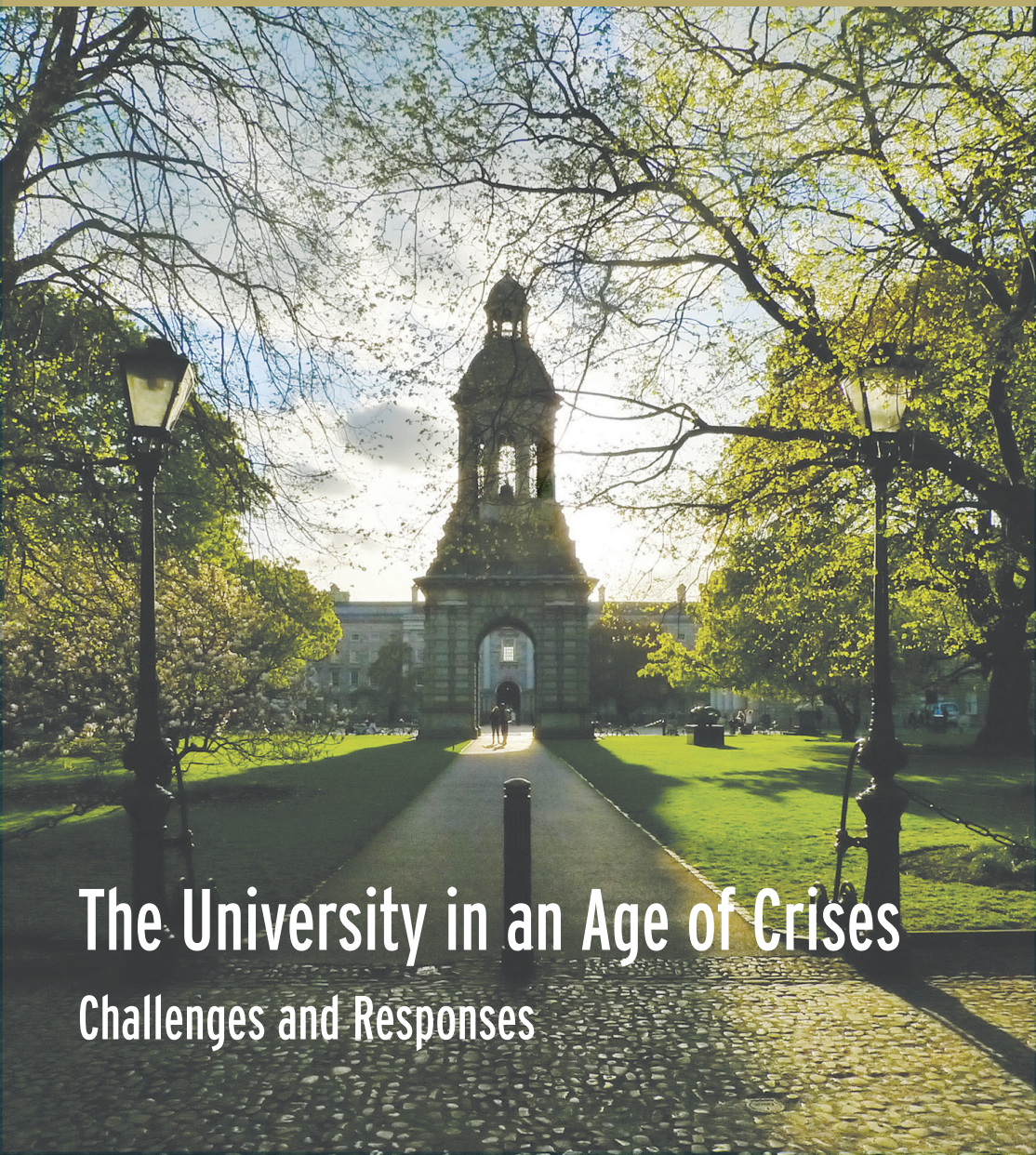


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The University in an Age of Crises
Challenges and Responses

The Case for Climate Justice Universities: Restructuring Higher Education for Transformative Change

Jennie C. Stephens

After more than thirty years working on climate and energy research and teaching in higher education, I am increasingly concerned that universities are obstructing rather than facilitating transformative social change toward more just, healthy and climate-stable futures. Although many universities claim to be addressing humanity's biggest challenges, the corporatisation of higher education has seriously constrained their engagement with the human vulnerabilities caused by accelerating climate disruption and worsening economic inequities. The competitive, individualistic, technology-focused, profit-seeking culture that so many universities reinforce is limiting society's capacity to transform away from worsening ecological destruction and human suffering.

