

Key Concept: A Turn Towards Academobilities

ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the key concept ‘academobilities’ as an addition to the growing collection of keywords of mobility studies. Situating academobilities within the tradition of keywords will allow scholars across disciplines to refer to it as a tool that can be used in their own research. Academobilities is a two-fold concept. First, it calls into question the culture surrounding academia by examining the specific ways information is transported and communicated to the public, critically examining power structures, inclusions, and exclusions. The second way in which academobilities can be employed is to examine the interconnected relationship between the academy and mobility; academia is dependent upon mobility. This paper introduces academobilities as a key concept that scholars can adopt and apply in unique ways that move beyond this two-fold understanding. Scholars across disciplines can certainly add fruitful theoretical underpinnings to academobilities, and to do so is encouraged. Understandings of key concepts change and fluctuate over time (Williams 1976) to address our ever-changing society. The goal of writing this paper is to identify a starting point from which scholars of all disciplines can leap.

Keywords: academobilities, mobilities, academy, key concepts, assemblages



In April of 2010, the volcano Eyjafjallajökull erupted. Located in Southern Iceland, the eruption had major global consequences. Plumes of ash were sent across Europe, with it being detected as far as 3200 kilometres away from the eruption site (Rossini et. al. 2012). Millions of people’s travel plans were disrupted. The International Air Transportation Association reports that over a period of seven days following the eruption, over 100,000 flights were cancelled, U.S. \$1.7 billion in revenue was lost, and 10 million travelers were affected (International Air Transportation Association 2010). Due to the far-reaching consequences, many scholars sat down at their computers to write about the effects (and affects) of this natural disaster. Some scholars examined the fragility of the global air travel system (Jensen 2011), some scholars examined how global mobility flows were disrupted (Woolley-Meza et. al. 2013), while other scholars wrote of specific geologic consequences caused by the

event (Olsson et. al. 2014). Many of these articles begin with personal anecdotes from the author(s) about how the eruption affected them specifically.

I would like to examine one article in particular, which briefly mentions that the Association of American Geographers Annual meeting in Washington DC was disrupted as a result of Eyjafjallajökull's eruption (Adey et. al. 2011). I find it significant that academia was affected by this natural disaster, however, Adey et. al. only mention this phenomenon in passing. They assert that "for the Association of American Geographers Annual meeting in Washington DC, the eruption meant interruption, a small microcosm of the world-wide disruption" (Adey et. al. 2011: 338), before moving on to discuss environmental, travel, and governmental issues related to the event. In all of the articles that discuss the significance of Eyjafjallajökull's eruption and the affect it had on various agents, not a single article is devoted to discussing how this lack of mobility affected academia—aside from scholars using brief personal anecdotes as introductory tools to discuss other issues.

This lack of critical engagement and connection between mobilities and the institution of academia is not unique to this event. Since the birth of mobility studies in 2006 with Mimi Sheller and John Urry's introduction of the New Mobilities Paradigm, mobility scholars have examined everything from car travel to helicopter travel to everything in between and surrounding (see Cwerner 2006; Redshaw 2007). However, not a single scholar has devoted an entire study to critically examining the academy using a mobilities framework. Since so much information is produced and disseminated from within the academy, examining how all of this material moves, and is effected by movement, is fruitful. Academic conferences, meetings, and events were disrupted as a result of Eyjafjallajökull. There is a gap in the literature discussing the disruption specifically within academia as a result of the volcanic eruption. This event, and many others, should be critically examined keeping the new mobilities turn and academia in mind. To address such holes in research, I am proposing the tool 'academobilities' to examine the specific ways that events affect the mobility of scholarship. Returning to events and phenomena that have occurred and drawing upon the new mobilities turn, specifically academobilities, for analysis will offer interesting research results.

Before delving into the theoretical explanation of academobilities, I will first situate it within the new turn towards mobilities. Mobilities is a relatively new field, not being named as such until 2006 with Sheller and Urry's (2006) 'new mobilities paradigm'; however issues involving mobilities have been around for decades (see Schivelbusch 1977). Mobilities is concerned with the world's movements, some of which include "asylum seekers, international students, terrorists, members of diasporas, holidaymakers, business people, sports stars, refugees, backpackers, commuters, the early retired, young mobile professionals, prostitutes, armed forces" and so much more (Sheller and Urry, 2006: 207). Mobilities is also concerned with immobility, and the power structures and significance of immobile bodies

and objects. However, humans are not the only (im)mobilized entity. Broad areas of interest within mobilities include transportation, mobility of ideas, mobility of information, mobility of goods, services, technology—the list goes on. Cresswell (2010) describes three aspects of mobility as:

The fact of physical movement—getting from one place to another; the representations of movement that give it shared meaning; and, finally, the experienced and embodied practice of movement. (19)

Each of these aspects are intertwined and related to one another. They do not exist in a vacuum (Merriman 2015).

