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SPECIAL FORUM

Aluminum across the Americas: Caribbean Mobilities and Transnational American Studies

MIMI SELLER

Introduction

Over the past decade a “new mobilities paradigm” has emerged across the social sciences to make sense of recent developments in European and North American cities. This article aims to situate this new research in relation to a geographical area and a disciplinary field it hasn’t reached yet: the Caribbean and transnational American Studies. It also seeks to mobilize Caribbean studies as an approach that transcends regional or national paradigms, in part by showing the debt of mobilities research to Caribbean studies and to the theoretical trajectories that have arisen out of research on the colonial and post-colonial Atlantic world. Above all, it considers how an approach to critical mobilities research infused with an awareness of Caribbean studies enables one to envision a wider and more dynamic transnational American studies focused on the intricate relations among diverse and uneven mobilities (and associated immobilities) that interweave North America, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

Part of this effort involves a certain degree of reflexivity concerning my own intellectual trajectory, which spans both Caribbean studies and mobilities research. As a key contributor to the formulation of the new mobilities paradigm, I am especially aware that my own research arose out of and continues to engage with my training in Caribbean studies, which is often overlooked by those who focus on globalization, late modernity, or reflexive modernization as if these processes were only occurring in the global North. My interests in mobilities actually began with an

appreciation of the Caribbean as a highly globalized and mobile region at the heart of the Americas, and as a region that was deeply connected to widespread modernization processes across the entire Atlantic world, including industrialization, democratization, and economic modernization, despite its historiographic marginalization by European and North American thinkers.¹ It was also my own upbringing in Philadelphia and sojourns in New York, London and Lancaster, all important Atlantic world port cities, that led to my historical curiosity about connections with the Caribbean (and Africa) as an alternative to the more traditional sea-to-shining-sea national narrative of American history. By paying attention to people, things, and ideas that were moving across hemispheric oceanic pathways, my work has sought to foreground the interconnectivity of trans-Atlantic and pan-Caribbean geographies in a shared time-space.

Mobilities research focuses on the combined movements of people, objects, and information in all of their complex relational dynamics. However, mobilities research is distinguishable from earlier theorizations of globalization imagined as unfettered flow, because it emphasizes the relation of such mobilities to associated immobilities or moorings, as well as to questions of power, uneven access, and social justice. The mobilities paradigm overlaps with some aspects of globalization studies, migration and border studies, cultural geography, transport geography, and the anthropology of circulation, but it also differs in its scope, foci, and methodologies from each of these. Above all, critical mobilities research advances a relational basis for social theorizing that puts mobility, immobility and their associated power relations at its center; it proposes a research agenda around the study of various complex systems, assemblages, regimes and practices of (im)mobility; and at times involves a normative emphasis of addressing the future of mobility in relation to ecological sustainability and mobility justice. Mobilities research combines social and spatial theory in new ways and in so doing has provided a transformative nexus for bridging micro-interactional research on the phenomenology of embodiment, textual and visual methods drawing on the cultural turn and hermeneutics, macro-structural approaches to the state and political-economy, science and technology studies (STS), new media and digital culture studies, and in some cases post-colonial and critical theory.²

There is also a strong current of mobilities research that seeks to challenge Eurocentric theories of late modernity with their presentist emphasis on an imagined collective “we, who are now mobile.” I can best explain this position by describing my own relation to the field. In my earliest work I explored how processes of democratization arose out of the intrinsic worldview and struggles of the freed people of Jamaica and Haiti in envisioning freedom, and were not simply attributable to a British legacy or to North American tutelage, with which the Caribbean was somehow catching up (Sheller 2000).³ Then I moved on to consider how the modern Caribbean region was initially formed out of the global mobilities of the colonial era, including the flows of plants, people, ships, foodstuffs, technologies, travel

narratives, visual images, and venture capital (Sheller 2003), creating a transatlantic world. I have further analysed how the Caribbean region today is enmeshed in the multiple intersecting global mobilities and immobilities generated by shipping routes, communications infrastructures, tourism, migration, offshore financial flows, and diasporic cultures on the move (Sheller 2004, 2009a, 2009b). Finally, I extended this analysis of mobilities to thinking about air travel, border security regimes, and post-disaster humanitarian logistics as sites for the production of uneven “mobility regimes” (Sheller 2010, 2012b).

