Submitted Paper

Critical climate geographies

Progress in Human Geography
2025, Vol. 0(0) 1–18

DOI: 10.1177/03091325251365280
journals.sagepub.com/home/phg


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Abstract

Climate change has long been a concern for geographers. Yet in recent years, the relationship between the discipline of human geography and the topic of climate change has evolved. Reflecting this, an especially vibrant area of scholarship is the consolidating field of 'critical climate geographies': a field that not only examines the spatial and temporal dimensions of climate change, but also the social, political, economic, and cultural structures that underpin its impacts and governance. This paper considers the present and future role of critical climate change research in geography, both within the discipline and within climate scholarship more broadly.

Keywords

climate change, climate geography, decolonising climate change, coproduction, climate epistemology

Climate change has become a major topic for human geographers for decades. Yet in recent years, the terms of engagement have begun to evolve. The relationship between the discipline of human geography and the topic of climate change is rapidly broadening and deepening, creating new fields with their roots outside of climate science. In this regard, an especially vibrant area of scholarship is the consolidating field of 'critical climate geographies': an area of work that not only examines the spatial and temporal dimensions of climate change, but also interrogates the social, political, economic, and cultural structures that underpin climate change and its governance (Bulkeley, 2019; Castree, 2015a; Mahony and Hulme, 2018). Drawing from critical theory, political economy, post-structuralism, and decolonial perspectives, critical climate geographies challenge dominant paradigms, expose power relations, and seek to address inequalities and injustices associated with climate change (Nightingale, 2017; Sultana, 2022; Swyngedouw, 2010; Yusoff, 2018).

Critical climate scholars emphasise the coproduction of climate knowledge, recognising the interplay between environmental processes and societal dynamics (Lave et al., 2014; Lemos and Morehouse, 2005; Pelling et al., 2008; Whatmore, 2009). As such, critical climate geographies focus on the entanglements of social science perspectives embedded within climate geographies. This contrasts with traditional or "uncritical" climate geography, which may focus primarily on physical aspects of climate systems or spatial patterns without engaging deeply with these underlying socio-political issues and their meanings (Aspinall, 2010; Bulkeley, 2019). In order to make sense of how evolving climate change research intersects with the work of human geographers, this paper considers the present and future role of critical climate change research in geography, both within the discipline and within climate scholarship more broadly. After this introductory overview, the paper proceeds in three sections: first, it will delineate the landscape of current work in critical climate geography, before secondly exploring where critical climate geography is developing most promisingly. Finally, the paper will conclude by asking where next for critical climate geography?

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I Critical climate geographies: An absent presence

Our interjection into the 'critical climate geographies' narrative begins at the 2018 Royal Geographical Society (RGS) conference in Cardiff, where the organisers convened a meeting to discuss the revitalisation of the RGS-IBG Climate Change Research Group (CCRG). This effort was made to restore a scholarly collective that was on the verge of being disbanded, broken up, and absorbed into

related groups, barely 10 years after its founding. At the time, the call came as a surprise to many of those who attended. The apparent demise of a dedicated climate research group within a disciplinary space whose history has often centred on the mapping of climates stood in stark contrast to the wider context of climate events and politics that year. In 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its influential special report on 1.5°C warming. Extinction Rebellion (XR) began its first wave of protests, occupying five bridges in London on November 17th, 2018. Greta Thunberg's speech at Davos a few months later would catapult her to global fame and galvanise the *Fridays For Future* movement into a worldwide force. Despite geographers living, writing, and thinking amongst these unfolding events, contributing to the IPCC's reporting, providing critical viewpoints on socio-political causes and implications of events, and engaging in the civil society that shaped that year and those before it, there did not seem to be a cohesive sense of doing 'climate geography' together, nor indeed of being *climate geographers* at all.

Yet the CCRG's near demise points to a wider issue. The sense that the wider social sciences, including geography, have had a one-way, 'science-first' relationship with studying climate change was articulated by John Urry, a sociologist who as recently as 2010 argued - perhaps controversially - that 'the social sciences have been nowhere, barely even Johnny-come-latelies' (Szerszynski and Urry, 2010: 3) in climate change research. Indeed, as Bulkeley (2019) later argued, there has long been an uncomfortable engagement between human geography and climate change, where the epistemological divide between human and physical geography has at times entrenched assumptions of a socio-natural divide. As a result of this discomfort, there is "a curiously ambiguous position within our discipline of both an explicit presence and an underlying absence" for climate change (ibid: 3).