When I began my academic career, I was more optimistic and idealistic about the role of higher education in society. I believed in the intellectual independence of universities, and I recognised how the 'public good' mission of higher education enabled academics to contribute to society invaluable long-term perspectives that were often neglected by those focused on the short-term cycles of business and politics. But my academic experiences over the last three decades have shown me how many universities have lost both their independence and their public good mission. Instead of focusing on teaching and research that serves the needs of communities and supports societal change toward more just and stable futures, the financialisation of universities causes academic institutions to increasingly prioritise the interests of the powerful, including extractive industries and exploitative companies. The problem with this is not just that catering to corporate interests distracts students and researchers away from the public good, but research shows that many powerful corporations strategically invest in universities to gain legitimacy for their profit-seeking climate obstruction agenda.¹

Climate injustice and academia

In August 2005, I started my first full-time teaching position as an assistant professor of environmental science and policy at Clark University, a private liberal arts research university west of Boston, Massachusetts. During the first week of my first semester, Hurricane Katrina devastated the US Gulf Coast. Video footage of the terrible human suffering in New Orleans exposed the racialised divides of climate vulnerabilities in the US. Media coverage included disturbing images showing that most of those left behind struggling to survive after the hurricane were poor and Black. Within my university community, students, faculty, and administrators reacted with dismay, compassion, and shock at the injustices of this destructive climate disruption. As hours turned into days, which turned into weeks and then months, the devastating scale of human suffering and displacement among those who had been systematically marginalised and underinvested in became clear.

As the magnitude of the crisis unfolded, I was part of an innovative interdisciplinary academic department that focused on understanding issues of environment, community, and human displacement. We worked on conducting research and preparing students to engage with governments and organisations to reduce human and ecological vulnerabilities around the world. Despite this focus, my colleagues and I recognised that the financialised structures of US society that created the stark racial and economic disparities in human suffering during Hurricane Katrina were deeply entrenched. We also knew that the worsening climate crisis was exacerbating inequitable vulnerabilities and increasing the urgency to change those structures. Throughout that semester, our academic community engaged with, discussed, and explored both the expanding disparate impacts and the societal responses to Hurricane Katrina.

During this time, I remember feeling both empowered and disempowered – hopeful and discouraged – at the same time. I was empowered and hopeful that the devastation would be a wake-up call, that the deep injustices exposed to the world after the hurricane would catalyse transformative action. I thought the impetus to change social and economic structures would minimise future suffering from worsening climate instability and devastating climate disruptions. But I also felt disempowered and discouraged, as it quickly became clear that the rebuilding and recovery efforts were disproportionately benefiting households and communities that were already better off before the hurricane. The response to the hurricane, like the responses to so many crises

and climate disruptions, reinforced economic inequities and worsened racial disparities by providing more support to those who were already privileged and delivering less support to those most precarious and vulnerable.

Throughout that first year as a young new professor, I became acutely aware of the minimal influence that our academic work had on the policies, practices, and systems that were creating, reinforcing, and expanding social and economic vulnerabilities as well as climate instability. Despite the idealism of our students and the commitment among the academic and professional staff within our university community to reduce human vulnerabilities exacerbated by the climate crisis, I recognised a disempowering acceptance of our limited role in making structural change toward climate justice. Like others, we could donate money, send supplies, or volunteer our time to travel to ‘help’ those in crisis, but none of those compassionate responses would reduce the risks of the next devastating climate disruption. As academics, we could also continue to teach and conduct research to expose structural injustices and systemic deficiencies. During this time I found myself struggling to define what more we could do to create transformative change. How could we collectively leverage the power of higher education to shape a future with fewer Hurricane Katrinas? Could universities become critical infrastructure for advancing transformative climate justice by imagining and creating better futures for all?

Twenty years later, I am still asking these same questions and engaging with many colleagues and communities to reconsider and reimagine the power of universities. With regard to the injustices that the climate crisis reveals, humanity is in an even worse place now than it was in 2005. The need for transformative change in universities is, therefore, more urgent than ever.

