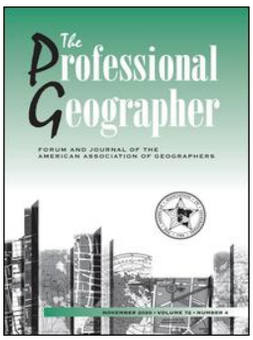

The Professional Geographer

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtpg20

Not Flying as Anticipatory Critique

Hannah Knox

To cite this article: Hannah Knox (2021): Not Flying as Anticipatory Critique, The Professional Geographer, DOI: 10.1080/00330124.2021.1915826

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00330124.2021.1915826

Not Flying as Anticipatory Critique

Hannah Knox
University College London

In this commentary I contribute to discussions about the possibilities for postcarbon conferencing by drawing on my own experience of deciding not to fly. In this piece I explain how my epistemological position of reflexive critique cultivated within my home discipline of anthropology became compromised in the face of an increasing awareness and understanding of climate change. Reflexivity here operated not as a liberatory form but as a mode of thinking that stifled and closed down possibilities for acting in a climatologically engaged way. I describe how I came to rethink my own academic practice through a shift from epistemological reflexivity to material reflexivity and how this opened up the possibility of not flying as a legitimate mode of academic critique. In conclusion I describe some of the conceptual and intellectual openings that such a practice of critique is capable of generating, with a view to expanding the terrain of the possible to include transgressions that might eventually need to become the norm in a climate-changing world. **Key Words: anthropology, carbon, ethnography, materiality, not flying, reflexivity.**

On 22 March 2018 during "Earth Hour" while I sat in Frankfurt Airport, I made a decision to stop flying. Sitting in the departure lounge with the lights of planes taxiing on the runway dotting and streaking the plate glass windows, I penned a blog post explaining as best I could my decision to stop flying (see https://hannahknox.wordpress.com/2018/03/24/not-flying-steps-towards-a-post-carbon-anthropology/). I felt invigorated but also nervous, justified but also ambivalent about whether this was the right thing to do. As the announcement came over the loudspeaker that the gates were open, I uploaded the post and just before joining the queue to board the plane, I wrote and then submitted a tweet linking to the post. It was done. But what had I done? And why? And would it make any difference to anything?

In this short article I reflect critically on both why I made this decision not to fly and the ambivalent affect that this decision produced. The decision was a long time in the making. It had been informed by a sensibility to climate science and climate politics that emerged during field work in Manchester, UK, in which I had been looking at the way the projections of climate science were incorporated (or not) into urban planning; a sensibility that had made me deeply attentive to the carbon cost of the life of an average UK academic. Not flying was also a difficult decision, however, and one that remains complicated. If conferences are to go online, then it is crucial that we attend not only to the objective question of how to reduce the carbon footprint of a large-scale conference like the American Association of Geographers (AAG) Annual Meeting but also its implications for the identities, experiences, and commitments of being an academic. Reflecting on the specific subject position from which this decision emerged, this contribution draws on my own experiences and those of others I have met who have also stopped flying to try to understand why it might be a difficult or transgressive thing to do and how it could be otherwise.

To begin to answer this question, let us first consider the context in which I came to consider not flying as a possibility. My climate change ethnography was focused on people who were thinking about climate change and its implications for the future of the city of Manchester in the United Kingdom. It had involved field work with local government officials, activists, engineers, and scientists who were involved in a collective project to try to work out how to reduce the city's carbon emissions. The question of air travel often lingered at the edges of these conversations. It manifested in discussions about the city's airport, appeared in snide criticisms of the flying habits of council officers and local politicians, was the focus of presentations given by local climate scientists, and was a frequent aside in conversations and reflections both among those who saw themselves as generally environmentally concerned and those who were active in climate politics.

Like geographers concerned about the carbon impact of their conferences, the concern of those with whom I was doing research was first of all how to bring down specific sets of carbon emissions, in their case doing so to create a future city that would be better for everyone living there and better for the world. There was a hopeful side to their project—an idea that a city that dealt with climate change could be a healthier city, a more equitable city, a city that redistributed wealth and resources more equitably. This reflects in many ways the tenor of recent discussion about how online conferences might be the trigger for a more equitable form of academic knowledge production (Watson 2014). It was also a project that was mired with significant challenges of which the problem of flying was a part, however.

