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Towards Just Geographies of Academic Mobilities

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Article abstract

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Towards Just Geographies of Academic Mobilities

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Abstract

Just geographies of academic mobilities recognize the complicity of some forms of academic work with fossil fuel extraction and combustion. The necessity for academics to be mobile is entrenched through disciplinary norms and social values, as well as academic structures characterized by precarious work contracts and policies of internationalization, and is often reliant on highly polluting air transport. In the absence of climate-compatible technologies enabling business-as-usual aeromobilities, we – the aeromobile publics – need to rethink our practices. These practices, and their unjust impacts, are incongruent with critical geographical scholarship. In this paper I begin to theorize just geographies of academic mobilities in the climate crisis. I do so by engaging with feminist climate justice, just mobilities and radical mobilities to consider the inequities within and beyond academic mobilities. I signal the ways that academic mobilities relate to broader patterns of education, labor market practices, and economic models, and how these together reinforce the discursive and lived power of the mobile academic work/life. I suggest that a starting point for just geographies of academic mobilities should be redressing asymmetries in geographies of knowledge production and signal 7 initial actions with the potential to initiate more just forms of climate changed academic mobilities.

Keywords

justice, academic mobilities, climate action, climate changed geographies

Introduction

For many geographers, climate breakdown is inextricably linked to questions of social justice. This recognizes the potential for actions to address human impacts on the climate to worsen injustices in highly uneven ways, which often mirror historical and contemporary patterns and geographies of disadvantage, prejudice and harm. Those who have not benefitted and do not benefit from “oil soaked and coal dusted” lifestyles and subjectivities (Daggett, 2018, pp. 27-28), pay the highest price. This has led to scholarship that seeks to bridge multiple, intersecting and compounding environmental, social, political harms, and show the ways that these need to be understood in relation to one another (Godfrey & Torres 2016). A justice framework provides a powerful vocabulary for engaging with these topics, recognizing that “a Just Geography is not simply a condition or place, but rather a goal towards which we should work. It is also not spatially or temporally fixed, nor is it something that we can achieve and then move on” (Raphael 2022, np). This offers compelling ways to think about collective efforts to imagine, envisage and enact just, climate-changed geographies.

There has been a surge in spatial thinking about forms or modes of justice around particular domains across energy, transport, mobility and climate. As scholars/activists, we arrive at these topics with our own sub-disciplinary vocabularies, national and institutional contexts, career stages, and life contexts, yet we are all geographers, living in the climate crisis, and thinking about what it means to ‘do’ geography and to be(come) geographers at this time. For all the good that thinking spatially does to understand histories and futures, economic processes, political contexts, policy formation and infrastructures, the discipline of geography also has an origin story based on gendered, racialized, classed and ableist patterns of access, opportunity, and mobility (e.g., Oswin 2020; Bonnett 2003). I thus argue that the question of what just geographies of academic mobilities look like in the climate crisis is also one of what geography¹ looks like, what it might be and for what/whom, with a particular focus on what we – geographers – do: who we are (and might be), how we create knowledges (and for whom), what knowledges are prioritized (and why) and what futures are (made) possible.

Just and Mobile Geographies of Academia in the Climate Crisis

This paper engages with theorizations of climate, social justice and mobile lives to examine academic work/lives. Climate justice is not only about the climate crisis, it is “a symptom of an unequal and unsustainable system of global production and consumption” (Mikulewicz et al. 2023, 6). This encourages us to analyze and address the uneven conditions which have led to, and sustain/accelerate, climate breakdown. Farhana Sultana (2021, 118) extends a *feminist* climate justice which “bolsters solidarity praxis while enriching and reframing dominant climate change discussions for more impactful and accountable action”. This is fruitful for thinking on academic mobilities, since the emissions produced through academic mobilities are also a ‘symptom of an unequal and unsustainable system’; a globalized, hegemonic system of *knowledge* production and consumption, and responses require solidarity and accountability. What counts as knowledge, who gets to produce it,

¹ While the focus here is on the discipline of geography, much of what is said in this essay is common across multiple disciplines and research domains in the neoliberalized universities of the Minority World.

share it, and engage with it are fundamental questions that must be at the heart of just geographies of academic mobilities in the climate crisis.

