

Linked (Im)mobilities and the Relational Politics of Movement in Post-Earthquake Nepal

Benjamin Linder

Department of Anthropology & Geography, University of Illinois at Chicago, USA

Mailing Address:

University of Illinois at Chicago Department of Anthropology
Behavioral Science Building #2102
1007 West Harrison Street
Chicago, IL 60607-7139

Phone Number:

001-317-679-0665

Email Address:

blinde2@uic.edu

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Abstract:

This article highlights the importance of various (im)mobilities which were induced by the massive 7.8 magnitude earthquake that struck Nepal on April 25, 2015. Around 100 news articles published in the two weeks following the earthquake were collected and analyzed. After weaving these articles together into an overarching mobility-centric narrative, the politics of such (im)mobilities are critically considered. The final sections situate this empirical data within the theoretical “mobilities” literature to show how any given mobilities system is always constituted in relation to other (im)mobilities as well as a variety of geographical and political factors to produce a mutually constitutive, even dialectical, web.

Keywords:

linked (im)mobilities, post-disaster, Nepal earthquake, infrastructure, new mobilities paradigm, politics of mobility

Word Count:

9,855

1. Introduction

This article highlights the importance of various (im)mobilities which were induced by the massive 7.8-magnitude earthquake that struck Nepal on April 25, 2015. Around 100 news articles published in the 16 days following April 25ⁱ were collected and analyzed from the perspective of the ‘new mobilities paradigm’ (Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2007). The first aspect of this is to arrange these news sources into a mobility-centric narrative to emphasize the importance of various (im)mobilities for the disaster’s aftermath, followed by a critical discussion of the politics of such (im)mobilities in Section 4.

In so doing, the article makes two subtle contributions to the literature. First, it offers an empirical case study to operationalize the theoretical strides made by eminent mobilities scholars, who have noted that (im)mobilities must be understood relationally, dialectically, and within their larger socio-political contexts. Furthermore, the “mobilities” framework has most prominently examined Western contexts, and Nepal remains absent from the literature. The discussion here, therefore, widens the conceptual space in which we might discuss the applications of a mobilities approach to the Global South in general, and to Nepal in particular. Second, it makes a subtle methodological contribution. Coming to grips with the complexity of post-disaster (im)mobilities—or *any* (im)mobilities system for that matter—often requires a logistically difficult body of data. The method advanced here—creating mobility-centric narratives of disaster events—both highlights the importance of mobilities in such situations and simultaneously offers sufficient data to begin understanding the particularity of the mobility system’s mutual constitutions, what are here called *linked (im)mobilities*.

2. Literature Review

Many social science debates have been recently reinvigorated and upended by increasing focus on mobilities as central to the (re-)production of social, cultural, and political life. Mobilities represent more than a peripheral concern, as they can in fact constitute the apparently bounded and static objects of culture (Clifford 1997), place (Massey 1994; Cresswell 2004), urban spaces (Simone 2004; Quayson 2014; Matthews 2011), ethnic identity (Shneiderman 2015), embodied subjectivities (Ghannam 2011; Cresswell 1999), and more.

For this article, one of the crucial sub-fields in the literature deals with the facilitation of various mobilities by highly immobile infrastructural elements, the dialectic between ‘mobilities’ and ‘moorings’ (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006). Mobile capital (and capitalism more broadly) requires the construction of large-scale urban command centers (Sassen 2001; Harvey 1989). Aeromobility requires airports to serve as immobileⁱⁱ connecting nodes (Cresswell 2006b; Adey 2010). The development of automobility depended on particular historical and geographic contexts, requiring the wide-scale construction of motorable roads (Urry 2007). Even quotidian, everyday forms of mobility depend on, among other things, communications infrastructures for synchronized scheduling (Peters, Kloppenborg, and Wyatt 2010) and established transport structures (Rajé 2007). Furthermore, Frith (2012) reminds us that all information technologies, like automobility and aeromobility, require (relatively) immobile communications infrastructures situated in particular places. Therefore, infrastructure has clear importance for any discussion of movement, particularly in a

post-disaster situation like Nepal's, when so much of the material infrastructure was damaged by the earthquake and/or overwhelmed by bottlenecks in the earthquake's aftermath.

This literature also critically examines the politics of infrastructural projects, and it has uncovered the way in which such elements exacerbate, maintain, or create various modes of inequality. Thus, infrastructural elements serve as sites for considering the political structures in which they are embedded as well as crucial sites for the performance of political agency and disempowerment (Mains 2012; Anand 2011; Westphal 2008). Roads are commonly conceptualized as bringing places closer together and facilitating broader development, often breeding a sense of 'enchantment' toward such projects for the promises they hold (Harvey and Knox 2012; see also Ferguson [1999]). In actual implementation, however, roads often serve as divisive sociopolitical technologies, facilitating the ability to literally bypass social interactions and divide groups of people (Pedersen and Bunkenborg 2012). Furthermore, economic constraints and differential pricing can have the effect of curbing individuals' mobility (Schönfelder *et al.* 2007), often for the benefit of some and to the detriment of others (Lin 2012).

