I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking.
– Thoreau, “Walking” 225

In this age of advanced globalization, we witness portable personhood. Identity does not merely ‘bent’ towards novel forms of transportation and travel but fundamentally recast in terms of capacities for movement. Put another way, the globalization of mobility extends into the core of the self.
– Elliott/Urry, Mobiles Lives 3

For the Transcendentalist philosopher Thoreau, the practice of walking has special meaning and is closely connected to the idea of pilgrimage. Thoreau believes that walking brings a person in contact with “absolute freedom and wildness” (225), thus philosophical reflection ties in with this form of mobility. Far from claiming that philosophical reflection is an exclusively sedentary activity, Thoreau seems to suggest it happens best when the body is in motion, at the right kind of pace. From a contemporary perspective, as sociologists John Urry and Anthony Elliott have shown, mobility becomes the quintessential experience of contemporary life-styles defined by intensive travel, transport and tourism. Both scholars quickly add that this not simply entails a preference for mobility, as an opportunity to be enjoyed in an increasingly globalized world, but they insist on pointing out mobility’s ‘fundamental’ impact on the very constitution of identity and a sense of self. In a similar vein, Zygmunt Bauman has spoken of “liquid life” as a precarious kind of life implicated by a fast-moving relentless society.

In many ways, mobility has always been essential for drama and theater: every performance stages carefully rehearsed movements; a dramatic text is transformed into the language of body, lighting, sound, props etc. The audience, too, is moved emotionally, traveling to various theater spaces, entering the auditorium and then watching the curtain (if there still is one) being moved to the side. Also, theater companies tour from one place to the next, and performance
collectives move theater into the streets. Performance, in general, is ‘on the move’ and difficult to get a hold of.

But the range of possibilities and experiences of mobility has dramatically changed and expanded in the recent past. A multicultural and global world in which information, capital as well as cultural work move, at least for the most part, freely and without consideration for national borders, has triggered a widespread and increasing fascination for all aspects of mobility and processes related to mobility. This phenomenon has been captured most prominently in the concept of “mobility turn,” or “mobilities turn,” that social science scholars such as John Urry, Tim Cresswell, or Peter Adey have been propagating for the past 15 years or so. In outlining what he conceives as the “mobilities paradigm,” Urry’s starting point “is that the analysis of mobilities transforms social science. Mobilities make it different” (Mobilities 44).

So far, the “mobility turn” has been a topic in the social sciences and has only in the recent past been received more widely in the humanities (e.g. Greenblatt). Also due to a traditional focus on theater as a closed performance space, the “black box” (Balme e.g. 12), a thorough and critical engagement with the topic is still in demand in the study of theater and drama, as the scarcity of scholarly work in this field demonstrates (e.g. Wilkie; Birch). By bringing ideas from mobility studies to bear on the analysis of theater and drama, one would open up a rich field of enquiry and provide a theoretical framework for the discussion of mobile theater practices.

