

Race and the Politics of Mobility

Introduction

Judith A. Nicholson, *Wilfrid Laurier University*,
and Mimi Sheller, *Drexel University*

Race matters. “Too often scholars discuss mobility in the abstract, assuming or omitting the highly consequential matter of the identity of those who move and its effects on how they move.”¹ This special issue on Mobility and Race has invited contributors to rethink how unequal relations of power inherent in both mobility and race shape a racialized mobility politics. The articles that follow examine what Cotten Seiler has called the “racialization of mobility,”² meaning the ways in which “the modern practices and institutions of mobility have been and remain highly racialized.”³

In this special issue, Tim Cresswell explores the mutual constitution of blackness and mobility in the context of the United States; Sarah Sharma and Armond R. Towns examine the production of whiteness during Los Angeles gang tours; Amie McLean examines hierarchies of race and mobility in the long haul trucking industry in British Columbia, Canada; Bradley Rink explores the effects of relational practices and micropolitics of race, class, and identity on one South African bus service; and Tamara Vukov examines how mobility becomes racialized at the “smart” border. These articles are linked through their focus on intersections of racial politics and mobility politics in three white-settler countries: the United States, Canada, and South Africa.

The notion of racial politics posits that a wide variety of unequal relations of power shape, and are shaped, through the racialization of some groups and not others in different contexts, eras, and encounters. In white-settler countries such as Canada, the United States, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, the notion of racial politics further posits that differential racialization is mapped onto a racial ascendancy, which is based on a hierarchy of white over dark. A racial ascendancy endures in white-settler countries centuries after Europeans colonized Indigenous territories and after other peoples from many corners of the world have migrated to these countries.⁴ In South Africa’s case, the racial ascendancy was state-sanctioned further in the form of apartheid from 1948 to 1994. Unequal relations of power in everyday and institutionalized forms give racism its multiple and pernicious dimensions, aid in securing the continued dominance of whiteness, and galvanize critical race theorizing and other forms of activism.⁵ This special issue



addresses these matters by considering race as a consequence of mobility politics.⁶

The notion of mobility politics posits that unequal relations of power shape, and are shaped through mobility.⁷ Despite scholarly attention paid in recent years to how multiple and differential mobilities shape mobility politics, for example, in relation to gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and age,⁸ surprisingly little scholarship currently focuses on intersections of mobility and race. The latter takes different forms at different scales, and in different times and places, but too often these have been addressed in widely disparate disciplinary fields such as migration studies, transport studies, cultural studies, surveillance studies, and postcolonial studies. We believe that mobilities research and critical race theorizing can be productively brought together to further expose the dynamic processes of racialization that take place across different scales and time. This special issue is important because, undeniably, “nearly every aspect of our everyday lives is shaped in crucial ways by race,”⁹ including mobility.

In this special issue we propose to explore these questions: How do mobility and race intersect in historical and contemporary practices, experiences, and representations? How can race and mobilities be brought together, theoretically and methodologically, in studies of transportation, communication, and media that open up new perspectives? How can a deeper historicization of colonial and postcolonial paradigms of racial mobilities inform how we understand race and mobility today?

Histories of human migration and histories of transportation are crucial starting points for thinking about the relation between theories of race and mobilities in white-settler countries. Studies of the transatlantic slave trade emphasize that from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century there was an interconnected transoceanic economy connecting Africa, the West Indies, North America, and Europe, into a world economy that led to the displacement of indigenous populations, the massive coerced migration of Africans, and the migrations of Europeans into the new World, including the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and Portugal in the fifteenth century; the migration of indentured contract laborers from India and China into the Caribbean in the nineteenth century; the movements of people within and beyond the Caribbean in search of employment especially in the mid- to late twentieth century; the ongoing flow of migrants from Central America and Mexico into the United States today; the steady rotation into Canada from Mexico, the Caribbean, and the Philippines of temporary workers who labor in homes as nannies and domestics or on farms as seasonal pickers; and the ongoing flow of undocumented laborers into South Africa from neighboring countries. Some of these migrants and temporary workers send a large amount of their wages home in the form of remittances in order to support their families, thus further extending the transoceanic economy into the current era.¹⁰

These histories of human migration and encounters across difference have imbued race with significant meanings that are contingent on time, place, and mobility politics. For example, in mid-summer 2015, more than 200,000 Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian descent faced expulsion from the Dominican Republic, although many can trace their family roots in the country over eight decades.¹¹ In light of the threat, Haitian American author Edwidge Danticat commented, “[t]hese days, it seems that black bodies are more threatened than they have ever been so far in this century.”¹² Without eliding the daily tragedies playing out across Europe as thousands of Syrian and other African refugees risk their lives to reach European countries, or ignoring Australia’s controversial detention of asylum seekers who reach its borders in rickety ships and boats, or glossing xenophobic attacks on migrant workers in Durban, Johannesburg, and other parts of South Africa, or overlooking the unsolved disappearance and murder of thousands of Indigenous women in Canada including many along a stretch of highway now called “The Highway of Tears,”¹³ in the months leading up to the publication of this special issue, the U.S.-based Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement gained momentum in the wake of video-recorded violent arrests or deaths of African-American men who were in police custody.¹⁴ BLM activists assert that the victims were racially profiled while driving, then detained and permanently immobilized by police.

