

Special issue for *English Studies in Africa*

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Moving Publicly, Writing Mobility: Public Transport in African Literatures

Social sciences and the humanities are affected by a mobilities turn that foregrounds the meanings of mobility in social and cultural formations. Mobilities research concentrates on “the study of various complex systems, assemblages and practices of mobility” (Sheller 2014, 45), opposing itself to “sedentarist” theories that “treat [...] as normal stability, meaning, and place, and treats as abnormal distance, change, and placelessness” (Sheller and Urry 2006, 208). The mobilities turn is not solely a social sciences phenomenon. As important predecessors such as Clifford’s concept of “dwelling in travel” (1997) show, mobilities research is firmly rooted in the humanities (Merriman 2012, 13–14; Aguiar et al. 2019, 4–5; Merriman and Pearce 2017, 493–494). The “mobility humanities” (Kim et al. 2019, 100) pays attention to the ways in which the meanings of mobility are produced by humanistic production via representation, imagination, and speculation.

This special issue will apply a mobility studies perspective to explore representations of public transport in African literary texts. Literature is an important realm for producing the meanings of public transport as exemplified by the portrayals of the foula-foula in Biyaoula’s *L’Impasse*, the bush taxi in Rakotoson’s *Juillet au pays: Chroniques d’un retour à Madagascar*, the bus connecting urban and rural areas in Tagwira’s *The Uncertainty of Hope*, the railway in Vassanji’s *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* and other modes of public transport across the continent in Khumalo’s *Dark Continent, My Black Arse*. Public transport also plays a pivotal role in literary representations of diasporic spaces: bus stops, the London Underground, and the Paris Metro are sites where narratives unfold or stand metonymically for the space abroad, as in Huchu’s *The Maestro, the Magistrate and the Mathematician*, Chikwava’s *Harare North*, Dadié’s *Un Nègre à Paris* and N’Sondé’s *Le Silence des esprits*.

While there are some examples of engagement with mobility practices and systems in African literary studies (e.g., Anyinefa 2003; Tunca 2008; Steiner 2014; Upstone 2014; Savonick 2015; Green-Simms 2017; Chidora 2017; Jones 2018; Toivanen 2021a & 2021b; Pfalzgraf 2021), the notion of mobility tends to be equated with migration or to function as a metaphor thereof (Toivanen 2021a, 1–2). From a mobility studies perspective, this is a reductive understanding that erases the holistic, relational and everyday aspects of mobilities. Simone (2004, 118) proposes a broader notion of mobility which goes beyond migration and even physical movement. Mobility in his understanding “is not totally subsumed by these categories; rather it has been appropriated as a multifaceted strategy of urban survival – accumulation but also control” to do justice to the fact that “Africa is a space of intensified movement, of movement in a very broad sense that encompasses migration, displacement and accelerated social mobility.” The focus on African literary portrayals of public transport answers the call for approaches that challenge conceptions of the continent as a passive venue for the mobilities of non-African things and subjects (Mavhunga et al. 2016, 44) and that move beyond what Nyamnjoh (2013, 659) and Matereke (2016, 113) criticise as stereotypical understandings of African people and societies as immobile.

We understand public transport as any form of infrastructure aimed at enabling people’s movement through space. This includes the use of public as well as private, informal transport services such as emergency taxis, combis, bajaj, tro-tro, foula-foula, boda boda, danfo, matatu, etc. While these diverse forms of ‘getting around’ in African urbanities, between rural and urban space, and even across national and continental borders have attracted the attention of the social sciences (e.g., Pirie 1988; Cissokho 2014; Stasik and Klaeger 2018; Stasik and Cissokho 2018; Xiao 2019; Rink 2022),

literary scholarship is only beginning to understand their importance in African literature. We seek to address this gap by conceiving of public transport as a literary phenomenon in a twofold sense: as a subject of literature and as a literary practice in itself, i.e., as a space and site where literature ‘happens’ and comes into being. Thus this special issue will be part of a larger effort invested in strengthening the dialogue between mobility studies and literary scholarship and will set out to develop mobility as a category of literary criticism.

We invite articles that address representations of different modes of public transport set in diverse geographical, historical, cultural, linguistic and social contexts on the African continent but also in contemporary African diasporas. The literary representation of public transport is an interesting subject of critical inquiry in the sense that public transport is everyday mobility par excellence and also because it plays such a central role in the production of space, urban space in particular (Jensen 2009, 141). Public transport can be seen as mobile public space that enables ephemeral, embodied encounters between strangers (Tuvikene et al. 2021). As such, the mobile public space of public transport can become a site for producing social relations (Quayson 2018, 115) in terms of transcultural encounters, differentiation, and inclusionary and exclusionary practices (Wilson 2011; Koefoed et al. 2017; Rink 2022). Mobile infrastructures such as bus stations can be spaces of encounter between drivers and passengers (Horta and Malet Calvo 2018) and of informal trade (Stasik and Klaeger 2018). In effect, as Quayson (2018, 115) summarises it, public transport and their infrastructures are chronotopes not only of time and space but also of social relations.

We welcome articles that explore the following questions:

- How are modes of public transport and mobile infrastructures represented in African and Afrodiasporic literature?
- What sorts of encounters do scenes of travel by public transport enable? How do these encounters contribute to character and plot construction?
- What formal functions do portrayals of travel by public transport have; how do public transport mobilities and their infrastructure motivate the literary form? What are the implications of public transport mobility for narration?
- How do passengers use literature while moving publicly?
- What is the relationship of the experience of being stuck in traffic to the practices of reading, writing, narration, and literary imagination?
- How do contemporary representations of public transport differ from earlier, mid-century or colonial representations of ‘getting around’ and moving through public space? For instance, how has the role of the railway changed?
- How are spaces constructed through portrayals of public transport? How do representations of public transport mediate between the space of the vehicle and the space outside the vehicle?
- What is the relationship between public transport infrastructure and informal literary practices (incl. the marketing and circulation of self-published material)?
- How are (informal) economic activities (e.g., *kukiya-kiya*, *débrouillardise*, hustling) represented in the context of public transport?

Deadline for abstracts: 17 April 2023 (selected full papers due by 1 November 2023; publication scheduled for September 2024)

Please send an abstract of **350 words** and a short bio note (50-100 words) to both guest-editors by 17 April 2023: anna-leena.toivanen@uef.fi and pfalzgraf@uni-bonn.de

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