American Studies as Im/Mobility Studies

Introduction

In the aftermath of 43-year-old African American Eric Garner's murder by a police officer in New York City, Matt Taibbi's account of this "killing that started a movement," *I Can't Breathe* (2017), also tells the story of the gradual immobilization of the victim. Due to structural racism, Garner, once a promising athlete, gradually deteriorated physically and psychologically, with two long stints in prison for petty crimes, until his final immobilization in a police "chokehold." His death was a death semantically foreshadowed in the racial slur "deadbeat dad," which was used in the Reagan era to refer to unemployed Black fathers.[1] Garner "would have none of it," trying to resist the stereotype as best as he could by making a living on the streets, mostly bartering cigarettes illegally.[2] Out there, even Garner's smallest movements, Taibbi tells us, made him prone to suspicion and police violence. Taibbi succinctly connects the racialized street regime of policed mobility to Donald Trump's border wall: "Like Trump's wall, New York's new policing regime was also a form of border enforcement. It was about keeping 'the right people' off the streets, not through physical walls but through constant, demoralizing, physically invasive harassment."[3] In the epilogue, the wall imagery reappears when the author summarizes, "Garner kept running headfirst into invisible walls. Each time he collided with law enforcement, this unspoken bureaucratic imperative to make him disappear threw him back into an ever-smaller pen. Even allowing him a few feet of sidewalk space was ultimately too much. His world got smaller and smaller until finally even his last breath of air was taken away from him."[4]

Much has been written in the last two decades on the United States' mythology of mobility. Many publications describe how geographical and social mobility as well as their entanglements have been pivotal tropes in U.S.-American literature and culture. They discuss how American narratives and performances of mobility have celebrated individualism, in line with dominant models of American subject formation and nation-building.[5] Consequentially, American studies, inspired by the interdisciplinary field of mobility studies, has focused on journeys of exploration and "discovery" in this context, the Puritan "errand into the wilderness" (Perry Miller), westward expansion, the upward social mobility associated with the American Dream,

and space exploration as the tackling of new frontiers.[6] Such traditional, hegemonic tropes have perhaps not been adequately questioned by early mobility studies work, implicitly affirming a national mythology around the freedom of mobility that is deeply grounded in the United States' settler colonial history. Drawing on German sociologist Katharina Manderscheid, the correlation of exploration, discovery, and mobility may be characterized, following Michel Foucault, as a mobility dispositif of conquest, which retains mythological status in the U.S.[7] The conquest of the natural world as a conquest of time and space, as Lewis Mumford described it,[8] is encapsulated in the exploration and conquest of outer space, for instance; indeed, what Captain Kirk branded as the "final" (i.e., unlimited) frontier is portrayed in contemporary Hollywood by a plethora of cosmic border zones. The way these are dramatized and represented performatively affirms U.S. exceptionalism and its mythological promise of prosperity and leadership through conquest—sometimes territorial, sometimes economic, sometimes social; John F. Kennedy's idea of the "new frontier" of social reform, which historically inspired the concept of the "final frontier" by analogy, reveals that the frontier has also functioned as a left-liberal trope.

The protagonists of these narratives—explorers, adventurers, pioneers, and immigrant families searching for the promised land—have been cast as heroic figures of exceptional achievement in American literature and culture, from Mary Antin to Barack Obama.[9] Even though this Eurocentric, white male-dominated historiography has long been contested in the field of American studies, it continues to resonate in inadvertent ways: in tropes of American exceptionalism but also in the focus on mobility rather than immobility. The clichéd notion that "to be an American is [to] go somewhere, especially to go west," has certainly helped obliterate immobilities produced by hegemonic regimes of mobility in (and beyond) the United States.[10] Following cultural geographer Tim Cresswell, one of the founders of the interdisciplinary field of mobility studies, there are forms of mobility which are ideologically and culturally legitimate but simultaneously depend on types of mobility which are illegal(ized), socially despised, and/or unsanctioned.[11] Critical mobility research in American studies has accordingly set out to critique dominant scripts of American mobility as they are articulated in cultural forms and texts from gender-, race-, and class-critical angles, and, in the wake of the transnational turn in the field, from perspectives critical of and exceeding the nation state as cultures are themselves always in motion.[12]

