

# Introduction to Climate Action Task Force 2023 Plenary Lecture and Forum

Patricia M. Martin

Université de Montréal  
patricia.martin@umontreal.ca

Joseph Nevins

Vassar College  
jonevins@vassar.edu

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## Abstract

This special issue emerges out of the plenary lecture sponsored by the American Association of Geographers (AAG) Climate Action Task Force at the AAG Annual Meeting in April 2023. The lecture was the opening session of a “node” based in Montreal. The issue comprises revised versions of the original lecture and the comments offered by three respondents, as well as an essay inspired by the node. All the pieces consider academic (in)mobility, the need to transform institutional practices and how to do so in a way that advances social justice rather than reproducing unjust hierarchies and exclusions.

## Keywords

academia, Climate Action Task Force, decarbonization, ecological justice, mobility, social justice

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In April 2023, three universities across Montreal (the Institut national de la recherche scientifique [INRS], the Université de Montréal, and Concordia University)<sup>1</sup> were the site of one of the AAG's Annual Meeting's inaugural "nodes." Each institution took a turn hosting the node for a full day. Session topics included energy insecurity, borders, Latin American political ecologies, critical cartography, and urban infrastructures. They formed part of the Annual Meeting's virtual offering (all sessions were streamed), while also being in-person events.

The Montreal node emerged out of the work of the AAG Climate Action Task Force (see American Association of Geographers n.d.). It represents a form of praxis that seeks to respond to the following question: how, in an era of climate crisis, can and should scholars come together in an intellectually meaningful and inclusive manner? More broadly, the Montreal node is part of an effort to transform the practices of fossil-fueled mobility by academics in a manner that promotes social and ecological justice within their institutions and far beyond (Jepson et al. 2022).

While the node encountered challenges—mostly technological—it had at least four significant successes. First, the sessions were hosted in public institutions, not private conference hotels and centers, connecting the AAG with universities campuses in a direct, mutually beneficial manner. In this sense—and this is the second success—the node created spaces of enhanced inclusion. Students at all levels of study attended, as did some local community members and activists. A significant number of graduate students—including international students—were able to present their work without facing the prohibitive costs of travel or the deep anxiety of the US border regime. Third, many sessions were bilingual, with some moving from English to French, reflecting how the latter was often the dominant language. As a result of these qualities—the fourth success—the node brought together Montreal-based geographers in an unprecedented manner.

As part this initiative, the Climate Action Task Force invited Debbie Hopkins to offer a virtual keynote address from her home institution, the University of Oxford. This address was broadcast simultaneously in Montreal and at the AAG conference in Denver. Three scholars then delivered responses: Magdalena García, from Montreal; Farhana Sultana, from Denver; and Jessica Dempsey, from Vancouver. It was, echoing the pioneering work of the Society for Cultural Anthropology (n.d.) and the Society for Visual Anthropology in "nearly-carbon-neutral" conferencing, a distributed event, characterized by deep connection and dialogue that bridged scholars, spaces and gatherings. Following the insights of Hannah Knox (2022), the session's organization shifted the materiality of knowledge production from carbon-intensive to low-carbon practices, prefiguring alternative futures.

The pieces that follow address academic (in)mobility in a broad sense, moving beyond a focus on conference-going. They all agree that academic practices must change; the question is, how do we do so in a way that expands the possibility for social justice rather than

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to recognize the work of the local organizing committee which was essential to the node's success. Stéphane Guimont Marceau (INRS) Sophie L. Van Nest (INRS), Sébastien Caquard (Concordia University) and Liliana Perez (Université de Montréal) joined Patricia Martin in organizing efforts. We also thank the AAG for its support.

reinscribing contemporary social hierarchies and exclusions? In the first piece, Debbie Hopkins' reflects on "just academic mobilities." At issue is not simply whether to move or not, but how and why we move, what this mobility performs, who has control over mobilities, and how they relate to gender, race, class and coloniality. Farhana Sultana's response deepens some of these insights, focusing on the intersection between practices of decolonization and decarbonization. Magdalena García, similarly concerned about the ties between decolonization and decarbonization, explores various ways to democratize knowledge production. Jessica Dempsey then reflects on climate justice work at her own institution, asserting the importance of linking efforts to reduce flying to other social justice concerns on campus. Finally, Patricia Martin and Joseph Nevins, in an essay inspired by the Montreal node, consider literature on "slow scholarship." Slowing down, they contend, requires addressing the actual carbon-based materiality and speed of academic mobility, thus providing the means to further the ethical and political concerns that underpin slow scholarship.

## References

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