Mobile dwelling

David Bissell & Andrew Gorman-Murray

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Dwelling has conventionally been understood in rather immobile ways. Such a contention owes much to Heidegger’s (1993) influential account of what, exactly, constitutes dwelling as a way of being in the world. For Heidegger, dwelling is about building an ongoing practical involvement with an environment, both materially and immaterially. However, while it is a term that insinuates the fervour of practical activity that is required in building a life, rather more problematically, he conceived that the most authentic mode of dwelling was a relatively rooted life which was involved in a particular place. For Heidegger, dwelling involved sparing, preserving, and being at home in a place. The influence of this immobile understanding of dwelling as staying can be traced, for instance, through the way that humanist geographers developed accounts of place that emphasised rootedness. Tuan, for instance, writes that place is “essentially a static concept. If we see the world as process, constantly changing, we would not be able to develop any sense of place” (1977, 179). Yet such a static sense of dwelling clearly overlooks the myriad ways that contemporary forms of dwelling involve diverse forms of mobility. As Urry summarises, there are “a variety of ways of dwelling, but that once we move beyond that of land, almost all involve complex relationships between belongingness and travelling, within and beyond the boundaries of national societies. People can indeed be said to dwell in various mobilities” (2000, 157, emphasis in original).

So, what might it mean to dwell in a mobile world? Travelling-in-dwelling and dwelling-in-travel (Clifford 1997) have become vital social science preoccupations, especially over the last two decades as work in the mobilities paradigm has explored the intricate combinations of mobility and immobility that characterise different lifeworlds (Adey 2018). Rather than antithetical, mobilities and moorings are now acknowledged as mutually dependent. However, the intensity and configuration of these processes has arguably changed during this time. In particular, we have witnessed the rise of complex new mobility and migration practices related to work and employment as well as social reproduction at a range of different scales (Cresswell, Dorow, and Roseman 2016). The intensity of these practices has been shaped by changing technologies of travel and communication, changing geopolitical forces, and changing economic circumstances. In light of such changes, this collection asks: how we might understand mobile dwelling today? Accordingly, the papers in this theme issue are interested in a range of contemporary problematics, including: emerging technologies of transport; developments in platform capitalism; the intensified pressures of urbanisation; and the challenges of underinvestment in public transport. Each paper explores mobile dwelling through a diversity of theoretical and methodological perspectives. The papers in this collection hail from a diversity of geographical contexts, including Australia, Canada, Myanmar, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. A variety of disciplinary perspectives
are also evidenced. By way of introduction, we summarise three cross-cutting themes that emerge from the papers in this collection, before proceeding to summarise the papers.

First, the papers draw our attention to the forms of labour that are involved in mobile dwelling. Mobile dwelling involves all kinds of bodily labours that stem from an array of material practices and processes. These labours signal a diversity of active competencies, skills and habits; and more passive modes of sustaining or suffering situations. These forms of labouring induce ambivalent sorts of sociality, reworked intimacies, sometimes characterised by fleeting, ephemeral and weak ties (Nowicka 2006). Mobile dwelling can also rework relationships of paid and unpaid labour, intensifying or breaking down certain forms of inequality in the process, and giving rise to new forms of valuation. The papers also address issues relating to the methodological labour of tracing and narrating mobile dwelling, such as multi-sited ethnographies, mobile methods, and more traditional methods repurposed for exploring mobile dwelling.

Second, the papers explore how different forms of mobile dwelling produce different experiences of inhabitation. Different practices of mobility have given rise to a range of unique sites of dwelling. These sites are characterised by different experiences of inhabitation which in this collection include cars, taxis, bikes, campgrounds, and rented accommodation (see also Meier and Frank 2016). Such diverse sites of mobile dwelling invite analysis of the complex politics of inhabitation that mobile dwelling produces from a range of conceptual perspectives. For instance, how does the coerced or voluntaristic nature of being on the move change the way that mobile dwelling is experienced? Inhabitation also prompts consideration of dwelling as an unfolding material process, where the sites themselves can subtly alter bodily capacities and sensibilities in complex ways.