Despite concerns in 2018, the CCRG was ultimately not disbanded. On the contrary, climate change has become a topic of such importance that *Climate Changed Geographies* was named as the chair's theme of the 2023 RGS conference. Nevertheless, the awkward ambiguity of climate within the discipline remains cloyingly persistent. More recently still, the contradictory presence-yet-absence in the discipline of geography was demonstrated in an emerging debate in Ireland about the introduction of a school qualification on 'Climate Action and Sustainable Development', highlighting a desire for a new discipline to address social and political responses to climate change specifically. As Möller (2024) writes, geographers have taught these issues for years, yet the need for a debate highlights a disconnect between what geographers do and what the discipline of climate geography is perceived as doing, perhaps linked to the lack of a cohesive scholarly articulation of what *climate geographies are or might be,* and what *climate geographers do*.

There is a need, in other words, to turn the lens back on climate geography and it is here that 'critical climate geographies' have a crucial role to play. Nevertheless, what makes this such a challenge is the vast scale and sprawling diffusion of Geographic engagement with the climate. Geography is already a discipline that spans from natural scientific perspectives such as glaciology and climatology to post-structural social scientific perspectives that explore the discursive and emotional geographies of climate change. Yet this expanding landscape of climate geography remains unmapped, even in outline. Climate change is everywhere within geographical scholarship. Yet, it is not *equally* everywhere. Which themes, fields, sub-fields and innovations have proliferated the fastest within the discipline? Which appear most promising as catalysts for future work? And what remains to be done despite these efforts? With these questions in mind, this paper aims to sketch the most active and promising contours of critical climate Geography, past, present, and future.

It does so by drawing on the expertise of a group of scholars convened towards this purpose by the RGS' reinvigorated Climate Change Research Group [CCRG] in November 2022. In an event entitled *Mapping the Landscape of Climate Geography*, which brought together leading UK geographers from a diverse range of fields to sketch the contours of the discipline's engagement with the climate, 23 UK and international scholars discussed their views on the primary engagement sites by climate geography and, subsequently, the fields within those

sites. Whilst the workshop primarily consisted of UK geographers, we are aware that much of the critical climate geographical scholarship is produced elsewhere globally, and that many of the geographers present in the workshop actively researched geographies outside of the Anglo-perspective. In this sense, our positionality is that we are not UK geographers (and this paper is not about the shape of UK geography in relation to climate scholarship), but rather that we are global geographers working in UK institutions, who identify with being a 'climate geographer' in the broad sense of the term. Our discussions thus enabled examination of the perceived contributions made by human geographers to the field of critical climate geographies, the distillation of key avenues in which human geographers are currently advancing the field, and future possibilities. This has framed the structure of our review through the sections 'Where we are now', 'Where we are going', and 'Where next' - the landscapes within each are presented in the following three sections.

This paper draws together the diverse human geography perspectives from the workshop to outline pathways for critical geographical engagement with the climate, building upon and extending previous insights of the field of critical climate geographies to identify the distinctive perspectives that critical geographical scholarship brings. While no such task can hope or aim to be a fully comprehensive and systematic 'mapping' of climate geographies, we intend to add new insights of what it means to be a critical climate geographer based on previous and extant scholarly geographical interactions with climate change. Aiming to highlight the conceptual and practical commonalities that critical climate geographers share in their approaches, we outline the emerging landscape of critical climate geographies to foster a shared understanding of the field. Throughout this paper, we use 'discipline' to refer to Geography as an institutionalised academic domain; 'subdiscipline' to describe more established thematic areas within it, such as political or urban geography; and 'field' to describe more fluid or emergent areas of scholarship, such as climate geographies. 'Critical climate geographies' is thus treated as an interdisciplinary field: variegated, plural, not yet fully formalised within disciplinary boundaries, but nonetheless a site of growing cohesion, self-awareness, and importance to the future of the discipline.

II Where are we now?

Recent work on the epistemology of climate change has helped to situate critical climate geographies within the wider landscape of climate geography. For example, Aspinall (2010) identified two spheres of geography's contribution to climate knowledge, highlighting, on the one hand, engagement with the physical aspects of understanding the climate: notably the domains of climatology, historical climate change, numerical modelling, and geomorphology. On the other hand, he foregrounded geographic contributions to the spatial mapping of climate impacts, including biogeographic responses, vulnerability, and inequality, but also - in a reflexive sense - human geographers' critical contributions to science-policy debates and the social and political construction of climate change (ibid).