The story of American mobility, even in its most critical form, can no longer be told in this way. With the development of mobility studies into a critical endeavor that equally addresses immobilization, the dominant script of the U.S. as what Sylvia Hilton and Cornelis van Minnen call a nation on the move appears as highly essentialist and exclusionary,[13] as it obliterates immobilities and forced mobilities from the

transatlantic slave trade to internment, incarceration, expulsion, and deportation (a recent estimate reveals that since the 1880s, 57 million people have been deported from the U.S.—far more than immigrants admitted).[14] As both gendered and racially orchestrated immobilities and immobilizations have come to the forefront in the course of the #MeToo and BLM movements, it is the inverse of the mythology of American mobility as a democratic practice available—or at least promised—to all that has become increasingly visible. Recent mobility studies scholarship has also called into question such dominant narratives for the ways in which they have served to obliterate *im*mobilities and forced mobilities, embodied in the U.S. context by the enslaved African, the Caribbean refugee, or the migrant waiting for deportation (to name but a few).[15] Seen in the larger and more recently developed discursive framework of mobility justice, a concept that arose from these very debates as well as from postcolonial mobility studies contexts,[16] immobilities and immobilizations need to be given scholarly priority without, however, falling back into misleading and untenable dichotomies between mobility and immobility, flux and stasis, "uprootings" and "re-groundings"—for, as Sara Ahmed and her co-authors importantly point out, "*being grounded is not necessarily about being fixed; being mobile is not necessarily about being detached*."[17] Arguably, mobility justice starts with what NAACP President Derrick Johnson, on occasion of the George Floyd murder trial in late March 2021, called "the right to breathe," in reference to the smallest unit of physi(ologi)cal movement that enables any other form of mobility—the movement and circulation of air through the human lungs that make the heart beat, the brain function, and muscles move.[18]

Racialized immobilizations of African Americans, also discussed in Christina Sharpe's seminal *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), have always also triggered resistance.[19] Historian Mia Bay's monograph *Traveling Black: A Story of Race and Resistance* (2020), for instance, examines Black experiences on stagecoaches and trains, buses, cars, and planes, exploring the formation of—as well as the resistance to—racial restrictions of mobility by rescuing forgotten stories of undaunted African Americans who moved on in spite of harassment and ignorance.[20] Likewise, football players' kneeling down during the national anthem as a form of protest, and NBA games that had to be canceled because celebrations of Black athletic bodies seemed too cynical for many players as less desired Black bodies were being attacked and murdered, perform forms of resistance to structural racism that play on (im)mobilizations of African American bodies. The same holds true, of course, for gender-critical and queer interventions in dominant regimes of mobility that privilege patriarchal and heteronormative mobilities over others, in effect depriving the latter of their right to move.[21]

On each of these grounds, which we can only briefly broach for further critical discussion here, the 2018 Austrian Association for American Studies annual conference

"American Im/mobilities," from which this special issue of *JAAAS* stems, set out to reject the hegemonic, essentialist notion that U.S. citizens' allegedly greater mobility is evidence of a more democratic society. The conference set out to do so not only by bringing in sub- and transnational perspectives as well as gender-, race-, and class-critical angles, from the colonial period to the twenty-first century, but also by directing attention explicitly to American immobilities and immobilizations and resistance against racialized, gendered, and ableist regimes of mobility, especially in the wake of BLM and #MeToo activism. These angles are not to be understood as mere additions; rather than merely factoring into immobility as a glitch in the mythology of the freedom of mobility, discussions should rather revolve around combined im/mobility regimes and discourses.

During the conference, papers and panels problematized dominant narratives of U.S.-American mobility as they are articulated and represented in various media. They reflect on an age in which solidifying borders are again on the rise on both sides of the Atlantic and inhibit the mobility of many, while leaving a few untouched. Topics included the im/mobilities of settler colonialism, U.S. expansionism, and American imperialism; African American im/mobilities, from the plantation to the Great Migration and mass incarceration; further racialized or ethnicized im/mobilities (e.g., with regard to Japanese-American internment, immigrant and border narratives); "minor," or everyday, domestic, or intimate forms of mobilities; gendered and queer dimensions of im/mobility (e.g., the representation of "unsafe" spaces); ecocritical perspectives on mobilities; as well as alternative and resistant forms of im/mobility in various historical contexts.