Since its inception, the 'mobilities turn' has also come to bear on several disaster events. Scholarship about Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, and the ash cloud caused by the 2010 eruption of Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcano have all been exemplary in highlighting the ways in which a mobilities approach can strengthen, nuance, and expand our understandings of both the disasters themselves as well as the complex mobility systems they disrupt. As a starting point, such 'natural' disasters foreground the fragility of mobility systems in the first place (Budd *et al.* 2011;

Sheller 2012; Birtchnell and Büscher 2011), reminding people that such systems are, in fact, always on ‘the edge of chaos’ (O’Regan 2011). Such approaches have also allowed scholars to grasp the ‘normal’ functioning (i.e., outside of disaster contexts) of these systems. The ash cloud in Iceland, which led to the closure of huge swaths of European airspace, ‘clarified the collective nature of air travel’ (Martin 2011, 90). The everyday inconveniences and frictions of aeromobility ‘were magnified through their aggregation for all to see’ (90).

Additionally, a focus on post-disaster mobilities opens up new ways of conceptualizing the politics of such situations. It inherently reminds us that ‘natural’ disasters are far from *only* natural. Indeed, they always enter into particular historical, geographic, political, and socio-cultural contexts (Fatton 2011; Iversen and Armstrong 2008). Furthermore, post-disaster situations frequently produce deeply differential and unjust (im)mobilities (Sheller 2012). After the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the well-off had a much easier time coping than more disadvantaged groups: ‘Although death and devastation affected all irrespective of class or color, old divisions and social reflexes soon reasserted themselves’ (Fatton 2011, 164).

During Hurricane Katrina, race, class, gender, and education level directly related to people’s in/ability to evacuate before the storm as well as the quality of such evacuations (Rhodes 2010; Elliot and Pais 2006; Litman 2006; Li *et al.* 2010; Thiede and Brown 2013). Therefore, ‘disasters do not ‘level the playing field’ but rather interact with previously existing social structures to produce unequal outcomes’ (Thiede and Brown 2013, 804). Even in the case of Iceland’s ash cloud, an event that did not lead to a widespread humanitarian crisis, the ‘unequal power-geometries configuring global

mobility systems became exposed...’ (Jensen 2011, 70). In that situation, ‘the poorest passengers were more vulnerable and less able to adapt to the closures’ (O’Regan 2011, 27). These examples demonstrates the more general point that separating ‘mobility from race (and class and age, in particular) is simply nonsensical’ (Cresswell 2006b, 261; Motte-Baumvol and Nassi 2012).

Much of this literature focuses on the weaknesses of the pre-disaster mobility systems and/or the subsequent blockages and disruptions caused by the disasters. While necessary and important work, it tends to downplay the way in which disasters *produce* new modes of mobility, as well as the broader insight that all mobilities must be produced in the first instance (Cresswell 2001, 2006a). For any holistic understanding of such situations, therefore, it becomes necessary to consider the obstructions *and* the facilitations, the blockages *and* the propulsions. While the Iceland ash cloud was expected to cause huge decreases in tourist arrivals, the mobilization of particular media images transformed the event (for some) into a tourist commodity for visual consumption, which ‘ironically added to the sense of the sublime that still attracts many tourists to Iceland’ (Benediktsson, Lund, and Huijbens 2011, 83). In a counterintuitive turn, then, that disaster may have actually propelled particular types of transnational mobility at the same time as it arrested others. Furthermore, in the ash cloud’s aftermath, people were forced to make alternative travel arrangements. To do this, many drew upon their own social networks and forged new ones, which themselves required the mobilization and coordination of information (Guiver and Jain 2011; Barton 2011). This article, then, takes seriously the assertion that ‘disasters demobilize and remobilize. They

strike at mobility systems but also engender their own unique mobilities (and immobilities)...’ (Sheller 2012, 188).

The complex politics of mobility cannot be reduced to any simple formulation. The most productive theorizations of this complexity have come from the work of Tim Cresswell (1999, 2006a, 2006b, 2010) and Peter Adey (2006, 2010). Both of them conceptualize such politics in holistic terms of mutual dependence and relationality. Echoing Henri Lefebvre’s (1991 [1974]) tripartite conception of social space, Cresswell (2006b, 2010) has argued that mobilities exist in the dialectical relations between movement, representation, and practice. The politics of mobility, in this conceptualization, are ‘the ways in which mobilities are both productive of such social relations and produced by them’ (Cresswell 2010, 21). In a slightly different vein, Adey (2006) begins with the contention that mobility is a universal absolute. Even apparently immobile things are in fact mobile. He then complicates this by noting, ‘if everything is mobile, then the concept [of mobilities] has little purchase’ (76). He convincingly argues that this problem requires that we work towards a *relational* politics of mobility: ‘By this I mean that there is never any absolute immobility, but only mobilities which we mistake for immobility, what could be called relative immobilities’ (83).

This work goes a long way toward grasping the complexity of mobility systems. It suggests that all mobilities inherently depend on particular immobilities. How could aeromobility operate without the (relatively) immobile airports, countless workers who maintain the airport spaces, and huge security apparatuses whose effective purpose it is to immobilize certain types of people and facilitate the mobility of others? However, mobilities do not depend solely on immobilities. It is also the case ‘that one mobility may

be symbiotically related to other mobilities with entirely different cultural and social characteristics' (Cresswell 2006b, 22).