In both historical and present situations, then, the idea of flows is not meant to suggest unfettered fluidity, but rather highly channeled, uneven, and friction-filled movements along with barriers, gate-keeping mechanisms, demobilizations and remobilizations. For some time now, as historian Daniel Rodgers notes in his introduction to the forthcoming volume *Cultures in Motion*, “contemporary anthropology has spawned an uprooted vocabulary of diasporas, transculturations, entanglements, and zones of cultural friction.”⁴ Anthropologists have thus explored the disjunctures, divergences and frictions produced across various “scapes,” as Arjun Appadurai influentially theorized global mobilities, and the ways in which people dwell in mobility, putting down roots along their routes.⁵ “In contemporary historical writing, older implicit historical geographies are increasingly being challenged by models of worlds in motion,” argues Rodgers, because “‘transnational’ is [now] an agenda and a buzzword. Borderlands studies, diaspora studies, Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Ocean studies, studies of cultural transfer, and studies of interwoven histories have loosened many of the assumptions of stable, place-grounded tradition or localized social character that were common not long ago.”⁶

A good way to think about Caribbean mobilities, therefore, is in terms of “tidalectics,” as described by Elizabeth DeLoughrey in her interpretation of the concept first developed by Caribbean poet and theorist Kamau Brathwaite. In her book *Routes and Roots*, DeLoughrey points out that “[w]hile western scholars are increasingly turning to the Atlantic as a paradigm of transnational crossings and flows, the conceptual implications of this oceanic model have been deeply explored in the Caribbean, where tidalectics reconceptualizes diaspora historiography” (DeLoughrey 2007: 51). She points toward the Caribbean antecedents of recent theoretical projects, which reveal the transoceanic spaces of African, Asian, European and indigenous island crossing. “This dynamic model,” she argues, “is an important counter-narrative to discourses of filial rootedness and narrow visions of ethnic nationalism.” Following this tidalectic engagement, Caribbean mobilities research aims to look at the relation between different regions of the Americas through a shared theoretical framework that highlights relationality, a transoceanic imagination, and a “scattered” geography of belonging.

The Caribbean, to be sure, has long been a region formed out of multiple intersecting and contested mobilities, on both the human side (indigenous settlers of the pre-modern era, colonists and buccaneers of the early-modern era, those who

made the middle passage into slavery, naval flotillas and privateers, indentured laborers and Maroons, and eventually tourists and diasporic migrants) as well as the non-human side (invasive animals, viral and bacterial diseases, plantation commodity crops, ships and airplanes, maps and travel narratives, newspapers and archives, music and dances, etc.). Hence, mobilities are always deeply historically embedded and adaptive to already existing fields of power and meaning—moving with the ebb and flow of “tidalectics.” My most recent work adds a new dimension to this understanding of the Caribbean and North America as a transnational mobile region by tracking a single material—aluminum—through its production, circulation, representation and consumption across the Americas (Sheller, 2014). The idea of “following the thing” has been used by geographers, complementing a recent anthropological emphasis on circulation, to trace how things that travel connect and thus constitute transnational networks—especially edible crops like sugar (Mintz 1996), papaya (Cook et al. 2004), bananas (Trouillot 1988; Sheller, forthcoming), or other foods like cod (Kurlansky 1998). Tracing commodity chains and the ethics of eating can help reveal connections between places that are not only economic, but also visceral, affective and aesthetic.

To give just one example that takes a very material form, social sculptures like Shelley Sacks’ “Exchange values: images of invisible lives” used the dried, cured and stitched skins from twenty boxes of St Lucian bananas—and the recorded voices of their growers telling visitors about their lives and work—to create a social-sculptural “space for imagination” that was intended to provoke discussion about hidden relations between producers and consumers in contemporary capitalism (see Cook et al 2001 for a detailed description). Following plantation crops from the days of slavery to the rise of the Fair Trade movements is one important way of exploring connections across the Americas. However, there are also many other mobilities that constitute such geographies of connection. Nor are the connections simply about the commodity chain itself, with its producers and consumers, buyers and sellers, middle men and market women, but also about the narratives and cultural meanings that accompany traveling objects, the symbolic fields in which such material objects are located, and the contestations, translations, and hybridizations that occur along the way.