Mobilities scholarship has foregrounded what it means to be im/mobilized, to live im/mobilized lives in ways that are relational and contingent. Through her writing on mobility justice, Mimi Sheller (2018,18) traces the politics of movement in the climate crisis and argues that responding to the injustices of unequal mobilities goes beyond daily travel, to more fully recognize “gendered and racialized colonial histories and neocolonial presents” as well as their connections to extractive industries. This account encourages more expansive thinking on sustainable *and* just mobilities, whereby mobility is seen as ‘an operation of power’, reorienting responses from technoscientific emission reduction approaches to recognition of forms of power that limit avenues *of* and *for* change (Davidson 2021).

Academic institutions increasingly acknowledge the role they play in generating carbon emissions through both direct (Scope 1) and indirect (Scopes 2 and 3) activities. Sustainability offices and officers in academic institutions are multiplying in number, often more highly resourced and with a more prominent voice. This could be because sustainability has become big business: links between university sustainability and the unequal² and neoliberalized academic system are abundant³.

The contribution travel makes to academic institutions’ total carbon footprint is dependent on a number of factors. Most travel is captured under ‘scope 3’ emissions⁴. The proportion of institutional transport/ travel emissions varies on the basis of activities, student recruitment, size and geographical location. While ‘internationalization’ is a founding principle for many institutions, it takes a variety of forms and manifests in different ways. Resulting aviation emissions can make up 70% of an institution’s carbon footprint (ALLEA 2022)

Across institutions in Western Europe and the U.S., Kreil and Stauffacher (2021) found common policy measures to reduce air transport GHG emissions: (1) top-down commitments to reducing aviation emissions; (2) promoting virtual communication; (3) questioning travel necessity and prioritizing train travel where possible; (4) recommending economy class travel. These policies broadly fit within an *avoid* (travelling) - *shift* (to less polluting modes) - *improve* (the efficiency of the modes) model of transport policy, popular within sustainable mobility discourse, with travelling less or more sustainably framed as individual-level climate actions that academics can take (see Latter et al. 2024). Yet a focus on technological innovation remains dominant in popular discourse. But Kevin Anderson (2023) asserts: “we’ve left it so late that technology will never deliver in isolation. It is a prerequisite condition but not enough. We also need profound changes in the socio-economic structure of modern society. That is to say a rapid shift in the labour and resources that disproportionately furnish the

² Donations are highly uneven, often going to already-wealthy, research-focused institutions and further extending the stretched patterns of funding and finance for institutions.

³ In 2022, Stanford University announced a \$1.1 billion donation to establish a School for Sustainability, one - extreme - example of donor and philanthropist desire to support ‘sustainability’.

⁴ The ‘difficulty calculating’ discourse has been used to explain delays in climate action, and to justify increased bureaucracy to monitor travel practices, and ongoing use of ‘preferred’ travel agents.

luxuries of the relative few..." But most telling are his next few words "...not just the billionaires, but also people like me". *People like us*.

From here, I will reflect upon the multiple shape/s of just geographies of academic mobilities, questioning what academic mobilities are, what they make possible and for whom. I challenge the idea of a universalized formulation of academic mobilities, and show how the highly mobile, 'coal-dusted and oil soaked' academic might reflect scholars from the Minority World, research-intensive institutions, disciplines that attract research funding and prestigious positions, but equally scholars who are locked into precarious employment contracts.

Mobilities in/of Academia

"Mobility and control over mobility both reflect and reinforce power. Mobility is a resource to which not everyone has an equal relationship" (Beverley Skeggs, 2004, 49)

Increasing interest in academic mobilities over the last decade has questioned the changing conditions of academic work/lives brought about through globalization, neoliberalism and precarity. This scholarship has pointed to the various actor groups: academic institutions, funders, disciplinary bodies, private sector event organizers, industry bodies, academics, university management, students – who all play roles in developing and sustaining the need for mobility in academic lives (Görlinger et al. 2023). Critical geographers are well-placed to extend this scholarship through interrogation of the underlying asymmetries and inequalities of academic mobilities across spatial scales, the power relations these mobilities maintain and reinforce, and the spaces of – or for – resistance.

My own writing on academic mobilities began in 2013 with my PhD supervisor and now colleague and friend, James Higham, in Aotearoa New Zealand. On Te Waipounamu / South Island of Aotearoa, where aviation dominates international *and* domestic mobilities, we were conflicted by our desire to travel to see family, friends, colleagues, peers at events around the world, and our awareness of our complicity with climate breakdown. We were (and remain) the problem. The cognitive dissonance was palpable (Schrems & Upham 2020), particularly given that it is written into the Education Act that academic institutions should be the "critic and conscience of society"⁵.

