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Book review

Aluminum Dreams: The Making of Light Modernity, Mimi Sheller. The MIT Press, London (2014). £20.95 (Hardback). ISBN:978-0-262-02682-6

The 20th century marked a period of rapid advancement in global transportation, seeing not just significant growth in automobility but also the invention of flight, space travel and, for a time, swifter ocean liners. The material foundations of these technological breakthroughs are however often given little attention in the transport geography (and history) literatures, which tend to view such inventions in strictly cultural and political terms. *Aluminum Dreams* offers an important corrective to this optic with its careful tracing of the life-cycle of aluminum—beginning with its bare form as bauxite ore and transiting to its many uses as instruments of speed. Noting how the 'magic metal' has been favored for its economy, versatility and durability, this book draws key connections between aluminum and the construction of a mobilities-oriented modernity in the last 130 years. It presents the reader with an invaluable account of the practices and networks surrounding the emergence of aluminum as a material of choice, as well as the human and environmental costs of its utilities.

As its central thesis, *Aluminum Dreams* focuses on the metal's lightness as a prerequisite for the creation of a modernity now distinguished for its speed. This does not only pertain to transportation, which no doubt features prominently in the book in the form of futuristic aircraft, trains and cars. But it also relates to new applications in telecommunications, architectural and building conventions, innovations in home design, and the advent of a 'throw-away' culture in food packaging. The first part of the book serves as a detailed historical documentation of how aluminum has come to be valued for these different uses. Here, the reader is acquainted with a wide range of actors that have been complicit in these technological changes, including not just inventors, designers and engineers, but also monopolistic corporations, smelters, hydroelectric power plants, and the military. By providing a meticulous picture of how aluminum is materially harvested, visions of what the metal can achieve are interwoven with its productive arrangements and strategic interests. Mobile modernity, including the transportation systems it engenders, is accordingly rendered an assemblage of highly complex parts and trajectories.

The second part of this book nuances this understanding by uncovering the injustices of the said modernity. Cognizant of the uneven geographies of aluminum's benefits, the analysis insightfully juxtaposes the accelerated mobilities achieved among industrialized countries with the more ambivalent mobilities and immobilities in the 'developing' world. At this juncture, the book takes on a more transnational turn, expanding its vistas beyond the world's metropolitan centers to encompass a variety of 'slowed down' sites where the mining, production and control of aluminum are coordinated. It skillfully connects these places by delving into the operations of aluminum companies and how these multinational firms interact with local politics to sustain the industry's quest for raw materials and energy. From Alcoa's (Aluminum Company of America) immortalization of Jamaica as a 'backward' antithesis of speed ready for resource exploitation, to the dispossession and displacement of local communities and indigenous groups in India and Guinea by mining conglomerates, Sheller's book sheds sobering light on the discrepant cultural and developmental velocities that have been deliberately set in motion to service the economy of aluminum. Striking at the heart of what makes mobilities possible, *Aluminum Dreams* is a timely reminder to transport geographers of the inherent politics within movement, this time attributed to the very material (or vehicle) that facilitates it.

Anticipating another salient theme in transport geography, *Aluminum Dreams* further helps establish new and sophisticated links between mobilities and environmental issues. Besides bringing into view other temporalities in transportation's carbon footprint—in prior activities such as bauxite mining and smelting—the book also raises several important conundrums in basing the world's mobilities on aluminum. Indeed, just as the light metal—along with plastic—seems to hold the promise of future energy savings in the form of more fuel-efficient vehicles, it is simultaneously generative of, and embedded within, lifestyles of increasing movement, both physically and virtually. Accordingly, the solutions proposed by Sheller do not impracticably call for an outright reduction in the consumption of aluminum-based mobilities, but rather seek to find a middle ground between industrialism and environmentalism. By taking a keen interest in the connecting lines that bring forth today's mobilities, this book serves as an instructive guide to transport geographers to devise similarly holistic remedies to the ecological problems they identify.

The import of *Aluminum Dreams* lies in its creative connections across diverse spaces, temporalities and scales. Yet, while this book is careful to unearth the transnational tentacles of aluminum, many of the 'bright sides' of the metal remain tinted through the preponderant experience of the Global North, especially the United States and the American Dream. Perhaps a parallel perspective to adopt in the future is to examine how aluminum dreams might actually be lived and realized elsewhere, especially within the grouping of Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC). Sheller has in fact copiously cited the BRIC as huge investors in the industry, but how aluminum is (re)appropriated by/in these countries—whether for their own growing middle-class consumption, for military re-balancing, or for the re-export of aluminum-based goods to the Global North—may add further complexity to this ongoing story of modernities. Extending these relations between the 'developed' and 'developing' would forestall a clear-cut bifurcation of where the ills and gains of aluminum are to be located. Concurrently, it can help re-configure climate change as a differentiated responsibility tethered not so much to increased production, but (transnational) consumption.

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Aluminum Dreams is a truly engaging and provocative book that will speak to a wide audience in transport geography, and beyond. It is a lucid chronicle that thoroughly investigates how a cultural epoch fervent in lightness, speed and mobility has progressively emerged in sinuous and intertwined ways. Sheller has breathed life into an element once thought so mundane and unremarkable, that this book should encourage a re-examination of other equally vital resources in transportation and other industries, for their weighty influence and intrigue.

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