With this special issue, we present a selection of conference papers brought into article form in order to further critically interrogate the mobility/immobility nexus, on the one hand, and highlight case studies that demonstrate the theoretical and methodological potentialities as well as challenges in crossing American and mobility studies, on the other. The contributions' as well as our editorial's decision to open this special issue with essays on African American im/mobilities also reflect on the present moment in which millions of African Americans are again facing voter disenfranchisement as a form of political immobilization and structural racism. Since American studies in Austria is primarily focused on the contexts of literary and cultural studies today, the essays in this volume revolve around representations, aesthetics, and discourses regarding the entanglements of mobilities and immobilities in U.S.-American and transnational contexts. With Cresswell, however, we understand those realms as tightly interwoven, focusing on im/mobilities in terms of "a politics of meaning."[22] In reverse, as Lesley Murray and Sara Upstone conclude, "The cultural text—word, image, sound—has always been, but is also more than ever before, a space of mobility," as "mobility cultures are negotiated in the context of dominant repre-

sentations—signifiers, which attempt to order and fix experience in particular politically charged ways."[23] In line with Murray and Upstone, this issue sets out to contribute to explorations of how "creative representations enrich our understanding of how mobilities function at scales from the local to the global" in an endeavor "to fully appreciate the complex spatial practices that make up both contemporary and historical movement—and the continuity between these," "look[ing] more intently not merely at how mobilities are represented, but at how they work through representation."[24]

The article that opens this special issue, Isabel Kalous's "Navigating Hostile Terrain with the *Green Book*: How a Travel Guide Mobilized African Americans during Segregation," is a vital reminder that the current discussion of the ways in which African Americans face structural immobilization is by no means limited to the present but has a long and complex history. In her essay, Kalous explores the narrative strategies of the *Green Book* (published from 1936 to 1966), a travel guide that helped African Americans experience (auto)mobility against the pressures of segregation-era immobilization. The *Green Book*, Kalous argues, did much more than provide information on "safe" (that is, hospitable to African Americans) accommodation, restaurants, and service stations; in fact, it encouraged African Americans to claim public spaces and thus actively challenged the spatial and social mechanisms of racist immobilization that restricted Black movement. In doing so, however, it reaffirmed the principles of the free market, promoting a middle-class lifestyle and consumer capitalism as a socially progressive force. Thus, as Kalous shows, the *Green Book* engages in ambivalent politics of im/mobility, as it tried to speak to and empower affluent Black readers in particular but, at the same time, was careful not to offend a white readership.

In "Black Im/Mobilization, Critical Race Horror, and the New Jim Crow in Jordan Peele's *Get Out*," Alexandra Hauke critically investigates the Black horror movie genre and looks specifically at *Get Out* (2017). While many horror films commonly reproduce structural racism and the immobilization of Black bodies, the author reads *Get Out* as a counter-narrative. Employing mobility studies and critical race theory, she defines critical race horror as a genre that is characterized not by silencing or actively perpetuating the horrors of racism but rather by encouraging a critical engagement with colorblindness and anti-Black sentiment. *Get Out* thus speaks to working toward Black mobility justice with the affordances of critical race horror. Ultimately, Hauke argues that by mobilizing Black subjects within the film, *Get Out* exposes racism and its entanglements as the true horror.

Next, Katharina Wiedlack's article, "'The Beast from the East': Mental Dis/Ability and the Fears of Postsocialist Mobility in North American Popular Culture," explores the

representational im/mobility dispositives attached to post-socialist orphan characters in contemporary North American film and television. Wiedlack combines critical race theory with queer theory and dis/ability studies in order to suggest that the figure of the "psychopathic post-socialist orphan" engages in forms of mobility that are configured as a threat to liberal Western societies. Critically reading the movie *Orphan* (2009) as well as the television series *Orphan Black* (2013–2017) and *Killing Eve* (2018–), Wiedlack argues that these orphan figures revitalize older Cold War fears of East–West mobility that would question the seemingly stable cultural difference between "the East" and "the West." This revitalization, however, is decidedly neoliberal: Wiedlack's analysis shows that the mobility of contemporary post-socialist figures does not pose a threat to an idealized white heteronormative society, but rather to the notion of Western societies as ethnically, sexually, and gender "diverse"—and thus, to their liberal self-conception as culturally superior.