By bringing together studies of migration, transportation, infrastructure, transnationalism, mobile communications, imaginative travel and tourism, new approaches to mobilities (note the plural) are especially able to highlight the relation between local and global “power-geometries” (Massey, 1993), which have been especially relevant to the forming of the uneven geographical and conceptual space that we call “the Americas.” This sensitivity to power differences originates partly out of anthropological studies of migration, diasporas, and transnational citizenship (e.g., Basch et al., 1994; Clifford 1997; Ong, 1999) and partly out of trenchant postcolonial feminist critiques of colonial masculine mobilities on the one hand (Kaplan 1996; Pratt 1992) and the bounded and static categories of race, nation,

ethnicity, community and state on the other (e.g, Kaplan and Grewal, 1994; Ifekwunigwe, 1999). Caribbean mobilities were of course central to the initial theorizations of mobile diasporas and transnationality (Gilroy 1993; Basch et al. 1994; Clifford 1997); debates concerning creolization (Benitez Rojo 1996; Glissant 1989, 1997; Shepherd and Richards 2002); as well as empirical studies of phenomenon such as “transnational families” (Bauer and Thompson 2006) and “longdistance nationalism” (Schiller and Fouran 2001). So, although mobilities theorists are not Caribbeanists per se, they implicitly tap into conceptual currents that were first navigated and charted by Caribbean theory.⁷

Of significance here is the observation that critical mobilities research does not necessarily propose that “we all” live “more mobile” lives today, nor that we are in an epoch of unprecedented mobility. Although the speed, intensity, and technical capacity of various mobile flows *may* be greater than ever before—for some people, in some places (though certainly not all)—the emphasis on the historical relations between mobilities and immobilities, scapes and moorings, movement and stillness (Hannam et al., 2006: 3) expands analysis to take into account the frictions and turbulence of *differential mobilities* both in the past and in the present (Cresswell 2010; Tsing 2004). Movements of people, goods, capital and information are always being controlled, regulated, and constrained by various gate-keeping institutions and channeling mechanisms such as border regimes, passports, visas, taxes, tariffs, customs and duties, as well as other more informal cultural mechanisms for slowing, sorting and carrying out surveillance of mobilities. My methodology thus emphasizes the historical practices, meanings, and struggles over interconnected mobilities and immobilities; the differential velocities of people, goods, information, texts and images; and the fixed infrastructures (such as ports, borders, fiber-optic cables, oil refineries, etc.) that shape such (im)mobilities.

In what follows, I summarize aspects of a larger project, *Aluminum Dreams: The making of Light Modernity*, that traces a transnational cultural history of a single material made by the Aluminum Corporation of America (Alcoa) out of bauxite ore mined largely in Suriname, Guyana and Jamaica for much of the twentieth century. My aim is to show how advances in economic development in the United States, including the emergence of mass consumer markets, faster transportation, and modern styles, all were closely linked to “other” modernities in the Caribbean. Telling this transnational history of aluminum across the Americas requires a narrative spanning North and South America, spun through the heart of the Caribbean, in a connective meshwork that is often made invisible in national histories or area studies, the latter isolating only one portion of the whole. A focus on movement brings to the foreground that which is often left in the background: the movement of ships, of capital, of ore, of multinational corporations, and of labor movements trying to wage a transnational struggle linked to national politics, but transcending any single national history. In the following sections, I offer a condensed account of aluminum’s

trajectories across the transnational Americas as exemplary of how to mobilize Caribbean studies, and how to Caribbeanize critical mobilities research.

A Transnational Spatio-temporal Fix

Aluminum, which is made from bauxite ore, is one of the most abundant minerals on earth, and the most commonly occurring metal, but it is economically recoverable only in limited forms and limited locations. One of those locations is the Caribbean. Aluminum is a substance constitutive of both mobilities and immobilities due to the crucial part it plays in the transportation and aviation sectors, in lightweight architecture and streamlined design, and in the electric generation and satellite communication industries. It shapes homes, vehicles, cities, regions, and states, re-makes infrastructures, and contributes to the “spatial fix” that locks in certain kinds of implementation and control of mobilities. As Saskia Sassen has observed, the increase in cross-border transactions and of “capabilities for enormous geographical dispersal and mobility” go hand in hand with “pronounced territorial concentrations of resources necessary for the management and servicing of that dispersal and mobility” (Sassen, 2002: 2). Such infrastructures and concentrations of mobile capital are linked to what David Harvey describes as “spatial fixes” and later elaborated as “spatio-temporal fixes” (Jessop, 2006). We could think of the creation of the Caribbean region as a spatio-temporal fix on a hemispheric scale, one that produces uneven relations to divergent spaces and times.

