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Editorial: Mobility, Connectivity, and the Implications of Covid-19 for Latin American Geography

To say that Covid-19 has changed everything about how we do geography is by now cliché. Multiple academic journals, including this one, have published special issues on Covid-19, and countless editorials signal how the on-going pandemic deepens existing inequalities, not only in the worlds we study as scholars but also in the ways in which we produce scholarship. The spaces of research and teaching that we inhabit on a daily basis are immune neither to Covid-19 nor to the public health recommendations of social distancing and other isolation efforts.

Across the next three issues of the *Journal of Latin American Geography*, we will use this space to reflect on the multifaceted ways the global coronavirus pandemic is impacting geographers in and of Latin America, tracing its implications for research and scholarship (this issue); its effects on teaching and pedagogy (Vol. 20, No. 1, March 2021); and its institutional impacts (Vol. 20, No. 2, June 2021).

Even before Covid-19, the uneven conditions of academic knowledge production were apparent—one could even say they had become “normal.” Indeed, the prototypical model of geographical fieldwork is one in which academics and graduate students set out from the global North to study peoples in places in the global South who frequently do not have the power to say “no” to being studied, and almost never have the recipro-

cal ability to conduct analogous research in the global North. The prototypical model of academic publishing, as we’ve written about previously in JLAG, is one where English dominates both the language of publication and the language of cited research. And the prototypical model of academic conferences is one in which North-based professional associations organize large, expensive, in-person conferences with multiple cross-cutting barriers to participation from the South, including registration fees, travel costs, and visa restrictions. This is true of both large disciplinary conferences, such as the annual meeting of the American Association of Geographers, and smaller conferences like the recent CLAG conference in Antigua, Guatemala, which, even while taking place in Latin America, was predominated by North American geographers of Latin America.

Covid-19 is upending these prototypes in ways that frequently make field research more challenging, if not impossible, but also in ways that have pried open new possibilities for participation.

For those of us feeling the isolation of restrictions on public life and what this means for our ability to travel to or within Latin America, virtual technologies have been one way to remain connected. However, many of the forms of geographical research that we engage in are not easily replicated or replaced by remote/virtual engagement. Latin Amer-

ican geography, like regional geography more broadly, has a robust tradition of field research that constitutes embodied learning. Many public archives and government offices where we search for and collect documents in hard copy due to the paucity of digitized resources are closed. Public meetings, which are so useful for understanding how issues are presented and contested, are suspended. In principle, we could conduct interviews remotely, but this has the potential to change the dynamic in a similar way to plonking a voice recorder down on the table during an in-person interview. Site visits, transect walks, informal interviews, and unplanned encounters on farms, in informal settlements, and in any of the countless other places we conduct research are no longer viable, and most forms of participant observation are off the table for the foreseeable future. What is at stake here is not just research data, but the personal experiences and interpersonal connections that underpin so many of our scholarly endeavors.

Travel restrictions and limitations on gatherings that have been put into place to slow the transmission of the virus have also resulted in many disciplinary conferences, another important site of academic production, being converted to hybrid or fully virtual meetings. This trend seems likely to continue into 2021, potentially allowing more scholars from Latin America to participate in Northern academic arenas and vice versa, so long as they have access to high-speed internet connections able to support videoconferencing. At the same time, smaller and more dynamic webinars, panels, and live events have proliferated across virtual spaces. Using social media platforms and

digital presentation platforms, geographic scholarship in Latin America has experienced a democratization of access—to an extent. For instance, institutions such as the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS), Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), and Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales (CLACSO) are facilitating online courses that feature diverse scholars and activists reflecting and analyzing current conditions. Furthermore, grassroots organizations and intellectual groups, such as Re-existencia Cimarruna and Red Feminismo/s Cultura y Poder, among many others, are also holding public seminars where Indigenous leaders, Black feminists, and queer activists theorize current conditions in ways that exceed and question the bounds of formalized processes of knowledge production. These spaces of engagement, mostly conducted in Spanish and Portuguese, enable a more international circulation of South-based ideas as well as a greater visibility of Latin American scholars across and beyond the region. Of course, this does not mark a complete democratization of access, which remains dependent on the logistics of digital connectivity, including the assumption that all of those who wish to engage will have the technology, bandwidth, and time, not to mention care-giving support, to connect, all of which vary according to class, race, and gender. It is indisputable, however, that these virtual spaces of engagement have brought the intersectional dimensions of knowledge production into clearer focus.

With these restrictions of mobility and changing methods of connectivity, how

should Latin American(ist) geographers respond? One option is simply to wait for the situation to return to “normal,” when travel restrictions have been lifted and an effective vaccine offers widespread immunity. This is a weak response. Just as the virus has laid bare the stark social inequalities in terms of infection and health outcomes in Latin America, it also reflects these in the practice of geographical scholarship. To us, simply waiting to return to this unequal and unjust “normal” is unacceptable.

Another response is to directly contend with the “new normals” of both the uneven production of Latin American geographical knowledge and the global pandemic by thinking more deeply and creatively about ways to disrupt hegemonic structures of knowledge production. This should include prioritizing collaborative work with South-based scholars and organizations across all stages of the research process,

from design to data collection to publication. These transnational collaborations are a first step to addressing travel restrictions and the problematic ethical concerns of North-based researchers carrying disease with them into the field, but will require an equitable distribution of both risks (e.g., exposure to disease) and rewards (e.g., grant funding, co-authorship on publications). This journal has recently published several articles based on successful South-North research collaborations. Contending with the “new normal” must also include supporting the continuation of the virtual engagements described above by hosting, participating in, disseminating, funding, and translating these virtual encounters. This will guarantee, at the very least, that the prying open of these spaces of (albeit limited) democratized knowledge production in, about, and from Latin America will not be fleeting.

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