Adey (2010, 104) argues that mobilities 'always have relational impacts and we must question what those are.' This article takes up this challenge precisely. For the analysis that follows, I offer a unique case study to flesh out this conceptual terrain. First, this article conceptualizes (im)mobilities as being produced as well as productive. Second, it understands (im)mobilities as always relational. Not only are (im)mobilities related to one another, but also they are related to sociopolitical power structures, which are themselves inter-related. All of these, of course, intersect with infrastructural and geotopographical conditions. A linked (im)mobilities approach operationalizes and extends all of these previous insights by widening our frame to include the myriad facets that produce (im)mobilities. Furthermore, by de-centering all of these facets, it offers a practical framework for holistically untangling the complex inter-relationships and mutual dependencies that converge in time-space to produce any given mobility system.

3. The Ubiquity of Post-Earthquake (Im)mobilities

This section will analyze a variety of articles that appeared in newspapers around the world to demonstrate the centrality of (im)mobilities after the earthquake of April 25. (Im)mobilities are here considered in relation to three crucial categories that impacted the outcome of the earthquake's aftermath: (1) *geography/infrastructure*, (2) *people*, and (3) *information*. These will be dealt with separately in this section to illuminate their importance and ubiquity after the disaster, but Section 5 will show the ways in which

these particular aspects of the overall mobility system interacted with, facilitated, and obstructed all of the others.

The first aspect that impacted the movement (or non-movement) of people and goods was the natural topography of Nepal. The earthquake's epicenter was in Nepal's central hills, and the region's rugged terrain created logistical problems for the movement of people and goods into some of the worst-affected districts. As an article carried in Montreal's *Gazette* (April 29)ⁱⁱⁱ reported:

Delays will be exacerbated by the logistical difficulties presented by Nepal's geography. Across most of the country there are no roads, even before the earthquake. Many villages are accessible only on foot. The country is all cliffs, ravines and valleys, every path punctuated by steep staircases, meaning even all-terrain-vehicles are of limited use. The very qualities that make Nepal a mecca for hikers and climbers make it impossible to service in a disaster.

The *Los Angeles Times* (May 4) reported that delivering relief supplies was 'a task made more difficult by central Nepal's rugged terrain—beautiful but notoriously hostile to recovery efforts[...]' Peter Walton of the Australian Red Cross succinctly identified the problem in an editorial published in Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* (April 30): 'The scale and treacherous terrain make delivering aid a nightmare.'

Beyond the geo-topographical problems, Nepal's infrastructure was already notoriously poor, particularly so outside of the Kathmandu Valley. The *New York Times* (April 27) reported, 'Nepal's poor road network, a limited number of helicopters and planes to shuttle supplies to distant villages, and intermittent communications throughout the country would likely worsen the current situation, [experts] said.' Of course, these geo-topographical and infrastructural 'problems' were not unique to the aftermath of April 25, though the disaster situation—where the need to swiftly move people and

supplies over such unforgiving terrain became a humanitarian imperative—foregrounded this nascent issue. Not only was this a difficult existing context into which the earthquake appeared, but also the earthquake made these issues worse in a variety of ways.

Geographically, the earthquake initiated a series of landslides. While these posed grave dangers to villagers in their own right, they also exacerbated and worsened the existing infrastructural challenges:

Here in the Gorkha district, the epicenter of the magnitude 7.8 quake, roads that are repaired or cleared during the day are often blocked before the next morning by landslides, making it difficult to reach communities where hundreds are feared dead. (*New York Times*, April 29)

The *International Business Times* (April 30) noted, ‘Many of the worst-affected areas are remote, and the few roads that connected them to transport hubs were destroyed in the quake.’ In addition to damaging roads, the instability of the land after the earthquake also made it difficult for helicopters to find safe places to land, deliver supplies, and evacuate victims (*Daily Telegraph* [Sydney], April 30).

Furthermore, Tribhuvan International Airport (TIA) in Kathmandu was simply too small to manage the dramatic traffic it received after the earthquake. The *Kathmandu Post* (April 30) reported that in the aftermath of April 25, TIA received a record number of flights. The *Himalayan Times* (April 27) reported:

Tribhuvan International Airport witnessed huge congestion and rush the entire day today due to increased operation of international aircraft bringing in rescue teams and relief materials. This resulted in delay, holding, diversion and cancellation of many commercial flights. People thronged the TIA’s premises wanting to be evacuated and those having scheduled flights to different countries.

Canada’s *Globe and Mail* (April 29) reported some of the difficulties experienced by Canadian officials trying to get relief supplies *into* Nepal and Canadians *out* of Nepal.

This bottleneck grew worse as the airport—'built to handle only medium-size jetliners' (*Washington Post*, May 4) as opposed to the larger aircrafts delivering relief supplies and aid workers—was closed to heavy jets 'as the air influx began to damage the runway' (*Daily Mirror* [Northern Ireland], May 3).

Here again, these infrastructural challenges partially determined how people and supplies moved after April 25. Beyond this, it speaks to the multi-causal and interdependent nature of these various (im)mobilities. The tidal wave of aid efforts descending on Tribhuvan International Airport, coupled with the congested lines of people trying to flee Nepal, dovetailed to *produce* newly configured modes of (im)mobility. The political and theoretical implications of this will be fleshed out below, but for now it is important to keep this general insight in mind.