Aluminum not only changes shape as it moves, but its fluid forms change the places and infrastructures that enable its movements and the movements of others. Drawing on actor-network theories within science studies, we can think of aluminum not so much as a singular thing, but as a fluid entity constituted by complex hybrid mobilities that involve: a) the mobilization of resources, corporate networks, market economies, and state power around the world; b) the mobilization of technical instruments such as patents, electrolytic conversion processes, and technologies of power generation, mining, smelting, transport and fabrication; c) the mobilization of consumers, the products they use, and the circulating representations of such products in advertising and marketing; and d) the actual material flux and “agency” of the multiplicitous forms that aluminum takes: bauxite ore, alumina, molten aluminum, forgings, castings, extruded shapes and sheets of metal, and a multitude of finished products, waste products, and recycled aluminum.

In the late nineteenth century the United States patent system gave first mover advantage to the company founded by Charles Martin Hall, a 23-year-old American chemist, trained at Oberlin College, who discovered the electrochemical smelting of aluminum in 1886 (curiously simultaneous with a French discovery by another 23-year-old, Paul Héroult, which is itself already suggestive of the deep interconnectivity of the Atlantic world). By the early twentieth century, Hall’s Pittsburgh Reduction Company became the Aluminum Corporation of America, which

used patents, monopolistic control, as well as US military backing, to move into bauxite mining in the Caribbean region and protect its interests there. Light and flexible, yet very strong in alloy form, aluminum became a substance constitutive of modern mobility due to the crucial part it played in transportation, construction, and the rise of aviation, as well as in the packaging and container industry, and in distributing electricity, without which many other things would not be able to move. Within a few decades the “speed metal” played a crucial part in the development of lighter vehicles and airplanes, lightweight objects and packaging, and national public infrastructure for transportation and electricity. Aluminum-consumption growth rates exceeded those of all other major metals in the 20th century.⁸

Just as anthropologist Sidney Mintz argued in *Sweetness and Power* (1986) that the modern Atlantic world was built upon sugar consumption in the age of slavery, we could say that aluminum offers a successor to that narrative: a late (and light) modernity built upon consumption of aluminum and all that it enables, including speed and mobility itself. While the transatlantic circulations of the sugar plantation and associated slavery system created certain constellations of mobility (ships, capital, the commodity itself, goods to support the plantations, anti-slavery texts, and runaways) and immobility (the enslaved and indentured, plantation land and sunk capital, forts to keep colonial control of islands, and racial ideologies), these were eventually overturned by other spatio-temporal fixes, such as the coffee production system or the banana trade, and later tourism and bauxite mining, all of which are transnational systems. This is therefore a transnational story that like other recent commodity histories “embed[s] America [meaning the US] in larger circuits of people, ideas, and resources,” rather than stopping at “the water’s edge,” as Robert Vitalis puts it in his study of American multinationals on the Saudi Arabian oil frontier.⁹ Yet I approach this history neither as an Americanist dipping a toe into international waters, nor even solely as a Caribbeanist studying a highly mobile region, but as a mobilities theorist analyzing how “America” and “the Caribbean” are together produced by the transnational (im)mobilities carving out spatio-temporal fixes that become durable political, economic and social entities.

In the larger project, *Aluminum Dreams* (which I can only partially present here), I make the case that aluminum first transformed vehicles and the infrastructures that support the movement of people and goods, whether automobiles and road systems, tankers and trucks, shipping and freight movement, airplanes and airports, or eventually space ships, rockets, and satellite communications systems. The industry’s design and publicity departments also played a crucial part in circulating images and representations of mobility, instigating a wider culture of speed and positive valuation of mobility. At the same time, the aluminum industry also played a crucial part in the control, regulation, and sedimentation of certain kinds of immobilities, demobilizations, or unequal mobilities of the modern world. Aluminum has been dubbed “packaged electricity” or “solidified electricity” because smelting demands so much power,¹⁰ but it might

equally be called solidified power because it tends towards such an uncompetitive industrial structure. Through the use of patents, cartels, international trade regimes, anti-trust battles, negotiations with various states, and the benefits of military power, the industry tried to set the terms for control over the global movement of bauxite, electricity, and aluminum, and thus control over the price of commodities and labor around the world.

