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BOOK REVIEWS

Indigenous Agency and European Science: Exploring the Emergence of “Race” Across Seas and Centuries


In Science, Voyages, and Encounters in Oceania, 1511–1850, Bronwen Douglas brings together twenty years of research in an ambitious, stimulating, and engaging history. The book highlights the simultaneous and competing influences of indigenous agency, experiences in the field, and metropolitan theories about human diversity on the representations of Oceanic peoples produced by European voyagers. It also traces how European understandings of humanity were constructed via the circulation of knowledge between imperial centers and peripheries and the accumulation of knowledge from one encounter or voyage to another. The gradual emergence of the “science of race,” Douglas reveals, was affected by the regular movement of people and the constant exchange, accrual, and testing of their knowledge over space and time.

This history is told chronologically and in two parts. Beginning in the sixteenth century with so-called Indians, Negroes, and Savages in Terra Australis, the first part takes the reader through three stages—“Before Races,” “Towards Races,” and “Seeing Races”—from Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch exploration to British and French scientific expeditions, concluding at the turn of the nineteenth century. In Douglas’s own terms, this first part constitutes a “lexico-semantic history and an ethnohistory of ‘not race’” (33). In the second part, the scope narrows as Douglas concentrates on a series of French maritime expeditions that, unlike their predecessors, involved only naval staff—no civilian naturalists. They experienced Oceanic encounters and produced textual and visual representations of humanity in a climate of “hardening racial values and imperial rivalry in the metropole” and amid an array of “conflicting imperatives”—personal, official, and experiential (34). Despite its breadth, this history is thorough and scholarly. Douglas smoothly combines ethnohistory and the history of science, acknowledges the complexities of the historical record by considering, for example, the differences between textual and visual genres, and traces the shifting moods of her subjects by noting, for instance, the patterns and connotations of their language.

The book’s vibrant cover image provides an engaging and appropriate entry to this complex history. Truly a “graphic narrative” (33), it depicts the meeting between a boatload of voyagers from the Astrolabe and several men
of the island of Vanikoro in 1828. The Frenchmen are surrounded by Vanikoro Islanders on canoes and wading through the water. Without weapons, the men mingle and trade; one islander is seen helping to rig an awning to protect officers from the sun. Apparently, local men were the main agents in this scene, and their actions were friendly. Nonetheless, Captain Dumont d’Urville wrote in the official voyage account that the Vanikoro people were “timid, mistrustful, and naturally hostile to Europeans” (238). Douglas provides several convincing reasons for this dissonance, at the same time demonstrating the role of mobility in the development of a racial science. During the month they hosted the expedition, the islanders upheld local interests just as tenaciously as the French asserted their own; ultimately, frustration, insult, and “racial pride” leaked into d’Urville’s account. Reflecting metropolitan theories, d’Urville assigned these people to a so-called race: “like all those of the black Oceanian race,” he wrote, “this people is disgusting, lazy, stupid” (237). Furthermore, his perspective was influenced both by fresh memory of conflict at Tonga and an “imagined precedent” (238): it was apparently at Vanikoro that the La Pérouse expedition had foundered.

Like others, this description of humanity was constructed from imaginings, memories, experiences, and theories that themselves came together across years, ships, and lands and reflected the voyagers’ responses to the local people. Indeed, Douglas argues, such encounters as that of the d’Urville expedition at Vanikoro, and the corresponding representations, were profoundly influenced by indigenous agency and voyagers’ experiences and played a crucial role in feeding the natural history and science of Man.

From 1850, Europeans in Oceania moved within a colonial context and thus with different interests and greater freedom. Indigenous inhabitants adjusted their degrees and methods of resistance and adaptation. And ideas about human diversity, molded over centuries of encounters and ethnographies, congealed on paper and in minds; they colored maps and colonial policies. This study is therefore crucial to an understanding not only of mobility and the concept of race but also the history and contemporary politics of Oceania.

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An Exploration of the Metaphorical Power of Vehicles

Vehicles, be they airplanes, automobiles, or bicycles, have the obvious purpose of transporting people and things from one place to another. Yet this is not the only purpose they serve; among other things, they can be a basis for self-expression, elevated status, and fun. Less obviously, they can be important sources of the theme of this book: cultural metaphors. In keeping with this perspective, most of the contributors to this book are anthropologists, members of a discipline that has found considerable value in the applicability of metaphors, tropes, and figurative thinking to a variety of cultural practices.

The importance of vehicles as sources of metaphors is outlined in an introductory chapter by David Lipset, the volume’s coeditor, followed by his chapter on the metaphorical connection of canoes and humans in New Guinea. In an environment where traveling by canoe on lakes and the ocean is a central occupation, canoes and their constituent parts are sources of many metaphors found in the Murik community that occupies a portion of the island. So fundamental is their place in this community that canoes take on human aspects, while individual humans are perceived and understood in terms directly derived from canoes.

The following chapter, written by Richard Handler, the other coeditor, draws upon Erving Goffman while probing the cultural construction and reconstruction of roads, cars, and traffic. An important element of the chapter is a discussion of shifting attitudes concerning the primary purposes of roads from the preautomobile era to car-centric times. Building on Peter Norton’s research, Handler examines the social construction of a new type of road user, the jaywalker, whose deviance from norms derived from the primacy of automobiles threatens the safe and smooth flow of vehicular traffic.

A different sort of construction is analyzed by Kent Wayland: the “nose art” that decorated World War II combat aircraft. Almost invariably depicting a cartoon character or a young woman, the latter is of particular interest to the author, who narrates the significance of depictions of scantily clad females and what these images tell us about the gendering of weaponry. As Wayland points out, the identification of warplanes with women is a dual relationship: as with real women, the men flying, restoring, and maintaining these aircraft have a problematic relationship with their craft, one of affection mixed with the difficulty of dealing with them. With women as with vintage aircraft, domination and control emerge as key concerns.