My own journey of learning and unlearning

I have worked in multiple universities in the US and in Ireland, and I have visited universities across Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Throughout decades of academic experiences, I have been exploring the powerful potential of universities to respond to ecological destruction and social injustice. Through my teaching, research, and service – carried out in different ways with multiple initiatives, projects, and roles – I have collaboratively and collectively experimented with students, colleagues, and diverse communities to expand the transformative societal impact of the work being done within higher education.² While my sense of possibility for change has

vacillated over these years, I have consistently maintained my fundamental belief that higher education is an underleveraged resource within society.³ I view universities as critical infrastructure with untapped potential to enhance society's capacity to respond to and facilitate transformative change.

In this era of polycrisis, when economic precarity is combined with deadly heatwaves, flash flooding, and dangerous storms, it is increasingly acknowledged that large transformative systemic social change is urgently needed.⁴ But like so many who have spent time working in higher education institutions, I have learned that universities are not currently structured to facilitate and advance transformative structural social and economic change. Rather than disrupting and transforming the destructive and exploitative systems that are causing devastating decline in human well-being and ecological health, it seems clear that many universities are reinforcing a complacent attitude toward the polycrisis facing humanity.

Recognising that universities are still largely organised within narrow and strict disciplinary departments based on a medieval way of organising knowledge, I have become increasingly critical. Learning from others who have contributed to the emerging area of Critical University Studies, I was able to make sense of some of my own traumatic experiences within academia by acknowledging that universities are organisations rooted in patriarchy, racism, capitalism, and coloniality.⁵ I realised that reckoning with the legacy of extractive and exploitative practices within higher education is essential to unleashing the transformative potential of higher education. To move beyond the narrow focus of promoting individual and institutional success and maximising the financial status of the university and its students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni, a critical perspective is essential to unlearn the frameworks that prevent change. I have found it helpful to bring an intersectional antiracist, feminist, anti-classist, decolonial lens⁶ to considering the potential of universities, because understanding power dynamics and how universities serve to concentrate wealth and power in society is critically important to reimagining alternative structures.

I became intrigued by the idea of unlearning, which is a key concept for transformation. Unlearning describes the process of letting go of existing and constraining knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and assumptions to allow for appreciation of new perspectives and information that may not align with previous understanding. Unlearning within higher education acknowledges the importance of letting go of traditional ways that universities curate and

organise their knowledge dissemination processes. Unlearning allows for a reimagining of what is possible with curriculum changes, pedagogical innovations, and epistemic pluralism. Unlearning can also be powerful because it encourages a humbling of higher education by reducing the arrogance and false sense of certainty that is often projected from academic experts claiming to know the best path forward. Unlearning provides a way to conceptualise how and why universities need to stop reinforcing narrow, distorted perceptions of how the world works. Unlearning of how mainstream neoliberal economics is taught in universities around the world is necessary to open up possibilities for envisioning alternative ways of structuring the economy, including a care-based economy or a well-being economy.⁷ Unlearning is also required to make space for teaching relational knowledge and understanding about the planetary limits to the earth's systems.

Exnovation and the role of universities

In addition to unlearning, another concept that I have explored in my analysis of universities is 'exnovation'. Exnovation refers to the processes of phasing out established technologies, practices, structures, and ideas.⁸ While the term 'innovation' is ubiquitous throughout higher education and in almost every other organisation and sector, exnovation is a concept that has been underdeveloped and underutilised. Throughout my decades-long work on the social dimensions of energy system transformation, I have been frustrated by the fact that despite massive investments in innovation in renewable energy, fossil fuel extraction has expanded rather than contracted. The disproportionate focus on innovation, and the lack of attention to the exnovation processes of how to move humanity away from fossil fuels, has thwarted the so-called energy transition. When considering the power dynamics of fossil fuel interests and how they have strategically invested to block transformative climate action and policy, it is clear that the lack of attention to fossil fuel phaseout was not accidental but very strategic and it involved directing university research away from exnovation. So now, during this era of increasing ecological, geopolitical, and economic disruptions, I believe a new collective commitment to ramp up exnovation away from harmful technologies, materials, and practices and to phase out destructive structures and systems is urgently needed. My own challenges in trying to focus on fossil fuel phaseout in my academic research and teaching have demonstrated to me that in order to promote exnovation in higher education

and throughout society, universities need to be restructured financially with different incentives and a renewed commitment to the public good mission.⁹

My experiences as an academic administrator (I served as the director of the School of Public Policy at Northeastern University for several years) confirmed for me that the increasingly financialised model of universities prioritising profit-generating research and market-based learning has diverted attention away from exnovation research and practice. Corporate capture of academia, including strategic investments by fossil fuel interests and other wealthy elites who partner with universities in an effort to obstruct transformative climate policy and prevent transformative change, has reinforced a pro-innovation bias in universities that prevents a focus on exnovation.¹⁰

Realising this led me to imagine how higher education systems could be restructured to better meet society's urgent needs. Based on my work on energy democracy, I began applying the simple framework of resist/reclaim/restructure to consider the various ways to approach transforming society by transforming universities. I decided to write a book about an alternative reimagined vision of higher education that resisted the corporatisation of universities, reclaimed the public good mission of higher education institutions, and restructured universities for transformation toward social and economic justice.

