

Transfers at a Crossroads

An Anthropological Perspective

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Abstract

In this short article, I offer a personal reflection on my own mobilities and how these influenced my academic interest in human movement and brought me in contact with mobility studies and *Transfers*. On the special occasion of the journal's tenth anniversary, I look back at how the journal has fared. I remind readers of the initial plans and expectations that were expressed by the founding editors, with a focus on issues that are important from an anthropological point of view. I complement this critical and constructive analysis with a brief look into the future. In which direction should *Transfers* ideally be moving? What are the implications of societal developments such as the ones surrounding the coronavirus pandemic for the journal and its thematic focus?

Keywords: anthropology, circulation of ideas, critique, COVID-19, language, mobility/immobility, world, testimony

“Everything is connected, everything changes, pay attention.”

—Jane Hirshfield (poet; 1953–)

My own interest in mobilities is heavily influenced by my personal background and life experience. In my monograph *Momentous Mobilities*,¹ I recount how human mobility became my main research focus. My family and personal history are deeply marked by multiple mobilities and international border crossings. My Flemish mother met my father while on holiday along the Costa del Sol in the south of Spain. This encounter, in turn, led my Spanish father to migrate to Bruges, Belgium. I was born in between, in France, and spent most of my formative years shuttling between Belgium and Spain. I had the opportunity to study in the United Kingdom and the United States. For my PhD degree in anthropology, I conducted research on international tourism in Indonesia and Tanzania. In my dissertation, I do mention mobility but it does not play a major role (yet) in my analysis.

After a short stint as an applied researcher in a government-related project on tour guiding in Flanders, I obtained a research grant from the EU and landed as a postdoctoral fellow at KU Leuven, in an anthropology research unit specializing in migration studies. It was this “transfer” that forced me to come up with a creative way of combining research on tourism and migra-



tion. Using mobility as an analytical lens seemed to offer great possibilities in this regard. As a result, I founded in 2009 the Cultural Mobilities Research (CuMoRe) cluster at KU Leuven. This coincided with the start of the Open Anthropology Cooperative Anthropology and Mobility group, which was institutionalized in 2010 as the EASA Anthropology and Mobility Network (better known as AnthroMob). These organizational developments crystallized in a first set of publications exploring what an anthropology of mobility looks like.² Interestingly, *Transfers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Mobility Studies* was founded around the same time, emerging “out of a desire and urgent need to think through and beyond mobilities scholarship as it emerged in the social sciences in the late 1990s early 2000s.”³ However, it would take a couple more years before I got to know the journal, started reading its articles, periodically reviewing submissions, meeting the journal’s founding editor, Gijs Mom, and, like many others, hop on his *Transfers* bus and eventually becoming a member of the journal’s editorial board in 2014.

I was excited when I discovered the existence of mobility studies, not because I saw it as particularly “novel” but because its interdisciplinary basis allowed me to combine previously compartmentalized fields such as tourism studies and migration studies. However, as I became familiar with the emerging field of mobility studies, I felt that not enough credit was given to the scholarship that preceded it—the historical component that is so present in *Transfers*. This gap was also palpable in my own discipline, anthropology. Anthropologists were rather late in engaging with the “new mobilities paradigm,”⁴ which continues to be dominated by sociologists and geographers. This is why, in my “Anthropology” entry for the *Routledge Handbook of Mobilities*,⁵ I stressed the genealogies of contemporary mobility concepts. In a contribution for *Theory in Social and Cultural Anthropology*,⁶ I repeated the same message for an audience of anthropologists. What could be added now to those early overviews are, for example, the work of Dimitris Dalakoglou on roads or Danny Miller on mobile technologies,⁷ and the ground-breaking volumes that have been published since 2016 in AnthroMob’s *Worlds in Motion* book series.

Who or What Is Being Transferred?

It is worthwhile to reread the *Transfers* inaugural editorial a decade after it was published.⁸ The text starts with a quote by anthropologist Tim Ingold and also mentions the work of Ramona Lenz (who, unfortunately, has left academia since). I remember being particularly attracted by the promised attention to arts (through exhibition reviews, artwork, and photography) and the 3Ts (transdisciplinary, transnational, and transmodal scholarship), the combination of which, indeed, created the possibility of *Transfers* becoming a pub-

lication “where borders can be tested and transgressed, and new vistas can be opened.”⁹ Important, particularly from an anthropological point of view, was the attention paid to “local perspectives”¹⁰ and the possibility of offering readers an English version of “cutting-edge scholarship already published in a less accessible language.”¹¹

Language remains a huge barrier in the transfer of knowledge across the globe. The idea to translate selected texts into English is certainly laudable. Nonetheless, when comparing the original writings of French scholars with the English translations I had to process as a graduate student, I became acutely aware of how much can get lost in translation. It is true that translations help the transfer of knowledge. However, they do not necessarily enhance academic dialogue because language barriers remain and because there are often substantial time gaps between an original publication and its translation(s)—what provokes a novel scholarly debate in one place is already considered outdated elsewhere.

