every one of us. Further, textual materials—autobiographical or fictional—are unquestionably the scholar’s best window into this order of lived experience. In my own recent work on mobility and memory,¹⁶ I have thus been forced to depart from otherwise enabling posthumanist or non-representational frameworks

on account of my ongoing interest in a variety of cognitive processes such as reverie and memory. I would like to think, however, that the resulting methodological tension is one that can be embraced by scholars working in a field such as mobilities as a thought-provoking instance of how humanist textual criticism exposes a limit-point in posthumanist approaches to the social and cultural world. On this point it is interesting to observe that one of the journal's mission statements (quoted by Mom in his article published in 2017) is cast in markedly posthumanist rhetoric ("(t)ransfers . . . might be thought of in terms of circulations, assemblages, entanglements, mobile social practices, networks of movement, moving onward, migrations, and the choreographies of bodies within practices of transport"¹⁷). While this is a statement that will doubtless resonate with authors who have already conceptualized their research in posthumanist terms, there are others for whom it might prove alienating—which is precisely why we are compelled to consider what more human-centered research might contribute to the topics and debates in which we are all interested.

In the short space available here I have done my best to draw out the historical blindspots and limitations of literary scholarship—especially that which takes the form of literary criticism—as well as to highlight the benefits of text-based research. As Peter Merriman has observed in several of his commentaries on mobile methods,¹⁸ the source materials associated with more traditional humanities scholarship must not be overlooked notwithstanding the benefits of the many innovative "mobile methods" now employed. Written texts are often the only means of accessing the full complexity of our experience of mobility given that ethnographic methods such as interviews rarely yield the same degree of reflexivity or honesty. Indeed, it is often the incidental information in which textual narrative is embedded that reveals the most about the situation or practice under investigation. In addition, and as noted above, textual materials typically locate an experience or event in time in ways that other data fails to do and alert us to the fact that our cognitive and embodied practices are often at odds with one another. In other words, to an outsider I may be presumed to be immersed in the here and now of an "entanglement" of events, affects, and processes, but my thoughts might be somewhere else entirely.¹⁹ This is precisely the sort of cognitive dissonance that literary texts—both fiction and non-fiction—capture so well and lend important food for thought to all manner of social and cultural applications.

For me, the fact that what we are often thinking about is not the present but the past or the future is also germane to understanding global events like the current pandemic or climate change. Much of what has so far been written about the pandemic, for instance, is from the perspective of the present; scholars, journalists, and the general public recording what they see unfolding before their eyes—and how certain changes might fast-track us to a brighter future—without recognizing how the event is simultaneously being

“laid down as a memory”²⁰ whose significance will only be revealed over time. For those at the sharp end of this catastrophe, the long-term consequence for daily life is not new working patterns or transport futures but the negotiation of loss. Indeed, it is perhaps only when enough of our COVID-related experiences have sedimented in the memory of both individuals and the public at large that we shall be able to establish a meaningful perspective on what we have lived through and what we can, and should, take forward. At this juncture, literary texts—and their commentators—potentially have a great deal to offer. As the “noise” of the lifting of lockdown reverberates throughout the world it will, for example, be interesting to see how many people continue to remember, and value, our “silent” spring, or whether the often highly mobilized “routines of everyday life” that Sheller invokes in her article here²¹ will equate to a headlong rush back to modernity. At the very least, we shall understand more about the complex human cost of the “strange times” we are living through from the perspective of 2030 than we do now.

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Notes

1. Gijs Mom, “Trending *Transfers*: A Decade of New Mobility Studies through the Lens of Transmodality, Transnationalism, and Transdisciplinarity,” this issue.
2. Ibid.
3. Sasha Disko, “The World Is My Domain: Technology, Gender and Orientalism in German Interwar Motorised Literature,” *Transfers* 1, no. 1 (December 2011): 44–63; Frederike Felcht, “Constantly in Motion: Appropriation and Hans Christian Anderson’s Texts,” *Transfers* 2, no. 3 (December 2012): 81–96; Heather Joyce, “Landscapes of Englishness in the Postwar Railway Poetry of John Betjemen and Philip Larkin,” *Transfers* 4, no. 2 (June 2014): 49–67; Sunny Stalter-Pace, “Underground Theatre: Theorising Mobility through Modern Subway Drama,” *Transfers* 5, no. 3 (December 2015): 4–22; Special Issue, “Print Culture, Mobility and the Pacific, 1920–1950,” *Transfers* 7, no. 1 (March 2017): 26–212.
4. Peter Merriman and Lynne Pearce, “Mobility and the Humanities,” *Mobilities* 12, no. 4 (August 2017): 493–508; special issue also published in book form as Peter Merriman and Lynne Pearce, *Mobility and the Humanities* (London: Routledge, 2018).