Academic mobilities do not only refer to short duration trips for meetings, conferences, examinations, lectures, but encapsulates a variety of different forms of mobility with complex histories (Ackers 2005). Travel/tourism and the production and consumption of knowledge have a long, relational history, and throughout it has been deeply gendered, classed and racialized. In the 1600s, Michel Eyquem de Montaigne (1533 – 1592) reportedly stated that "a mere bookish learning is a paltry learning", advocating instead for learning through travel, observation and experience. Through this period, leisure and education collided, beginning the practice of the upper-classes and ruling elites "sending their sons abroad as part of the educational scheme." This "became successively an experiment, a custom, and finally, a cultural norm" (Independent Transport Commission, nd, np).

⁵ Interestingly, in the same Education Act, academic freedom and the 'critic and conscience' text was added later as a result of push back on the loss of autonomy implied in the original text (University of Auckland, 2021).

These norms have accelerated, but patterns of inclusions/exclusions have broadly remained the same; wealthy elites are able to access particular forms of 'better' educational opportunities – often in North American and Western European schools, colleges and universities, but also with new geographies of educational mobilities/migrations emerging (Leung & Waters 2017). Tomasz Kamiński (2023, 66) describes the "circulation of elites from Southern countries to prestigious Northern universities where they study" which then accelerates knowledge flows and re-entrenches power relations in knowledge production. Education and mobilities intersect throughout the educational life-course (e.g., Brooks & Waters 2013; Waters & Brooks 2021). New trends include the highly profitable 'satellite academies' of UK private schools⁶, with 'flying faculty' providing teaching blocks in off-campus locations (Leung & Waters 2017). Thus, dominant patterns of knowledge production are reliant on, and produce new forms of carbon-dependent mobilities.

The labor geographies of academic mobilities are also pronounced. A precarious job market and low levels of job security create the need for mobility. The acceleration – and implications – of these mobilities are recognized by Mbembe (2016, 41):

The speed, scale and volume of transnational talent mobility are remarkable, producing the phenomenon of knowledge diasporas. The constitution of these knowledge diasporas is encouraged, supported and necessitated by globalization. We need to take this phenomenon seriously and stop thinking about it in terms of theories of migration. The complexity of the current motion defies the labels of brain drain, brain gain or even brain circulation. We live in an age in which most relations between academics are deterritorialized.

And these different forms, durations, modes of academic mobilities are highly relational. Spatially dispersed social and professional networks established through student and educational mobilities (see Henderson 2019) create patterns of mobility, re/enforcing new meanings and identities, facilitated by aeromobile norms. This shows how paid work, and life outside of work are never separate (Belluigi & Chiappa 2022).

Because of this, it is not as simple as 'No Fly' for many; the system of academic work pushes some scholars to (multiple) new countries as they seek new employment contracts. Research conducted by Giulio Mattioli and Joachim Scheiner (2022) has shown how first-generation migrants have higher levels of air travel, a trend which reduces for second- and third-generation migrants, explained by spatially dispersed kinship and/or social networks. These migrant-mobilities are likely to include PhD students, postdocs, fixed-term researchers, and their families, as they move from country-to-country to secure academic positions.

Further to this, academic institutions lock in international profiles and hypermobile careers through their recruitment, retention and promotion exercises (Hopkins et al. 2016). The language used in promotion policy all but tells academics to travel as much as possible, to build their networks, and to show they are part of a globalized academic community. Recruitment practices frequently overlook local scholars in favor of their international counterparts, with local academics retained on precarious, fixed term contracts while the (few) permanent contracts are bestowed upon scholars arriving from/educated in (elite institutions

⁶ These satellite academies are often located in low-income countries, reflecting neocolonial trends (See, Bunnell, 2022).

from) the UK or the US; through this international education becomes a pathway to academic diasporas (Czaika & Toma 2017). Together this shows that decarbonizing academic practice cannot be detached from the labor conditions, contractual arrangements and job markets of academic work/lives. Employment decisions induce mobilities and generate carbon emissions. Consequently, employment policy must be aligned with climate policy and sustainable travel policy.

Transforming (Academic) Aeromobilities

"Everyone's an environmentalist until you talk about flying" (Amy Hemmeter, Twitter, 03 March 2023⁷)

Much academic mobility depends on highly polluting air transport. That aviation accounts for 'just' 3% of global carbon emissions or 11% of transport-related GHG emissions are statements oft-repeated but these emissions are compounded by (1) additional climate forcing from aviation, (2) forecast passenger growth and, (3) participation inequities. This last point is significant; Gössling and Humpe (2020) report that in 2018 about 11% of the world's population travelled by air, with "at most" 4% taking international flights. Then, within the aeromobile population, the most frequent fliers – at most 1% of the world population – account for about half of all emissions from passenger air travel. These trends are mirrored within academia, with the top 1% of academic fliers at King's College London generating more emissions (728 tons CO_{2e}) than the bottom 50% (663 tons CO_{2e}) (KCL 2019).

