Editorial

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This is the twelfth issue of *Transfers*, and perhaps it is time to stop calling it a “new” journal! Our “baby” is growing up, thriving in an expanding landscape of interdisciplinary mobilities research. *Transfers* is maturing into a robust vehicle for global conversations.

Our rather ambitious mission has been both conceptual and empirical: to “rethink mobilities” and provide publishing opportunities for innovative research. For us, that has been exemplified in our commitment in several areas. Most importantly, we fly the flag for the new theoretical approaches that continue to move the field beyond the social sciences, where the “new mobilities paradigm” was first articulated.¹ We position ourselves as part of a vibrant intellectual project that bridges theoretical developments and research agendas in the humanities and the social sciences.

The project is carried forward by an array of colleagues who do not always fit into neat disciplinary boundaries. So far our authors include sociologists, historians, geographers, cultural theorists, philosophers, museum practitioners, activists, artists, literary scholars, policy analysts, ethnographers, engineers, and town planners.

We have been strong in publishing research on historical mobilities and have placed particular emphasis on spanning the relationship between past practices, contemporary policy, and future directions. Roads, bicycles, walking, airports, trains, cars, ships, motorcycles, rickshaws, cinema, mobile phones, mules, migrants, sausages, and the manifold interconnections between them have all been part of the historical mix. We have taken a special role in promoting scholarship that draws on the transfers between communication, media, and mobilities scholarship. In the pipeline is more work on the value of critical mobility approaches for re-reading travel writing.

Of all our priorities, however, one of the areas that gives us great satisfaction is our success in eliciting (and sometimes mentoring into publication) submissions from beyond the “usual suspects” of Western scholarship. So far we have taken a particular interest in tracking local perspectives on the rickshaw and its many variants. We have approached rickshaws as mediums of sociality, objects of political contestation, and part of the multi-modal transport mix in a range of modern Asian cities. We have done so, not just to foster a much-needed expansion in the geographical reach of mobilities scholarship, nor just to understand better the history, cultural meanings, and

environmental impacts that surround this fascinating vehicle, but also as a way of interrogating the notion of “modernity” itself. The studies we have published constitute a much-needed antidote to assumptions that have lasted all too long in the West: that modernity follows a linear trajectory, from West to East, and that it is mainly connected to the train and the automobile.

That cultures of mobilities can take unexpected U-turns has been amply demonstrated in the recent challenges to the dominance of automobiles in a growing number of cities. We could point to New York, that exemplary modernist city, which under transport commissioner Janette Sadik-Khan and Mayor Michael Bloomberg has seen the beginnings of an astonishing reinvention, one that is notably low-tech and low-cost. New York was the city that famously saw Robert Moses’ modernist dream to rebuild it into a free flowing automobile metropolis turn into a nightmare. For the past fifty years, New York’s image seemed permanently welded to congested and gridlocked “mean streets.” Today, however, Times Square is a vehicle-free plaza with granite pavers and bench seating, alongside sixty other new pedestrian precincts. There are rapid bus lanes, 600 km of dedicated bicycle lanes, and last year a hugely popular bike-share program was launched, with tens of thousands of bikes and more than three hundred parking stations, priced to provide affordable short rides. New York is just one of the many cities that illustrate how mobile modernities can loop and twist in unpredictable ways.

Mobilities are volatile and changeable indeed, and in this our second Asia edition, we again pay attention to diverse mobile modernities in a region that increasingly shapes our world. As William Steele and Weiqiang Lin assert in their introduction to our Special Section on Rethinking Mobility History in Asia, the articles represent a move to evade the constraints of Western academic ethnocentrism and place agency in Asian hands. The three articles explore Asian agency to create and distribute new products and practices, to assert national power, to imagine mobile futures, and to chart divergent historiographies. In the first of the articles, Michael D. Pante’s “Racialized Capacities and Transgressive Mobility: ‘Asian’ Laborers and ‘Western’ Urban Transportation in Colonial Manila and Singapore,” turns to modernity’s impacts on subjectivity by directing our attention to the subversive power of “native” drivers in the Philippines and Singapore to resist the colonial definition of modern vehicles as the province of their colonial “betters.” Next, Kate McDonald revisits the equation of mobility with modernity in Japan. “Imperial Mobility: Circulation as History in East Asia under Empire” uses Japanese debates over the historical meaning of railways to consider how transportation became intertwined with Japanese and American imperial ambitions in Asia.

William Steele then returns us to our earlier interest in rickshaws, this time taking us East of the Indian subcontinent to the place of their origin in Japan. “Mobility on the Move: Rickshaws in Asia,” displaces the standard narrative of modernity as a Western creation by tracing the vehicle’s invention,

distribution, and adaption to other parts of Asia in the *fin de siècle*. We invited India specialist Kevin Hannam to comment on this set of historical articles from a more theoretical perspective, as we like to present our material from a multidisciplinary perspective.

In the two articles outside of the special section, we stay with historical analyses of mobilities in Asia, this time in colonial Indochina and in the western Yunnan Province of China. In “*Indigènes* into Signs: Incorporating Indigenous Pedestrians on Colonial Roads in 1920s and 1930s French Indochina,” Stéphanie Ponsavady brings together the insights of literary studies, historical studies of French colonialism, and critical mobility perspectives to provide us with a subtle view of colonial relations in Indochina in the 1920s and 1930s. She shows how the simple practice of walking by indigenous people on roads, which colonists had envisaged as spaces for the flow of their automobiles, constituted a challenge to colonial power. Ma Jianxiong and Ma Cunzhao, in “The Mule Caravans of Western Yunnan: An Oral History of the Muleteers of Zhaozhou,” examine the far-flung networks of mobility that centered around tight-knit communities of muleteers, whose caravan trade once linked southwest China, southeast Asia, and Tibet. They provide a vision of a mobile frontier that is yet little known in the West. Like we did in our previous Asia issue, this contribution has been transcribed and translated in-house, by our editorial team member and sinologist Nanny Kim, before it was subjected to our usual double-blind refereeing process. We call upon scholars writing in languages not easily transferable into English, to contact us if they would like to propose similar projects that would fit in this journal’s mission to “rethink mobility.”

Most of our review sections in this issue (i.e. book, film, art, and museum reviews), are dedicated to the Asian region of the world, testifying to our ambition to have at least half of our annual editorial space dealing with non-Western topics and authors. This is also true for Victor Seow’s contribution to our polemical Ideas in Motion section “Fuels and Flows: Rethinking Histories of Transport and Mobility through Energy”. Seow takes us through episodes in the global history of transport to provide a timely reminder of the dearth of scholarship on the relationship between mobility and energy production.

We trust that, like us, you will be stimulated by and enjoy what we have brought together for you in this edition.

Notes

1. Mimi Sheller and John Urry, “The New Mobilities Paradigm,” *Environment and Planning A* 38 no. 2 (2006), 207.