The gendering of a technology is also the focus of Joshua Hotaka Roth’s contribution, which compares the gendered identities of two different classes of automobiles in Japan. Tiny kei cars, with their 660-cc engines, are considered the domain of women, whereas performance cars like the Mazda RX-8 are mostly driven by men. The respective cars have distinctive cultural penumbras; K-cars stand for domesticity, while performance cars exude an exuberant sense of freedom. They also occupy distinct spaces: neighborhood roads for the former and highways snaking through mountains for the latter.
But gender metaphors are subject to change, and the article concludes by noting present and possible future alterations of the nexus between gender and automobile type.

The metaphorical significance of cars is also the topic of Marko Živković’s narration of the enduring presence, if only in memory, of the Fića. A Fiat 600 design manufactured in Yugoslavia, the Fića is freighted with many meanings: a family’s first car, the nodal point in a network of reciprocal social relationships, and the object of improvised make-do repairs, to name a few. Of particular significance, the latter carried a fair amount of metaphorical freight in a postcommunist society that often appears to be “ungainly, disjointed, and inchoate” (126).

The theme of automobile as metaphor continues in Beth Notar’s linkage of cars and corruption in China. In late dynastic and republican times, automobiles had a dual identity as emblems of modernity and progress, but also of official status, power, and corruption. Today, cars are much more widely available, but still bear the taint of corrupt officialdom, especially when their drivers willfully flout traffic regulations. Ironically, with cars and other things, in present-day China the term “public” has come to convey official corruption, while “private” signifies the modest, law-abiding beliefs and actions of ordinary citizens.

Continuing in the theme of automobiles as metaphors, Ben Chappell views lowriders (customized cars with modified suspensions that allow them to ride low to the ground) as exemplary “metaxis,” which may be defined as an ambiguity or duality embedded in material and nonmaterial cultural elements. Here, the term is applied to the primary creators and owners of lowriders, Mexican Americans, many of whom, according to the author, bear ambivalent feelings that come from being part of American culture, yet still disconnected from it in a number of ways.

In the final chapter, Mark Auslander considers the paradoxical re-enactment of a lynching that occurred in Georgia in 1946. Although the re-enactors wore clothing appropriate to the time period, the car used for the simulated abduction of four young African Americans was a well-worn 1977 Lincoln Town Car owned by a middle-aged African American man. Auslander notes several reasons for this discrepancy, perhaps the most important being that it served to remind spectators that the horrendous event is not buried in the past, but continues to have relevance today.

The collection concludes with an afterword by James Fernandez that summarizes some of the main points of the preceding articles while noting an inherent tension in the discipline of anthropology, a discipline that is “problematically bridged” between scientific and humanistic approaches.

As with all collections, readers will differ in their assessments of the individual articles. In any event, despite some impenetrable passages, particularly in the introduction and the afterword, the book succeeds in demonstrating that
vehicles of all sorts may powerfully affect our ways of looking at the world, even as they help us travel through it.

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Automobile as Architecture


The importance of the privately owned automobile to the development of the industrialized world in the twentieth century is now widely acknowledged by scholars working in a variety of disciplines. Historians of space and place are scrutinizing the automobile ever more closely, and *Carscapes* is a welcome addition to their canon. Architecture is the focus of this new Yale release, but it goes far beyond a mere retrospective of parking garages and expressways. *Carscapes* focuses on the impact of the automobile on England’s built and natural environment, supported by a luxurious collection of artwork and photographs.

Published by Yale University Press in the United States on behalf of the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art (in cooperation with English Heritage), *Carscapes* practically overflows with beautifully reproduced images. These range from reproductions of vintage advertisements to historic plates and modern photos of architectural and landscape features. The quality of the images is exceptional, drawing on the Paul Mellon Centre’s extensive archives, as well as newly commissioned photography. This is far from a mere “coffee-table” book, however. Morrison and Minnis have created a well-researched narrative to go along with their carefully curated selection of photos and artwork. With extensive footnotes and a bibliography, *Carscapes* has the kind of intellectual firepower behind it that close readers will appreciate.

Although it can be read narrowly as a history of the automobile’s influence on English architecture, this work has greater ambitions. *Carscapes* discusses the impact of the car on English architecture at length, discussing how parking garages, service stations, and motorways evolved in their design. This material is interesting on its own, but the ways in which architecture is repeatedly connected to the controversies associated with mass automobile ownership is what makes the book a true standout. The authors address issues such as urban sprawl, pollution, safety, and the destruction of historic resources.
These are analyzed in the context of the English landscape and the changes wrought upon it by the introduction of the automobile. Protests against the impact of the automobile on English society are well covered, with antidevelopment campaigners getting their full due in the text. The successes and failures of various auto-centric development schemes are addressed in detail. The authors find that the British have a rather tortured relationship with the car, much like other Western societies. The automotive architecture of the British nation represents a delicate balancing act between the dream of mass automobile ownership on the one hand, and the preservationist impulses of a historically and aesthetically conscious populace on the other. In a landscape where virtually everything is invested with some historical or emotional significance, these desires are bound to clash. In creating this narrative, the authors are writing a history of space and place similar to that offered by Wolfgang Schivelbusch in *The Railway Journey*.

_Carscapes_ is more thematic than thesis-driven. It relies on the architectural theme to tie together many small threads, which works well in most instances but occasionally feels unsatisfying. Politically, _Carscapes_ skews toward the neoliberal. The authors generally come down in favor of private auto ownership and treat the machinations of city planners and bureaucrats with a healthy dose of skepticism. An odd swipe at the role of labor unions in the demise of the British auto industry is sure to wrinkle the noses of some readers. That said, there is sympathy here for those that protest the enormous social and economic costs of modern road construction, even if they are at odds with “progress.” Protest against auto-related development is appreciated as a serious and enduring feature of modern British political culture. With current concerns about climate change and sustainability growing ever more influential, the role of the car in the British landscape of the future is far from certain.

