



# HISTORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL CULTURE

# Contemporaneity

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## Questionnaire

### Introduction

Paula Kupfer and Jacob Eisensmith

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### **About the Authors**

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# Questionnaire

## Introduction

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The impetus for this issue of *Contemporaneity* and the questionnaire section was growing scholarly discussions surrounding the movement of people and objects across time and space, with emphasis on the forms of cross-cultural knowledge that emerge from these mobilizations. However, the concepts of mobility and exchange acquired a decidedly different character after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States in March 2020. We solicited contributions in February, and by the time texts began coming in a few months later,

much had fundamentally shifted. The historic developments of 2020 revealed to us newfound permutations of the notions of mobility and exchange, while surprising us with the ways our own physical and scholarly movement became almost unimaginably restricted. This year, we witnessed the fast spread of a novel coronavirus and the ways it laid bare systemic racism and socioeconomic inequality. As we negotiated our own truncated movement, we came face to face with ever-present questions of who is allowed what kinds of freedom of movement with or without fears of violence or harm.

This questionnaire was first conceived as a way to take the temperature of the “state of the field” from those actively participating in the interdisciplinary conversation surrounding mobility and exchange. We sought to learn from researchers across disciplines how these notions—both as research foci and as methodologies—manifested in their work and how they envisioned them shaping future scholarship. We asked them to respond to one or more of the following prompts:

- What aspects of the mobility and exchange of people, objects, and ideas manifest most prominently in your work, and how?
- How do issues related to mobility and exchange manifest in your academic life and environment? How do they impact your work? If they don't, why might that be?
- Have you seen shifts in the ways issues related to mobility and exchange have been addressed in your field over the course of your career? Whose scholarship do you look to as a model for its theoretical framework or application?
- Within your field, where do you see the greatest potential or need for the implementation of concerns related to mobility and exchange? How do you think future scholarship could benefit from considering issues from this vantage?

As the deadline for responses grew near, it became apparent that no consideration of research methods could be immune to the daily, embodied experience of 2020. Our respondents, a diverse group of academics at the University of Pittsburgh, articulated probing, thoughtful responses that weave a consideration of the scholarly and the quotidian. Their reflections are grounded in their research and practice, but reveal how academic projects, regardless of historical era or geography, have stakes for our daily, present reality. They speak simultaneously to urgent contemporary concerns and broad historical interests, while also serving as text-based time capsules of a particular moment in this ever-shifting year.

Dr. Sahar Hosseini's (history of art and architecture, HAA) response, rooted in early modern Safavid Persian architecture, considers issues of center and periphery by thinking about how mobility manifests in the immobile architecture of the city of Isfahan during the seventeenth century. Hosseini, an architectural historian, tracks the movement of people and ideas between Europe and Persia, focusing on ritualized movements through space. At the same time, she connects her analysis of seventeenth-century Iran to the present day, considering how displacement is visualized in the work of Western-trained architects operating in the Global South or the foodscapes shaped by immigrant communities in Newark, NJ.

Architectural historian Dr. Mrinalini Rajagopalan (HAA) reflects on the intersections of architecture, mobility, class, and gender, asking what the possibilities of mobility are when social restrictions are in place. Rajagopalan reflects on the role of a nineteenth-century female patron who enabled religious connections between Luso-Indian Calcutta and the Catholic capital of Rome despite her own gender-based mobility restrictions. Her case study exposes gender- and class-based biases that underwrite some of the scholarship on mobility within art and architectural history, while her close analysis of a nineteenth-century British watercolor demonstrates how notions of movement framed the colonialist visual representation of Indian locals.

Moving us into the present, ethnomusicologist Dr. Lee Veeraraghavan (music) discusses the paradoxes of mobility in relation to Indigenous communities in Canada, whose movement the government desires to limit through forced displacements and reservations, while simultaneously seeking to increase the flow of energy commodities from the very lands in question. Through a focus on the aural, Veeraraghavan thinks holistically about how vocal and listening practices of Indigenous communities have been vital elements in the historic negotiation between Indigenous and colonial law, while remaining attentive to the colonialist undertones of certain modes of scholarly research and the academic desire for the free exchange of ideas. Our final respondent, artist Lindsey French (studio arts), shifts our attention from the mobility of ideas and populations to exchanges among and with the natural world. French expands the framework of communication by focusing on exchange among plants, including their release of airborne chemicals as warning signals. She focuses in particular on marginalized plants such as poison ivy, highlighting how their release of *urushiol*, the itch-inducing allergen, makes humans objects of transmission rather than the subjects of an exchange. Using a botanical framework, French meditates on issues of purity as they extend to consideration of the human body and to constructions of whiteness as they are envisioned by white Americans.

In each of these responses, our contributors offer unique and original perspectives on issues of mobility and exchange, pushing beyond a standard conception of the movement of people and objects, and the exchange of ideas. By troubling the question of who has the ability to move, and how that movement is registered, they prompt us to consider questions of inclusivity and novel methods of identifying historically marginalized communities. By expanding the frame so as to consider exchanges from and between non-human actors, these responses directly address the role of humans in the Anthropocene, thereby decentering humans as the principal agents in considerations of mobility and exchange. In doing so, these reflections speak to the unsustainable movement of commodities and the modes in which nature continues to declare its presence despite continued marginalization. We are deeply grateful to our respondents for their thoughtful contributions and to the editors of *Contemporaneity* for their invitation to organize this questionnaire section. We hope that you will find the following responses as thoroughly compelling as we have, as we all continue to anticipate and work toward a time of increased and equitable mobility and exchange.



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