However, while Aspinall (2010) identified the physical and spatial mapping aspects of climate geography, our definition of critical geography extends further to interrogate the socio-political structures underlying these phenomena. Critical climate geographies challenge dominant paradigms and expose power relations, seeking to address inequalities and injustices associated with climate change (Swyngedouw, 2010). Geographers such as Brace and Geoghegan (2010), Edensor et al. (2019), and Garrard (2020), have critically engaged with the temporal politics of climate change, highlighting not only how the public perceives environmental time, how climate timeframes are communicated and intersect with these lived experiences, and who benefits from these framings. The resulting politics of climate time is shown to underpin competing discourses and political projects, emerging as a key critical lens on these frameworks.

Work of this sort has invigorated a critical nexus at the science-policy interface, in which communication and framing is shown to be an actor in the landscape of climate vulnerability. Bulkeley et al. (2019), for example, has shown how climate impacts might reshape forms of vulnerability and the possibilities for resilience and adaptation, even as the

science-policy interface - including research on the factors that influence individual attitudes and behaviours, and the politics of governance systems - continue to focus on individual responsibility. Countering this convention, she has emphasised the contribution of geopolitics and securitisation to carbon markets, climate-induced migration, cities and climate change, alternative economies, climate and development, climate finance, corporate social responsibility, and carbon sequestration. In other words, she has shown how the framing of these problems shapes their manifestation.

Bulkeley thus reframes the question *Where does human geography fit into the study of climate change?* in its entirety. Arguing that the role of geography is not in responding to the social lacunae left by the gaps in physical data, nor even in deciding what societal responses to these findings should be, but rather ontological, she situates the role of the discipline in asking how climate change is "made, remade, held together, contested, is always in a state of unbecoming" (2019:11). For climate geographers, this represents a fundamental shift in mindset: from being 'climate geographers' in a descriptive sense, to being 'critical climate geographers' with the power to initiate societal change. As such, whilst for Aspinall, the diverse scope of geography as a discipline is important in advancing its contribution, for Bulkeley, this integrative middle ground between human and physical geography underpins climate change's ambivalent, dialectical, and contradictory presence-yet-absence in geography. Rather than viewing climate change as an objective problem to which a societal response is required, climate change emerges through an antagonistic framing as a condition actively shaping new forms of politics.

This is a crucial standpoint, yet it presents a definitional challenge. In the early decades of the 2000s, for example, many human geographers were concerned, alongside political scientists, with climate governance and its diverse scales and multilevel aspects. This included urban/local scales and Bulkeley's focus on cities and urban governance of climate change (Bulkeley and Betsill, 2003; Bulkeley et al., 2009; Granberg and Elander, 2007) and urban experimentation (Bulkeley and Cástan Broto, 2013; Bulkeley et al., 2019). Yet it has also extended to the transnational (Andonova et al., 2009), highlighting both multi-level (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2006; Gustavsson et al., 2009) and polycentric (Jordan et al., 2015) governance interactions, as well as profiling the re-emergence of national territoriality and sovereignty governance (Kythreotis, 2012) and, more recently, missing interconnections of multi-scalar climate governance (Kythreotis et al., 2023). Notably, it also attended to how discourses of climate change are embroiled with those of securitisation globally, and within the United Kingdom's security policy specifically (Gemenne et al., 2014; Methmann and Oels, 2015; Peters, 2018), green authoritarianism and a post-politics of scale (Kythreotis, 2023), and attended to blind spots over the interaction and amplification of climate risks across scales (Challinor et al., 2017).

More recently, human geographers have been especially prominent in developing historical accounts of the development of discursive and material economies – such as developing social histories of climate politics (Jäger and O'Riordan, 2019), contextualising the emergence of key policy hooks such as the 2-degree target (Randalls, 2010) or how economic theories of cost-benefit analysis have shaped ideas of optimal climate change (Randalls, 2011) and the uncomfortable epistemic politics of climate and colonialism (Mahony and Endfield, 2018; Mahony and Hulme, 2018). In doing so, human geographers have demonstrated that climate is not only a physical phenomenon but also a social one (Offen, 2014), shaping specific cultural and material economies (c.f. Caprotti, 2012). And these economies in turn, including carbon economies, have been the subject of critique by geographers who seek to understand and address their impact on society (Blakey, 2021; Bridge et al., 2020; Jordhus-Lier et al., 2022; Lovell and Ghaleigh, 2013).