At over 400 pages, _Carscapes_ is a hefty volume that will take some time to read and appreciate fully. Even so, it is well worth the investment for anyone with an interest in the automobile, architecture, or British studies. No other authors have offered such an exhaustive treatment of architecture and the automobile in a European context.

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An Interdisciplinary Introduction to Music in Motion

Across the two volumes of *The Oxford Handbook of Mobile Music Studies*, editors Sumanth Gopinath and Jason Stanyek present a range of interdisciplinary perspectives as fluid and wide-ranging as the topics of music and mobility themselves. Tackling such topics as listening, musical markets, urban ecologies, popular music, dance, and video games, among others, *The Oxford Handbook of Mobile Music Studies* introduces significant questions and challenges to existing studies of both music and mobility. In addition to contributions from scholars working in such diverse fields as graphic design, sociology, instructional technology, music studies, electrical engineering, and dance, among others, the volumes emerge from multiple institutional initiatives, conferences, press editors, and other productive and creative collaborations. In this way, the texts echo the inherently resonant and diffuse history of sound media throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In their own scholarly output, Gopinath and Stanyek each perform the movements, interjections, and choreographies detailed throughout the collection, embodying a pluralistic notion of mobility that reflects the various migrations and cultural flows that define contemporary globalization. Gopinath’s *The Ringtone Dialectic* is a seminal work of mobile music studies, providing a historical snapshot in the emergence of cloud computing through the lens of aesthetic, political, and economic frameworks. Stanyek’s research deals with both Brazilian diasporic performance and the various historical echoes of music technology across the American mediascape. Together, their work provides crucial insight on the significance of music and mobility—namely, the fact that sound inherently exceeds its source, insidiously weaving through social and cultural space.

Insofar as they provide a conceptual umbrella for the intellectual diversity of the chapters, Gopinath and Stanyek’s introductions to each volume are the highlights of the collection. These critical overviews present not only cursory introductions and chapter summaries, but also unique frameworks and guides through which the reader can navigate the vast sea of ideas ahead of them. While many edited collections—on this scale at least—attempt to provide comprehensive and complete accounts of a given topic, *The Oxford Handbook of Mobile Music Studies* recognizes the incomplete and “silent” aspects of mobility studies, particularly in the context of music and sound media.

Approaching the collection from the perspective of a music scholar, I initially felt that the contributions were catering to a nonmusicological audience. At first glance, the chapters presented here come across as expansions and addendums to existing work published by these music scholars elsewhere. Jonathan Sterne’s “How the MP3 Became Ubiquitous” serves as a useful supplement to his book, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*; J. Martin Daughtry’s “Aural Armor: Charting the Militarization of the iPod” in Opera-
tion Iraqi Freedom” is a teaser for his forthcoming book, *The Amplitude of Violence: Confronting the Sounds of Wartime Iraq*; and Mark Butler’s “(In) Visible Mediators: Urban Mobility, Interface Design, and the Disappearing Computer in Berlin-Based Laptop Performances” provides interesting new perspectives on the work presented in *Playing With Something That Runs: Technology, Improvisation, and Composition in DJ and Laptop Performance*. At the same time, the authors are adept at catering to the handbook through the inclusion of alternative methods and perspectives—all of which coalesce in a rich narrative that creates a unique and enjoyable reading experience. In the end, it is the conceptual coherence of the volumes that allows them to appeal to both scholarly and nonacademic audiences across disciplines and professional industries.

Of course, the inclusion of sound into the already heterogeneous and emergent mix of mobility studies represents the most significant contribution of the volumes. The table of contents reads like a who’s who of music scholars involved in a multitude of emerging subdisciplines, from historical studies of sound, voice, and performance to transnational and intergenerational case studies in the broad and evolving industries of “mobile music.” Chapters from pioneering media theorists Jonathan Sterne and Michael Bull, as well as musicologist Martin Scherzinger, provide fitting introductions to the volumes, offering theoretical insights on the relationships between specific devices, technologies, and formats, and what Gopinath and Stanyek term “ideologemes” of “ubiquity,” “freedom,” and “instantaneity.” Sterne’s work on the MP3 and file compression offers a particularly unique and undertheorized outlet for media theorists to enter the world of mobility studies. Meanwhile, chapters from media and disability theorist Mara Mills, hip-hop scholar Justin Williams, and game sound scholar-practitioner Karen Collins present comprehensive case studies that combine technical and practical insights with a breadth of historical research. This transference of theory and practice represents a major theme across the volumes—one that is facilitated by the inherently mobile aspects of sound in everyday life.

In light of the various economic, social, political, and aesthetic contexts within which contemporary music and media operates, is it possible to pose the “mobile” as a cultural dominant—in Fredric Jameson’s sense—capable of supersed ing previous descriptors such as “global,” “cosmopolitan,” and “postmodern” (3)? Moreover, what might scholars and professionals gain in viewing the digital age as just one moment in a long history of “mobile sound culture” (2)? Balancing the fine line between theorizing the “mobile” and providing practical case studies of sound performances, Gopinath and Stanyek’s collection offers a useful conduit in the channeling of aesthetics and practices across cultural arenas. In doing so, they reveal the devices that have become so ubiquitous in the formation of a “global” culture to be more than just portable entertainment gadgets, as they also encapsulate national identities,
political ideologies, and entire microhistories of cultural communities from around the world.

