

# Literature provides valuable insight into the meanings of mobility and place

November 13 2023

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Cultural products, including works of literature, are not detached from reality; instead, they construct and challenge our understanding of the world. Literary texts show the complexity of reality, reflect on the power

structures of the surrounding society and reveal the weight of history in the present.

Academy Research Fellow Anna-Leena Toivanen's research explores portrayals of Afro-European mobilities in African literatures.

"Mobility is not only a part of everyday life, but also a global megatrend and an integral part of Western and colonial modernity."

Toivanen's research has shown that representations of mobility often have an important function in advancing the story, and they draw attention to the intertwining of place, time and movement.

"In [migrants'](#) homecoming narratives, for example, different forms of physical travel play a key role in their attempts to connect with their former home. In these narratives, the meanings of urban space are built in motion and in a way that juxtaposes memories, the present and the new home in Europe," Toivanen says.

The special characteristics of mobility infrastructures have an impact on the understanding of place. This is seen, for example, in the case of African travelers who arrive in Paris by plane for the first time: Paris turns out not to be the city of light or the center of modernity and "progress" they were expecting, but a shabby periphery.

"The modes and speed of travel can be reflected on the narrative rhythm, and they can have an influence on how the characters are described. The speed of air travel and the hectic metro of Paris create accelerating rhythms of narration, while also painting a picture of a modern African tourist."

The portrayals of mobility examined by Toivanen are marked by the [colonial history](#) shared by Africa and Europe, and by its traces in the

present.

## A key phenomenon in the global world

Toivanen is working on a Research Council of Finland project, which runs until the autumn of 2025. Drawing from this project, she is in the process of writing a monograph on mobilities research in the humanities, to be published in 2025.

"Several other publications are also coming out from the project. For example, a forthcoming compilation I've co-edited with Patricia García applies the perspective of mobility studies to urban literature and art. I'm also editing a special issue of English Studies in Africa, which deals with representations of public transport in African literature."

According to Toivanen, it is important to study literary portrayals of African mobilities because they offer a special perspective on marginalized experiences of one of the key phenomena of global modernity.

"My research also diversifies the migration-focused view of Afro-European mobilities by highlighting experiences of everyday physical travel."

**More information:** Urban Mobilities in Francophone African Return Narratives. [www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters ... 6d-b39d-6e61e0214374](http://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/.../6d-b39d-6e61e0214374)

Peripheralising the Metropolis: Aeromobile Portrayals of Paris in Francophone African Literatures. [journal-mobilityhumanities.com ... pageid=1&ckattempt=1](http://journal-mobilityhumanities.com/.../pageid=1&ckattempt=1)

Anna-Leena Toivanen, Modes of transport and rhythms of mobility in Bernard B. Dadié's *Un Nègre à Paris* (1959) and Tété-Michel

Kpomassie's L'Africain du Groenland (1981), *Studies in Travel Writing* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/13645145.2022.2099643](https://doi.org/10.1080/13645145.2022.2099643)

Provided by University of Eastern Finland

Citation: Literature provides valuable insight into the meanings of mobility and place (2023, November 13) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-11-literature-valuable-insight-mobility.html>

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