A flood of international support descended on Nepal in the earthquake's immediate aftermath—which is to say, the earthquake *produced* a new scale of human movement *into* Nepal just as so many foreign nationals sought to get *out* of the disaster situation. The day after the earthquake, the Israeli military pledged to send 260 aid workers and over 90 tons of cargo into Kathmandu on two Boeing 747's (*New York Times*, April 26). Gurkha engineers from the British Army were also sent back to lend assistance (*Daily Telegraph* [London], April 28). Singapore deployed the largest overseas operations relief team in its history (*Today* [Singapore], May 4). Ireland sent 'thousands of blankets, tents, tarpaulins, jerry cans and other urgent supplies' (*Irish Times*, May 1). Canada dispatched doctors, medical supplies, and its military's Disaster Response Team (*Globe and Mail* [Ontario], April 27). New Zealand sent its Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) team (*Press* [Christchurch], April 28). By April 27, a mere two days after the

earthquake, ‘India said that it had sent 13 military transport planes and a 40-person disaster response team, and China said that a search-and-rescue team had already reached Katmandu’ (*New York Times*, April 27). The United States sent 500 troops (*Los Angeles Times*, May 3) as well as five much-needed helicopters (*USA Today*, May 4).

As such international relief teams came into Nepal, a mass of foreign nationals left Nepal. Within three days of the earthquake, India and China had each evacuated at least 2,000 nationals (*Straits Times* [Singapore], April 28). By May 3, all 42 known Hong Kong residents had been flown home (*South China Morning Post*, May 3). 89 Singaporeans were evacuated as well (*Straits Times* [Singapore], April 30). Indeed, a mere five days after the earthquake, the *Kathmandu Post* (April 30) reported that 30,000 foreign tourists had already left Nepal. Such rapid evacuation response also entailed more human mobility *into* Nepal to facilitate these outbound mobilities. In addition to the aid they sent, the Australian government sent ‘a crisis response team to confirm the safety of 349 Australians who have not been accounted for after a massive earthquake hit the country’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*, April 27). The Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) sent a C-130 Hercules aircraft to evacuate Malaysian nationals who had been stranded by the disaster (*New Straits Times* [Malaysia], April 29). Ireland’s Department of Foreign Affairs set up an emergency consular response team to assist around 120 Irish citizens still in Nepal (*Irish Times*, April 28). Indeed, ‘Diplomats from all over the world descended on the Kathmandu, Nepal’s capital, in the days after the quake to try to find and rescue their citizens’ (*New York Times*, May 2). My argument is that focusing merely on the movement of people and supplies into and out of Nepal is less interesting—from a

theoretical perspective—than the nuanced way in which certain mobilities enabled, arrested, and caused other forms of mobility.

In addition to international (im)mobilities, the earthquake also initiated a mass exodus of Nepalis from the Kathmandu Valley, ‘hitching rides on crowded buses and taxis’ (*Los Angeles Times*, April 30). Four days after the earthquake, the *Guardian* (April 29) reported that over 100,000 people had already left Kathmandu and that officials estimated another 200,000 would follow, bringing the total to over a tenth of the city’s population. Thinking again about the inter-connections and interdependencies of such mobilities, this mass exodus from the Kathmandu Valley was both facilitated and obstructed by a variety of political and logistical forces at the same time as the drive to leave Kathmandu facilitated and arrested other mobilities. First, there were the damaged roads. Second, with so many people attempting to leave the Kathmandu Valley simultaneously, a bottleneck effect overwhelmed the city’s motor vehicle infrastructure, which led to price gouging for bus tickets that further blocked people’s ability to leave the city (*Globe and Mail* [Canada], April 28; *Himalayan News Service*, April 28). At the same time, gouged prices for basic necessities in Kathmandu—along with fears of imminent aftershocks and disease outbreaks—also *propelled* people out of the city (*Christian Science Monitor*, April 28; *Daily Telegraph* [Sydney], April 29).

In addition to such obstructions, several forces mobilized to make it easier—at least in principle and plan—for people to leave the Kathmandu Valley. The Prithvi Highway Bus Operator Committee arranged 50 buses to take passengers to home districts west of Kathmandu (*Himalayan Times*, April 26). Within three days of the earthquake, Nepal’s government ‘promised to provide 500 buses to transport people free of cost out

of Kathmandu Valley to their home districts in far-flung rural areas' (*International Business Times*, April 29). While many people did manage to take advantage of this program, the number of buses actually provided was significantly less the government's initial commitment, causing anger and mild violence to erupt between crowds and police.

In addition to the physical (im)mobility of people and supplies, the aftermath also witnessed huge changes in the communications infrastructure of the country, interrupting the flow of much-needed information from rural areas into Kathmandu, the hub of relief operations and distributions. The first need that arose at the scale of individuals was the need to contact family and friends, both inside and outside of Nepal. Several technology companies—both foreign and domestic—implemented policies to make contacting loved ones easier. Google activated its 'Person Finder' tool so that people could post information and find missing loved ones, and Facebook activated a tool whereby users likely in the vicinity of the disaster could mark themselves as 'Safe' (*New York Times*, April 27).

