



Decarbonization and Decolonization of the Academy: A South-North Perspective

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Abstract

This article invites reflection on possible paths toward a more equitable way of conducting research, which involve both decarbonizing academia and decolonizing knowledge production. Drawing on the work of Hopkins, I explore how academic travel perpetuates colonialist and capitalist power structures, often marginalizing scholars from the Majority World. In this vein, I propose four strategies to foster just geographies of knowledge, including prioritizing North-South articulation with the Majority World, promoting multilingualism, advocating for the redistribution of resources and recognition of locally produced academic knowledge, as well as exploring the potential of virtual conferencing as spaces where multilingual and multi-location dialogue can be embraced. Ultimately, I posit that embracing a more equitable approach to research serves as a pathway to decarbonizing academia.

Keywords

North-South research, flying less, decarbonization, virtual conferencing, co-production of knowledge, decolonization

Contemporary academic life is characterized by highly mobile spaces and activities. This is particularly true in geography, where long-distance exploration and research has played a significant role in the historical and contemporary development of our discipline. However, as Hopkins highlights, academic travel is distributed unevenly; it is concentrated in institutions and regions with large financial resources and, for, those engaged in international

travel, who hold passports that face fewer border restrictions. The organization of the academic world thus reflects colonial and capitalist power structures, thereby marginalizing Majority World scholars. In this way, flying both reflects and maintains the spatial concentration of colonial, and capitalist power. Keeping these observations in mind, in this piece, I draw on Hopkins' invitation to collectively imagine, envision, and enact just geographies and possible futures that expand the scope of generating and sharing geographical knowledge, all while addressing the climate crisis.

As a Chilean scholar conducting research in Canada, I have been engaged in on-going discussions regarding the possibilities for long-distance, south-north and south-south collaborative research within a context of the climate crisis. From such a position, I argue that calls to fly less must be accompanied by a global, transnational redistribution of academic resources and recognition. To this end, I identify four ways to make the production of geographic knowledge more just.

First, we must recognize, value, and privilege academic knowledge produced in the Majority World to challenge the colonial geopolitics of knowledge production that continues to dominate academia. I routinely come across articles published in well-known journals produced in the North by Northern academics that do not acknowledge the academic and situated knowledge produced in places they study, generally in the South. Some articles do not include a single reference from local researchers, even if their work is published in English. Drawing upon local scholars that do research in the Majority World, is one path toward more a just geography that decolonizes academic knowledge production.

Second, we should work towards expanding the real possibilities for the production and dissemination of multilingual and multi-epistemic knowledges. As Martin Muller (2021) has highlighted, English confers linguistic privilege in geography, a privilege that excludes non-English speakers from spaces of dialogue, including within the AAG. Not all geographic knowledge in the world is created equal. Moving towards just geographies means putting an end to the representation of knowledge produced in certain privileged Northern, Anglophone universities as universal. As part of the 2022 AAG annual meeting, Patricia Martin, one of the co-editors of this section, organized a virtual session with Latin American scholars and graduate students on the geopolitics of knowledge production. As a result of dialogue between organizers and participants, it was decided that the panel should be conducted bilingually; it is possible that this panel was the first bilingual Spanish-English session at the AAG. In the digital era in which we live, the possibilities of bilingual encounters and dialogue are expanding, but the existing linguistic privilege of English as universal and standard remain largely unquestioned.

Third, co-producing knowledge is essential to confronting the challenge of ecological crises, including climate breakdown. This requires genuine collaboration and recognition of the work of scholars producing knowledge outside the Minority World. Hopkins provides great insight into the different power structures in the academic world, including international travel and the concentration of research funding opportunities. As she highlights, research funding is concentrated in certain parts of the world reflecting what Martin (2022) calls knowledge enclosures. Administrative and financial rules in northern institutions make truly collaborative South-North research difficult to fund. Neoliberalized academic systems perpetuate this unequal system, ensuring that benefits, in terms of knowledge, skill, resources and recognition, accrue to institutions in the Global North. For example, transferring financial

resources to partners from organizations situated in the South is often constrained by limitations imposed by funding sources or bureaucratic processes within universities. Moving toward just geographies of academic mobility entails the redistribution of resources between institutions in order to confront this pattern of financial privilege. Securing funding opportunities for international research partners within collaborative, anti-extractivist frameworks can make possible fieldwork and data collection that centers on the knowledge and experience of researchers from the Majority World. The interpretation and co-production of geographical knowledges in a non-hierarchical manner can be accomplished, furthermore, without a compulsory need for air travel. This is a path towards just geographies that would strengthen academic networks and empower locally produced knowledges, particularly those produced by Southern scholars.

Lastly, we should rethink conferencing. Virtual conferencing opens many possibilities; however, as Hopkins' invites us to consider, a narrow reading of #NoFly could re-entrench existing hierarchies of knowledge. Particularly in Europe and to a lesser extent in North America, scholars can travel by train to continue meeting and collaborating, while those outside these regions are left with virtual attendance and a paltry claim of knowledge democratisation. Certainly, avoiding carbon intensive transport systems should not mean business as usual. The AAG Climate Action Task Force is trying push these boundaries and seek alternative futures. In this vein, the 2023 Montreal Node of the AAG provided an example of the way to use available academic infrastructure and resources in order create a space for collaboration and knowledge production in different locations. The node developed in Montreal in 2023 demonstrated the real possibility for both local and transnational dialogue in a way that enriches virtual or hybrid gatherings. Reflecting this, multilocation and multilingual nodes could be an interesting future avenue. Clustered conferencing opens possibilities for local encounters and virtual dialogues with geographers situated in different locations. Additionally, technological advancements, such as captioned dialogue, make the idea of multilingual discussions and expanded participation more attainable.

Shifting toward a more equitable way of conducting research helps to open a path for decarbonizing academia. This involves valuing locally produced knowledge and co-producing knowledge with partners who are geographically distant. Ironically, flying less may help pave the way to this alternative future.

References

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