This racial profiling, commonly known as DWB (Driving While Black or While Brown),¹⁵ and DWI (Driving While Indian),¹⁶ describes the frequency with which racialized automobile drivers are stopped by police, detained, and sometimes searched. This surveillance practice, which impedes the automobility of racialized drivers and ascribes criminal intent, is a familiar example of how mobility and race intersect, though it is often not connected to its deeper historical antecedents in slavery and the control of mobility.¹⁷

Scholarship on intersections of mobility and race has focused largely on automobilities because of its significance in modern life.¹⁸ For example, in an essay titled, “Driving While Black,” Paul Gilroy has analyzed the deep link between racial cultural performances of automobility and the African-American search for freedom, arguing that “automobiles acquired a particular significance in the context of the U.S. racial nomos—a legal and spatial order—that secured segregation and promoted the reproduction of racial hierarchy.”¹⁹ Gilroy argues that a “distinctive history of propertylessness and material deprivation” actually “have inclined African Americans towards a disproportionate investment” in automobiles and a “receptivity to the pleasures of auto-autonomy as a means of escape, transcendence, and, perhaps fleetingly, also of resistance.”²⁰ Gordon Pirie notes a similar regard of singular black drivers in the context of apartheid South Africa.²¹ In a testament to how race and mobility are coproduced, Pirie argues that “[r]epetitive apartheid mobility practice sedimented a mobility pigmentocracy.”²²

Historians of transportation, race, and mobility have contributed further important understandings to the relation between racial politics and transportation systems through which mobility was controlled. Racialized mobility systems in the United States originate in the system of slavery and its coercive and violent controls over black mobility.²³ But modern unequal mobility regimes are also grounded in the reactions against the abolition of slavery and the backlash against the Reconstruction era, which produced efforts at segregation codified as Jim Crow laws. This led into a long history of conflicts over segregated street cars and public transit in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century; the Great Migration out of the South and into the Northern Cities largely in the 1920s–1930s, with the Pullman Porters becoming the largest black employer in the country; and then the crucial struggles of the Civil Rights era to gain equitable access to urban transit systems and public spaces along with voting rights, education and other elements of full citizenship, exemplified by the figure of Rosa Parks.²⁴

In the United States, since the age of abolition, historians have detailed specific regional histories of some of the racial politics of automobility and transit, highlighting the experience of African Americans.²⁵ In the nineteenth century, for example, whites used streetcar segregation to establish racial categories and boundaries, and shape urban space.²⁶ Through the use of these innovative “clean” vehicles, whiteness became linked with new technology, speed, and industrial modernization. According to Geoff Zylstra, “The measure of control that streetcar companies and conductors exerted over the streetcars was an effort to reproduce white dominance and privilege by making these benefits appear to be a natural part of the social and technological organization of the city.”²⁷ In the twentieth century, whites would instead use automobility to “secede” to the suburbs.²⁸

In both Canada and the United States, the national railroad was an important site where racial politics and transportation systems intersected. The Pacific Coast portion of the national Railway in Canada was built on appropriated Indigenous lands and, as in the United States, was constructed by thousands of male Chinese migrants who labored under dangerous conditions and were then blocked by the federal governments of the day from bringing over their wives and children either to Canada or the United States.

In South Africa, the historical role of transport technologies in racializing mobilities occurred even in the context of pre-apartheid politics. Writing about train travel in the decades before official apartheid in South Africa, Gordon Pirie notes that “fare-based travel classes which had been previously open to people of any race acquired connotation of colour: ‘First Class’ came to mean ‘Whites Only’; ‘Third Class’ was short for ‘Blacks Only.’ In an infinitely complex and fluid lexicon, ‘Second Class’ denoted any seating arrangement that testy or tired conductors and passengers would tolerate at one or another moment.”²⁹ These particular histories of transportation highlight that racial

politics often intersect with gender and class dynamics, which also shape and are shaped by mobility politics.