Additionally, several telephone services attempted to relieve the cost of making phone calls in Nepal. NTC and NCell—the two large mobile phone carriers in Nepal—both 'offered free services to ease the flow of information' (*Republica* [Kathmandu], April 28). T-Mobile announced that it would not charge for texts and calls to and from Nepal (*Christian Science Monitor*, April 27). However, these efforts obviously did not solve all communications issues. Days after the earthquake, 'central-government authorities were still unable to establish contact with local officials in some places[...]' (*Wall Street Journal*, April 27). Access to communication technology quickly became a unique type of 'network capital' (Urry 2007). Indeed, the *Jerusalem Post* (April 29)

reported the story of an Israeli trekker who fortuitously brought a satellite phone from Israel before embarking on a trek in Nepal. When the earthquake struck, Shani and her group of 10 Israeli trekkers—along with many more Nepalis and foreigners—were trapped in the hard-hit area of Langtang. Not only was Shani able to contact her mother in Haifa using the satellite phone, but she and her mother became walking communication hubs, *ad hoc* bastions of network capital. The mother's phone number was circulated on Facebook and the radio, allowing others to contact their loved ones through the mother to Shani, who could then relay messages to others in the stranded group. Not only did this offer peace of mind to those involved, it also *facilitated* a helicopter evacuation back to Kathmandu. Another trekker in Shani's group was insured, and the insurance company used Shani's satellite phone to organize the evacuation.

Clearly, then, the ability to mobilize information offered more than just reassurance to scared families.^{iv} It also partially determined who got rescued and received relief supplies. In a situation of such complicated inter-linking (im)mobilities, the ability to get information into the right hands, to catch the right person's ear, and to know the proper channels through which to do so all became critically important forms of social capital that had real implications for the physical movement of both people and supplies.

The movement of information also proved critical for broader recovery efforts. British NGOs flew drones across the country in the days following April 25 to assess the damage done to rural areas across the country, and the aeromobility of these drones made it possible to literally transcend many infrastructural difficulties discussed above (*Guardian*, May 4). American scientific institutions also mobilized their vast technological resources for similar purposes (*Christian Science Monitor*, April 27). At a

more grassroots level, Kathmandu Living Labs initiated the crowd-sourced project QuakeMap.org, which allowed affected people to submit their coordinates and particular needs, thereby helping agencies better tailor their strategies (*New York Times*, May 1). Using GoogleDocs and Facebook, others created platforms to streamline the coordination and organization of *ad hoc* volunteer efforts.

Additionally, one cannot understand the huge influx of transnational financial support outside of the communications infrastructure. Many mobile carriers operationalized ‘text-to-donate’ programs, making it easy for individuals outside of Nepal to donate funds (*Christian Science Monitor*, April 27). Crowd-sourced funding websites like Indiegogo.com were used by a variety of organizations to raise money (*New York Times*, May 1). This is all *beyond* the realm of international (i.e. nation-to-nation or nation-to-NGO) money that flowed into Nepal, all of which we must consider in the context of highly developed transnational infrastructures for the movement/circulation of finance.

4. The Politics of (Im)mobilities

Having already presented a general case for the ubiquity and centrality of various (im)mobilities after the April 25 earthquake, this section will now return to these points to critically highlight some of the political dynamics connected to such intersecting and differential (im)mobilities. An exhaustive unraveling would be both impossible and redundant, so only an exemplary sample has been selected for discussion here. As with any ‘natural’ disaster, the earthquake did not simply create new inequalities. Rather, the earthquake exacerbated *existing* economic and social inequalities that have plagued Nepal

for so much of its history.^v One Nepali commentator put it thusly: ‘It is not the earthquake, but enforced poverty and systematic exclusion that has crushed these people’ (*eKantipur.com* [Kathmandu], May 11).

The first mobility-related dimension to be addressed is the government’s rescue, recovery, and relief efforts. These interventions were neither wholly positive nor wholly negative, though the fragile Nepali state did become the target of citizen ire. Many reported the lack of competence and speed on the part of the government (*New York Times*, April 29), and some survivors ‘clashed with police in some parts of the Kathmandu Valley over the slow distribution of emergency supplies’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*, May 1). Furthermore, widespread accusations of official corruption became commonplace (*Los Angeles Times*, May 4), and some residents voiced ‘suspicion that officials are hoarding the aid supplies for themselves’ (*New York Times*, April 29). While some of this can probably be explained as a necessary outlet for the anger and heartache of Nepali victims, the state did, indeed, make some questionable choices that ultimately impeded the flow and distribution of relief supplies. In a positive step, the government removed all import taxes on tents, tarpaulins, and other supplies being flown into Tribhuvan International Airport. However, they nevertheless ‘insisted all goods flown in from abroad still be checked’ (*Daily Mirror* [Northern Ireland], May 3). Such customs delays directly contributed to the huge piles of aid and equipment sitting in (immobile) piles at the airport despite being desperately needed across the country. Situations of this sort reportedly occurred at the India-Nepal border as well, further delaying the mobility of aid via international roads (*Republica* [Kathmandu], April 30).

Additionally, youth activists from various political parties reportedly constructed impromptu checkpoints and chased down relief vehicles along important roadways, ‘demanding the aid be handed over to them for distribution’ (*USA Today*, May 4). In other words, relief was always political, and the partisan political structures sought to capitalize on this by attaching their particular parties to relief projects in pursuit of expanding and reinforcing their constituent bases. These examples all point to the fact that mobilities cannot be considered apart from the particular political contexts in which they exist. These political contexts not only shaped the manner and pace relief distribution, but *also* became co-opted directly in the service of the ubiquitous partisanship of Nepal’s contemporary political climate.

