

Aeromobilities from a Global South Perspective

A Symposium Reflection

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In a conversation during my fieldwork at the Santiago de Chile International Airport, an air traffic controller told me: “Commercial aviation is quite impressive because it’s one of the few activities where we as humans reach an agreement.” However, this global universality also obscures a series of cracks that have been appearing throughout the development of aeromobility worldwide. To discuss these cracks, the symposium “Aspirational Infrastructure Research: Mobilities, Airports, Place (AIR-MAP)” was held in Seoul on October 24–26, 2024, with support from Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA), IDE-Jetro, and the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI). The symposium was nested within the Global Mobility Humanities Conference, titled “Mobilities, Aspirations, and Affective Futures,” which was co-organized by the Academy of Mobility Humanities at Konkuk University, the National University of Singapore, and the International Institute for Asian Studies. This symposium brought together junior and senior researchers whose work focuses on airports in different cities of the Global South, covering different regions of Asia, Africa, and South America.

Personally, this symposium began at the start of last year, when different people spoke to me, encouraging me to submit an abstract and participate. The invitation sounded interesting, considering that aeromobility is not a topic that attracts much attention within the anthropological discipline, nor in the Chilean or South American context, at least from the perspective of the social sciences and humanities. This symposium represented the possibility of meeting people from different parts of the world with research interests similar to mine, which provided a unique opportunity to talk about these topics. So, I contacted Benjamin Linder, one of the organizers at the International Institute for Asian Studies, whose enthusiastic response was key in encouraging me and making me seriously consider the trip from Santiago to Seoul.

Santiago de Chile is 18,343 kilometers (11,398 miles) from Seoul, but since there are no direct flights, the trip must be made through the United States or Australia, in a journey that exceeds 30 hours (37 hours in my case, with layovers in Panama City, Houston, and San Francisco). But this geographical distance has not prevented South Korea from earning a special place among Chileans, whether because of K-Pop or K-Dramas. This made the destination immediately interesting, inviting me to explore the different possibilities the city

offers to travelers. Thus, everything came together to make this experience a great opportunity in different ways, and in retrospect, I can say that both the city and the symposium exceeded my expectations.

First, Seoul itself is an amazing experience. Having been fortunate enough to visit different cities in South America, Europe, and the United States, I would say that none of them managed to captivate me in the way this city did: the interweaving of different historical moments that can be seen, the appeal of its corners, the dizzying nature of its public spaces, the attention to detail in public spaces and in services, the delicious and diverse food, along with the mystery of immersing yourself in a completely unknown language and yet still being able to navigate it quite well. All of this made me fall in love with this city, which I hope to return to soon, even if I have to face again what it means to be twelve hours ahead of my own time zone.

Regarding the symposium, it took place over three days, beginning with a field visit to the surroundings of Incheon International Airport led by Kaya Berry. This visit allowed us to recognize how airport infrastructure reconfigures its human and more-than-human environment through the development of various related services such as transport from the city, commerce, and hospitality, in addition to the traces they leave through their own materiality. Along with this, this visit allowed us to put faces to names and share as a group, thus facilitating the discussions that would take place during the four sessions on Friday and Saturday. The first day ended with an opening cocktail party and a musical performance, which also served as a first encounter with the hospitality of the host institution, Konkuk University, where the university students had a central role that extended throughout the rest of the event.

The second day began with the inaugural lecture by Professor Katarina Damjanov, who presented “More-than Planetary Futures: Infrastructural Capital and the Makings of a Lunar Frontier.” This day featured two AIR-MAP panels, the first with research by Krittika Uniyal in Nepal, Elizabeth Ann Fretwell in Senegal, and Khidir Marsanto Prawirosusanto in Indonesia. The second panel, sponsored and organized by IDE-Jetro, featured the work of Hiroshi Ikegami in Taiwan and Kiyoyasu Tanaka in Nepal. This second day ended with a dinner at a restaurant near the university and, later, a pleasant conversation at the restaurant of the Riviera Hotel, the main hotel of the conference.

The third and final day began with Professor Bradley Rink’s lecture, entitled “Drawing a Future Breath: Hope, Ambition,

Mobility, and Their Consequences.” The third AIR-MAP panel was held afterwards, where research by Champaka Rajagopal in India, Dato Laghidze in Georgia, my own work in Chile, and Juan Miguel Leandro Lim Quizon in the Philippines was presented. Finally, the fourth panel, funded by the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI), featured research conducted by Alejandra Espinosa Andrade in Ecuador, Ahmad Baydoun in Lebanon, and Zakir Hossain Raju in Bangladesh. This day and the conference as such concluded with a banquet held in one of the university’s halls.

Regarding the conference as a whole, it had a total of twenty panels that addressed various perspectives on the phenomenon of mobility, mainly around the meeting’s *leitmotif*: aspirations and affective futures. Personally, I would like to highlight the encounter with the already known work of Peter Adey and Kaya Berry, and the opportunity to learn about the research of Tina Harris and Weiqiang Lin. For me and my fellow researchers – who are just beginning academic careers – this was a great opportunity, and I hope we can all continue to cross paths in the future.

Finally, and in line with the idea of the aspirational, I believe that the most relevant aspect of this symposium is that it served as a starting point for future discussions on aeromobility and its challenges. Such discussions must take place with a global perspective and must emphasize that, despite being global, the phenomenon takes various territorial forms, both in its deepening as well as in the consequences and resistances it generates. The first concrete product is the upcoming publication of a special issue in the journal *Mobility Humanities*, which will be worked

on during 2025 with an expected publication in early 2026. For me, this meeting also led to the presentation of a panel at the next meeting of the Society for Social Studies of Science, to be held in September 2025 in Seattle. Entitled “The Third Aerospace Revolution and its Reverberations,” our panel will be led by me and Naomi Veenhoven, whom I met at AIR-MAP, and its aim is to thematize from various disciplines the multiple challenges and consequences implied by the third aerospace revolution – that is, the role of digitization and the search for a more sustainable aerospace industry in the face of a massification of aeromobility.

Lastly, it is important to conclude by highlighting and thanking the institutions that made both the conference and the AIR-MAP symposium possible, in terms of their organization, the funding that facilitated the attendance of many of the participating researchers, and the care and dedication involved in convening and bringing to life an event of such magnitude. As mentioned above, these include Konkuk University, through its Academy of Mobilities Humanities; the International Institute for Asian Studies; Urban Knowledge Network Asia; the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes; the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences of the National University of Singapore; and the Institute of Developing Economies – Japan External Trade Organization. Without them, both the conference and the symposium would not have been possible.

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Fig. 1 (above): Group excursion to the surroundings of Incheon International Airport, led by Kaya Berry. (Photo courtesy of Benjamin Linder, 2024)

Fig. 2 (left): Alejandra Espinosa Andrade presents her work on Mariscal Sucre International Airport (Quito, Ecuador) at the AIR-MAP symposium. (Photo courtesy of Benjamin Linder, 2024)