Gregory Nowell argues in his study of mercantile states and the world oil cartel in the early twentieth century that the process of competition, shifting investment, and market governance that he calls “transnational structuring” includes cycles of both deregulation and increasing regulation. This generates “the seeming contradiction that the increased power of multinational corporations will also lead to increased regulatory power of states; far from having their ‘sovereignty at bay’, states will find their regulatory powers greatly strengthened in some dimensions.”¹¹ Hence, the emergence of transnational corporations such as Alcoa, which operated throughout the Caribbean and later globally, was closely allied with the emerging economic, military and regulatory power of the US state. The growth of US regional power in the Americas first built on the colonial relations that shaped the Caribbean; it then took a direct military form as the US exercised direct interventions and occupations starting in the late nineteenth century and extending until today, while also indirectly shaping the degree of independence that post-colonial states could exercise in terms of limiting their self-determination and resource sovereignty. Yet, as I shall describe below, this struggle for control of their own resources drove West Indian ideological critiques of dependent development. Caribbean moves to nationalize bauxite mines and form a bauxite producer’s cartel flew in the face of US control of this strategic war material (used to make both airplanes and explosives, and later rockets and satellites). As the US moved to control the sea lanes and air space that allowed for movement through the region, there was an undertow of tidalectic mobilities pulling the region in other directions.

Struggles for Resource Sovereignty in Jamaica

The military significance of aluminum for the US connects particularly to economic development issues in Jamaica. The aluminum industry’s celebration of its own contributions to mobility, to technological advancement, and to global productivity masked the behind-the-scenes work that enabled it to lock in immobilities (of technologies, capital, and labor) grounded in both global economic inequalities and in military force. During the First World War about 90% of all aluminum produced was consumed by the military, whose requirements for 1917 and 1918 totaled 128,867 tons.¹² During World War II, US government investment drove aluminum production to grow by more than 600 percent between 1939 and 1943, outpacing the increase in all other crucial metals.¹³ During the war the United States produced 304,000 military airplanes in total, using 3.5 billion pounds of aluminum, claiming more than 85% of

Alcoa's output. At the war's end, the government had \$672 million invested in fifty wholly state-owned aluminum production and fabrication plants, which were disposed of after the war through the Surplus Property Act.¹⁴ Subsidies to favor Alcoa's competitors, stockpiling after the war and the outbreak of the Korean War all led to even greater government participation in the industry.

From a wartime resource of national strategic importance the aluminum industry mutated into a multifaceted industry that not only produced goods, but produced the capacity to consume more electricity, to transport more goods, and to keep the economy on the move more quickly. In other words, aluminum boosted economic capacity as it was consumed, building infrastructure as well as the goods that flowed through it, while also helping to build US global military power. The system of Allied collaboration known as "Lend-Lease," along with the September 1940 destroyers-for-bases agreement, enabled the US to provide aluminum to British wartime industries (whose European sources of bauxite and power had been seized by Germany) in exchange for air bases in British colonies, including Jamaica, Trinidad and British Guiana.¹⁵ These new military bases embodied the waning of Britain's power in the region and gave the US a valuable military foothold just as the US multinationals were engaging in bargaining with Caribbean states over access to resources, preferential tariffs, and deals for low taxation.

North American aluminum production depended largely on Caribbean bauxite throughout most of the twentieth century. Suriname, in the Netherlands Antilles, where Alcoa first opened mines in 1916, became a key supplier, while its Canadian sister-company, Alcan, sourced its bauxite in British Guiana (later Guyana). However, the threats posed by German U-boats to trans-Caribbean shipping during World War II prompted an interest in securing steady supplies closer to the US mainland, especially in Jamaica, where bauxite ore was discovered only in the 1940s. The increased demand for aluminum during the Second World War, the emergence of the United States as the world's largest aluminum producer, and the dangers of wartime shipping all led to the emergence of Jamaica as the primary supplier of bauxite to the US aluminum companies.¹⁶

At the same time, however, the Caribbean region also claimed one of the most mobile working classes in the world, whether moving to work on the sugar plantations of other islands, the banana plantations of Central America, or in the building of a trans-isthmus railway and the Panama Canal. This mobile working class was at times highly politicized, cosmopolitan, and critical of the world economic system. Ideologies such as Garveyism, pan-Africanism, Socialism, and Communism circulated amongst them and between the Caribbean and its US outposts in places like Harlem.¹⁷ The most organized workers in the region were the stevedores and other port workers who, along with sugar plantation workers, led major strikes and the "labor rebellion" of 1937-38.¹⁸ As Jamaica adopted universal enfranchisement in the 1940s and moved towards self-government in the 1950s, thanks in part to this major labor uprising, there was "an increasing sense of nationalism and concern for

the protection of national resources,” especially among the labor parties of the left.¹⁹ Out of the labor movement arose a generation of nationalist leaders who pushed the British West Indies towards independence and towards democratic socialism. Bauxite played a crucial part in these movements, or counter-mobilities, of the transnational system.