This spirit of reflexive self-awareness has seen geographers play an enthusiastic role in attending to the knowledge politics of climate change. Indeed, for many, this has been their critical meat and drink. Following early work in geography that emphasised the social dimensions of climate science (Demeritt, 2001) and in political science, where Foucauldian approaches were employed to highlight how viewing the earth from space via remote sensing has produced

new ways of understanding environmental governance that privilege the planetary scale and calculative practices (Lövbrand et al., 2009; Lövbrand and Stripple, 2011) human geographers have been active alongside Science, Technology and Society [STS] scholars in highlighting the politics of making climate policy knowledge. Notably, work in this area has critiqued the making of global knowledge (Hulme and Mahony, 2010; Mahony and Hulme, 2016), contested objectivity of knowledge (Grindsted, 2014; Mahony, 2015) and emphasised the importance of moving beyond modelling as a singular source of information (Demeritt and Wainwright, 2005; Hulme, 2011).

This critical position emerges in part from the experience of participation. Human geographers have been at the forefront of research on climate change impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability (for example, see work by Barnett, 2003; Adger, 2006; Liverman, 2013; O'Brien, 2012). In addition to their contributions to climate change assessments, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, human geographers have developed a political attention to knowledge-shaping processes through ethnographic work with advisory bodies (Dudley et al., 2022; Owens 2000, 2010; Owens et al., 2006; Turnpenny et al., 2013) and the study of specific knowledge processes, such as knowledge translation (Machen, 2018). They have highlighted the contributions to climate science and policy of lay knowledge (Brace and Geoghegan, 2010), indigenous knowledge (Chanza and De Wit, 2016) and contested the epistemological makeup of scholarly communities that have gathered around climate change or the Anthropocene (Castree ,2015b; Hulme and Mahony, 2010) arguing that geography as a discipline is particularly well suited to addressing the conceptual challenges that the Anthropocene presents (Johnson et al., 2014).

Within this, a key theme has been the nexus of climate and conflict: a recurrent concern of human geographers (Adger et al., 2013; Mach et al., 2020) that has been extended through critical engagements with climate migration (Adger and De Campos, 2020; Parsons, 2019), and the imbrications of climate migration and race and racism (Baldwin, 2016, 2022) as well as differential geographies of health (Curtis and Oven, 2012). This is, however, a vibrantly contested area of work. Indeed, this is part of the point. As Watson et al. (2023) argue, for example, to better understand the implications of climate change on global society and security from a geographical perspective, it is essential to develop a more holistic understanding of the interplay among climate, conflict, and migration. So, to this end, climate geographers have engaged productively with the ways in which the historical and present political economy shapes the landscape of climate change and its policy responses. Work by Sultana (2023, 2022) and Yusoff (2018) among others, highlights how the legacy of colonialism – and its undergirding racial logic – underpins the epistemology of climate science. By asking "whose growth in whose planetary boundaries?" (Sultana, 2023: 1), for example, this burgeoning body of work returns the weight of politics to 'the uneven anthropogenic use and abuse of the planet's biosphere and common pool resources'. The result is a reflexive lens on the questions we ask, who gets to speak, and the imbricated consequences for society, environment and the humans embedded within them.

Indeed, this nexus of the climatic, the epistemic, and the political has increasingly underpinned attention to the emerging digital landscape of climate geographies. For example, Nost (2015) has highlighted that governing ecosystems via software creates social relations that legitimise the neoliberalization and financialization of nature. At the same time, several scholars have explored the role of social media platforms in the circulation and understanding of climate knowledge (Pearce et al., 2019; Tuitjer and Dirksmeier, 2021). Machen and Nost (2021) then further explore the epistemic commitments that thinking about climate through algorithmic devices entails and how these epistemic commitments intersect with operations of hegemonic power. In a different vein, recent geographic scholarship has also attempted to counter and subvert these top-down hegemonic narratives, for example, by proposing speculative-feminist propositions for planetary images in an era of the climate crisis, in which 'earth images may transcend their dominant roles as scientific tools and cultural allegories and become tactical devices for imagining and acting otherwise' (Engelmann et al., 2022: 237).