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Nautch Girls, Kothis, and Bar Dancers: Mapping Public and Erotic Dance Cultures in Colonial and Contemporary India

Anna Morcom, Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance: Cultures of Exclusion (London: Hurst & Company, 2013), 320 pp., £45

Anna Morcom’s Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance is a well-researched book describing the processes of inclusion and exclusion of female public and/or erotic dancers and dance cultures in India. The book has six chapters, as well as an introduction and conclusion. Chapter 1 investigates discourses around hereditary performers (performers with endogamous membership to certain dance communities, notably devadasi and different nautch communities, including traveling dance troupes) in colonial as well as contemporary India. Morcom makes it clear that the discussions of values and morality, purity and impurity, victim and agency, and status and class that were ripe within the colonial context (the immoral nautch girl, for example) mirror similar concerns in contemporary kothi (men who perform as females) and Bombay bar dance cultures. Chapter 2 reviews the various public and erotic dance communities in postcolonial India; this chapter is a very concise and interesting introduction to the rise and fall of hereditary dancers in India. Chapters 3 to 6 go on to detail contemporary performing public and erotic dance cultures, showing how some cultures are struggling to remain respectable, safe, and in commission (notably kothi and bar dancers in Mumbai) while others (Bollywood dancers/dance culture) are thriving and enjoying newfound public acceptability in a globalizing India where consumption possibilities are numerous and changing rapidly. We get a sense of not only social shifts within the nation about who are acceptable public performers and why, but also what discourses of human rights, development, and marginality has meant for certain communities.

Morcom gives concrete examples of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) and international nongovernmental organization (INGO) worlds intersecting strongly with marginalized dance communities and how organizational use of universal human rights discourses can conflict with a more
personalized understanding of the value of aesthetic and dance identity. Indeed, dance identity and its related mobility is a key theme throughout the book. For example, Morcom interviews kothi who do not practice in their own states; rather, they cross borders to perform publicly as female dancers—their dance moves imbued with “the feminine touch” (194)—before returning home as male, often to their wives and children. Morcom shows how both the physical crossing of borders and the physical dance moves in context facilitate multiple gender identity performances that are at the heart of membership in traditional kothi communities. Of particular interest to me was chapter 4, which details the movement of Bollywood dance off the screen and into various urban (and rural) centers across India. This chapter responds to scholars such as Gopal and Moorti, Dudrah, and Dwyer, who have all made strong calls for greater research on the lived and everyday experiences of Bollywood culture in India. It discusses the rise of Bollywood dance in mainstream fitness, nightclub, and sangeet (organized wedding entertainment) venues across the country.

While overall the book is incredibly informative, and it is very clear Morcom has done extended research in the area, there are a few issues the reader should be aware of. First and foremost is structure. While I do appreciate that perhaps Morcom was trying to present the chapters using a linear timeline (from colonial issues to contemporary issues), having two chapters on kothi dancers and kothi culture and two chapters on colonial anti-nautch and modern anti-nautch campaigns (in the form of the bar girls ban in Mumbai) at opposite ends of the book meant having to flip back and forth between companion chapters to make sense of the communities as a whole. The confusing structure accounts for the repetition between and within chapters (the last chapter on kothi dancers in particular) and the choppy descriptions of actual dance performances themselves. Another issue is that contemporary interviews within the text are minimal; we briefly meet Bollywood dancer Justine and dance entrepreneur Guggun and members of the kothi community like Aamir and Narendra. Their interviews are gems appearing ever so briefly in the book before being overwhelmed by secondary text and analysis. While exploration of secondary text may meet one of the stated goals of Morcom’s book, which is to “understand the present through looking back into history” (28), the lack of narratives means the book does not always meet its other “ethical” aim, which is to “reveal unseen cultures” (27) and tell the stories of (contemporary) marginalized erotic performers for the first time.

Dance is mobility in practice, and throughout the book we are reminded of Dewsbury, who argues that dance allows us to think about the ontology of movement and mobility. Morcom’s book is an important contribution to the study of historical and contemporary production of trained bodies and the art of mobility in India. On the whole the book is valuable for scholars interested in performing arts in a globalizing India, and is particularly useful in
understanding how and why in a changing nation certain types of dance and performance gain status and capital, while others fall out of place.

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The Territory of Infrastructure

Maarten Van Acker, From Flux to Frame: Designing Infrastructure and Shaping Urbanization in Belgium (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2014), 464 pp., 400 black-and-white illustrations, €49.50

From Flux to Frame discusses the history of Belgian urbanization since the nineteenth century from the angle of its infrastructural development. Instead of considering infrastructure as a single technofunctional range of canals, railroads, tramlines, and highways, the book analyzes it as a mode of territorial occupation with social and economic roots, one that transforms the cultural landscape.

The book is a dense one with an intellectually ambitious goal: to understand the national and urban landscape through the cultural history of its infrastructure building. As shown through an enlarged literature review analyzed by the author, the “infrastructural turn” has now gained worldwide attention. Van Acker’s research can be considered part of what we could call the “Belgian school on infrastructures” in search of a broader renewed interpretation of the infrastructure term. Recent work in this vein includes The Landscape of Contemporary Infrastructure by Marcel Smets and Kelly Shannon, as well as the cartographic atlas Figures, Infrastructures by Bruno de Meulder and Bieke Cattoor. Smets and de Meulder supervised Van Acker’s doctoral research, and their work, like his, adopts the posture of respatializing infrastructure in order to contextualize it as a societal, political, and cultural artifact.

To investigate the spatiohistorical shaping of Belgium, From Flux to Frame focuses on three infrastructural sites, each one contextualized within their territorial environment: the region of Campine, the touristic North Sea coastline, and the Antwerp metropolis. Moving from chapter to chapter, Van Acker makes dramatic shifts in scale, period, and project. However, this apparently heterogeneous method also reveals crisscrossed stories and attitudes, and as such it succeeds in sketching the national territory’s modern construction.