In "'But I'm Not Even in a Wheelchair': Dis/ability, Im/mobility and Trauma in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*," Dorothee Marx explores the intersection of dis/ability and im/mobility by looking at the 2015 novel's protagonist Jude. Marx convincingly argues that the novel depicts disability as deeply intertwined with immobility, which needs to be overcome or made invisible in order to strive for American individualism and success. While the immobilizing effects of Jude's disability can be compensated for by his financial means, the traumatizing events in his life cannot be overcome by social or geographical mobility and render the protagonist permanently immobile. Thus, Jude's trauma and forced institutionalization stand in stark contrast to American narratives of linear progress and continual improvement. Ultimately, Marx reveals that the novel perpetuates prevalent norms about disability as a burden and a problem to be solved, demonstrating how disability and poverty are excluded from narratives of American success.

In the subsequent contribution, "The Speed of Dreams Versus the Inertia of Enlightenment: Fantastic Movements in Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*," Burak Sezer revisits the trope of a "foundational" American mobility and examines two different modes of such mobility represented in Pynchon's 1997 novel: the physical (that is, slow, arduous, and scientific) westward movement of Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon's 1760s surveying expedition and the fantastic (that is, dream-like, airborne, and incredibly fast) mobility associated with their romantic imagination of the "unex-plored" American West. For Sezer, the clashes between physical and phantasmagorical mobility are at the center of Pynchon's critique of the Enlightenment: in *Mason & Dixon*, the world cannot be understood solely through scientific rationality and empiricism, but neither can it be contained by the simple drawing of a demarcation line. Instead, Sezer points out, Pynchon complements the historical Mason and Dixon's perspectives of geometry and astronomy with discourses of geomancy,

astrology, and parageography to offer a romantic imaginary of forms of mobility that defy the laws of physics.

Continuing in the vein of literary analysis, Leonardo Nolé likewise re-examines canonical U.S. literature through the lens of mobility studies. In "William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*: A Chronicle of Im/Mobilities," Nolé focuses on *Go Down, Moses*'s (1942) representation of a variety of social and technological forms of mobility as a cornerstone of Faulkner's literary commentary on the exploitation of people and land. Building on scholars such as Lawrence Buell and Judith B. Wittenberg, the author argues that the natural world of the book invites readers to reflect on its subjection to temporal and human agencies. In this reading, Faulkner offers the opportunity to explore the cultural meanings behind the main forms of modern mobility and their relationship with modernity at large, which is also reflected in his employment of a mobile literary genre that sits in-between the short story and the novel.

In her article "Mobility, Car Culture, and the Environment in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*," Tatiana Konrad re-reads this classic of social-realist literature from a mobility studies and ecocritical perspective. She views the novel as an expression of American perceptions of freedom of movement through individualized travel and critically reexamines its implications with regard to environment and ecology. In her argumentation, Konrad claims that *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) complicates the view of American mobility as liberating by examining the protagonists' journey as ultimately leading nowhere as well as at the novel's representation of fossil-fueled vehicles. While the novel does not openly critique car culture, it nevertheless opens up discussions about the disruptive nature of automobility and the ensuing environmental degradation.

Taken together, the seven articles in this special issue provide contemporary ways of thinking about the multiple regimes of im/mobility that have shaped the U.S.-American national imaginary at home and abroad. We hope that they will provide readers with a new and inspiring critical lens through which to read and reflect on literary and audio/visual works, and, by extension, on American landscapes, architectures, and bodily practices. Likewise, we hope that researchers in more established fields such as race and gender studies will find fresh angles to complement their methodological approaches.

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Notes

1 Matt Taibbi, *I Can't Breathe: The Killing That Started a Movement* (London: WH Allen, 2017), 21.

2 Taibbi, *I Can't Breathe*, 21.

3 Taibbi, *I Can't Breathe*, 34.

4 Taibbi, *I Can't Breathe*, 303.

5 See Tim Cresswell, *The Tramp in America* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001); Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Heike Paul, Alexandra Ganser, and Katharina Gerund, ed., *Pirates, Drifters, Fugitives in the US and Beyond* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2012), DOI: 10.33675/2012-82538586); Julia Leyda, *American Mobilities: Geographies of Class, Race, and Gender in US Culture* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2016).

6 See Heike Paul, Alexandra Ganser, and Katharina Gerund, "Introduction," in *Pirates, Drifters, Fugitives in the US and Beyond*, ed. Heike Paul, Alexandra Ganser, and Katharina Gerund (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2012), 11–27.

