

## Comparative mobilities in an unequal world: researching intersections of gender and generation

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### ABSTRACT

Mobilities are shaped by social inequalities and spatial unevenness as demonstrated in a range of existing studies across disciplines. These inequalities are manifest at different scales, from the very local spaces of everyday life to global spaces of accelerated mobilities. Mobile spaces, however distant, are connected through common everyday practices and the sociocultural contexts in which they are produced. In this paper, we argue that researching these interconnectivities and commonalities requires a particular methodological approach that accounts for the situatedness of experience. Our focus is on the ways in which inequalities according to gender and generation are generated through urban designed spaces. We suggest that drawing in to a shared material and 'border' object, the urban bench, provides a point of reflection on these distant yet parallel expressions of mobile inequality.

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### Introduction

It is a brisk mid-winter afternoon in Santiago, Chile. At the Centro Cultural Gabriela Mistral (GAM), a cultural space just off a main street in the city centre, an older woman has been sitting, knitting, on one of the space's wooden benches for hours, despite the cold. She says that she is ok as she has a thermos of tea. She is waiting for her teenage grandchildren who come to this public space to dance every Saturday. They depend on her being there as they would not be able to come downtown and dance in the space unaccompanied. The space is open on two sides with a roof, so it is sheltered. The bench affords her presence. She is able to sit without feeling like she is bothering anyone and observe all the comings and goings of the day. Meanwhile, in Montreal's Shamrock Place, it is already hot on this summer day. An older gentleman sits on one of the coveted swinging seats that is in the shade, situated just in front of a carousel. His Walkman is on the table top in front of him. Music in his ears, he gently rocks back and forth enjoying the sight of children jumping on and off of the carousel, and the bustle of shoppers toting bags of fresh produce from the local market. On a similar day in Jubilee Square, Brighton, UK, in a similar site of cultural significance, these acts of passive repose on a public bench are less apparent. The sculptural bench, 'Liquidus', is an artwork, commissioned by the local authority as part of a policy to promote public art. Constructed of wood and acrylic slices, the bench has fallen into disrepair as its artwork status positions it outside the remit of the private company that manages the space. The wood has eroded leaving uncomfortable acrylic barbs as the most prominent means of support for those using it. It is hence used, or not used, discerningly, noticeably by more