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# What is Mobilities?

David Madden

In May 2013, scholars from around the world gathered in Montreal for *Differential Mobilities: Movement and Mediation in Networked Society*. The international conference, hosted by the Mobile Media Lab (MML) in the Communication Studies department at Concordia University, brought together researchers, artists, community organizers, activists and students concerned with issues, questions and articulations connected to what Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2006) have coined, the “new mobilities” paradigm. This paradigm has been described as a turn within humanities and social science research. It focuses on contemporary social, cultural, spatial, and technological practices within an increasingly mobile world. It opens frameworks for critical inquiry and, simultaneously urges the question: *what is mobilities?*

In order to explore this very question, members of the MML spoke to conference participants about their research practices and trajectories. This collection of interviews presents a range of answers from a diversity of scholars, media practitioners and activists.

The conference was thematically structured around the concept of “differential mobilities.” The organizers used this concept as a way to acknowledge and problematize

the multiplicity of power relations and situations that networked connections help to engender:

When we conceptualize movement, mobility, or flows within spaces and places, we need to account for the systemic differences within infrastructures and terrains that create uneven forms of access. ‘Differential mobilities’, conceptually, highlights how exclusions occur, creating striations of power.

Conference participants spanned a variety of academic disciplines – from anthropology, architecture and design, criminology, and communication, to geography, media, sound and visual arts, transport research, and urban studies. Although much of this work is carried out within the university, it is crucial to note that mobilities research now extends well beyond the borders of the academy. Researchers are seeing questions of mobility almost everywhere.

This special issue of *Wi* collects the ideas from sixteen of the nearly fifty interviews that were conducted by the WIM (What is Mobilities?) team. Using a simple set of questions, these brief interviews are intended to furnish a textual ‘snapshot’ of the field from the perspective of our participants, who come from diverse fields and a range of locations.

We asked our participants to recall their initial engagement with mobilities research and, also, to explain what the term means. Researchers then talked to us about the central themes of their current work.

The interviews included in this edition have been arranged into five clusters of activity and all of the clusters intersect in terms of theories and methods. The sections are meant to act as thematic points of departure rather than tightly composed formations. Given the interviewees’ repeated emphasis on partial perspectives, it should come as no

surprise that a wide range of interpretations and understandings of mobilities research emerges from these texts. The multiplicity of ideas expressed in these interviews eschew what Donna Haraway (1988) calls “the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere” (p. 580).

The first cluster of scholars share an interest in race, justice and mobility. Judith A. Nicholson, who began working in this area during her time as a master’s student, discusses the ways that race appears in mobilities research and how it is present in origin stories of media and mobility. Mimi Sheller outlines how her approach to mobilities research comes through thinking about histories of the Caribbean as a mobile region. Sheller uses “mobility justice” as a way to highlight “the power differentials that come into play in any form of mobility.” Esteban Acuna Cabanzo critiques the historicity of the term nomadism in relation to the binary set of categories associated with it and the way it is used to label populations.

The second grouping consists of five artist-researchers who draw on their varied artistic practices to make connections with communities outside of the university. Collaborators Danielle Peers and Lindsay Eales use film, dance, and performance to critically engage with issues related to disability, sport, and social justice movements. Arseli Dokumacı, whose research centres on critical disability studies, uses video as a “powerful tool for representing how invisible disabilities are occurring.” Andra McCartney touches on her soundwalking practice vis-à-vis questions of access and longstanding associations

between walking and thinking. Jen Southern's locative art practice collaboratively explores uses of GPS technology and concepts of comobility and polyrhythmia.

The third cluster of researchers investigate questions related to the movement of goods, people, and containers. Darin Barney's interest in mobilities research began in 2010 when he initiated a project on grain handling technologies in Canada's prairies. While Barney agrees that a mobilities turn has occurred in social research, he also sees "a kind of mobilities imperialism happening, where everything is being rearticulated and rethought in terms of mobilities." Bianca Freire-Medeiros' research on tourism activities in segregated spaces currently focuses on Brazil's favelas and the *Teleferico do Alemao* cable car. Daniel M. Sutko discusses how containers offer possibilities for thinking about questions related to media technologies such as mobile phones.

The fourth set of interviewees are linked by an interest in mobile media technologies, policy, and platforms. Gerard Goggin, who started working on mobilities research in the early 1990s, highlights how the everyday use of mobile technologies is connected to issues of politics and power. The interview with Catherine Middleton touches on the relationship between the creation of mobile environments and the technology that supports them. Social media scholar Germaine Halegoua relates mobilities research to "the practices and processes of movement, and knowing or realizing that that movement is never neutral, that there are always constraints."

The fifth cluster of scholars are associated through a concern for infrastructure, sustainability, and urban design. Nancy Cook and David Butz are currently exploring

mobilities research as a way to better understand the implications of road infrastructure for community organization in the Gilgit-Baltistan region of northern Pakistan. Natalia Radywyl, an ethnographer and advocate for the commons, talks about her experiences working for an urban design non-profit called Project for Public Spaces. Shelley Smith, who became involved with mobilities research over ten years ago, uses parkour as “a lens through which to view urban design and mobility or bodies in movement in public space.”

This publication of *Wi* is the result of an ongoing collaboration with the MML involving over sixty people and tons of goodwill. My enthusiasm for this project and the MML continues to grow. It has been an honour to act as coordinator of the WIM project and to edit this special issue. There are so many people to acknowledge.

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