Following negotiations with the Canadian and US aluminum multinationals, Jamaica’s British colonial government enacted The Minerals (Vesting) Act and The Mining Act in 1947, which set a very low royalty payment of only one shilling per ton of bauxite mined, equivalent to about US 20 cents, and also set a very low level of assumed profit on which taxation would be based. Kaiser Aluminum based its new mining operations in Jamaica and the American mining companies acquired up to 142,000 acres of agricultural land for mining exploration, while Reynolds Metals gained exclusive access to 206,000 acres of Crown Land in British Guiana.²⁰ However, a major renegotiation of the terms of bauxite royalty payments and taxes was undertaken by People’s National Party (PNP) Chief Minister Norman Washington Manley (one of the founding fathers of Jamaican independence) in 1956-7, based on the principle that “Countries in the early stages of economic development ought to derive the largest possible benefits from their natural resources. They ought not to be regarded merely as sources of cheap raw materials for metropolitan enterprises.”²¹ Following his tough negotiations, the 1957 agreement re-set the royalty, which led to a substantial increase in revenues to the Jamaican government, eventually contributing more than 45% of the country’s export earnings by 1959.²²

During the Korean War, Jamaica moved from supplying about one quarter of all US bauxite imports in 1953 to over one half in 1959.²³ Jamaica achieved independence in 1962 when it “was the world’s largest producer of bauxite” according to historical sociologists Evelyn Huber Stephens and John Stephens. “In 1965, the country supplied 28 percent of the bauxite used in the market economies of the world . . . [and] bauxite along with tourism fueled post-war Jamaican development and the two provided the country with most of her gross foreign exchange earnings.”²⁴ In 1973 Michael Manley’s PNP government “opened negotiations with the aluminum TNCs on acquisition of 51 percent equity in their bauxite mining operations, . . . acquisition of all the land owned by the companies in order to gain control over the bauxite reserves, and a bauxite levy tied to the price of aluminum ingot on the US market.”²⁵ In March 1974, inspired by the success of OPEC, a bauxite producer’s cartel known as the International Bauxite Association [IBA] was set up and was quickly able to double the price of bauxite on world markets. Meanwhile, the socialist government of newly independent Guyana nationalized the Demerara Bauxite Company in 1970 and took a 51% stake in Alcan’s DEMBA subsidiary.

The New World Group of economists at the University of the West Indies (including Lloyd Best and Norman Girvan, leading members of the Caribbean “dependency school” of economic theorists) began to publish critiques of foreign capital and the economic underdevelopment of Jamaica and also called for the

nationalisation of the Jamaican bauxite industry in the early 1970s.²⁶ It is in the context of the bauxite industry that these radical Caribbean economists first elaborated theories of “dependent development,” and socialist post-independence nationalist leaders such as Prime Minister Forbes Burnham of Guyana and Michael Manley of Jamaica tried to stand up to the multinationals and the International Monetary Fund by nationalising the bauxite industry in the 1970s.²⁷ It is worth noting that such struggles over minerals and mining rights continue to embroil countries across the Americas today, where transnational corporations are still vying for gold, silver, tin, zinc, bauxite, and the hydroelectric power needed to smelt aluminum. The government in Bolivia recently nationalized mines, anti-mining protests have taken place in Peru and Chile, and the Rio-Tinto aluminum conglomerate has been accused of involvement in “the parliamentary coup d’etat against Paraguay’s President Fernando Lugo on June 22 [2012]” due to his efforts to stop the building of a hydroelectric project by the major aluminum TNC Rio Tinto Alcan.²⁸

Such contemporary charges echo past events, when Michael Manley’s socialist rhetoric, friendship with Fidel Castro, and support for African liberation movements such as the MPLA in Angola did not endear him to the United States, nor to the multinationals. In response, American aluminum companies “doubled their bauxite imports from Guinea in 1975, [and] they reduced their Jamaican imports by 30 per cent. . . . Jamaica’s share of the world market for bauxite plummeted.”²⁹ The corporate powers that controlled the global aluminum industry would never allow “Third World” countries, especially socialist ones, to wrest control over their own resources. The bauxite taken from the Caribbean allowed the United States to build a material culture of light aluminum, unquestionable military air power, and space-age mobility. At the same time, the terms of oligopolistic international trade and market governance that allowed this transfer of resources to take place helped to lock in place structures of global inequality that prevented Caribbean countries from exercising true sovereignty or benefiting from their own resources.³⁰ This kind of failure of “development” contributed to the rise of labor migration as a survival strategy, which in turn produced the transnational patterns of life that became the signature of the Caribbean diaspora in the late twentieth century. These transnational dynamics of resource extraction, capital flow, labor migration, border control regimes, and mobilizations of both military power and resistance movements continue to drive relations between the northern and southern parts of the Americas today.