There is also a more contemporary literature within the field of transportation equity that has highlighted the inequitable race and class distribution of transport access today.³⁰ This has created what Cresswell calls the “mobility poor,” who in the United States are predominantly black, Latino/a, and racialized immigrant populations. Racial and class inequalities are a crucial axis for the differentiation of network capital, arising out of long histories in the United States, Canada, and South Africa of racial and class discrimination in mobility rights and freedoms, which carried over into the age of automobility.³¹

Mobility and race have intersected historically, and they intersect today, in unequal relations of power that make mobility racially loaded in particular moments while also making racial processes, racialized spaces, racialized identities, including whiteness, deeply contingent on differential mobilities. We introduce this special issue with Tim Cresswell’s article, “Black Moves: Moments in the History of African-American Masculine Mobilities,” which productively explores the mutual constitution of blackness and mobility through a series of vignettes. While not being exhaustive, these brief glimpses at racialized mobilities point toward the different scales and registers of mobilities research, being concerned with bodily movements such as sports, dancing, or simply walking, and their relation to policing; vehicular movements such as driving or riding transit; and transnational movements such as the slave trade and migration. Each of these produces racialized space in different ways, and is accompanied by different narratives about race. Cresswell’s concept of “black moves” offers a new lens for bringing into focus how race makes mobilities, and mobilities make race. This piece connects directly to Sarah Sharma and Armond R. Towns’s “Ceasing Fire and Seizing Time: LA Gang Tours and the White Control of Mobility,” which focuses on “white moves” and the ways in which “white mobility” produces racial space. Through a study of LA Gang Tours through South Central, Los Angeles, this article demonstrates how whiteness is enacted through privileged ways of moving with security, even in areas that are experienced by inhabitants as insecure. This experience of “safe passage” then becomes a pretext and justification for white gentrification, “paving the way” for white control of mobility.

We then turn to Amie McLean’s “Four Guys and a Hole in the Floor: Racial Politics of Mobility and Excretion among BC-Based Long Haul Truckers,” which looks at white truckers’ racializing narratives in the long haul trucking industry in British Columbia. Here the emphasis is on the construction of Indo-Canadians as “bad” mobile subjects, and how this contributes to the racial distinction of white Canadians as “good” mobile subjects, and as more legitimate citizens. This piece brings out how relations between race and mobilities span multiple scales at once, entangling interpretations of the meanings of the vehicle, the highway, and international migration.

Turning to another setting of vehicular motion, Bradley Rink's "Race and the Micropolitics of Mobility: Mobile Autoethnography on a South African Bus Service," explores intersections of race, class, and identity during a daily commute from a Cape Town suburb in South Africa. Rink draws on elements of mobilities theory to bring out the embodied aspects of mobility inequality on the mundane daily bus journey, shedding light on the relation between the micropolitics and macropolitics of race, mobility, and propinquity in the specific context of post-apartheid South Africa.

Finally, the special issue is rounded out with a more theoretically informed piece by Tamara Vukov, who explores algorithmic and biopolitical means of racializing mobility control through the "smart" border. In "Target Practice: The Algorithmics and Biopolitics of Race in Emerging Smart Border Practices and Technologies," Vukov shows how the technologies that are alleged to avoid racial profiling by being more neutral, objective, and "smart" are in fact deeply implicated in the reproduction of racialized mobility regimes. Working at the intersection of mobility, media studies, and critical surveillance and race studies, she analyzes how four specific border technologies (biometrics, movement sensors, autonomous machines, and algorithmic data analysis) remake and extend the kinds of racialized mobility control highlighted by Seiler and by Cresswell.

Judith A. Nicholson is an associate professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada. Her research interests include mediated mobilities and mobilities and race. She has published in journals and collections, including *The Routledge Companion to Mobile Media* (2014); *The Wireless Spectrum: The Politics, Practices and Poetics of Mobile Media* (2010); *Canadian Journal of Communication* (2008); and *Fibreculture Journal* (2005). E-mail: jnicholson@wlu.ca

Mimi Sheller is a professor of sociology and founding director of the Center for Mobilities Research and Policy at Drexel University. She is founding co-editor of the journal *Mobilities*; associate editor of the journal *Transfers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Mobility Studies*; and serves on the Scientific Board of the Mobile Lives Forum, SNCF, France. She is the author of numerous articles and several books, including *Democracy after Slavery* (Macmillan, 2000); *Consuming the Caribbean* (Routledge, 2003); *Citizenship from Below* (Duke University Press, 2012); and *Aluminum Dreams: The Making of Light Modernity* (MIT Press, 2014). Her coedited work includes *Tourism Mobilities* (Routledge, 2004); *Mobile Technologies of the City* (Routledge, 2006); *The Handbook of Mobilities* (Routledge, 2013); and *Mobility and Locative Media: Mobile Communication in Hybrid Spaces* (Routledge, 2014). E-mail: mimi.sheller@drexel.edu

