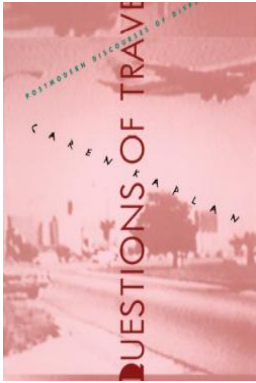


## 1. Essential Reading



# Question of Travel - by Caren Kaplan

By Javier Caletrío (Sociologue)  
11 December 2012

*Questions of Travel* argues that metaphors of travel in cultural theory fail to grasp the diversity of conditions of movement and displacement in the contemporary world. It examines the ideological role of metaphors and shows the enduring presence of colonial narratives in postmodern critical theory.

---

## **Metaphors of mobility**

Metaphors provide a way of making sense of and experiencing the world. As imaginative understandings of one thing in terms of another, metaphors not only affect the communication of ideas but also structure perception and understanding. Theories in social sciences, the arts and humanities, including mobilities studies, often rely upon a range of metaphors of mobility, although the efficacy and persuasive power of these metaphors depends upon their ability to resonate with contemporary experiences.

In the first third of the twentieth century, certain metaphors of travel gained prominence in cultural criticism as a productive way of capturing changes in the lived experiences of western European and North American societies. It was at this time when widespread access to electricity, the telephone, the car, and the cinema exposed whole populations to the thrills and disjunctures of a world on the move. This was also the period of 'high modernism' in arts when many of its expressions reflected society's fascination with speed, change and novelty. ( Giacomo Balla's *Speed of a Motorcycle* , for instance ). Metaphors of travel and dislocation seemed particularly suited for the moment. Paradigmatic of the cultural and artistic sensibilities of the time is the figure of the modernist exile which emerged as a celebration of singularity, solitude and estrangement. The melancholic male writer or poet in a strange city came to convey the idea of exile as an aesthetic gain (Joyce, Lawrence, Mann, Auden, Gide, among others). Yet this period of 'high modernism' was also the climax of European colonial domination, when war, famines, new borders, and partitions led to the forced migration of millions. If modern experiences are varied, this raises the question of why modernist metaphors of travel and

displacement refer to individualized and elite circumstances such as in the case of the modernist exile. This same question is no less relevant for contemporary metaphors of travel.

## **About the book**

In *Questions of Travel*, Caren Kaplan questions the efficacy of metaphors used in late twentieth-century Euro-American literary and cultural theories to capture the diversity of conditions, situations and experiences of travel. The book is born of her skepticism concerning the way in which travel is described and the ahistorical and universal nature of its many metaphors and symbols. Displacement, Kaplan argues, has been mythologized by individuals who rarely acknowledge the position of privilege from which they write. 'Who benefits and who suffers', she asks, 'from the attitude that distance is the best perspective?' (p. 10). It is true, she continues, that marginal figures such as immigrants, refugees, exiles and nomads do appear in discourses of cultural criticism, but always as romanticized figures and seldom as producers of critical discourses themselves. Her concern is then about who produces knowledge on travel and from what perspectives.

She proposes to question this fascination with singular, elite (and often male) figures of travel by focusing on the material conditions by which the terms of displacement are produced and distinguishing between historical periods and perspectives in the emergence of notions of 'home' and 'away'. Kaplan's concern centres on the ways of producing metaphors that account for economic and political contexts and the production of subjectivities within these. She is particularly interested in two moments in relation to cultural and artistic movements: 'modernism' and 'postmodernism'. This comparative approach allows for the discernment of continuities and discontinuities in the use of metaphors.

## **Aesthetics and politics**

Drawing on the work of authors such as Fredric Jameson regarding the dependence of aesthetic forms on social and economic processes, Kaplan claims that the terms 'modern' and 'postmodern' as used in describing a form of travel and displacement should not be seen as simply referring to a style but to economic and political situations. Considering that, in this context, postmodernism is a way to question modern culture in relation to non-western cultures, then a particularly interesting issue to examine is modern imperialism and the impact that imperialist social relations have had on aesthetic projects. This involves deconstructing the opposition between politics and aesthetics, built partly by gatekeepers of artistic styles arguing for a disinterested domain of culture.

