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Just Academic Mobilities in an Unjust World

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Article abstract

Addressing academic mobilities in a time of climate breakdown requires a transformation in social values, behaviors, and systems. Our related task is twofold. First, scholars must foster knowledge production and circulation that 1) challenge a status quo that stems from colonial, capitalist, and racist histories and 2) are consistent with an inclusive, equitable, and low-impact academy. Second, we must strive for just geographies in an unjust world of climate, socioecological, and academic disparities. Such goals necessitate working for far-reaching changes within academic institutions as well as for systemic change in the broader world.

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Just Academic Mobilities in an Unjust World

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Abstract

Addressing academic mobilities in a time of climate breakdown requires a transformation in social values, behaviors, and systems. Our related task is twofold. First, scholars must foster knowledge production and circulation that 1) challenge a status quo that stems from colonial, capitalist, and racist histories and 2) are consistent with an inclusive, equitable, and low-impact academy. Second, we must strive for just geographies in an unjust world of climate, socioecological, and academic disparities. Such goals necessitate working for far-reaching changes within academic institutions as well as for systemic change in the broader world.

Keywords

academic mobilities, climate change, conferencing, social justice

Concerns around academic mobilities necessitate a deep dive into who travels, under which conditions, at what career stage, and for what purposes. This exploration is not merely about movement or its absence but intricately tied to power hierarchies, knowledge production, and the overarching theme of justice (Hopkins, 2023). Transformative changes in social values, behaviors, and systems are needed for climate justice, and academics can demonstrate leadership in this. Embracing alternative modes of conferencing, and challenging the colonial biases in knowledge production, dissemination, and circulation, are now essential.¹ However, while large place-based conferences raise concerns around our

¹ As a member of the American Association of Geographers (AAG) Climate Action Task Force, I am keenly aware of the challenges of just academic conferencing in a time of climate and ecological crises.

climate emissions and ecological impacts, focusing on the lifespan of academic mobilities and prestige invites us to consider the broader interconnected pathways with which can engage such socioecological concerns that are institutional, systemic, and scholarly.

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a disruptor, challenging conventional academic research and conferencing models. It forced the academic community to introspect on the ecological and social ramifications of academic aeromobilities. In response, various conference modalities emerged, ranging from in-person to hybrid, virtual, and multi-locale nodes. These adaptations allowed scholars from various global locations to participate, albeit unevenly. This unevenness underscores a pressing need: to challenge and ultimately dismantle the colonial structures deeply embedded in knowledge production, dissemination, and circulation.

The conventional in-person conference perpetuates colonial inequities in knowledge production, rewarding more hyper-mobile scholars (often from the Global North). It is also ecologically- and carbon-intensive while maintaining racist, ableist, sexist, classist, and Othering experiences for many scholars and students. Immobilities due to costs, visa hassles, care responsibilities, health, disability challenges, or other obligations can reinforce who travels and who does not. If academia is genuinely committed to decolonization, it must position conferencing and research within the broader narratives of extraction, exploitation, and climate degradation, while championing alternative paradigms that challenge the prevailing status quo. This commitment to decolonization and decarbonization requires a nuanced understanding of our participation and mobilities in today's world (Nevins et al., 2022).

Post-pandemic, the unreflective rush to revert to in-person conferencing has been critiqued as "highly irresponsible, unjust, and exclusionary" (Chasi & Heleta, 2022, p. 3). While hybrid models have democratized access to some extent, they often result in a "two-tiered" experience, inadvertently sidelining online participants. Challenges such as time zone mismatches, technical glitches, digital divides, and the absence of genuine networking opportunities further exacerbate the divide. Some emerging solutions include alternating between in-person and virtual conferences and advocating for regional hubs and workshops. These smaller, more intimate gatherings can then synchronize with other regional activities, fostering community and shared learning. These often draw inspiration from feminist, decolonial, antiracist, and disability justice perspectives. In this complex landscape, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, embracing a spectrum of alternatives, coupled with introspection and a commitment to ethical collective action, can pave the way forward.

Considering aeromobilities, one proposition is for senior faculty from the Global North to travel less, thereby redistributing the 'carbon budget' to allow scholars from the Global South and Early Career Researchers to attend more conferences (Sarabipour et al., 2021). This approach addresses low-carbon and more diverse conference modalities. Various incentives, mandates, and tradeoffs have to be considered. The goal is to foster spaces that transcend traditional face-to-face meetings, promoting mentorship, networking, and collaboration. Ongoing efforts will remain necessary for improving inclusive conferences, whether in-person or virtual, and for figuring out how to transform the prevailing unjust structures that permeate academic life.

Unfortunately, the fetishization of aeromobilities often correlates with academic prestige, inadvertently reinforcing gender and racial disparities in academia. This dynamic becomes even more pronounced up the academic seniority ladder. Addressing this requires a systemic overhaul of biases in higher education, prompting a reevaluation of our value systems and challenging the entrenched notions of "mobility-as-success" and "mobility-as-prestige" (Hopkins, 2023).

Thus, climate justice requires dismantling wider systemic and structural factors that stem from colonial, capitalist, and racist histories in the unequal contributions to and the lived experiences of impacts of climate breakdown (Sultana, 2022). Academic conferencing is a part of that and not the only contributor - the atmospheric and biospheric impacts of consumption, local transportation, housing, infrastructure, and employment relocation impact our contributions over a lifecycle as academics (Sultana, 2023). Furthermore, advocating for institutional change at our universities on its overall ecological and emissions imprints matter too, as does activism towards progressive policy changes to reduce fossil fuel dependency and the corporate capture of policymaking on just energy transitions. The approaches should not be viewed as either/or but yes/and. As a result, co-creating more options for systemic change and fostering equitable praxis become central.

Decolonizing climate coloniality and extractive academic practices necessitates reimagining and pursuing a more inclusive, equitable, and low-impact academic life. Our task is to foster knowledge production and circulation that challenge the status quo and to strive for more just geographies in an unjust world of climate, socioecological, and academic disparities.

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