Colonization of the Campine is described as a process of correlated industrialization and urbanization, progressively implemented thanks to a dense and diffuse infrastructural net. Van Acker discusses how this infrastructure is activated and stratified by three national monuments: the Albert Canal, the
Iron Rhine railway, and the Koning Boudewijn highway. The study shows in particular how the widespread and disorderly contemporary suburbanization can be understood as the result of a reinterpretation and spatial appropriation of the infrastructural network.

The next section presents a study on the North Sea coastline, developed along a linear orientation as the country’s premiere tourist resort and the result of a continuous interaction between multiple infrastructures. Here Van Acker shows how the natural and artificialized relief of the sea coastline, made of creeks and dunes, dikes and polders, serves both as a maritime defense system and a place for a real estate touristic El Dorado, favored by the local terrestrial network of tramlines and railroads.

Finally, the modernization of Antwerp during the last two hundred years is described from the perspective of its beltway, which functions as a palimpsest of successive infrastructure plans partially built, giving rise at each period to new visions mirroring the city’s key issues. Conceived as a ring road moving from the Promenade du Glacis—inscribed within the former military walls—to the natural parkway and from the urban highway to the Groene Singel (Green Belt), the road is here considered as a tectonics of urban visions, as well as a site for experimenting with new devices and spatial paradigms. Van Acker’s work evokes the pioneering study Des Fortifs au Périf by Jean-Louis Cohen and André Lortie, which covers the progressive transformation of the former Paris fortifications into its actual ring road, showing through this space-time study of visions, plans, and constructions how this territory shaped and reflected the tense relations between the city of Paris and its broader metropolitan region.

Van Acker’s materials for argumentation are impressively various and abundant. He uses texts, from technics to rhetoric, but also perspective views and advertisements, plans, cross-sections, and maps, some from archives and others designed by himself in order to clarify his own research. Scholars may regret the absence of specific comments on the visual dimension of these artifacts, focusing on unrealized and built projects, showing how ideas materialize and circulate through designs and visuals.

The whole project of From Flux to Frame opens up two stimulating perspectives for scholars of mobility. First, it aims to rethink urban history, taking the apparently decentered angle of the infrastructure to renew methodologies and goals. Second, it aims to renew the importance of infrastructure as a term through its contextualization within the urban realm.

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Interdisciplinary Journeys: Imagination and Transformation in Travel Studies


*Travel and Imagination* and *Travel and Transformation* represent the two latest installments in the Ashgate series Current Developments in the Geographies of Leisure and Tourism, which first appeared in 2012 and now includes (as of the date of this review) some eight volumes. As part of a series committed to the idea, as expressed on the publisher’s website, that “tourism and leisure exist within an inherently dynamic, fluid and complex world and are therefore inherently interdisciplinary,” both volumes consist of chapters contributed by a wide variety of scholars from the human sciences and the humanities working in travel studies. Both volumes offer complex, inquisitive, carefully researched attempts—many highly interdisciplinary in themselves—to grapple with the importance of these two stubbornly amorphous concepts that are nonetheless central to the ways travel has been practiced, marketed, and inscribed within contemporary global culture.

In an effort to trace common themes across chapters, the introductions to both books provide fine short essays in themselves, highlighting, for instance, in *Transformation*, how deeply the language of modernism still informs the ways we conceive of travel’s potential for inducing individual and cultural change; and, in *Imagination*, the importance of the body in mediating what tends to be thought of as a more cognitive or meditative process. Both volumes also open with a stage-setting “prelude” consisting of a short, original piece of travel writing. Simone Lazaroo’s “Transit,” from *Imagination*, is especially effective and memorable in this respect, illustrating how a single journey continues to evolve in the memory, even up to an individual’s final moments.

Below I have tried to highlight those contributions to both volumes that feature theoretical concepts or approaches with the potential for wider deployment or that approach the topics of imagination and transformation from especially innovative, revealing, or unexpected angles.

*Imagination* opens with a section on “Mobile Identities” and two chapters that brilliantly illustrate why bodies matter when we talk about travel and imagination. In the case of “Embodied Travel: In Search of the Caribbean Self in Tropical Places and Spaces,” Jennifer D. Adams traces the intersecting and
colliding identities she experiences as an American academic returning to her mother’s native Jamaica. Ultimately, Adams cultivates a “hybrid” identity in part grounded in the knowledge her mother imparted to her about the foods and plants of the island, which in turn lends her a kind of common language with many of the native Jamaicans she encounters. Harriet Bell examines how her own limited mobility due to multiple sclerosis has conditioned her imagination to operate on two coproductive levels. As she plans and maps out a journey, “[i]magining the experience of sensation of being in places—and moving through them—has become part of my coping strategy for dealing with my loss of mobility” (41). At the same time, she imagines an “un-bodied version of myself,” weightless and capable of flight, undertaking the same journey (42).

“Visual, Media, Representation” offers two of perhaps the strongest chapters in the book, although, having long admired the work of filmmaker Werner Herzog, I should allow for some potential bias in the case of Gabriella Calchi-Novati’s “‘Where All the Lines of the Map Converge’: Werner Herzog’s Ekstatic Imagination and Performative Thresholds.” Aside from the insight it offers into Herzog’s *Encounters at the End of the World* (2009), Calchi-Novati’s concept of the “ekstatic imagination” is a rich one with the potential to unlock how the imagination engages with the world in a wide range of texts. The concept hinges on the understanding of the imagination being “always already in transit” (143) but, somewhat paradoxically, being most alive or transformative in moments of stillness or liminality within travel. For thinking about the evolving nature of the traveling imagination in the unsettled, vibrant space John Urry calls “post-tourism,” there is perhaps no more fertile investigative ground, as Shanna Robinson explores, than the phenomenon of traveling toy mascots. What struck me most about her careful, revealing study of traveling toy culture is how socially engaged and community-oriented the practice is, both on-site and online, where travelers post pictures of their toys as they “tour” a destination. Rather than embodying an “anthropomorphization” triggered by feelings of social alienation, she sees “evidence of a desire to creatively and imaginatively engage with travel spaces and touristic encounters” (155). Also worth mentioning from this section is Sean Williams’s revealing analysis of the mixed promise of matter transfer in science fiction—an indispensable “advance” that essentially renders the whole concept of the “journey” obsolete and presages a more “claustrophobic” future where “everybody in the world is in immediate contact with everyone else” (170).