The Professional Geographer, 0(0) 2021, pages 1–3
Initial submission, October 2020; revised submission, March 2021; final acceptance, March 2021.

One key challenge people were facing was the issue of how to deal with the question of personal responsibility in relation to the everyday practice of planning for the future. As people I spoke to become increasingly attuned to the problem of climate change, its causes, and its anticipated effects, this awareness caused them to reflect back on the material implications of their own practices—driving to work, flying on business trips, heating their houses, and consuming imported goods. Some dealt with this by partitioning off their professional lives from their personal choices, others by offsetting the effects of their work with the effects of their consumption, and some responded by deciding to try and radically change the way they operated to live a lower carbon lifestyle. Whichever route people chose, it was clear that the carbon-based materiality of contemporary existence had become a matter for ongoing consideration and deliberation.

To be able to tackle climate change then required not just an awareness of an additional external, knowable, social, or economic factor that now needed to be taken into account in planning for the future. Rather, awareness of the climate entailed a confrontation with the relationship between the self as a site for material engagement with the world, and the project of knowing and transforming that people were engaged in—a project that had conventionally proceeded through abstraction from the infrastructures that sustained this knowledge work.

As I spent time researching climate work, I gradually found myself drawn into a similar position. With contemporary anthropology shaped by similar histories of thought as planning and urban governance, it is perhaps unsurprising that I, too, found myself being similarly troubled by the spectral presence of carbon-based matter that crept into the crevices of my conceptual and analytical work and ate away at the boundaries I had built between creating knowledge and remaking the world.

Like city planners, for whom the injunction to see themselves as a constitutive part of the fabric of the city that they sought to transform was often a considerable challenge, I had also started with a mode of analysis in which I situated myself as outside the problem I was studying. I began this work into climate change politics with an anthropological curiosity as to the rationalities, justifications, and socialities of those who were engaging with the problem of climate change as revealed by the vast machine of climate science (Edwards 2010). In approaching the research, I drew on my anthropological training in epistemological reflexivity to cultivate a means of interrogating and making strange the mundanities of bureaucratic practice, activist intervention, and everyday political relations through a method that created insight through a "re-description" of other people's ways of knowing and doing (cf. Lebner 2017). To render climate change politics redescribable ethnographically, epistemological reflexivity offered a tool that was capable of producing a critical, analytical distance between myself as an anthropologist and those with whom I was doing research and had much in common. It enabled me to study the everyday work of carbon reduction—work that I found enmeshed in stiflingly familiar ideas about progress, sustainability, transitions, mitigations, adaptations, and behavior change. It also allowed me to focus my attention on the how these categories came into being and the knowledge work necessary to hold them in place. Building on the work of anthropology, feminist science and technology studies, and critical geography, my hope was to find a way of rerendering familiar concepts like footprints, responsibility, the city, culture, politics, and so on, newly curious, and in doing so to open up ways of thinking of climate change differently (Knox 2020). Although this technique of epistemological reflexivity had the benefit of situating and contextualizing everyday work of carbon reduction to reveal its cultural contingency, it simultaneously created a problematic fissure between analysis as something that renders an external world knowable and analysis as a form of material practice that changes the world at the same time as it studies it.

One person who was very articulate on this problem was Manchester-based climate scientist Kevin Anderson, who had engaged closely with the local authorities in Manchester in their climate change planning. The main thrust of most of his presentations to city policymakers ran along the lines that the worst culprits causing climate change are relatively wealthy academics like climate scientists and policymakers like those trying to reduce carbon emissions. Climate models told as a story about personal responsibility had the effect of collapsing structural global change and mundane individual actions into a morally inflected newly material engagement with the world. Here recognizing the need to do something about climate change required nothing less than a reconsideration of the theory of knowledge with which science and planning—and indeed we might add anthropology and geography—worked, turning planning or science from an epistemological set of concerns about truth or imagination into an ontological issue. Knowledge about the future was no longer disassociable from the material processes through which that future was being made knowable. The more time they spent understanding climate change, the more people I worked with became aware that the very way in which they made knowledge was part of the cause of climate change—the act of knowing was part of the act of making the world anew in a very literal, material sense. It was this reconsideration of their practice that had prompted some to decide to stop flying.