Complementing their engagement with the technical dimensions of climate sensing, critical climate geographers have engaged enthusiastically with the embodied and the human. Notably, research in this area has explored the personal and emotional impacts of climate grief (Head, 2016; Moser, 2021) and the gradual damage caused by the slow violence of environmental degradation (O'Lear, 2016). Additionally, they have investigated the role of emotions in politics, such as how enjoyment can influence political action (Pohl and Swyngedouw, 2023) and how emotions can drive transformative change (Ryan, 2016). Geographical studies now emphasise the importance of starting with a ground-level understanding of climate, including its emotional and affective dimensions, to comprehend mobility and change (Parsons, 2019). Seeking always to interpret the transformative potential of these frames, much attention has focused also on how these emotional, embodied, and discursive frames contribute to political subjectivities (Bond et al., 2020; Dowling, 2009) and public participation in decision-making (Chilvers et al., 2022; Pallett et al., 2019).

A plethora of perspectives have emerged to underscore this importance in recent years, highlighting how climate viewpoints are shaped by socioeconomic status (Weckroth and Ala-Mantila, 2022), place (Brown et al., 2019; Howarth and Parsons, 2021), power and politics (Nightingale, 2017), governance (Adger et al., 2009), psychology (Clayton et al., 2015); vulnerability (O'Brien and Wolf, 2010) and geographical scale (Kythreotis et al., 2021). Indeed, this impetus towards change is one of the most consistent dimensions of the field. Despite their consistent foregrounding of intractability, the contested geographies of climate change have tended to retain a common interest in the generative politics of policy (Head and Gibson, 2012). This means not only how policy might be improved but also possibilities for more fundamental transformation (Chatterton, 2016; O'Brien, 2010) and a more radical sense still of how climate imaginaries and technologies shape futures to be acted upon (Anderson, 2010; Braun, 2015; Machen et al., 2023; Mahony and Randalls, 2020). And as ever, reflexivity has been key, with scholarship on climate justice (Henrique and Tschakert, 2020) complemented by concerns for equity both in climate policy (Klinsky et al., 2017; Liverman, 2009) and in institutional spaces of decision-making (Gay-Antaki and Liverman, 2018).

Whilst typological generalisation of what is already a vast and rapidly growing field of work is challenging, two broad, cross-cutting themes may be identified that both connect the varied approaches and underpin geography's general disciplinary contribution to the study of climate change. Specifically, the focus on *climate epistemologies* and *climate values*, which underpin the fundamental lenses through which geographers have faced the climate crisis. Here, *Climate epistemologies* reference the persistent goal of deconstructing the work that produces the climate as an object of global governance, examining the implications of different epistemic commitments and forms of climate governance, and exploring possibilities for contesting/resisting/reappropriating new ways of seeing via technology (Bakker and Ritts, 2018; Goldstein and Nost, 2022) . As Jasanoff (2017) argues, these different ways of seeing and understanding climate matter because they generate standpoints with both an epistemic and a political difference, from which to address "the often-messy processes of linking scientific knowledge to decision-making within different policies" (Mahony and Hulme, 2018: 395).

Just as epistemic framings shape not only what we know about the climate but also what we see of it, such framings also produce and are produced by our *climate values*, necessitating practical attention to the politics underpinning climate knowledge, its frames, its assumptions and its effects (Kythreotis et al., 2019). Returning attention and scrutiny to these values has had a mixed response in contemporary climate geographies. On the one hand, recent geographical climate change literature has witnessed a growing attention to values, considered significant factors in public engagement with climate science (Corner et al., 2014), climate scepticism (McCright and Dunlap, 2011; Poortinga et al., 2011), disagreement (Hulme, 2009) pro-environmental behaviour (Lorenzoni et al., 2007), risk perception (Leiserowitz, 2006) and in the assessment of climate impacts (Wolf et al., 2013), as well as future policy acceptance (Demski et al., 2015; Nilsson et al., 2004).

Yet at the same time, the concept of values itself has been problematised for its implicit essentialism (Hajer, 1995), fragmented theoretical legacy (Corner et al., 2014), malleability (Hulme, 2009) and the problematic relationship between values and behaviour that creates a 'value-action gap' in which pro-environmental behaviours are seen as only loosely correlated with pro-environmental action (Pepper et al., 2009; Poortinga et al., 2004). As a result, perhaps ironically, many of the most prominent engagements with values and climate change have taken place outside of geography (c.f. Moellendorf, 2014; Morrow, 2020). Nevertheless, the notion of climate values now offers an increasingly definitional point in critical climate geographies, drawing together what seemed two decades previously as irreconcilable strands of climate governance: environmental data generation/knowledge epistemologies and the cultural politics of the environment.

III Where are we going?