The book’s closing section, “Unsettling Imaginations,” includes a notable chapter examining video testimony of Holocaust survivors who felt compelled, much later in life, to revisit the concentration camps at Birkenau and Auschwitz. In addition, Martha Pearce offers a cautionary tale of sorts with respect to the traveling imagination in her analysis of the *décollage* works of Andrea Chung, which consist of idealized, fantasy-driven images of the Ca-
ribean that include tears in the canvas revealing underneath the kinds of native bodies and histories that such images effectively erase.

Two chapters from the opening section of *Travel and Transformation*, on “Transformation Speculations,” recommend themselves for the careful attention they show to the cultural and socioeconomic politics of travel transformation. Drew Ninnis employs Foucault’s concept of “heterotopia” to probe Colin Thubron’s travelogue *To a Mountaintop in Tibet* (2011) and its understanding that the travel “space is expanded and elaborated by the many narratives that occupy it” (49)—including the kind of Orientalist narrative Thubron himself performs and self-critically questions. (Foucault, in fact, is cited in several other places in *Transformation* and becomes a somewhat unexpected advocate for the possibility of transformation, even a kind of freedom, through travel.) Fiona Allon and Maria Koleth offer a guardedly optimistic appraisal of the transformations afforded by volunteer travel. Their caution stems in part from the ways the burgeoning volunteer travel industry promotes its product essentially as a job skill—thus epitomizing the demands of a “down-sizing, competitive neoliberal market to render even … leisure time verifiably useful” (63). Despite the commodification of volunteer tourism, they argue that the “imaginative and material vitality” offered by such experiences has the power to transform the traveler politically and ethically (69).

“Transformation, Representation, Story” includes critical readings of the British novelist Geoff Dyer’s *Jeff in Venice/Death in Varanasi* (2009)—which offers a more satirical or bleak commentary on the kind of spiritual pilgrimage performed by Thubron—and the works of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. While not literary in focus, Shannon Walsh’s “The Nomad, the Refugee, the Developer, and the Migrant: Four Stories of Inner-City Travellers in Johannesburg, South Africa” struck me as performing the same kind of creative juxtaposition we see in the urban realism of Dickens or Balzac, with a wide cast of characters drawn from multiple levels of society. Despite the deep economic disparities between her subjects, Walsh uncovers an “entrepreneurial energy” that unites them all along the “passages and movements between the cracks in advanced capitalism” (120).

If we think of our contemporary moment as one of rapid, technology-driven travel transformations, the book’s section on “Transformation in Motion” underscores how much walking perhaps remains the preferred means of secular spiritual transformation. And while neither Leila Dawney, in her study of long-distance walkers on Britain’s South West Coast Path, nor performance artist Sarah Rodigari, in her analysis of her own peripatetic self-relocation from Melbourne to Sydney, invoke the concept of slow travel, they do end up illustrating the personal and social insights to be had by getting off the transportation grids that typically define the experience of mobility. Similar claims could be made for backpacker culture, as Amie Matthews explores in her contribution to this section, which tests how well the sociological model
of the rite of passage holds up when applied to this form of travel, ostensibly motivated by a wish to break with the familial and social spaces that define one’s youth and home identity. She argues, however, that “as our lives become increasingly globalized, and as communication and social networks extend, it is harder to see travel as a linear process from home to away, ordinary to extraordinary and back again” (162).

Taken together, these books showcase how different disciplines, all with a stake in understanding forms of contemporary travel and mobility, approach the same sets of concerns. Both volumes have a strong international feel to them: the editors, as with many of the contributors, are based in Australia, but both volumes include other contributions from scholars based in Europe, North America, and Asia. One leaves these books with a much deeper appreciation for why travel and mobility studies seem to have taken off so dramatically as fields of study across the academy: precisely because of the way they can serve as platforms for cross-disciplinary conversations that are vital, but perhaps all too rare, in an era of increasing academic specialization.

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Thinking Mobility through Driving in Film

Iain Borden, Drive: Journeys through Film, Cities and Landscapes (London: Reaktionbooks, 2013), 280 pp., £18

In 1963, Roland Barthes asked for someone to write a mythology of driving.¹ Today, the capacity to steer a car may become a superfluous human skill: autonomous cars have already completed nearly one million miles of test-driving on public roads. This seems to be a good time to ask how driving has been experienced and mediated in the last 130 years. In his book Drive, Iain Borden, professor of architecture and urban culture at the Bartlett School of Architecture in London, explores driving experiences through a close analysis of film, because cinema “provides the most direct sense of what it actually feels like to drive” (12). Drive is structured by the different speeds of driving: the first chapter, “Cities,” starts with filmic examples of urban driving around 30 miles per hour (mph), and chapter 2 takes the reader to existentialist “Journeys” with speeds around 55 mph. In the third chapter, “Motopia,” Borden lets us explore freeway driving in film, while the last chapter gives insights into the transcendental “altered states” of drivers at speeds of 100 mph or more. Over the course of the book, Borden discusses over 450 films. This quantity adds to
the strength of the book’s argument, but sometimes the reader might wish for a more detailed analysis of some films.