5. Lynne Pearce, “Mobility, Method and Textual Practice: Re-reading Thomas Hardy’s *The Woodlanders*,” in *Place to Place and Time to Time: Movement and Change in Language, Literature and Society*, ed. Joel Kuortti and Sirrku Kuokkeinen (Amsterdam: John Benjamins 2020), 21–46; Marian Aguiar, Charlotte Mathieson, Lynne Pearce, “Introduction,” in *Mobilities, Literature, Culture*, ed. Marian Aguiar, Charlotte Mathieson, Lynne Pearce (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 1–34.
6. Mimi Sheller and John Urry, “The New Mobilities Paradigm,” *Environment and Planning A*, 38 (2006): 207–226.
7. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturalism* (London: Routledge, 1992); Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).
8. Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880–1918* (London: Methuen, [1983] 2000).
9. Merriman and Pearce, *Mobility and the Humanities*; Aguiar, Mathieson, and Pearce, *Mobilities, Literature, Culture*.
10. Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (London: Routledge, 2006).
11. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).
12. Emma Short, *Mobility and the Hotel in Modern Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2020); Elsa Court, *The American Roadside in Emigre Literature, Film and Photography 1955–1975* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Erica Durante, *Air Travel Fiction and Film: Cloud People* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). For full details of books now published in this series see Palgrave Macmillan, “Studies in Mobilities, Literature, and Culture,” <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/series/15385> (accessed 25 November 2020).
13. Georgine Clarsen, *Eat my Dust: Early Women Motorists* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Gijs Mom, *Atlantic Automobolism: Emergence and Persistence of the Car* (London: Berghahn, 2015); Lynne Pearce, *Drivetime: Literary Excursions in Automotive Consciousness* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); Stéphanie Ponsavady, *Cultural and Literary Representations of the Automobile in French Indochina: A Colonial Roadshow* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Catharine Coleborne, “Consorting with ‘Others’: Vagrancy Laws and Unauthorised Mobility across Colonial Borders in New Zealand from 1877 to 1900,” in David Lambert and Peter Merriman, eds., *Empire and Mobility in The Long Nineteenth Century, Studies in Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 36–151; Marian Aguiar, *Arranging Marriage: Conjugal Agency in the South-Asian Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).
14. It is impossible to cite all the figures that have contributed to these fields but landmark texts include: John Law and John Hansard, *Actor Network Theory and After* (Oxford: Blackwell-Wiley, 1999); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (London: Routledge, 2008); Manuel DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory* (Speculative Realism) (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).
15. Merriman and Pearce, “Introduction”; Pearce, “Mobility, Memory and Textual Practice”; Aguiar, Mathieson, and Pearce, “Introduction”.

16. Lynne Pearce, *Mobility, Memory and the Lifecourse in Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
17. Mimi Sheller and Gijs Mom, "Editorial," *Transfers* 7, no. 2 (Summer 2017): vii-x.
18. Most notably, Peter Merriman, "Rethinking Mobile Methods," *Mobilities*, 9, no. 2 (2014): 167-187.
19. Lynne Pearce, "Routine and Revelation: Dis-embodied Urban Mobilities," in *Routledge Handbook for Urban Mobilities*, ed. Claus Lassen, Vincent Kauffman, and Ida Sofie Gotzsche Lange (London: Routledge), 205-213.
20. See Henri Bergson, "Memory of the Present and False Recognition" in *Time and the Instant: Essays in the Physics and Philosophy of Time*, ed. Robin Durie (Manchester: Clinamen Press, [1908] 2000), 36-63; discussed in Pearce, *Mobility, Memory and the Lifecourse*, 61-64.
21. Mimi Sheller, "Ten Years of Transfers: Mobility Studies and Social Change during a Pandemic," this issue.