As interventions such as these demonstrate, critical climate geographers have found, after several decades of concerted contribution to climate discourse and policy, a common and distinctive voice. What began as a bearish engagement with a topic viewed as important but inescapably connected to natural science has permeated every corner of the discipline, to produce something both fundamentally Geographic, and also novel in its relationship to the environment. Having previously sought to protect the 'fragile consensus' around global climate action (Broadbent et al., 2016), recent years have seen critical scholars develop the confidence to challenge and re-politicise climate change by approaching it on novel terms. Only now are the diverse hybrids of climate scholarship that have emerged from this engagement beginning to reconnect and coalesce, laying the ground for a novel geographical body of scholarship on the changing climate.

Critical climate geographers today share a largely consensual viewpoint on climate as a "multiple and dynamic condition" shaped by political, socio-economic, and cultural forces: a perspective conditioned by the discipline. After all, Geography is, at its core, an (inter)disciplinary subject (Baerwald, 2010). The cleft nature of the geographic discipline necessitates an awareness of the possibilities of 'an interdisciplinary discipline' almost by default (Baerwald, 2010; Goudie, 2016). And this interdisciplinary viewpoint has presented a unique set of epistemological and ontological challenges (Sui and DeLyser, 2011), to which critical climate geographers have dedicated substantial efforts in recent years. In particular, we identify four areas where critical climate geographers engage with vigour. Linked in their pursuit of cross- and interdisciplinary reflexivity, each field reflects a deep engagement with the history of the discipline of Geography, and a clear sense of where this inheritance can lead climate scholarship. Rather than simply problems to be solved, these areas of contested engagement constitute, we argue, a self-aware consolidation of the field, not just as geographers engaging with climate questions, but also of harnessing a shared sense of historical reflexivity to bear on critical present-day questions.

1 Linking the social and natural scientific dimensions of climate geographies

As the influence of the social sciences has grown in climate scholarship, concerns over the best ways to bridge competing epistemologies have become increasingly important. Well-documented epistemological disjunctures have become practical problems to resolve, particularly concerning the impact of climate change on humans, where a troubling gap persists between statistical climate models and their impact on people and livelihoods. Indeed, this is a position that geographers have taken up with increasing self-awareness in the wake of Castree's (2015a) call to situate geography in opposition to the 'ontological monism' characteristic of many forms of inquiry in global change science, which he argues have a limited understanding of complex interactions between humans and the environment. Towards this end, authors such as Popke (2016) and Colven and Thomson (2019) have posited Geography as an inter-epistemological dialogue capable of coping with the hybrid nature of climate change, as multiple knowledges and understandings need to be

considered. And within this broader disciplinary imperative, critical climate geographers provide a key nexus, opening up the potential benefits of a collaborative approach to climate modelling, actively advocating for a leading role in interdisciplinary climate change research (c.f. Lane et al., 2011), exploring the political promise of considering the posthuman (Whatmore, 2009; Wilson, 2025), as well as generating robust analysis of embedded relations between physical geographic knowledge, gender, and power (Carey et al., 2016).

Practical examples of such approaches have emerged in the interim, with Rickles et al. (2017), for instance, highlighting the capacity of GIS mapping to bridge existing silos, ranging from content knowledge, technological knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge, to incorporate the versatility of GIS and its potential for interdisciplinary research. Yet far wider potential exists to bring scholars together across a "cultural" divide that has proved challenging to transgress, often privileging physical sciences and scholarship at the expense of social scientific work. As a discipline that 'uniquely straddles physical/environmental and human/social scholarships', 'Geography should be centre stage for understanding today's climate emergency' argue Taylor and O'Keefe ,(2021: 394). And on this stage, critical climate geographers play a vital connecting role.

2 Reconciling knowledge from above and below

In addition to the ability of a geographical lens to bridge and transcend horizontal epistemological silos, climate geographers are equally adept at confronting the vertical challenges arising from top-down and bottom-up approaches. Specifically, the now central but intractable problem of how to meaningfully reconcile climate change as a statistical process with its impacts on a human scale remains a pressing question for contemporary scholarship. For critical climate geographers, it is a question to which a deep engagement with lay knowledge, as a site of valuable data, participation, and engagement in scholarship, has increasingly provided answers.

Engagements in this area have been fruitful. Brace and Geoghegan (2010), for example, convincingly made the case that a more nuanced understanding of the issue can be gained by considering different landscapes and temporalities of climate change, whilst Devine-Wright (2013, 2009) highlights the importance of place attachment, at various scales, for understanding human responses to climate change. Burnham et al. (2016: 18) similarly highlight how the 'dissonance' between data sets produced using different approaches and methods 'arises because each method produces knowledge that is partial and situated'. From an adaptation standpoint, Conway et al. (2019) make a similar case, arguing that integrating the results of bottom-up and top-down approaches is a crucial step towards developing relevant information to inform immediate adaptation decisions.