Borden’s book will inspire scholars who are interested in the phenomenology of driving. We know that driving a car signifies much more than simply steering from point A to point B. Borden gives us insight into the often mentioned but not yet enough analyzed “nontransport-based qualities” of car driving. What is going on when we drive a car, according to Borden, may be explained in three steps: a defamiliarization of the physical realm, which puts the driver in a contemplative state, thus allowing him to reimagine his identity. First, film teaches that driving has an important bodily effect because it transforms our gaze and changes our perception: while driving, the speeding car around us appears immobile but seems to animate stationary objects outside. The familiar becomes strange. “Driving helps us to forget what we know,” Borden says, “and to focus instead on what we simply see” (76). Second, this hypnotic mechanism animates us to connect the immediate present to “distant thoughts” while driving. Many films show “the road as space of contemplation” (154). Borden emphasizes that physical journeys are also psychological journeys. Referencing Steven Spielberg’s first movie, Duel, he explains that driving may connect us with “a primitive inner self” (87). Third, the parallel world of high-speed driving even has the power to plunge the driver into a transcendental transgressive state of being, which may be experienced as “reconfiguration.” That means that driving—like dreaming and movie watching—allows us to be at one place and another at the same time. It represents a state in between presence and dream, alertness and thoughtful digression, stasis and motion, life and death. In this sense, driving has a nearly therapeutic function. It helps “to negotiate the conflicts we feel in our lives, and, to some extent, transcend them through newly constructed attitudes, aspirations, beliefs and perceptions” (47). Finally, Borden affirms that the car is not only a means of transport, but also an important psychological tool “of emancipation, pride, independence, autonomy and self-expression” (47). This is especially validated in cinematographic representations of female drivers: the control of the car is a symbol of independence from the domestic sphere, as he details in a chapter about “Men and Women Drivers” (24–31). For African Americans, the neutrality and anonymity of the freeway offered protection from small-town violence and prejudices, says Borden (134), but this statement is not based on film sources. The question of driving and racial discrimination in film remains unfortunately rather a blind spot in his book.

Nevertheless, this journey into film history is an important contribution to our understanding of the cultural fascination of cars that are steered by humans. It helps to understand the specific subjectivity drivers produce by holding the steering wheel. Drive answers Roland Barthes’s call for a mythology of driving, emphasizing that it is “an existential condition whereby the driver seeks to confront, explore, express and produce the self through encountering
the world” (85) around him. The book is not only interesting for researchers working on car culture but for all scholars of mobility who are interested in the question of why people choose a specific mobility device and not another one. It helps to understand the emotional quality of mobility in general.

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**Note**


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**Walking Tour Guides of New York: Unique Ways to Engage with the City**


On my daily commute from Brooklyn to The Graduate Center, CUNY, located on New York’s Fifth Avenue, I moved through the same central streets that the author of *The Tour Guide* walked, only a year after the publication of the book. In these walks, as an ethnographer and a researcher interested in tourism mobilities, I always felt the urge to escape the classroom and hop onto one of those red bus tours that populate Fifth Avenue to learn how these official tours represent New York City, the kinds of tourists that enjoyed such excursions, and the labor conditions of those that day after day offered me tickets for a ride. It is from this standpoint that *The Tour Guide* has been an eye-opening reading. The book is a fresh ethnography of New York City from the perspective of walking tour guides, the exact opposite of the corporate tourism industry to which bus tour guides belong, and whose depiction of the city I considered somehow hegemonic. *The Tour Guide* thus offers a unique perspective on walking tourism, a modality of tourism that still has received very little academic attention.

Organized in seven chapters and three rich appendices, *The Tour Guide* is the perfect example of a thick ethnographic description: it provides an in-depth approach to the everyday practices of walking tour guides and the informal labor market to which they belong. And yet, the book is not just about tourism and its intersections with the informal economy; it is also about how this heterogeneous collective made of individuals with “untidy” and “chaotic
careers” (36) perform the city. The book’s main argument revolves around seven tensions that are tackled through the experiences of particular guides, the content and particularities of their tours, and the author’s extensive field notes regarding their personas, their self-representations and social worlds, as well as their power in reformulating the urban fabric. These tensions are the following: the tension between guiding as a profession or as a hobby, addressed in chapters 1 and 2; the tension of legitimacy and autonomy over the tour’s contents, discussed in chapters 2, 3, and 4; the tension of working as a freelancer or on behalf of a company, also addressed in chapters 2 and 3; the tension between the academic versus the autodidactic inclinations of guides; the tension between educative tours and more entertainment-oriented ones, both addressed in chapter 5; the tension between the city’s public interests and the guides’ private ones, portrayed in chapter 6; and the tension between being a local, a tourist, or a visitor in the walking tours, explored in chapter 7. As the author puts it, “this method of re-presentation makes this book a walking tour about walking tours” (13).

The book’s structure allows for the constant circulation of stories and dilemmas regarding the history of particular buildings and neighborhoods; it also highlights the guides’ unique perspectives on the city’s intention to professionalize this informal sector of the economy, the privatization of public space, and gentrification. Walking tour guides, as the author stresses, should thus be seen as unconventional intellectuals (12) who weave together bits and pieces of urban history, bringing them to life through carefully planned and studied performances.

Particularly interesting from a mobilities standpoint are chapter 6, “Re-keying the City,” chapter 7, “Urban Alchemists,” and appendix A, “Quizzes, Tests and Dissertations.” Following Goffman’s concepts of “keying” and “re-keying” to refer to processes of selection and interpretation of information regarding conventional and unconventional narratives about the city (136), the author explores the active power that walking tours and guides have to contest processes of homogenization, commodification, and banalization of social life. This occurs through their unique reinterpretation of neighborhood narratives, “do it yourself” approaches to urban life, and a contrarian disposition to mainstream culture (147). Walking tour guides appear in so doing as “urban alchemists” who create experiences that transcend the tourist gaze through myth, serendipity, and spontaneity. It is in this exercise of alchemy, always performed while walking, that visitors are transformed into locals and locals into tourists (173) and that tour guides unmistakably emerge as agents of modern urban life, “actively culling the free everyday molecules of cities to create new, interesting cultural compounds of their own fashion” (140).