Conclusion

My aim has been to show how even a brief cultural history that foregrounds material histories and relational processes, rather than national histories or sedentary regions, can help us to recognize (and to create) a more transnational American studies. The approach taken here still depends on knowledge of national histories, as well as

industrial history, international relations, etc.; however, in combining critical mobilities research with postcolonial Caribbean studies it also generates a renewed appreciation of the making of transnational modernities and counter-modernities through the political struggles over who and what could or could not move through the Caribbean, and to whose profit. It is the relations between places, and amongst mobile trajectories of various kinds of actors, that emerge as significant drivers of differential forms of national modernity. And so the distinction between the Caribbean and North America emerges as a kind of performance of a relational boundary rather than a fixed geographical divide.

Indeed, to return to our starting point, one could say that the transnational study of sugar circuits in the age of slavery would produce one mapping of the Caribbean and Atlantic worlds, while a transnational study of banana growing and the international banana trade would include different nodes and networks (with nodes, for example, in Saint Lucia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, the Canary Islands, the UK supermarkets, the World Trade Organization). The transnational study of bauxite mining and aluminum takes us through different networks connecting the United States with Suriname, Guyana and Jamaica, and carries us right into the present where we would have to follow those networks to Brazil and Guinea, Australia and India. Yet another map would emerge if we were to study the circuits of global finance and offshore banking, taking us to nodes such as Antigua, the Cayman Islands, or the Turks and Caicos. The complex geographies of the Caribbean are not only politically fragmented, but are also fragments caught in different global circuits of power, with different actors and regimes of mobility and immobility.

There are, moreover, very urgent implications to this history. We cannot understand the encroachment of mining companies into present-day Haiti or the alleged involvement of Rio Tinto Alcan in supporting a parliamentary coup in Paraguay in June 2012, for instance, if we are not conversant with the government of Suriname's violation of the lands and treaty rights of the Saamanka Maroons so that Alcoa could build the Afobaka hydroelectric dam to power an aluminum smelter in the 1960s, displacing thousands of people from their ancestral villages. Each incident is part of a national history, but is also a thread in the larger fabric of mobilities of capital, resources, and power across the Americas, which have had deep impacts on natural environments and human rights. The fact that the Saamanka finally won their case in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2007, recognizing their collective land ownership and rights to self-determination (Price 2011), is a decision that anthropologist Richard Price welcomes, yet admits is still in the fragile process of being implemented. While it might appear as an obscure legal battle by a barely known indigenous group, it is best understood as part of this wide historical sweep of twentieth century inter-American mobilities and counter-mobilizations of Caribbean peoples against the power of transnational corporations.

In sum, we cannot afford to study single national histories or even single area studies in ignorance of the connections that span them, or better yet that shape their spatio-temporal form and drive disjunctive transnational development. We need a generation of historians, anthropologists, and social scientists, not to mention citizens, lawyers and political leaders, trained in the critical analysis of transnational processes. And we need a transnational American Studies that is cognizant of critical mobilities research, of Caribbean studies, and of their deep theoretical connections—for only then will we recognize their contemporary pressing relevance.

Notes

¹ Here I am thinking of influential works on the slavery-based sugar plantation as a modern institution, beginning from Eric Williams' classic *Capitalism and Slavery*; debates about the modernity of Caribbean working classes, beginning from C. L. R. James's classic *The Black Jacobins*; and more recent histories of the silences around Caribbean modernity, e.g. Michel-Rolph Trouillot *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995); Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Culture of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2004).

² Mimi Sheller and John Urry, "The New Mobilities Paradigm," *Environment and Planning A* 38 (2006): 207-26; Kevin Hannam, Mimi Sheller, and John Urry, "Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings," *Mobilities* 1, no. 1 (2006): 1-22; John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007); Mimi Sheller, "Mobility," *Sociopedia*, 2011.