Taking this perspective a step further, critical climate geographers have sought to understand not only top-down and bottom-up accounts of the climate but also the insights of multiple intersecting scales (Bruno Soares et al., 2012; Kythreotis et al., 2023; Lehman and Kinchy, 2021). For example, Wurzel et al. (2019) critically analyse how multilevel and polycentric climate governance structures enable and/or constrain climate pioneers, leaders, and followers, highlighting how structural position shapes both actions and knowledge. Yet, as Swyngedouw (2010) has cautioned, a focus on consensus within climate governance works towards a post-political condition, which itself is antithetical to and exerts violence against the political dissensus that constitutes the 'bottom-up' condition of the political (Swyngedouw, 2010).

Examining this issue from a policy perspective, Howarth et al. (2022a) similarly argue that the 'dynamism of local scales are a powerful resource': a position taken up with particular enthusiasm by urban geographers (e.g., Connolly and Kythreotis, 2025; Wolfram et al., 2019), whose efforts to rethink and reorient urban life in response to climatic change have necessarily involved 'actors at multiple levels and scales' (Wolfram et al., 2019) and new configurations of infrastructural, data and ecological flows (Luque Ayala and Rutherford, 2023). Foregrounding accounts from different locations and epistemological traditions, these accounts have begun to coalesce into a critical research agenda to 'drive systematic analysis of innovative urban governance,

its heterogeneous formation, politics and possibilities' (McGuirk et al., 2022: 1). Geographers are thus increasingly placing their faith in the local as a solution to the inertia and unwieldiness of the global scale.

3 Decolonising climate knowledge

Valuing and accounting for knowledge circulating at very different scales is a challenge central to critical climate geography. Recent years have seen the proliferation of critical lenses seeking to foreground the value and power of local, indigenous, and non-Western knowledge. This point is compellingly made by Mahony and Hulme (2018) in their intervention on the epistemic geographies of climate change. As they argue, by considering different epistemologies, the role of space, and the political context, a more comprehensive understanding of climate change can be obtained, informing more effective approaches to addressing the issue.

Yet, as recent work has argued, there is more to this than merely a question of accuracy, but also of fully engaging with analytical positionality. Building upon the huge impact of Sarah Radcliffe's call to decolonise the discipline (2017, 2022), critical climate geographers have been increasingly concerned to decolonise their systems of environmental thinking: a burgeoning area of scholarship within Geography. Led by key scholars such as Whyte (2017), Yusoff (2018) and Sultana (2023, 2022), (see also Gay-Antaki, 2022; Simpson and Pizarra Choy, 2024), this area of climate geographical thinking is not only growing but consolidating as a rejoinder to the dominance of natural scientific thinking on the environment.

Emerging as a proliferating field in its own right, decolonial climate geography has also become a counterpoint to the concept of the Anthropocene, a hugely influential environmental lens with a strong rooting in the discipline (e.g., Castree, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c; Lewis and Maslin, 2015; Sandover, 2020). Indeed, a growing group of authors argues that the Anthropocene is a concept redolent with racialised assumptions and strongly rooted in colonial logic (Yusoff, 2018). Arguing against the 'depoliticized instrumental co-production of knowledge" that underlies dominant understandings of climate change (Goldman et al., 2018, 1), scholars such as Sultana (2022) in particular, have drawn focus away from top-down modelling towards highlighting the inequitable impacts of climate change through an understanding of climate coloniality and the lived experiences of people and communities on the ground. Contending, from this standpoint, that many approaches to doing climate research reinforce the political economy of colonial knowledge (Goldman et al., 2018), these approaches have aimed at contested values such as neoliberal paradigms, mainstream climate discourses and practices that conform with current Global North epistemological framings (Parsons, 2023).

4 Co-production and creativity

In seeking to re-politicise the frames, methods, and approaches that underpin geographical scholarship on climate change, critical climate geographers have also sought, with equal enthusiasm, to develop new ways of speaking and writing with those at the geographic margins (Sultana, 2015). This body of work has emphasised the value of co-production in shaping climate policy, with numerous authors (e.g., Bremer and Meisch, 2017; Howarth, 2018; Howarth et al., 2022b; Jack et al., 2020; Jagannathan et al., 2020; Sartorius et al., 2024) outlining the potentialities and pitfalls of the approach for climate geography. These and other authors have explored how to best unite the contrasting epistemological traditions and norms associated with different stakeholders regarding co-production, describing and exploring how various types of uncertainty can be represented, how narratives can be co-produced, and the value they bring to the integration and interrogation of relevant knowledge.