Nationality—itself tied up in differential geo-political power—also played a pivotal role in determining who could move, both within Nepal and internationally. Many of the aid planes sent by foreign governments left Nepal filled with evacuees of the same national origin. 120 Britons were flown back to the UK on one such flight (*Daily Telegraph* [London], April 30), and a Canadian supply plane carried 100 Canadian nationals to India after unloading supplies at the Kathmandu airport (*Globe and Mail* [Canada], April 29). Here, the mobility of aid *into* Nepal is intimately connected to the mobility of particular foreign nationals *out of* Nepal. Needless to say, this was not an option for Nepalis, nor for many foreign nationals from less powerful nations.

Even rescues within Nepal’s mountainous trekking regions illuminates such power differentials. In one case, ‘A helicopter was sent to pick up five Americans, leaving behind at least two British citizens for whom there was not enough space’ (*New York Times*, May 2). Even worse, the article describes three foreign trekkers—two

Americans and one Canadian—for whom the embassy sent a rescue helicopter. Almost as an afterthought, and offering no further information, the reporter writes, ‘They left behind their Nepali guide and two porters.’ One particularly self-aware tourist from New Zealand was quoted in Christchurch’s *Press* (April 28) as saying, ‘We’re the lucky ones. We can fly away from it all. The locals have to try and rebuild what little they had in the first place.’^{vi} Unsurprisingly, holding a particular type of foreign passport—one that could mobilize the forces of powerful militaries and embassy personnel—had direct implications for how long one remained immobilized by the disaster.

This dynamic also affected the ability to access provisions. Because all supplies, provisions, and reinforced shelters exist in physical spaces, the ability (or inability) to move into particular exclusionary spaces could mean the difference between struggle/hunger/danger on the one hand and merely waiting out the aftermath on the other. I had been working for a reputable study abroad program when the earthquake struck. Once all of our students and their research assistants had returned to Kathmandu, a risk assessment team concluded that we should try to get into a compound run by the American embassy. Two problems immediately arose. First, none of the Nepalis participating in the study abroad program would be admitted, and to abandon half of our program was both undesirable and deeply unethical. Second, one of the students from the program’s flagship American university was not a U.S. citizen. After an hour on the phone with various officials at the US embassy, I was told that they could not promise admittance to this non-American student. The point is not to point fingers at particular embassies simply for doing what they ‘ought’ to do in such situations. Rather, the point is

to notice the way in which such exclusionary politics led directly to differential mobility into certain spaces, thereby exacerbating unequal access to safety and provisions.

The important flipside to the (relative) mobility of foreign nationals was the (relative) *immobility* of Nepalis. Obviously, Nepalis were not allowed into the embassy compounds described above. Likewise, the five-star Hyatt Regency hotel in Kathmandu reportedly turned away ‘desperate locals seeking refuge from the earthquake devastation, while giving tourists exclusive use of its sprawling gardens’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*, April 29). Beyond being excluded from such safe spaces—which is to say, being denied *mobility* into such spaces—there were larger ways in which Nepalis were rendered structurally immobilized after the earthquake. Within Nepal, forces already mentioned above, without the possibility of evacuation by foreign embassies, stranded many. Outside the country, too, Nepalis working abroad felt the sting of immobilization (*New Straits Times* [Malaysia], April 29). As the anthropologist Sienna Craig poignantly wrote for the *Santa Barbara Independent* (April 27),

The fact that almost 3 million of Nepal’s able-bodied men and women are abroad working as wage laborers in the Middle East, India, and Southeast Asia will contribute to the complexity of rebuilding, particularly in rural areas. So, too, will trauma—faraway, so close. Imagine being suspended on scaffolding in a Doha high-rise, staring down at the world below, not knowing if your family is still alive.

Many of the people most in a position to help—young, able-bodied Nepalis with experience working construction—were working overseas when the earthquake struck and were unable to return home.

The final point that deserves brief mention in this section regards the geo-politics of earthquake relief. India’s *Quartz* (April 28) reported on the ulterior motives that China and India might have in such a context, saying that reconstruction was ‘when the

geopolitical wrangling over this strategically important nation is likely to intensify.’ In some ways, such political power plays may have sped up the process of receiving aid as India and China jockeyed for influence. In at least one case, however, such geopolitical concerns directly obstructed the mobility of potential help into Nepal. According to Canada’s *Globe and Mail* (May 1), Nepal ‘reportedly declined Taiwan’s offer of a search-and-rescue team shortly after the disaster, likely for fear of angering China.’

Many of these issues—the relative immobility of Nepalis, the relative ‘mobility privilege’ (Bartling 2006) of foreigners, and the multi-scalar politics involved in both—can be clarified through a few anecdotes. At the study abroad program where I worked, the students were required to conduct an independent research project as a capstone for the semester, for which a Nepali research assistant accompanied each of them. One such duo went to Solukumbhu, the Everest region. The earthquake caused horrific avalanches in this region, and many of the paths on trekking and mountaineering routes were damaged or destroyed (*Age* [Melbourne], April 28). *India Today* (May 3) summed up the immobilized situation nicely: ‘In a town, officially known as the gateway to Mount Everest, where there are no vehicles or roads to ply them on, the four parking bays at Lukla’s tiny Tenzing Hillary airport are the only means of exit.’