Third, the papers illuminate the different forms of spacing that mobile dwelling gives rise to. Through the way that they work with different vocabularies, the papers attempt to capture the peculiar spatialities of mobile dwelling. They draw on a legacy of work where mobile dwelling has been differently captured through both “translocal” forms of distance and proximity (Urry 2002) and “multilocational” living arrangements embedded in the circular migration patterns of economic and technological transformation (Dick and Reuschke 2012). Being attentive to the spacings of mobile dwelling also invites consideration of the ethical tensions that inhere between a “centripetal” tendency to enclosure and security that characterises some approaches to dwelling with other approaches that are marked by a “centrifugal” openness to exteriority (Harrison 2007).

Mark Holton and Kirsty Finn find the concept of mobile dwelling a productive way of attuning to the complex mobilities that characterise the daily lifeworlds of students enrolled in higher education who continue to live at home. In the context of recent trends in United Kingdom higher education that have seen more students remain living at home in response to contemporary economic pressures, their article challenges the dominant way of thinking about these students in policy terms as “stayers”. Through a combination of walking interviews and go-alongs with university students who live at home, rather than daily lives that are characterised by relative stasis and a sense of place that has a continuity with pre-university life, Holton and Finn discover much more intricate mobile life worlds that are created out of different patterns of movement and stillness. Through their attention to practices of commuting, waiting and lingering, their mobile dwelling framework acknowledges the significance of belonging, pausing and
feeling for these students. For their participants, reflections on dwelling at university were not characterised by the stillness that one might expect from being “rooted” in their hometown, but rather a series of new daily mobilities that transformed their sense of place. As Holton and Finn argue, “Far from reflecting rootedness, or indeed a sense of constancy, the experiences of [living at home] students reveal the complexity and dynamism of everyday movements and flows, as well as the significance of stillness and pauses, in ways that are rarely appreciated in the student geographies/mobilities literature and yet are crucial to the ways that ‘Living at Home’ students might navigate feelings of belonging” (2019, 12).

Damian Collins and colleagues develop the concept of mobile dwelling as a way of illuminating the ambivalences of the urban campground. In the context of the current housing crisis in Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Collins et al. explore how urban campgrounds have become places of residence for some, owing to a lack of affordable and acceptable alternatives. Through interviews with managers and residents of campgrounds, they explain how urban campgrounds have become places of “stalled mobilities”, where onward mobility is expected but does not necessarily eventuate. Conceptually, the paper situates itself within an extensive legacy of work on “the camp” as a place that deploys spatial techniques of isolation and containment. Drawing especially on the work of Agamben, the camp is understood as a space where the legal order is suspended, and where a sovereign power erases the rights of the individual. Whilst cognisant of the challenges of applying Agamben’s framework to the urban campground, they find his thinking particularly useful for speculating on how the campground operates as a space of exception, since it operates outside the bounds of tenancy law and is characterised by the prevalence of ad-hoc rules and unconstrained management discretion. However, whilst Collins et al. draw attention to the ways in which campers’ bodies are subjected to “sovereign” authority, they balance this observation by explaining how residents are also able to attain experiences of privacy, comfort and autonomy that would not necessarily be afforded to them elsewhere.

Beth Notar and colleagues use the concept of mobile dwelling to highlight the combination of mobility and immobility that is experienced by taxi drivers in Yangon, Myanmar, in the context of the opening up of the Myanmar economy. Conceptually, their thinking is guided by Heidegger’s processual understanding of dwelling as an ongoing achievement. They develop Heidegger’s thinking by considering what an enhanced attention to movement might mean for dwelling. Their argument is based on seventy interviews conducted with taxi drivers whilst travelling (and being held up) on the streets of Yangon. These interview encounters prompt Notar et al. to conceptualise taxi driving as both chronically immobile and hypermobile labour, where drivers are “stuck” in their mobility, owing to the congested traffic of the city. They explain how taxi drivers engage in myriad activities of situational dwelling in their taxis, such as socialising, eating, sleeping, reading and thinking. However, they argue that they cannot engage in what they term “existential dwelling”, following Heidegger, which implies a stronger relationship between their practice and their milieu. Notar et al. indicate that this absence of “existential dwelling” arises because taxi drivers are enmeshed in an environmentally unsustainable system of automobility.