Notes

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2. *Ibid.*, 232.
3. *Ibid.*
4. See Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000); Sherene H. Razack, ed., *Race, Space and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2002); Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castañeda, Anne-Marie Fortier, and Mimi Sheller, eds., *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration* (Oxford: Berg, 2003); Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (London: Routledge, 2003).
5. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Katherine McKittrick, "On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place," *Social and Cultural Geography* 12, no. 8: 947–963.
6. Seiler, "Mobilizing Race," 230.
7. See Mark Simpson, *Trafficking Subjects: The Politics of Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Tim Cresswell, "Towards a Politics of Mobility," *Environment and Planning D Society and Space* 28, no. 1 (January 2010): 17–31; and Jacob Shell, *Transportation and Revolt: Pigeons, Mules, Canals, and the Vanishing Geographies of Subversive Mobility* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).
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10. See Jenny Burman, *Transnational Yearnings: Tourism, Migration and the Diasporic City* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010).
11. Edwidge Danticat, "Black Bodies in Motion and in Pain," *New Yorker*, 22 June 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/black-bodies-in-motion-and-in-pain> (accessed 23 June 2015).
12. *Ibid.*
13. See <http://www.highwayoftears.ca/> (accessed 20 August 2015).
14. See <http://blacklivesmatter.com/> (accessed 20 August 2015).
15. See Paul Gilroy, "Driving While Black," in *Car Cultures*, ed. Daniel Miller (New York: Berg, 2001), 81–104; Sikivu Hutchinson, "Driving While Black," in *Imagining Transit: Race, Gender, and Transportation Politics in Los Angeles* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 77–101.

16. See Sherman Alexie, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* (New York: Little, Brown, 2007).
17. See, for example, David Lambert, "Master-Horse-Slave: Mobility, Race and Power in the British West Indies, c.1780–1838," *Slavery and Abolition* (2015). doi:10.1080/0144039X.2015.1025487.
18. Mimi Sheller, "Racialized Mobility Transitions in Philadelphia: Urban Sustainability and the Problem of Transport Inequality," *City and Society* 27, no. 1 (April 2015): 70–91.
19. Paul Gilroy, *Darker Than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).
20. *Ibid.*, 20–21.
21. Gordon Pirie, "Colours, Compartments, and Corridors: Racialized Spaces, Mobility and Sociability in South Africa," in *Cultural Histories of Sociabilities, Spaces and Mobilities*, ed. Colin Divall (New York: Routledge, 2015), 39–51.
22. *Ibid.*, 43.
23. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*.
24. Simpson, *Trafficking Subjects*; Cresswell, *On the Move*.
25. See Sikivu Hutchinson, *Imagining Transit: Race, Gender, and Transportation Politics in Los Angeles* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2003); Kathleen Franz, "The Open Road," in *Technology and the African American Experience: Needs and Opportunities for Study*, ed. Bruce Sinclair (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 131–154; Cotten Seiler, "So That We as a Race Might Have Something Authentic to Travel By': African American Automobility and Cold War Liberalism," *American Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (2006): 1091–1117; Jason Henderson, "Secessionist Automobility: Racism, Anti-Urbanism, and the Politics of Automobility in Atlanta, Georgia," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 30, no. 2 (2006): 293–307; Jeremy Packer, "Of Cadillacs and 'Coon Cages': The Racing of Automobility," in *Mobility without Mayhem: Safety, Cars, and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 189–230; Art Blake, "Audible Citizenship and Automobility: Race, Technology and CB Radio," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2011): 531–553; Geoff Zylstra, "Whiteness, Freedom and Technology: The Racial Struggle Over Philadelphia's Streetcars, 1859–1867," *Technology and Culture* 52, no. 4 (2011): 678–702.
26. See Zylstra, "Whiteness, Freedom and Technology."
27. *Ibid.*, 685.
28. Henderson, "Secessionist Automobility."
29. Pirie, "Colours, Compartments, and Corridors," 41.
30. See Robert D. Bullard and Glenn S. Johnson, eds., *Just Transportation: Dismantling Race and Class Barriers to Mobility* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1997); Robert D. Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson, and Angel Torres, "Dismantling Transportation Apartheid: The Quest for Equity," in *Sprawl City*, ed. Robert D. Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson, and Angel Torres (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2000), 39–68; Robert D. Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson, and Angel Torres, *Highway Robbery: Transportation Racism and New Routes to Equity* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2004).
31. Cresswell, *On the Move*; Gordon Pirie, "Non-urban Motoring in Colonial Africa in the 1920s and 1930s," *South African Historical Journal* 63, no. 1 (2011): 38–60; Cotten Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).