In this regard, critical climate geographers are far from alone in their interest in co-production, a perspective that has been explored across the social sciences. They do, however, add something particular to their interpretation. Among geographers, co-production is more than merely a research tool, being instead 'reconceptualized as a prism, where each aspect allows different but complementary insights on the relationship between science, society, and nature' (Bremer and Meisch, 2017). Yet it is no less

practical for this. On the contrary, understanding and reconciling the transformative potential of science-practice collaborations is viewed as a means to 'unite scientific and practice-based knowledges' (Howarth et al., 2022b) to 'catalyze a more integrated and actionable scholarship and practice' (Jagannathan et al., 2020).

Doing so means finding new ways to approach the impacts of climate change on the terms in which they are perceived, a task to which critical climate geographers have devoted much energy. For example, Yusoff and Gabrys (2011) have explored the role of imagination in shaping understandings of climate change, arguing that creative research practices such as storytelling and art can harness imagination to generate new knowledge and understanding of climate change. Along similar lines, Ryan (2016: 5) has argued that traditional climate change research methods have tended to neglect the emotional and subjective experiences of individuals and communities affected by climate change, necessitating 'emotive-physical storytelling' to generate greater engagement and impact. Taking this position further, Bentz et al. (2021: 687) make the case for fusing arts and science 'to create forms of knowledge that include embodiment as a way of knowing'. By actively pursuing new ways of conceptualising the climate through alternative lenses, geographers are solving the problems they raise, showing and telling the climate through the eyes of those who live it.

IV Where next?

In highlighting the contributions that critical geographers have made to climate change, Bulkeley (2019) suggests that questioning the a priori divisions between the social and the natural is particularly important. This ontological positioning enables critical geographers to move beyond interventions that position social science as responses to an objective (bio-physically defined) problem and instead see climate as a condition in which the problem framing matters as much as the response. Her core message is that rather than being carved off as an environmental concern or a bridging device between the findings of science and the implications for society, recognising "climate-as-condition creates new progressive possibilities for politics and action" (2019:16). Critical climate geographers must thus ensure that the values and epistemologies of the field remain as inclusive as possible to enable these progressive possibilities for politics and action to emerge.

For geographers, the emergence of climate change as a social scientific agenda is rooted, as ever, in Geography's particular histories and architectures. This has always been a discipline with a split personality; its physical and human dimensions exist in a sometimes uneasy yet durable relationship. In fact, one of the strengths of Geography as a discipline is that it draws its analytical innovativeness from many other cognate social science disciplines. Our world, Geographers recognise, can only be interpreted fully when informed by epistemological self-awareness. And it is this awareness of climate change as a confluence of inter-epistemological dialogue, that is, if not unique to Geography, then at least particularly well suited to it. Inheriting an uneasy legacy brings purpose: both a vital and critically important asset. Since geographers have always engaged with the interplay between environmental and social dimensions, they are especially well placed to assess how the prevailing power and politics of the day shape the frames employed to interpret them.

Crucially, this reflexive, historically situated perspective offers not only an awareness of the deep imbrication of power within the scholarship and policy of environmental management but also the means and obligation to unpack how 'knowledge has been shaped by Anglo-Western experiences and epistemologies' (Collins, 2022: 1243). Critical climate geographers, in other words, bear a legacy that presents a critical path forward: the opportunity to trace the complex landscape of power that underpins environmental analysis, asking who stands to benefit from each frame and who to lose. By situating climate policy within this broader landscape of power, this novel realm of geographical thinking can push back against the technocratic tendencies of adaptation, sustainable development, and green growth, highlighting the conflicts, contestations and consolidations that drive them. In embracing critical climate geographies, the field is uniquely positioned to challenge dominant paradigms and address the

complex socio-political dimensions of climate change. Critical climate geographies, viewed in this way, may become less an "underlying absence" (Bulkeley, 2019: 3) than a convergent centrepoint and critical mirror to climate scholarship more broadly: a field of meeting and reflection on the spatialities of climates, and the hybrid climate-societies.

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Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Royal Geographical Society, Research group funding 2023 round.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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