

Call for papers for a special issue of the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*

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Mobility Infrastructures in African Cultural Imagination

This special issue explores how mobility infrastructures – roads, bridges, ports, railways, airports, digital networks, dams, etc. – shape lived experience, cultural meaning, and aesthetic form in African cultural production, while also examining how African cultural products reshape theoretical debates on mobility infrastructures. Spurred by ongoing conversations in mobility humanities (Merriman & Pearce 2017; Aguiar et al. 2019; Shin & Lee 2022; Biasiori et al. 2023) and humanistic infrastructure studies (e.g., Larkin 2013; Rubenstein et al. 2015; Appel et al. 2018; Boehmer & Davies 2018), this special issue brings an African cultural studies approach to investigating the formal and discursive affordances of mobility infrastructures. By joining emerging discussions on infrastructure from a mobility humanities perspective (Adey et al. 2024), this issue sets out to pose new questions, and trouble old ones, about mobility infrastructures in (and through) African cultural productions.

By ‘mobilities’, we refer to everyday practices of movement, blockage, circulation, waiting, and connectivity, as they are mediated by material systems, that is, infrastructural “moorings” (Hannam et al. 2006, 3). As such, our approach marks a clear move beyond more conventional understandings that consign mobility to migration studies (Toivanen 2025, 5–7). The mobility humanities concentrates on “the phenomena, technologies, and infrastructures of mobility and its ramifications from a humanities perspective, specifically focusing on their cultural-political, ethical, and spiritual and emotional meanings” (Shin & Lee 2022, 3). Mobilities are understood as multiple, systemic, and relational (Adey 2010), and their meanings spring from specific social and cultural contexts of power (Cresswell 2006, 2). Mobility concerns humans, but also non-humans, objects, and ideas.

While the notion of movement has been a key trope in theories of late modernity and globalization, “[m]obilities have long been a central aspect of both historical and contemporary existence, of urban and non-urban locales, of Western and non-Western existence” (Sheller 2014, 48). Scholarship that looks beyond Western understandings and contexts of mobility articulate more pointedly the multiplicity of mobilities (e.g., Aguiar 2011; Hart 2016; Beck et al. 2017; Green-Simms 2017; Ponsavady 2018; Englert et al. 2021; Grace 2021; Toivanen 2021; Stasik 2025; Stork 2026). More importantly, such studies implicate mobility infrastructures in posing urgent questions about modes and practices of mobility in postcolonial Africa. Take for example Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall’s reading of Johannesburg by traversing it (2007), an exercise through which they call attention to the creative agency of the post-apartheid city. It is particularly noteworthy that it is from such contexts of reading mobilities in Africa that AbdouMalik Simone’s influential notion of “people as infrastructure” emerged (Simone 2004). This notion signals, on the one hand, that mobilities-related activities in Africa implicate and redefine traditional notions of infrastructure. On the other hand, it indicates that Africa remains a productive site for rigorous and often surprising new understandings of (mobility) infrastructures (see also Larkin 2008). This is the potential that our special issue seeks to mark.

Although there have been cultural readings of mobility and infrastructures in Africa, and in some cases, there are studies that have attended to the imbrication of both – such as Ato Quayson’s reading of Oxford Street in Accra (2014), Lindsey B. Green-Simms’s examination of car culture in West Africa (2017), Alain Serge Agnessan and Adama Coulibaly’s volume on roads in francophone fiction (2023), Anna-Leena

Toivanen's interrogation of mobility in African and Afrodiasporic literatures (2025), Hedley Twidle's piece on reading, writing and walking a South African highway (2017), and Sam Dennis Otieno's study of visual and textual representations of the Nairobi expressway (2025) – there is yet no comprehensive body of theory on cultural representations of and interactions with mobility infrastructures in African cultural studies. In light of this, and of newly emerging expansive understandings of infrastructure as a “multidimensional and lived phenomenon [that] is as much about space, place, ecology and culture, as it is about pipes, scaffolding, wire and concrete” (Steele & Legacy 2017, 3), this special issue aims to assemble theorizations of mobility infrastructure through African cultural productions. We are particularly interested in exploring African cultural products as laboratories rather than observatories for thinking about mobility infrastructures (see Frenay et al. 2025, 16), and in how they engage with aesthetic form (see e.g., Levine 2015; Davies 2019; Fyfe 2021).

We invite articles addressing mobility infrastructures set in diverse geographical, historical, cultural, linguistic and social contexts on the African continent. We are interested in diverse forms of mobility infrastructures that facilitate and regulate the movement of people, objects, and ideas in Africa. Contributions should speak clearly to cultural analysis rather than remain primarily sociological or policy-oriented, and engage with mobility and infrastructure studies rather than migration studies perspectives. We welcome submissions that engage mobility infrastructures through close readings of African literary texts, films, artworks, or other cultural forms, as well as theoretically driven essays grounded in specific case studies and that revolve around the following topics:

- Aesthetics of African mobility infrastructures
- Mobility infrastructures as narrative devices or chronotopes
- Post/colonial mobility infrastructures and colonial *longue durée*
- African mobility infrastructures, power and exclusion
- Mobility infrastructures and urban/regional/national/transnational connectivity in Africa
- Failures/failed promises of mobility infrastructures; unfinished mobility infrastructures
- Official/unofficial mobility infrastructures; invasive mobility infrastructures
- Mobility infrastructures, spatiality, and landscape
- Infrastructure and speed, deceleration, waiting, and immobility
- Imagining future mobility infrastructures in Africa; mobile infrastructural utopias/dystopias
- Human and non-human infrastructural encounters in Africa
- Affective and embodied experiences of African mobility infrastructures

Timeline:

Deadline for abstracts: 30 September 2026

Notification of acceptance: 23 October 2026

Deadline for selected full research articles (max. 8000 words): 31 March 2027

Please send an **abstract** of **350 words** (excluding name, affiliation, and reference list) and **bio**note of **100 words** to both guest-editors by **30 September 2026**: anna-leena.toivanen@uef.fi and tolulope.akinwole@ubc.ca

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