Moreover, having more texts available in English will do little to help us truly understand how people across the world think about and value (im)mobility. Therefore, Georgine Clarsen’s invitation to “learn to think from the specificity of place, as Indigenous people have always done,” is very pertinent.¹² Again, language is key here. The beauty of learning another language—a process I underwent multiple times throughout my life—is that you also learn to think differently. After all, language is nothing else but a lens through which we process and make sense of whatever happens throughout the course of our lives. In preparation for my doctoral research in Indonesia and Tanzania, I took the time and the energy to study both Indonesian and Swahili. Unfortunately, the brutal slashing of doctoral funding means that even anthropology students do not have the opportunity anymore to immerse themselves in a new language. Times were once (very) different. When I studied philosophy in Belgium in the 1990s, students were still expected to read philosophical texts in French, English, and German—and, I can assure you, reading Heidegger in German was maybe not much fun at first, but it taught me a lot about German culture and society.

But let us return to the beginnings of *Transfers*. Remarkably, the inaugural editorial did not at all define mobility; it only stated that the journal would rely on “a broad conception of mobility”¹³ and that the editors saw mobility as “a descriptive as well as an analytical tool.”¹⁴ This lack of definition was probably related to the expressed need to “rethink the very concept.”¹⁵ It would be nice to have some more in-depth analysis about the various ways the first decade of *Transfers* has reshaped our common understanding of mobility as a concept. Part of such an analysis should involve a critical assessment of the first T, transdisciplinarity.

For *Transfers*, the dialogue between academic disciplines has always been an important goal.¹⁶ Evaluating the first decade of the journal, it is fair to say

that it has been relatively successful in moving from a *multidisciplinary* to an *interdisciplinary* approach to transport, traffic and mobility—with a particular attention to the arts and humanities. The disciplines, particularly history and various social sciences, no longer provide their separate viewpoints but they combine insights from each other and also influence one another. However, *Transfers* is clearly more ambitious than that. The founders of the journal understood very well that the only way to make scientific progress, be it in the field of mobility studies or more generally, is by crossing boundaries. This includes breaking down the artificial boundaries between academic disciplines but also between academia and the world outside of it (e.g., the arts). The next big challenge is to move from an *interdisciplinary* to a *transdisciplinary* journal of Mobility Studies, through which a new holistic perspective can emerge. This path was envisioned from the very beginning.¹⁷ In any case, only “a collective process” can bring us any closer to this lofty goal.¹⁸

The contribution of anthropology to *Transfers* has not always been that explicit. Not many anthropologists have published in the journal, and in the few published contributions anthropology and anthropological theory remains in the background.¹⁹ On the other hand, the journal has published a number of very enlightening articles (written by non-anthropologists) about the history of anthropology.²⁰ This reminds me of the work of historian James Clifford, whose work on the intellectual history of anthropology has been so influential that many of my colleagues wrongly assume that Clifford was trained as an anthropologist. I attribute at least part of Clifford’s success to the fact that he was also embedded in a transdisciplinary work environment (including other luminary thinkers such as Donna Haraway). Not surprisingly, the visionary work of Clifford²¹ was highly influential in the establishment of mobility studies too.