Robyn Dowling and Sophia Maalsen address the concept of mobile dwelling by exploring how families negotiate new transport technologies that seek to decrease
dependence on car ownership. Their article explores car sharing and e-bikes as two forms of mobility that families in Sydney, Australia, are experimenting with. Dowling and Maalsen identify carrying, convenience and cocooning as three requirements that are specific to family mobilities, and they evaluate car sharing and e-bikes through these three “dwelling” requirements. Carrying relates to the transportation of luggage; convenience relates to the control over scheduling; and cocooning relates to separation and privacy. Through qualitative interviews with families, they argue that both car sharing and e-biking are effective ways of fulfilling families’ travel needs. However, and significantly, Dowling and Maalsen also identify ways in which these two modes alter the rhythms of family life, which serves to highlight differences between the two modes. They argue that “The routines of family life, and the characteristics of convenience, for instance, were altered by car sharers as they sought to carry out family activities within the temporal boundaries set by the car sharing system. The notion of cocooning was contested and redefined with e-bike use, emphasizing not autonomy but an openness to the urban environment. In sum, for these research participants, e-bikes created more seamless familial mobility than car sharing” (2019, 13). In short, in concert with other research on walking and carlessness, they suggest that family mobility is becoming less reliant on private automobility.

Katharina Knaus explores mobile dwelling by considering how AirBnB hosts dwell with the mobilities of their transient guests. Developing an underrepresented “host” perspective on this increasingly prevalent accommodation platform, through interviews with AirBnB hosts in New York City, Knaus traces the multiple forms of preparatory work and emotional labour that are required by hosts to provide comfort for guests. This work includes the regulation of interaction through signage, as well as the production of cleanliness and orderliness. Inspired by Hochschild’s work on emotional labour, Knaus evaluates hosts’ labour as skilful care work. In considering the home as a space of mobile dwelling, she argues that home becomes deeply entangled with and transformed by the mobilities and economic forces that pass through it. Significant ethical questions arise from this observation. Knaus concludes by stressing that “the ambivalence of the emerging labour practices discussed lies in the question if this is a sort of emancipation and opportunity for hosts or an expression of the increasing capitalisation of social life, leisure time, spaces and affective resources” (2019, 15).

Sharon Roseman explores how mobile dwelling can become a politicised spectacle. Focusing on the saga of the Bell Island ferry in Newfoundland, Canada, Roseman draws attention to the frequent line-ups that have resulted from insufficient ferry capacity, breakdowns and lack of replacement vessels, and wharf closures. Through extensive participant observation, archival analysis of media reports, as well as interviews with Bell Island commuters, Roseman argues that these line-ups have become a focal point for people’s reflections on the precarious nature of public transportation in the region. Although for the most part commuters must passively wait in long line-ups on a regular basis, she also points out how, at times, the line-up has become more actively commandeered as a counter strategy to protest to the provincial government about decisions relating to ferry services. Drawing on Debord’s writings on the spectacle, Roseman argues that these line-ups have become a form of spectacle dwelling, through the way that they are regularly referred to for commentaries that focus on public service provision and the under-resourcing of commuting conditions for rural workers. Where Debord’s concern is
principally related to the kinds of alienation that industrial labour produces, Roseman concludes that “a major source of an ‘expansion’ of alienation is tied to the uncertainty surrounding the ferry commute as long represented in the spectacular power of long line-ups and consequent waits” (2019, 13).

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**References**


David Bissell

*School of Geography, The University of Melbourne, Parkville, Australia*

[mailto:david.bissell@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:david.bissell@unimelb.edu.au) [http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0964-186X](http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0964-186X)

Andrew Gorman-Murray

*School of Social Sciences and Psychology, Western Sydney University, Penrith, Australia*