Within mobilities, a specific politics of mobility (Cresswell 2010) has emerged. Politics simply mean “social relations that involve the production and distribution of power” (21). The politics of mobility can be understood as “the ways in which mobilities are both productive of such social relations and produced by them” (21). The politics of mobility consider the different facets of mobilities—namely motive force, velocity, rhythm, route, experience, and friction (Cresswell 2010)—and how they are distinctly political and conducive of different power relations. The politics of mobility is concerned with the way in which movement occurs, the historical backdrop against which movement occurs, and the hierarchy of mobility (who can and cannot be mobile).

Mobilities is constituted by a vast web of articulations and assemblages (see Slack and Wise 2014) coming together to form rich contexts of movement. Specific terms are created within mobility studies to capture the relationship between certain agents and mobility. Each key concept is an assemblage composed of multiple articulations. For example, Sheller and Urry (2000) coined the term *automobility* to examine the unique influence automobiles have had on mobilizing people, goods, and information. Saulo Cwerner, Sven Kesselring, and Urry (2008) coined the term *aeromobility* to discuss the significant ways movement via flight affects society. Art M. Blake (2011) discusses *audiomobility* to examine the important ways in which sound transmission via radio has affected our culture. In each instance, a significant agent was paired with mobilities in order to fully examine the power relations, inclusions, and exclusions apparent within these systems. Each key concept is an assemblage, with different articulations available to use as tools, such as examining people, culture, and technology in terms of *automobility*, *aeromobility*, and *audiomobility*. Since no scholarship critically addresses mobilities vis-à-vis academia, I am proposing ‘*academobilities*’ as a key concept to address this complex relationship.

Key concepts are part of the structures that fields are built upon. Many fields have collections of keywords, explaining terms and concepts that are particularly relevant to a given subject. Keywords are significant not in isolation, but in how they fit into the assemblage of keywords used for a discipline (Williams 1976). Mobility studies

is no exception (Salazar and Jayaram 2016). When discussing the significance of keywords in culture and society, Raymond Williams (1976) asserts:

I have emphasized this process of the development of *Keywords* because it seems to me to indicate its dimension and purpose... [it is] the record of an inquiry into a *vocabulary*: a shared body of words and meanings in our most general discussions, in English, of the practices and institutions which we group as *culture* and *society*. (13)

Each term is part of a wider vocabulary that contributes to deeper understandings. Keywords are significant in any field, which is why I would like to situate academobilities within the tradition of keywords, specifically within mobility studies. There is no key concept that currently addresses the complex relationship between academia and mobilities. The key concept academobilities can be used as an articulation in the assemblage of mobility studies.

Academobilities is a tool that can be used in many applications. Generally, it examines the important relationship between the academy and mobility while also calling academic practices into question; academobilities is two-fold. First, academobilities calls into question the culture surrounding academia by examining the specific way information is transported and communicated to the public, among other factors. Being a member of academia requires a certain amount of privilege. This privileged group, which is the realm from which this paper originates, framed mobility studies and the new mobilities paradigm, among other theories and hypothesis across disciplines. If knowledge is power, then the production and distribution of power happens largely within academia; hence the need for academobilities. Academobilities questions this power, seeks to find a solution in balancing it, and recognizes that the academy has enough influence to warrant such critical inquiry. Academobilities uses fire to fight fire. In other words, academobilities uses the tools of academia to call academic practices into question. This is similar to the concept of decolonizing the academia, which works to recognize and problematize structural imbalances in knowledge production that result from legacies of colonialism (Robertson, 2016). Both key concepts address and challenge systemic power inequities, however, academobilities specifically examines the mobility and movement of information. Pairing academobilities with other concepts, such as decolonizing the academia, would lead to interesting and fruitful discussions.

The second way academobilities can be employed is to examine the interconnected relationship between the academy and mobility; academia is dependent upon mobility. Revisiting the disrupted annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, for example, this meeting is predicated upon the assumption that each member is privileged to mobility. It also relies upon the immobility of other actors allowing for their mobility: such as the infrastructure, workers, etc. that facilitate their movement (Graham and Marvin 2001). The geographers themselves are expected to make the journey, along with the information they have produced

and are planning to share at the conference. The simple example of a conference highlights human movement, movement of ideas and information, and coordination in communication. Therefore, these movements are also all connected with mobility technologies. For example, the geographers rely upon airplanes, digital files to store information and presentations, and communication technologies in order to coordinate the logistics of the meeting (Jain 2006)—among other things. Note that this is one example of hundreds within academia. Conferences, meetings, ceremonies, and all other manners of gathering take place across disciplines throughout the year. Clearly, the academy is closely connected to mobilities, thus the need for academobilities.