Academic mobilities are inequal *within* and *beyond* academia. *Hypermobile* academics, flying multiple times per year, are generating most of the emissions. But it has been argued that "there is often no real need to travel at a pragmatic level, but rather that 'need' functions through discourse" (Cohen et al. 2020, 162). The 'need' to travel is reproduced by and through academic practice, as well as through university policy, funding regimes and recruitment practices, all of which rely upon gendered, racialized, classed and ableist worldviews. They assume a 'free agent' able to travel at will; without the constraints of caring and other responsibilities outside of work, with mental and physical abilities to travel away from home (without one's support networks, see Hopkins et al. 2019), and unaffected by hostile bordering practices and complex, time consuming and expensive visa regimes.

Importantly, research has suggested that while academic air travel reduces the credibility of scholars, particularly environmental researchers (Attari et al. 2016), it has a limited influence on professional success. Wynes et al. (2019) examined mobility at UBC (Canada), using the h-index (adjusted for academic age and discipline) as a measure of success. While the h-index has been described as a "bogus measure of academic impact" (Gingras & Khelifaoui 2020) and 'impact' and 'success' differ, they do find a relationship between aeromobilities and salary, even when seniority was controlled for; suggesting those who travel more are negotiating higher salaries, or vice versa. Since the gender and racial pay gap is strong in academia (Woodhams et al. 2022), this is not surprising, but raises questions about who and what is valued in/as academic work.

⁷ https://twitter.com/AmyHemmeter/status/1631662420102971399?t=0BSzNMqyqIC_k72YiMaWfg&s=19

Career stage is one of a number of professional characteristics reported to influence mobility practices (Sautier 2021; Latter et al. 2024). This is reflected in the UK Tyndall Centre's⁸ travel policy⁹, which values conference travel more highly for junior scholars. Yet research has shown time and again that mobility *accelerates* with seniority (Whitmarsh et al. 2020). At the same time, long-distance, intercontinental travel has become normalized in university business (Hoolohan et al. 2021), particularly related to large disciplinary conferences. In their study of the travel emissions associated with the American Geophysical Union's (AGU) 2019 Fall Meeting, Klöwer et al. (2020) found that attendees travelled 285 million kilometers, emitting the equivalent of 80,000 tons of CO₂ (tCO₂-e); 3 tons per attendee. And that location matters; changing the host city from San Francisco to Chicago would *reduce* travel emissions by 12%, while a Hawaiian conference site (and host of the 2024 *American Association of Geographers Conference*) would *increase* emissions by 42%.

But is the answer to select conference host cities by their travel carbon footprint? Would this action constitute 'just academic mobilities', or instead reproduce historically embedded knowledge asymmetries whereby "differential mobility empowerments reflect structures and hierarchies of power and position by race, gender, age and class, ranging from the local to the global" (Mekonnen Tesfahuney 1998, 501)? Carbon Tunnel Vision (Konietzko 2022) may miss the opportunity to reorder the production and consumption of knowledge and challenge hierarchies.

There are economic geographies of conference organization. Where, why, and how they are established – and continue – in particular formulation and patterns can be explained through entanglements of academic actors. And conferences are lucrative; in the UK, international conference and business events will be worth £27.6bn by 2026, a 43% increase from 2019 levels¹⁰. The financial dependence of academic institutions on out-of-term conferences results in a complex array of incentives and (economic) priorities. Universities, colleges, disciplinary bodies, funders, publishers are all part of the conference system.

Towards Just Geographies of Academic Mobilities

"Travel is to geographers what a lab is to chemists" (Anon¹¹)

There is no easy solution to academic mobilities in the climate crisis. Discourses of avoiding travel, shifting to lower carbon or less polluting modes, or accelerating innovation to improve the efficiency of modes overlook the fragmented and interconnected nature of mobilities for academic work/lives. Yet the status quo is unjust both within and beyond academia; geographers "remain entrenched in old ways of knowing the world" (García 2022,

⁸ The Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research was established in 2000 at the University of East Anglia UK. It is now a partnership between the universities of East Anglia, Cardiff, Manchester and Newcastle (all in the UK) and Fudan University (Shanghai, China). It is a centre of academic excellence in climate research and using this to support a timely low carbon transformation of society. <https://tyndall.ac.uk/>

⁹ This strategy does run the risk of reproducing mobility norms and values. However, without structural change to the academic system it offers useful short-term remediation.