Envisioning the Future

When I think of “transfers,” I think in the first instance of interchange stations that allow passengers to move from one transport route to another. The most interesting ones are intermodal stations where passengers can choose between various modes of transport. I happen to live in between two such stations in Brussels. West Station opened in 2009 and still looks relatively new from the outside. However, its internal infrastructure is already dilapidated because of bad transport planning and insufficient embedding in the wider neighborhood where it is located. South Station is locally called “Midi” because trains in the nineteenth century had Le Midi (Southern France) as their final destination. This is a truly intermodal transport node in which it is easy to get lost. South Station offers passengers an incredible range of destinations and modes of transport (including unofficial ones). It really connects

Brussels with the world, with migrants and tourists alike using it as their entry port into the city and citizens of Brussels relying on the station to start their travels “elsewhere.” The metaphor can be extended in many different directions, but my future vision for *Transfers* is very much related to acting as a South Station for mobility studies—taking the geographical cue as a welcome invitation to turn the journal’s gaze even more from the “West” to the “(Global) South.”²²

The team of dedicated scholars who created *Transfers* have reason enough to be proud. After a decade, the journal has certainly earned its place among the academic outlets focusing on transport, traffic, and mobility. Moreover, its eclectic approach is quite unique, but absolutely necessary for a publication that aims to be “cutting edge.” The latter requires a community of passionate scholars who do not rest on their laurels. One of the constant preoccupations is related to the diversity of voices included in the journal. There is pride about the domains where this worked well (e.g. gender) and frustration where this seems to fail (e.g., non-Western scholarship).²³ The fact that this challenge is omnipresent within academia²⁴ is not an excuse to neglect it.

However, we should be careful not to exoticize non-Western scholars. The expectation that people have a different “voice” because they are from a particular place (e.g., the “Global South”) not only reifies the problems of methodological nationalism, it may also place a heavy burden on people. After all, many were either trained in Western institutions or otherwise influenced by the dominance of Western theories and conceptual frameworks. A close analysis of where exactly new theories are being produced reveals even more hierarchy and inequity within academia, also within hegemonic countries.²⁵ Scholars at top-ranked research-intensive universities have much more time and resources to devote to thinking and writing than those who work at institutions where teaching takes up virtually all the available time and research is often done only on demand. In other words, both the production and global transfer of knowledge are marked by huge inequalities. In this context, the *Transfers* experiment with the geographic “portfolios”²⁶ was more a confirmation of the current situation than a true “failure.”

Another, related concern regards the question whether *Transfers* offers representative coverage of the mobilities and mobility histories of the various groups that constitute societies around the world. Academia in general is biased because of the middle-class positionality of its researchers. Consequently, marginalized communities as well as elites are often underrepresented as subjects of research—the former because of lack of interest, the latter mostly because of problems of access. Depending on the context, race, ethnicity, and/or social class should be added to the mix.²⁷ Important here is the assurance that underrepresented groups are given a proper voice rather than being spoken for by academic others. This is part of our mission as scholars to act as catalysts for social justice.²⁸ It may be good to know that

disciplines such as anthropology have very relevant in-house knowledge and expertise about these matters.

The question of how the future of *Transfers* looks will be greatly determined by larger academic and societal developments. The 2020 coronavirus crisis has profoundly shaken the world. As Mimi Sheller rightly points out, *Transfers* is very well placed to play a major role in analyzing what is currently happening and making the necessary links to relevant histories.²⁹ This requires not only sustained attention to mobility practices but also to mobility discourses and their underlying imaginaries. While crisis situations are a cause of great distress for those affected, particularly the most vulnerable ones, they do offer unique opportunities to study people and society because crises magnify existing processes and problems. The COVID-19 pandemic brings imaginaries of mobility more clearly to the fore as well as the potential changes in signification they are undergoing. The gathered insights should help us “create the richer vocabulary that will make activism more effective in these times of crisis, or to provide hope in the face of the ominous signs of bleak years ahead of us.”³⁰

Sheller also reminds us that “science is a fragile mobile assemblage that depends on a scientific community who can freely communicate across linguistic and national borders.”³¹ In a context where it remains unclear whether a return to traditional forms of academic exchange—conferences, workshops and other face-to-face meetings—is desirable or possible, journals may function as sustainable points of reference, true rocks in the surf. At the same time, the current societal developments may have serious implications for the subject matter of *Transfers*. Mom hints at this when he asks himself whether he should not reconsider the importance of *immobility*.³² Another possibility, as suggested by Sheller, is to give more attention to the “more-than-human-agency.”³³ The COVID-19 pandemic, but also the wider Anthropocene debate, should help us reconsider the relations between nature and society and how this translates in the fields of transport, traffic, and mobility. In this context, it may well be worth revisiting the insights generated by scholars such as Tim Ingold. The *Transfers* inaugural editorial started with a quote by him. Let me end here with another fitting Ingold quote: “We need a different understanding of movement: . . . not the *trans-transport* (carrying across) of completed being, but the *pro-duction* (bringing forth) of perpetual becoming.”³⁴

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Notes

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