Academia is a powerhouse of information production and dissemination that necessarily encompasses junctures between different types of mobilities. Although mobility scholars study the kinetic elites within mobilities, academia, in and of itself, has a huge concentration of such elites via scholars. This speaks to the problematized belief that cultural studies practitioners are surveying culture from an ‘ivory tower’ (Rodman 2015: 141). Taking a step back and examining the structures and powers at play from which academia is bred is where the advantage—and necessity—of academobilities becomes apparent. Furthermore, it is notable that most scholars have access to mobility in various forms. This group is unique in the sense that they are privileged enough to partake in academia, in all of its mobilized knowledge. For example, scholars need to have the time, access to education, literacy, and enough status that people will take their work seriously. This is all a condition of privilege. Academobilities acknowledges this privilege, seeks to understand how the academy is affected by this privilege, and determines whether scholarly studies are affected by the condition of privilege from which they originate. For instance, this paper, in and of itself, originates from the ivory tower. As someone involved in academia, I have been trained to examine social phenomena in specific ways. As such, the way in which I understand and conceptualize academobilities is affected. Therefore, it would be appropriate for me to examine my own work using academobilities to recognize that I, too, am part of the ivory tower. As such, my arguments are necessarily influenced by my position in society. However, scholars have also examined the structural gendered imbalances within academia, and the ivory tower, by focusing on the overwhelming number of males within the academy (Curtis, 2011). Academobilities is not unique in its attempt to question imbalances and encourage reflexive scholarship, however, it adds to the conversation by examining the ivory tower in terms of movement as opposed to (or in conjunction with) gender or colonialism, for example.

There are global understandings between disciplines that are widely disseminated. For example, the laws of physics are globally recognized. Information about these laws are mobilized in specific ways. Textbooks, lectures, and journal articles are popular ways to mobilize information. However, each platform has certain affordances. Students cannot ask a textbook to explain something differently, however, if they

are at a lecture they can ask the speaker to. Power structures are also an important consideration in academobilities. Textbooks are not useful tools for an illiterate population. The people who supply textbooks may have a certain amount of power over people who are not as educated. Academobilities considers the ways that academic knowledge is mobilized, who does or does not have access to it, and which people have power within academia and which do not. Knowledge is not universally mobile. The way that academic knowledge travels is determined by an elite group that has considerable power, such as publishers, professors, authors, website creators, conference organizers, etc. Although academia has concerned itself with mobilities, it has not taken the opportunity to step back and consider how this production and mobilization of knowledge that academia is creating may, in and of itself, be problematic; which academobilities can begin to explore.

Academobilities moves beyond responsible reflexive scholarship by critically examining the underlying structures that drive the academy and how the mobilization of information is intricately connected with power structures. Academobilities can be used to return to established fields using a new theoretical lens. This tool can question the way entire disciplines were created and the underlying power and beliefs that these fields are predicated upon. Academobilities can question how a field became a distinguished discipline, how people move in and out of fields, how experts are created, how some ideas are widely accepted and some are widely discredited. Academobilities can study *how* academic knowledge is produced and disseminated and the articulations surrounding these processes. Radical contextualization of the way in which any field is established must inform current and future researchers. Academobilities is *not* synonymous with the conceptualization of the “academic sphere,” but is a tool to pull it apart and analyze it.

Academobilities is a tool that scholars can use to critically assess their own work, examine how mobilities and academia are interdependent, and examine how power structures fuel the academy. I present academobilities as a tool that is two-fold—it calls academic power imbalances into question and it examines the interdependent nature of the academy and mobilities—however, I hesitate to limit it. Although it is two-fold, these two aspects are interrelated and cannot be examined in a vacuum. Furthermore, academobilities can be applied beyond my two theoretical understandings. It is my hope that scholars view academobilities as a tool that can be applied to multiple studies across disciplines. Scholars can adopt the term into their own research and apply it in ways that they see fit. In this way, perhaps events such as the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull can be examined yielding unexpected and ground breaking results. Scholars much wiser than I can certainly add fruitful theoretical underpinnings to academobilities, and I encourage them to do so. Understandings of key concepts change and fluctuate

over time (Williams 1976) to address our ever-changing society. “Historically, keywords accumulate meanings, sometimes contradictory ones, and even when one is dominant, others remain available and can be reaffirmed” (Salazar and Jayaram 2016: 4). My goal in writing this paper is to identify a starting point from which scholars of all disciplines can leap. I am excited to see how academobilities will develop as a tool in the future and what it will offer academia.

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