7 Katharina Manderscheid, "Formierung und Wandel hegemonialer Mobilitätsdispositive: Automobile Subjekte und urbane Nomaden," *Zeitschrift für Diskursforschung* 2, no. 1 (2014): 5–31, DOI: 10.3262/ZFD1401005.

8 Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power* (New York: Harcourt, 1970), 172. See also Alexandra Ganser, "(Im)mobilität und Medialität im Hollywood-Weltraumfilm: *Interstellar* und *The Martian*," in *Mobile Kulturen und Gesellschaften/Mobile Cultures and Societies*, ed. Alexandra Ganser and Annegret Pelz (Vienna: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlage/University of Vienna Press), 163.

9 Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012); Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (New York: Viking Press, 2020).

10 John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge: Polity Books, 2007), 103, in reference to Alexis de Tocqueville's characterization. See also Paul, Ganser, and Gerund, "Introduction."

11 Cresswell, *On the Move*, 58. For a general, multidisciplinary overview of mobility studies discourses and methods, see Alexandra Ganser and Annegret Pelz, "Conceptualizing Cultural and Social Mobility Studies," in *Mobile Kulturen und Gesellschaften/Mobile Cultures and Societies*, ed. Alexandra Ganser and Annegret Pelz (Vienna: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlage/Vienna University Press, 2020), 32–56.

12 On gender, see, for example, Susan Clair Imbarrato, *Traveling Women: Narrative Visions of Early America* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006); Alexandra Ganser, *Roads of Her Own: Gendered Space and Mobility in American Women's Literature, 1970–2000* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008); regarding class, see, for example, Cresswell, *Tramp*; Beverley Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2020), ch. 3.

13 On cultural mobility, see Stephen Greenblatt, Ines Županov, Reinhard Meyer-Kalkus, Heike Paul, Pál Nyíri, and Friederike Pannewick, *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

14 See Sylvia L. Hilton and Cornelis A. van Minnen, ed., *Nation on the Move: Mobility in US History* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2002).

15 See Saskia Sassen, *Expulsions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014).

16 Julia Preston, "Deportation Nation," review of *The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Immigrants*, by Adam Goodman, *The New York Review of Books* (October 8, 2020): 27.

17 This is also one of the core perspectives explored by the University of Vienna's interdisciplinary research platform and FWF Doc.Funds PhD program "Mobile Cultures and Societies" and was the focus of the 2021 conference "Entangled Im/mobilities." A selection of work from the research platform has been published in the bilingual collection of essays *Mobile Kulturen und Gesellschaften/Mobile Cultures and Societies*, ed. Alexandra Ganser and Annegret Pelz (Vienna: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Verlage/Vienna University Press, 2020).

18 Mimi Sheller, *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in the Age of Extremes* (London: Verso Books, 2018).

19 Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castaneda, Anne-Marie Fortier, and Mimi Sheller, "Introduction: Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration," in *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, ed. Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castaneda, Anne-Marie Fortier, and Mimi Sheller (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2003), 1.

20 Derrick Johnson (@DerrickNAACP), "The right to breathe is on trial," Twitter, March 29, 2021, https://twitter.com/DerrickNAACP/status/1376570284988325892.

21 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). From a mobilities studies perspective, Sharpe's book can be read as a darker version of Paul Gilroy's seminal *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993): the former privileges the perspective of African immobilizations on the slave ship and the plantation (and, today, in the suffocating atmosphere of antiblackness), while the latter highlighted mobilization as a source of Black modernity, empowerment, and resistance.

22 See Mia Bay, *Traveling Black: A Story of Race and Resistance* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2021).

23 On mobility as a right, see Tim Cresswell, "The Right to Mobility: The Production of Mobility in the Courtroom," *Antipode* 38, no. 4 (2006): 735–54. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-8330.2006.00474.x.

24 Tim Cresswell, "Understanding Mobility Holistically: The Case of Hurricane Katrina," in *The Ethics of Mobility: Rethinking Place, Exclusion, Freedom and Environment*, ed. Sigurd Bergmann and Tore Sager (New York: Routledge, 2008), 131, DOI: 10.4324/9781315616186.

25 Lesley Murray and Sara Upstone, "Conclusion," in *Researching and Representing Mobilities: Transdisciplinary Encounters*, ed. Lesley Murray and Sara Upstone (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 191–92.

26 Murray and Upstone, "Conclusion," 193.