As I spent more time surrounded by climate change projects, modeled futures, and discussions

about the causes of the climate futures that might be coming, I also became, gradually, increasingly uncomfortable about anthropological practices of knowledge production and their entanglement with the fossil fueled infrastructures of academic life. As I jetted around the world to academic conferences, I was becoming ever more aware of my "individual" carbon footprint, the privilege it indexed, and what was starting to appear as a relatively significant responsibility as an academic for this contribution to global climate change.

For a long time I rationalized my carbon footprint from flying in all kinds of ways. As an anthropologist brought up in a discipline that deeply values reflexivity, it felt easy to engage a critical analytical faculty to deal with warning signals emanating from the technique of carbon footprinting. At the same time, as I spent more time with graphs and charts that presented the material connections among economy, knowledge, and climate and spoke to others who had reconciled the dissonance they experienced by attempting to step out of the infrastructures of their middle-class lifestyles, I felt myself gaining greater appreciation for the reasons for the actions of those who I was doing research with who had decided to stop flying. It was clear that their actions were not borne out of some higher moral ground, but rather emerged from an ongoing attentiveness to particular material sensibilities that they had come to see as entangled with the very way that they thought and acted.

It was in this attention to the critical possibilities latent in a shared awareness of the material basis of knowledge production (cf. Daston 2004) that I finally found a bridge between my own commitment to anthropology as reflexive critique and the problem of flying that was exercising my interlocutors and myself. For now, it was becoming clearer that the anthropological potential of not flying was not as a solution to a problem, but a mode of analysis that took the ethnographic practice of redescription and rendered it newly material. This enabled me to rethink the decision not to fly as not only a moral choice, a practical decision, or a political act but perhaps more important a form of situated reflexive practice that opened up new questions about participation, access, equity, ethics, and the politics of knowledge. One example of this is that it provided a vantage point from which to consider questions such as whether all flying is equal. This prompted me to consider whether flying to conferences was more or less problematic than flying for field work or to go on holiday or to visit family and to think about the criteria required to go about answering this question. It also caused the geographies of academic knowledge production to become more visible. In proposing not to fly as a Europe-based academic, I was patently aware how not flying in Europe might be different from not flying in North America, where intercontinental rail systems might not exist, in Australia where contact with disciplinary networks outside the Australian context would necessitate flights, or in many other locations where overland travel might be risky, expensive, looked down on, or even absent. It was very quickly clear there was no generic position from which to make a claim about the virtues or otherwise of not flying. With these questions of the positionalities inherent in flying or not flying, this also opened up questions about whom, and what system of academic knowledge production, flying sustains. This rapidly opened up to questions of access, equity, and power, bringing into view questions about the intersections of international mobility, gender, ethnicity, disability, and race. Moreover once these questions had been posed about flying, it also generated the possibility of considering similar questions about other fossil fueled practices of academic knowledge production and consumption, from the carbon-powered networks of e-mail and Zoom meetings to the social and material impacts of academic megaconferences.

If there is one thing I hope then, from the experiments in low-carbon conferencing that are now underway, it is that this spirit of anticipatory material critique is recognized as a key part of the impetus that has driven the change so far. Without this I worry that the best intentions to reduce carbon emissions will become an exercise in accounting and accountability, leaving the more profound questions about what academic knowledge is for, and what it can and should do, to become once again contained as epistemological problems that fail to recognize their manifestation in the material infrastructures of academic life. ■

Literature Cited

Daston, L. 2004. *Things that talk: Object lessons in art and science*. New York: Zone Books.

Edwards, P. N. 2010. *A vast machine: Computer models, climate data, and the politics of global warming*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Knox, H. 2020. *Thinking like a climate: Governing a city in times of environmental change*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Lebner, A. 2017. *Redescribing relations: Strathernian conversations on ethnography, knowledge and politics*. New York: Bergahn.

Watson, C. 2014. *Beyond flying: Rethinking air travel in a globally connected world.* Cambridge, UK: Green Books.

HANNAH KNOX is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at University College London, London WC1H 0BW, UK. E-mail h.knox@ucl.ac.uk. Her research interests include the study of infrastructures as technologies of state-making and the challenge that climate change is posing to modes of thought and practice.