In fact, a wide and growing array of theatrical performances is intricately engaged with issues of mobility as they stage stories of transnational traveling and experiences of migrancy and diaspora, or as they thematize traveling cultures (Clifford) and artistic exchange in the ‘contact zones’ (Pratt) of today’s world. With a nod to the documentary mode, for example, African-American dramatist Lynne Nottage investigates the plight of women in civil war-torn Congo in her Pulitzer Prize-winning play Ruined (2009). Before writing the play, though, the playwright and a few collaborators travel to the Congo where they meet the women who are themselves unable to move. The stories these women share then become the backbone of the finished play. Closer to home, contemporary theater is preoccupied with issues of social mobility, as playwright Lisa D’Amour’s Pulitzer prize finalist Detroit (2010) tells the tale of two couples in uncertain financial times and in fear of the downward spiral. With a long history of mobile theatrical practices, the Living Theater still tours the globe, firmly believing in the power of theater-on-site as a way of coping with conflict and the history of armed struggles (cf. Schmidt, “Ästhetik und Widerstand”; Resist!). Contemporary theater collectives such as the Nature Theater of Oklahoma have joined the mobile international theater circuit in order to reside and collaborate with theater groups
in highly subsidized European countries whereas in Asia and the Americas a predominantly commercial understanding of theater seems to dominate, thus introducing economic considerations more fully into the debate. Puerto Rican-American playwright John Jesurun’s plays are ‘mobilized’ by the ample use of media technology such as body sensors and the intricate arrangement of screens and live connections on stage. Some of his plays such as Deep Sleep or Chang in a Void Moon explore the range of mobility that a fully technologized body might enjoy (cf. Schmidt, “Theatrical Space”). In conversations, Jesurun has shown a keen sense of awareness of the role that mobility plays for his theater work, for instance, when he concedes that, early in his life, “I got a sense of the world as a constantly moving, changing place where everything is happening simultaneously” (“Natural Force” 44). Whereas Jesurun’s plays freely travel across boundaries between genres as well as places by the help of media technology, we today witness an increasing fixity and rigidity of the border walls between nation states as well as the concomitant limits on mobility with regard to migration and citizenship (cf. Benhabib/Resnik). The tension that “walled states” produce, to echo Wendy Brown’s eponymous study, is taken up by many artistic projects that deal with the highly contested U.S.-Mexican border. In a recent collaborative study, philosopher of place Edward Casey and psychologist Mary Watkins have studied a wide range of cultural-artistic activities, performance art among others, that are produced around the border wall. They show in how far these projects can serve as important factors in mobilizing a more encompassing re-imagination of the fixed place of the border (esp. ch. 8).

The essays collected in this volume ask how these and other mobilities are produced in contemporary plays. What is the role of media and digital technology in the staging of mobility on the supposedly static place called the stage? What can be said about the aesthetics of speed and mobility on the contemporary stage? Or, vice versa, in how far does contemporary theatrical practice show the limits of mobility, theater’s im-mobilities, and what is the relationship between the place and the situatedness of theater with regard to the moving places/mobile bodies in transnational theater circuits? How do ideas and cultural models travel, how are theater institutions affected by the new mobilities paradigm? And finally, how can theater move out of the “black box,” create and enrich public spheres and eventually contribute to a revitalized civic culture?

The term digitalization frequently appears in cultural debates on mobility. True, the online world of digitalization has significantly changed the notion of what presence, i.e. the “here and now” of dramatic performance, means for theatrical practice. With the possibilities of infinite communication – free internet is no longer outlawed –, the need for the presence of the body has become futile to a perhaps unprecedented degree. But what do avatars, for instance, make of
the presence of theater? Digital mobility seems to have made bodily presence superfluous as we can move, at least in some sense, while our bodies remain behind. Are such practices in danger of eventually emptying out theater as cultural practice? Or, is the internet, the vehicle of almost otherworldly transcendence, transcending the ties that bind the body to a concrete place on earth?

More than 20 years ago, when the internet just began to be a mass phenomenon, literary scholar Hartmut Böhme wrote a short, perceptive essay investigating the religious aspects of telepresence, “Zur Theologie der Telepräsenz.” In this article, Böhme described cyberspace as the “new cult” after the death of god (cf. Schloemann), looking for theological rhetoric in what the new cyber-priests were saying. Böhme compared internet communication to Emanuel Swedenborg’s ‘language of angels.’ Swedenborg’s angels were imagined as being constantly connected to each other in real time; in other words, they can be read as a “super-social celestial network” (Schloemann; my translation). Cyberspace, apart from facilitating, arguably improving communication, mirrors the search for bodilessness as the body and earthly matters have always been associated with religious stigma and sinfulness. As we study the global architecture of servers in a language similar to that used to describe the New Jerusalem (Schloemann), digitalization may well serve as a new frontier. This new frontier may be just as tricky and deceitful as previous “frontiers,” from the powerful construct of Manifest Destiny and the concomitant westward movement of the empire – discursively sanctioned in religious lingo – to the countercultural imagination of a “Whole Earth Network” and its ideas of digital utopianism that Fred Turner has studied so perceptively. In virtual reality, borders have been superseded to unprecedented degrees – in stark contradistinction the restrictions to actual border-crossings. 20 years after Böhme’s essay, the new god has grown into unimaginable dimensions, and, thinking about the seemingly unlimited provision of the “cloud,” the contemporary internet seems to have exploded the possibilities of mobility.