The appendices include a reflexive narrative about the author’s involvement with walking tours as both a researcher and a graduate student; his own experience giving a walking tour after completing the New York City licensing
test; as well as a cast of characters and a detailed catalog of the tours taken, including date, location, guide, and hours. Far from supplementary materials, these appendices can be considered chapters on their own, ones that are particularly thought-provoking from a mobile methods research perspective. It is rather unusual to find ethnographies with such a level of narrated reflexivity about the research techniques employed and their outcomes for the field. In this regard, there is also something about the book’s writing style that is worth mentioning for those interested in mobilities methods. The book gracefully jumps from the main narrative, to the author’s field notes, to excerpts from interviews, and back to the main narrative again. It keeps the reader moving among, or walking along, the streets of New York, its particular façades and problematics, the aspirations and self-representations of tour guides, the author’s own writing spots, and also, although to a lesser degree, the audience’s imagination. This latter group is perhaps an underrepresented one, overshadowed by the tour guides and the ethnographer’s own experiences.

The Tour Guide pays meticulous attention to walking as a mobility system, and although it is not conceptualized as such, the book would be particularly attractive for scholars interested in tourism mobilities and their role in dynamics of countercultural interactions in urban settings. Its ethnographically rich narrative, accessible style, and clear-cut organization make it a must for syllabi on mobile methods, tourism and travel mobilities, and mobile occupations.

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The Narrow and Wide Roads of War


War is about mobility: moving people, weapons, intelligence, and supplies; moving land from no-man’s-land to the front to beyond the lines and ultimately, if all goes to plan, to the liberated zone. War is about marching and running and creeping, hauling, carrying, pushing, and the vehicles that make all this possible. The Narrow Road to the Deep North has been described by its author as a love story and as a tribute to his father and those Australians who labored on the Thai-Burma railway. It is also a story of mobility.
Dorrigo Evans, war hero and philandering surgeon, ends his life in a car crash: a speeding Subaru Impreza hits his aging Bentley. Sometime before that he flew in a 707 to Tasmania and rescued his family from bushfire in a V8 1948 Ford Mercury. In the year that car was built, he returns to Sydney in a DC-3. He is later able to report the death of a soldier courtesy of a ride on a Cascade Brewery truck. Such details are not just the mechanical equivalent of costume drama; they underpin the book’s picture of modern society as a mobile, global phenomenon. Evans’s acquaintances move across Australia in search of work and escape from their past. Transport is part of folklore: a childhood friend races the train and ends up collecting Leyland P76s (“A car you couldn’t give away”); fugitive wives take the train and vanish.

Evans leaves Tasmania to study medicine in Melbourne. When he enlists, he visits an uncle who runs a pub out from Adelaide and has an affair with the uncle’s young wife, who becomes the love of his life. This is made possible because he can get to the pub in a coal-fired Studebaker truck and she has the use of a Ford Cabriolet. The beachside hotel itself survives only because of motorists. Evans sails with the AIF 2/7th Casualty Clearing Station to the Syrian campaign (mule teams, naval bombardment, and one strafing plane), to Java after surrender, then to Changi, Singapore (by boat), just in time to be sent (by train, truck, and on foot) to the Thai-Burma railroad.

His ordeal is, of course, determined by logistics. Japan needs to supply another front, and only occasional trucks manage the jungle mud to bring up rice and stray Red Cross letters. The book suggests that both guards and prisoners are victims of abstract policy and real tropical nature. Differences boil down to one group insisting on individual dignity and freedom and the other finding glory in being a dutiful cog in the machinery of empire. It is an irony for both that the epic venture ends in scrap metal and grass, and that afterward some engineers reconstruct as a symbol of Japanese triumph the ruined locomotive that first traveled the length of the line in 1944.

The novel presents Evans’s experience chronologically, showing his life before, during, and after his time in a prisoner of war camp. The “before” section establishes the affair that sustains and then haunts the protagonist. In the central POW material, Flanagan follows established types: the brutal “Jap,” the idiotic British officer, the heroic Australian keeping his men together, the inventive improviser, the boaster who secretly rats on his mates, the stoic whose heroism lies in sheer survival. As a consequence, his “after” section, which transforms villainous Japanese and Koreans into good men or victims of a system, now persecuted by war crimes tribunals, and which shows old diggers bewildered by, forgetting, even indifferent to their war, seems a bit forced, and perhaps comes too late to hold our sympathetic attention. The message is, however, saved by the antiphonal love story: the mystery of an endless, mutable, tragic, and ecstatic experience speaks to the human experience of war.
As a “narrow road” of narrative, the book itself is a vehicle: it is designed to move us (emotionally) in tales of pathos, such as a cringe-inducing scene of Evans operating on a mate to halt gangrene with little more than a bent spoon at the moment another mate is being beaten to death. The book is also a wide road, showing that the single-minded tale of war we hear in history is merely one part of a complicated multiplicity. Flanagan moves us through reading from beginning to end, from Tasmania to Melbourne to Adelaide to Sydney to Singapore to Thailand and back again, with additional journeys to Japan. His novel also moves us to and fro in a collage of memories and viewpoints. Like the book’s contrasting of epic struggle (invoked via allusions to Tennyson’s “Ulysses”) and quiet reflection (in recurrent haiku), we follow all its movements, holding in ironic counterpoint the brutality and poetry in all human civilizations.

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