³ I later extended this argument to consider how Caribbean achievements of citizenship, freedom, and nationhood also contained their own internal exclusions and silencing, in Mimi Sheller, *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁴ Daniel T. Rodgers, "Introduction," *Cultures in Motion*, eds. Daniel T. Rodgers, Bhavani Ram, and Helmut Reimitz (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); and see James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference," *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (February 1992); Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections* (London: Routledge, 1996); M. Kearney, "The Local and the Global: The Anthropology of Globalization and Transnationalism," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995), 547-563.

⁵ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

⁶ Rodgers, *Cultures in Motion*, op. cit.

⁷ On the dangers inherent in “global” theorists appropriating Caribbean theorizations (such as the concept of “creolization”) without acknowledging the Caribbean origin of, and debates around, such terms see Mimi Sheller, ‘Creolization in Discourses of Global Culture’ in *Uprootings/ Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, eds., S. Ahmed, C. Castaneda, A. Fortier, and M. Sheller (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), 273-94.

⁸ On the development of the US industry see Smith, *From Monopoly to Competition: The Transformation of Alcoa, 1888-1986* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁹ Robert Vitalis, *America’s Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ 13,500 kilowatt-hours of electricity are needed to produce 1 ton of aluminum, although the figure was higher in the first half of the 20th century; 18 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity were used in 1943 to produce the 920,000 tons of aluminum made in the USA that year (enough electricity to supply half the residents of the country for an entire year); today approximately 3 percent of electricity generated worldwide goes to aluminum smelting; in several less developed countries aluminum smelters consume up to 1/3 or more of the national power supply.

¹¹ Gregory Nowell, *Mercantile States and the World Oil Cartel, 1900-1939* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 299-300.

¹² Carlton E. Davis, *Jamaica in the World Aluminium Industry, 1838-1973* (Kingston and London: Jamaica Bauxite Institute, 1989), 1: 49-50.

¹³ Dennis Doordan, “Promoting Aluminum: Designers and the American Aluminum Industry”, *Design Issues*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Autumn 1993), 46.

¹⁴ Carr, *Alcoa*, 257, 263-4.

¹⁵ Ibid, 54. And O. Nigel Bolland, *The Politics of Labour in the British Caribbean* (Kingston: Ian Randle and London: James Currey, 2001), 443.

¹⁶ Davis, *Jamaica in the World Aluminium Industry*.

¹⁷ Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Ken Post, *Arise Ye Starvelings: The Jamaican Labour Rebellion of 1938 and Its Aftermath* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978).

¹⁹ Davis, *Jamaica in the World*, 135. There were few strikes or ‘unrest’ associated with the Jamaican bauxite mines, largely because they employed a relatively small number of workers, these workers were relatively well paid compared to other local industries, especially agriculture, and were thus easily replaceable. See Bolland, *Politics of Labour*; Evelyn Huber Stephens and John Stephens, *Democratic Socialism in Jamaica: The Political*

Movement and Social Transformation in Dependent Capitalism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 27.

²⁰ Horne, *Cold War in a Hot Zone*, 160

²¹ Norman Washington Manley to Kaiser Bauxite Company, 23rd May 1956, cited in Davis, *Jamaica in the World*, 189-90.

²² Davis, *Jamaica in the World*, 229, 251.

²³ Davis, *Jamaica in the World*, 251.

²⁴ Stephens and Stephens, *Democratic Socialism in Jamaica*, 26.

²⁵ Stephens, "Minerals Strategies," 63-4.

²⁶ Brian Meeks and Norman Girvan eds., *Caribbean Reasonings: The Thought of New World, The Quest for Decolonisation* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2010); Norman Girvan, *Foreign Capital and Economic Underdevelopment in Jamaica* (Mona: University of the West Indies, Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1971); Norman Girvan, *Corporate Imperialism: Conflict and Expropriation* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976).

²⁷ Evelyne Huber Stephens and John D. Stephens, 'Bauxite and Democratic Socialism in Jamaica', in Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Evelyne H. Stephens, eds., *States versus Markets in the World System* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1985).

²⁸ Roger Annis and Kim Ives (2012) "As Mining Conglomerates Target Haiti, Latin America Rises Against Them," *Haiti Analysis*, 27 July 2012, <http://haitianalysis.blogspot.com/2012/07/as-mining-conglomerates-target-haiti.html?m=1>, accessed August 15, 2012.

²⁹ Clive Y. Thomas, *Dependence and Transformation: The economics of the transition to socialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), 83.

³⁰ Today Guinea in West Africa has replaced Jamaica as the largest bauxite exporter in the world, yet its people suffer from deep poverty and political repression while its government strikes deals with Rio Tinto Alcan, Chinalco and Rusal.

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