It was ultimately decided that they should wait in Lukla until they could get a flight. This was initially complicated by an utter lack of flights due to the fact that airplanes had been commandeered by the government, and those that *were* leaving Lukla airport often contained dead bodies rather than live evacuees. After nearly a week of waiting, domestic commercial flights from Lukla became available. The flagship university of the study program emailed us only the *American* student’s itinerary,

apologetically reporting that the airline's online reservation system made it structurally impossible to purchase a ticket for a Nepali. Indeed, Nepalis simply could not purchase tickets on domestic airlines from Lukla. Despite this, guesthouse operators had somehow managed to procure and hoard airline tickets back to Kathmandu, power they wielded in the form of gouged prices. Ultimately, the Nepali bought a ticket through one such informal channel, paying *three times* as much as his American counterpart. This is a total inversion of typical aeromobility in Nepal, where foreign tourists pay more than Nepalis for domestic tickets. The fact that domestic airlines were not selling tickets to Nepalis, coupled with the informal ticket markets that emerged in Lukla, created a situation in which Nepalis—those generally *more* affected by the earthquake and generally *less* able to pay higher prices—had to pay exorbitantly more than foreigners for the same airline tickets.

One final story will drive home how unequal the distribution of mobilities (and therefore safety) was in the wake of April 25. This concerns the plight of Indian women residing in Nepal to act as surrogate mothers for homosexual Israeli couples. Within two days of the earthquake, newborn babies were airlifted back to Israel while these surrogate mothers, having recently given birth, were left behind in Nepal (*Jerusalem Post*, April 27). Of course, there were many surrogate mothers who had *not* yet given birth. India's *Economic Times* (May 4) reported that Israel was looking into allowing the *pregnant* surrogate mothers—no mention of those who had already given birth—to come to Israel to deliver their babies. In this way, the differential (im)mobilities intersected with a variety of geo-political structures in complex and interdependent ways.

First, Israeli law allows only heterosexual couples to have children through surrogacy, 'leading gay couples and single people to seek the service abroad' (*USA Today*, April 27). As reported on *Time Magazine's* website (April 28), such couples used to go to India for surrogate services, but a 2013 change in Indian law barred homosexual men from hiring Indian surrogate mothers. Many such surrogate services consequently moved to Nepal. Because of the Indian law, those women who had yet to give birth could not return to India after the earthquake because the children born there 'could not have certificates recognizing the commissioning parents from Israel' (*Economic Times* [India], May 4). Thusly, a variety of legal, economic, and political circumstances spawned the mobility of Israeli men and Indian women *into* Nepal for the purpose of surrogacy, and many of these same structures made the babies significantly more mobile after the earthquake, even as many surrogate mothers were immobilized in disaster-stricken Nepal.

5. Linked (Im)mobilities

_____The foregoing discussion largely isolated particular facets of the post-earthquake mobilities system. However, (im)mobilities cannot be understood in isolation. Adey's (2010) and Cresswell's (DATE) more holistic theorizations insist that we also attend to the way in which (im)mobilities are always constituted by other (im)mobilities, and always within larger geographical, political, and economic contexts. This section attempts to situate the newspaper data above within this framework, using the term "linked (im)mobilities" to signify such mutual, dialectical imbrications. The point of this section is to sketch the way in which, if one examines a particular (im)mobility issue long enough, it becomes apparent that each issue was somehow related to all of the others.

While not exhaustive, this section underscores several of the most crucial linkages. Furthermore, it offers a modest methodological contribution—namely, that creating mobilities-centric narratives of disaster events allows us to come to grips with the staggering complexity of interrelations at play in any given (im)mobilities system.

As an arbitrary starting point, let us consider the mobility of relief supplies. First, these relief supplies could not enter Nepal in the first place without the movement of people and vehicles, an example of the plural, ‘mediated’ mobilities described by Adey (2010). Physically, such shipments required the movement of aid workers and pilots as well as the mobilization of airplanes. The waiving of import taxes on the part of the Nepali state also facilitated such international importations. Conversely, Nepal’s insistence on inspecting all aid shipments clearly blocked the free flow of aid as relief supplies piled up at the airport. Finally, Nepal’s sensitive geo-political situation—wedged between the dual superpowers of China and India—also facilitated the movement of supplies from these two countries as they jockeyed for influence in the region. At the same time, such geopolitics also *obstructed* the movement of particular types of people and goods into Nepal after the earthquake, as the example of Nepal’s refusal of a Taiwanese search-and-rescue team for fear of angering China exemplifies. Furthermore, the aforementioned inadequacy of Kathmandu’s airport led to terrible bottlenecks, keeping certain relief flights from landing in the days following the earthquake. Not only did this obstruct the aid on these planes from entering Nepal, but it also obstructed foreign nationals from *leaving* Nepal on those same planes. The influx of aid and foreign relief workers into Nepal also had ambivalent and contradictory effects for the mobility and distribution of others’ aid. The *Washington Post* (April 30) reported, ‘Some

international aid workers also said that Indian military planes have occupied too much of the tiny Kathmandu airstrip, delaying others.’ The concept of linked (im)mobilities allows us to come to grips with the ostensibly paradoxical claim that the mobility of incoming aid was deeply connected to the immobility of aid as well.

Then there is the complexity of such aid once it was in Nepal being mobilized for relief efforts. As above, the most basic level of analysis reminds us that the mobility of such supplies was unthinkable and impossible without the movement of both transport vehicles (trucks, helicopters, etc.) as well as bodies (aid workers, pilots, drivers, etc.). While separate facets, they necessarily mobilize (or not) in tandem. After the disaster, thousands of people attempted to leave Kathmandu and return to rural villages in the countryside. This *intranational* mobility was itself facilitated by the aforementioned plans to provide free bus transit to many such people. However, it was also *obstructed* by damaged roads, landslides, price gouging, and failure to provide a substantial portion of the buses promised. Part of the reason these promises were not fully fulfilled was itself due to this urban-rural internal migration, which removed many of the city’s driver’s—and, therefore, transport vehicles—from commission.