¹⁰ <https://www.conference-news.co.uk/news/business-events-industry-worth-ps276bn-2026-finds-report>

¹¹ This was said by a colleague in a departmental meeting when we were discussing an institutional travel policy that, they felt, would disproportionately impinge on the research of geographers.

131)¹². Much of the corporeal travel undertaken by academics is justified – explicitly or implicitly – through these ‘old ways of knowing the world’, the order of things that means international is prioritized over local, be it in terms of conferences and events, workers, examiners, or keynote speakers. To adapt AC Davidson’s words (2021, 25, emphasis added), “*radical change in [academic] mobility is needed for futures that are just and sustainable*”, and this needs to go beyond avoid-shift-improve.

So, what do just geographies of academic mobilities look like? Returning to Raphael (2022), we need to envision, imagine and actively work towards a collective future. *Just academic mobilities* might begin by:

- Challenging the fields of power that re/produce academic mobilities (including, but not limited to colonization, patriarchy, heteronormativity, internationalization, neoliberalization);
- Resisting the allure of prioritizing the international and/or fetishizing the local without actions to prevent reproducing unequal historical patterns of knowledge production and knowledge consumption (e.g., journals, funding and conferences/events);
- Repositioning academic mobilities as more than an object to be measured (flight numbers, carbon emissions, percentages of total emissions);
- Confronting the dominant business model of conferences (and all actors who are part of this) and prioritizing alternatives;
- Opposing business models (both academic institutions and academic publishing) that depend on precarious and/or low-wage or unpaid labor;
- Recognizing the everyday labors that are incumbent on academics as they seek visa appointments, negotiate immigration, coordinate child/elder care, finance for pre-payment¹³;
- Engaging in organizing around unjust expansion of aeromobilities (e.g., airport expansions¹⁴)

Such a framing of academic mobilities can benefit from Davidson’s (2021, 26) conceptualization of radical mobilities, as one which “moves away from the search for a single structural determinant, origin or diagnosis of injustice and unsustainability of contemporary mobility”. The reasons why scholars in the Minority World are – on average – producing more carbon, attending more conferences and workshops, and so on, is tightly connected to the imbalances and injustices in our discipline and across academia Nevins et al. (2022, 232) argue that “the literature on decolonization provides valuable tools for illuminating what academic flight “does” and for imagining and creating pathways to reduce it. It is our contention that academic air travel both reflects and helps to reproduce colonial relations”.

¹² In discussing British academic geography, Sarah Radcliffe (2017, p.331) notes how “racism and colonial-modern epistemic privileging are often found in student selection and progress; course design, curriculum content; pedagogies; staff recruitment; resource allocation; and research priorities and debates”.

¹³ This latter point reflects on my own experience of (lengthy) reimbursement processes for travel-related expenses, which assume available credit/wealth.

¹⁴ <https://informedleaders.com/>

Perhaps the question then is, what forms of knowledge generation and sharing are compatible with a just and climate safe future? Thus, rather than starting with mobilities and modalities (i.e., aviation) and seeking ways to reduce them, perhaps we must start with matters such as conferences, workshops, symposia – and question what they're for, and whether the current formulation is workable in a climate constrained world, in a world where we are seeking to repair the legacies of inequalities and injustices.

The differentiated privileges associated with both mobilities and immobilities need to be taken seriously. Just geographies of academic mobility must resist carbon tunnel syndrome and the re-entrenchment of existing hierarchies of knowledge by enabling scholars in Western Europe and North America to use trains to continue meeting and collaborating, while those outside of those regions are left to 'virtual attendance' and its claimed democratization. When coupled with systematic dismantling of biases around *who* and *where* gets to produce and consume knowledge, new models of dissemination are required, which strengthen regional networks and partnerships, and prioritize geographical knowledges emerging from historically under-represented regions and countries.

Conclusions

It is critical that we – geographers – work to unlearn the patterns of mobility-as-success and mobility-as-prestige. Actions and activities to reduce the emissions from academic mobilities run the risk of reanimating historical geographies of knowledge production. But the challenge of articulating just geographies of academic mobilities in the climate crisis also opens space to rethink – to redress – what geography is, for whom and on what terms. Since there is more than one just geography of academic mobilities, this requires engagement with meta-frames and localized socio-spatial lived experiences of work/lives as academics in the climate crisis.

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