This issue of Journal of Contemporary Drama in English represents a selection of articles emerging from the annual conference of the “Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English” (CDE) that was held at the University of Eichstätt in May 2016. Under the title “Theater and Mobility,” scholars and theater practitioners from Britain, the United States, Turkey, Austria, Germany, and Japan addressed the intellectual, affective and corporeal dimensions of mobility in theatrical practice with a particular emphasis on gender-, race- and class-inflected mobilities. Increasing and intensified discussion of and research on mobility is essential to theater studies and addresses a lacunae in theater scholarship. Essays collected in this volume aim to reflect on theoretical, methodological, and aesthetic implications of the “mobilities turn” for the study of contemporary theater, drama, and performance. During the time of preparing for the conference,
the Munich theater “Kammerspiele” opened the season with a project that explicitly takes up issues of mobility with regard to the theater. New director Matthias Lilienthal initiated the project called “shabbyshabbyapartments” in which he had several different make-shift, one-room apartments built in public places all over the city that was, at the time, preoccupied with the plight of millions of refugees coming in on a daily basis. This provocative project raised a series of controversial debates over the use of the public sphere and the social responsibility of politics, civic culture, and the arts. Some regarded the project as cynical, some thought it was a revolution in the public sphere. But what Lilienthal achieved without doubt was a mobilization of theater out of the black box and into the politicized streets of one of the most well-off cities in the grip of the refugee crisis.

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The collected essays of this special issue examine multiple ways in which theater engages with the possibilities and challenges of mobility in relation to the world(s) enacted on stage. When theater turns its attention to an increasingly mobile world, it becomes a locale for debates on theatrical (re)locations, global movements, and the politics governing contemporary representations. In “‘It’s a big world in here’: Contemporary Voyage Drama and the Politics of Mobility,” Fiona Wilkie takes a critical look at a theatrical genre that brings travel experiences on stage. She discusses the functions of voyage drama in a mobile age and suggests that the “challenges of representing travel in the theatre [...] are more political than they are technical.” Her main example is Simon McBurney’s *The Encounter* from 2015, a mobile theater performance that reached a large audience with an international tour and a live broadcast on the internet. As she discusses the play’s stance on individualized mediation, authenticity, and privileged forms of mobility, Wilkie develops an analytical framework for the politics at play in theatrical representations of travel.

David Savran reads the Broadway musical as a transnational currency for entertainment theater in “Broadway as a Global Brand.” He argues that despite it being marketed as a musical brand with a distinct local and national identity, Broadway is also a deterritorialized theatrical form and an adaptable export commodity in a globalized world. In the twenty-first century, Broadway-branded musicals are not only staged locally in Manhattan but also globally, be it in Hamburg, Seoul or so many other theater venues around the globe. The inextricable link to New York as well as the Western cosmopolitanism inscribed in the brand make the Broadway musical a neoliberal symbol for the economic success of the cities in which they are produced. Savran retraces the transnational influences, conventions, and reinventions of Broadway, marking it as the genuinely global brand it has become.
In “Theatrical Entrepôts: Mediating Locality on the Bandmann Circuit,” Christopher Balme discusses the mobility of theatrical production by retracing the global activities of the theatrical network named after its first manager, Maurice Bandmann. Balme employs actor-network theory and proposes the notion of theatrical entrepôt to emphasize the “tension between mobility and locality” created by the global conception of the Bandmann Circuit. For a theater network meant to tour around the world, places such as Bombay, Calcutta, or Singapore can thus be considered as cosmopolitan outposts that attract theater audiences while remaining transitory passageways for tours in the respective region.

James Reynolds looks at experimental staging practices moving the human being through technological devices in “Hypermobility and Uncanny Praxis in Robert Lepage and Ex Machina’s Devised Solo Work.” He argues that Lepage’s performances and their intricate stage settings negotiate the interconnectedness of social and spatial mobility, particularly exploring the transitory locality of private and public transportation.