In this way, the mobility of people out of the city immobilized many left behind in the bus park bottlenecks, unable to find buses/drivers. In addition to obstructing the infrastructural elements necessary for large-scale aid distribution, anger at the government’s response sparked a variety of protests both in the city and countryside:

Nepalese villagers have blocked trucks carrying supplies for earthquake victims, demanding the government do more to help after last week's disaster that has left more than 5,200 people dead and tens of thousands homeless and short of food and water. In the capital Kathmandu, about 200 people protested outside parliament, asking for more buses to go to their homes in remote parts of the

Himalayan nation and to hasten the distribution of aid that has flooded into the country but been slow to reach those in need. (*Huffington Post*, April 29)

In other words, the political anger created by the post-earthquake chaos *itself* obstructed and redirected the distribution of aid supplies. In such a context, it is no surprise that so much of the foreign aid pouring into Nepal remained in the Kathmandu Valley, exacerbating the pre-existing rural-urban inequality, itself related to political corruption, partisanship, and the infrastructural elements that simply made it easier for organizations to remain in urban areas.

Furthermore, the equitable distribution of aid was hindered by a lack of coordination among relief organizations, which were reported to have been ‘bumping into each other and into Nepali recovery teams’ (*Christian Science Monitor*, April 28). Some of this problem was mitigated by the *ad hoc* social media pages aimed at coordinating volunteers and distribution. The aforementioned QuakeMap project proved incredibly useful in avoiding the ‘double-dipping’ of aid distribution, at least initially.^{vii} After the earthquake, one’s network capital also made it easier to mobilize supplies. Knowing a foreign anthropologist, for example, gave certain villages a direct link to financial and material aid. The inverse is also true: *without* this type of distinct advantage, the ability to mobilize people, finances, and goods was significantly more difficult.

6. Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Research Possibilities

This article presented a variety of media coverage to demonstrate that (im)mobilities were central to the unfolding of the April 25 earthquake’s aftermath in Nepal. As briefly mentioned in Section 1, the analysis did not specifically attend to discourse, or the way in which these media covered the disaster. This would be fruitful in

its own right, and it presents an avenue for future research examining the politics of mediated representation in post-disaster situations. Beyond this, one must remain conscious of the fact that the narrative presented above is *based on* these inherently discursive representations. In other words, media biases and omissions will naturally be reflected in the analysis above. In the interest of brevity, this article was not able to offer greater epistemological reflexivity. Nevertheless, the broader data set offered by popular news media renders such unfortunate pitfalls acceptable.

The mobility-centric narrative presented above offers an early attempt to bring the mobilities literature to bear on the underrepresented context of Nepal. It furthermore expands our understanding of (im)mobilities in post-disaster scenarios. Most importantly, it offers an empirical case study to flesh out the theoretical strides made by eminent mobilities scholars, especially those who have examined the mutual constitution and dialectical relations between particular manifestations of (im)mobility. By first telling the story of a disaster from a mobilities perspective, one uncovers the hidden complexity and linkages that constituted the post-earthquake mobilities system.

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ⁱ This is the period of time between the earthquake of April 25 and the smaller one that hit Nepal on May 12. This window of time provides a somewhat arbitrary, but nevertheless useful, boundary to the study undertaken here.

ⁱⁱ Like anything else, however, airports are not wholly immobile on a long enough timeline, as Julie Cidell's (2013) work on Chicago's 'O'Hare Modernization Program' reminds us. As Adey (2006, 2010) argues, nothing is totally immobile, but only *relatively* so.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the interest of avoiding redundancy, I have chosen to omit the year of publication when referencing news articles. All media sources examined for this research were published in 2015.

^{iv} This is not to suggest that the movement of this information was uniformly good. Many of the same technologies (mobile phones, social media platforms, etc.) that had such positive effects were also used to spread rampant rumors which perpetuated terrible fears of larger, supposedly imminent earthquakes (*Kathmandu Post*, April 29). I recall sitting beneath a tarp in Kirtipur several nights after the earthquake when a close Nepali friend got off the phone with a family member and reported authoritatively, 'NASA says there will be a 9.0 tonight.' Without a reliable Internet connection at that time, I was left with a total skepticism of the information (which turned out to be a piecemeal misreading of several other sources), yet without the peace of mind or courage to stalwartly ignore it. This type of information mobility—enabled by the very same technologies—made the aftermath significantly more frightening and frustrating.

^v For more on the long-term history of such inequality in Nepal, the scholarship of Mahesh Regmi is unparalleled. See especially *Thatched Huts and Stucco Palaces* (1978).

^{vi} Upon a bit more reflection, however, using the term *lucky* obfuscates the major structural inequalities at play. It was not 'luck' that saved the tourists, but rather structural geo-politics and inequality through and through.

^{vii} This excellent work, however, was subject to its own sort of diminishing returns. In a public discussion at the 2015 *Annual Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya* in Kathmandu, the panelist Austin Lord mentioned that, as the days and weeks wore on, people began to submit multiple and exaggerated reports to QuakeMap, essentially 'gaming' the system to procure more relief attention.