## **Colonial continuities**

Following this approach, the figures of the exile, the tourist, the nomad and the cosmopolitan critic are discussed in three different chapters. Chapter one, entitled 'This question of moving', brings together the apparently antithetical figures of the modernist exile and postmodern tourist, the first associated with high culture and the second with superficiality and commercialized culture. Chapter two, 'Becoming Nomad: Poststructuralist Deterritorializations', examines the metaphor of the nomad. In the work of French poststructuralist critics Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the nomad appears as a symbol of flux, mobility and hybridity, as opposed to fixity, purity and centralized authority. Chapter three, 'Travelling Theorists: Cosmopolitan Diasporas', analyses the terms exile, diaspora, immigrant and cosmopolitan in the postmodern

writing of Third World writers living in First World metropolises such as Edward Saïd, Mario Vargas Llosa and Derek Walcott. Kaplan's analyses of these metaphors show that despite postmodernism being described as a rupture in aesthetics, modernist themes and categories have not been erased so much as restyled in postmodern cultural theory. Running through all of these metaphors is the colonial trope that travel and distance provide a better way of knowing, and a tendency to erase difference in travel experiences, such as in the case of the terms 'exile' and 'expatriate', both of which have been used interchangeably as signifying voluntary estrangement that provides a critical edge. By questioning travel metaphors through a historical lens, what Kaplan proposes is to open up a space for multiple figures and discourses of displacement that better reflect the complex nature of cultural production worldwide

## **Contribution to the mobilities literature**

The mobilities turn is being developed with elements of different theories and intellectual traditions. Amongst these, *Questions of Travel* stands as a major contribution of gender and postcolonial studies to debates in the mobilities field, especially as related to critiques of nomadic theories. Through a focus on the influence of imperialism on culture, it calls for greater attention to be paid to questions of power and ideology in describing and understanding mobility. This book needs to be understood in terms of its author's concern to question her own position of privilege as a necessary way to participate credibly in social change through building transnational alliances with non-western academics and activists. Although *Questions of Travel* is a widely-known book in the mobilities field, most often it is merely cited rather than discussed which does not do justice to the depth and richness of the arguments.

The attention given to this book in academia more generally has varied geographically and within different fields of research. In the USA the book has been read mostly by cultural geographers. And although it develops a dialogue with gender and postcolonial studies it seems to have received little attention there partly because of the lack of transdisciplinary milieus where this book could find an appropriate response. It is in Europe and, more specifically, the UK where this book has been read more widely, mostly by academics working in the intersection of travel literature, diasporas, gender, migration, and postcolonial studies.

## **About the author**

Caren Kaplan is Professor of American Studies at California University at Davis. She has published on transnational feminist theory and her current research focus is on the visual culture of modern military practices.

## **Mobility**

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

[En savoir plus](#) x

---

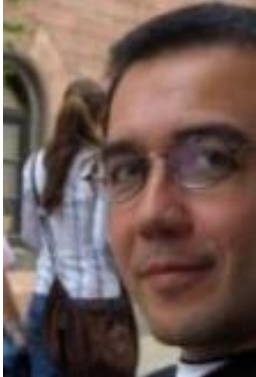
**Associated Thematics :**

Lifestyles

- [Leisure & tourism](#)
- [Representations](#)

Theories

- [Concepts](#)
- 

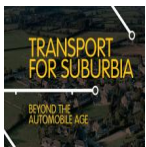


[Javier Caletrío](#)

Sociologue

Javier Caletrío is the scientific advisor of the Mobile Lives Forum for the English-speaking world (BA Economics, Valencia; MA, PhD Sociology, Lancaster) . He is a researcher with a background in the humanities and social sciences. In addition, he also has a strong interest in the natural sciences, especially ecology and ornithology. His research lies broadly in the areas of environmental change and sustainability transitions, especially in relation to mobility and inequality. Javier was based at the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University from 1998 to 2017.

The same author [See all publications](#)



**[Transport for Suburbia: Beyond the Automobile Age, by Paul Mess](#)**

Publication by Javier Caletrío



**[Harnessing social tipping dynamics for the ecological transition: the case of the electric car](#)**

Javier Caletrío



## **Ecotourism: Is my flying saving the planet?**

Javier Caletrío

---

To cite this publication :

Javier Caletrío (11 December 2012), « Question of Travel - by Caren Kaplan », Préparer la transition mobile. Consulté le 03 April 2025, URL: <https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/essential-readings/513/question-travel-caren-kaplan>

---

Other publications



In the post-Covid world, have we forgotten about walking again?

Jean-Marc Offner



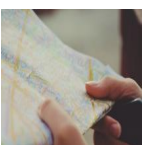
"We need to boost public transport supply and limit car use in order to reduce our emissions by 60% within 10 years"

Jean Coldefy



Are homeless people "vagrants"?

Projet collectif SciencesPo/Architecture Bordeaux



Mobility and job hunting: a digital barrier?

Christian Licoppe, H  l  ne-Marie Juteau