The competing practices of mobility in the Canadian Arctic are at the center of Nassim W. Balestrini’s article on “Climate Change Theater and Cultural Mobility in the Arctic: Chantal Bilodeau’s Sila (2014).” She analyzes how Bilodeau’s play retraces the discourses determining the socio-cultural assessment of human movement to and in the Arctic in order to make the global and local dimensions of climate change visible. Trish Reid explores the tensions between home and travel from the perspective of a national theater. “Theatre Without Walls: The National Theatre of Scotland” describes the collaborative and mobile works of the Scottish theater company that subsists without a fixed, emplaced establishment and is hence perpetually on tour. Reid argues that the mobile paradigm and the flexibility of the theater company can be considered as an endeavor to reflect a national cultural distinctiveness as well as the decentered heterogeneity of Scotland.

In the article “On the Portability and Meaning of Blackness in Young Jean Lee’s The Shipment (2009),” Ilka Saal discusses how ideas about blackness simultaneously persist through time, thus remaining static, but also display a mobile flexibility in relation to socio-cultural usages. She argues that Lee’s play problematizes this ostensible contradiction by evoking the enforced displacement, mobilization, and commodification of Africans during the Middle Passage. According to Saal, the actors’ performances in The Shipment establish relational connections and critical frictions between audience and stage, self-perception and othering, and the intersections between notions of whiteness and blackness.

With “The Mobility of Suffering: Cosmopolitan Ethics in debbie tucker green,” Martin Riedelsheimer and Korbinian Stöckl turn towards ethical considerations on mobility in twenty-first century Black British theater. They consider the play-
wright’s work to contextualize suffering and precarious living conditions by bringing global interdependencies to the stage and by emphasizing the connections between social responsibility and mobility, i.e. the increased movement of information, trade, and human beings in a globalized age. Julia Boll’s article considers theatrical contributions to the social negotiation of displacement and migration through the lens of philosophical debates on hospitality and community. In “The Sacred Guest and the Ungrievable Sacrifice: communitas at the Theatre,” Boll turns her attention to the theatrical adaptation of Vazha-Pshavela’s epic poem Host and Guest as an example for theater’s potential to facilitate communal rapprochement in the face of adversity, war, and mourning.

Both Leopold Lippert’s and Merle Tönnies’s articles reflect on performative representations of political forces that shape and eventually dictate the scope as well as the degree of individual agency in societies demanding certain forms of personal mobility, yet denying others at the same time. Lippert investigates exhaustion as a consequence of neoliberal capitalism in “Performance Labor, Im/Mobility, and Exhaustion in Nature Theater of Oklahoma’s Life and Times.” Drawing from his attendance at a fifteen-hour-performance of the play in Berlin, he argues that audience and actors are locked in an im/mobile routine that actualizes the neoliberal request for adaptability and self-exploitation through the physical fatigue that overwhelms both cast and participants. According to Lippert, the Nature Theater of Oklahoma problematizes the in-built sense of crisis, the overload, and the demand for overtime in contemporary labor conditions with their expansive life-writing project. Merle Tönnies turns towards the dystopian features of drama in “The Immobility of Power in British Political Theatre after 2000: Absurdist Dystopias.” She observes the renewed investment of British playwrights in power relations and social inequality. She takes the examples of Mark Ravenhill’s The Cut and Edward Bond’s Have I None to discuss how their plays thematize the denial of social mobility and the reinforcement of the status-quo in social systems by staging a “pervasive immobility.”

The final contribution to this volume consists of an artistic reflection on theater and mobility by playwright and acclaimed novelist Karen Tei Yamashita as well as a conversation between her and theater scholar Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns who has often worked as a dramaturg for Yamashita’s plays. Yamashita’s creative work displays a hemispheric scope as it explores the complex entanglements between the global and the local. Named after her collection of plays, musicals, and performances published by Coffee House Press in 2015, her essay “Anime Wong: Mobilizing (techno)Orientalism” and her conversation with Burns reflect on the orientalist heritage of cyborg representations in American and Japanese cultural production and showcase Yamashita’s artistic investment in cultural mobility as a theater practitioner.
Resist! Dir. Dirk Szuszies. Karin Kaper Film 2006. DVD.