The transformative vision of climate justice universities

To represent my alternative vision of higher education institutions structured to facilitate transformative change in society, I introduced the concept of climate justice universities. Climate justice universities are institutions committed to pursuing the collective mission of moving society on a path toward a more equitable, just, ecologically healthy, climate-stable future. Climate justice universities are institutions that are supported to unleash creativity and imagination to engage deeply with the potential of social and economic transformation. Imagining the possibilities of climate justice universities requires a paradigm shift in thinking about the role and influence of higher education in society.

In the book *Climate Justice and the University: Shaping a Hopeful Future for All*, I highlight distinct characteristics of climate justice universities.¹¹ Climate justice universities focus on unlearning as well as learning. For example, more attention and space within universities to unlearn growth-centred, market-fundamentalist economics, a dominant knowledge

framework, is urgently needed. Universities also need to unlearn the knowledge hierarchies of academia to make space for indigenous knowledge, embodied knowledge and relational knowledge.

Climate justice universities would also incentivise exnovation research as well as innovation. Humanity needs higher education to engage in exnovation research on how to stop using plastics, how to phase out fossil fuels, and how to move away from growth-centred economic thinking that is disconnected from planetary boundaries.

Climate justice universities would also be publicly funded with a public good mission. Private companies would not have power or influence over what is researched or taught, because the focus would be on societal needs and reducing community vulnerabilities. Recognising that too many universities have become reliant on, and beholden to, corporations and wealthy donors, reclaiming the public good mission is essential to unleash transformative thinking. Powerful interests that benefit financially from reinforcing the status quo and minimising the acute challenges facing people and communities should not influence university priorities.

Climate justice universities would also be distributed geographically to serve all communities – especially marginalised and climate-vulnerable communities. I propose that we envision universities more like public libraries, providing resources accessible to all and collaborating with communities to co-design and co-produce knowledge and training programs that people in local communities need. For universities to become accessible, regenerative, and reparative, a transformative vision of institutions focused on locally engaged collaborations, global solidarity, and inclusive and creative learning experiences needs to be co-developed.

I wrote the book to catalyse new conversations and transformative thinking about the role of universities during this disruptive and destructive time. My intention in writing the book was to draw attention to the ‘muddled missions’ of universities, including their current crises of purpose, accountability, and values, which prevent universities from aligning with societal needs.

While the book offers contours and some ideas of what climate justice universities could look like, the space for visioning transformative pathways in different contexts is wide open. In the Irish context, a strong societal commitment to public education coupled with a compassionate culture provides particularly interesting opportunities for reimagining the structure of universities.

Responses to the radical idea of climate justice universities

I first proposed the idea of climate justice universities to an international audience at a public lecture that I gave in November 2023 at the Harvard Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies, where I was a ‘Climate Justice Fellow’ for the 2023–2024 academic year. At this time, the Harvard campus, like many universities in the US, was embroiled in public controversy related to its perceived bias toward those supporting the Israeli government’s response to the brutal Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023 and its repression of free expression among those advocating for peace and liberation for the Palestinian people. As wealthy Zionist donors pressured the university with threats to withdraw financial support, the university took additional disturbing steps to further suppress expressions of solidarity with Palestinians.

As I prepared my public lecture within this tense campus environment, I recognised the need for courage. To present my creative critique of higher education institutions at Harvard, one of the wealthiest and most powerful and influential universities in the world, was both counter-hegemonic and counter-cultural. Discussing how wealth and power are constricting academic inquiry and distorting knowledge creation and knowledge dissemination at universities seemed both timely and risky. In these challenging circumstances, I felt honoured to have this unique opportunity to share my ideas by speaking truth to power.

The responses I received after this public lecture fit into two broad categories: appreciative enthusiasm and resistant scepticism. The presentation was livestreamed (and recorded and subsequently posted on the Radcliffe Institute website¹²), so I received feedback from people around the world. In addition to appreciation from environmental-justice oriented peers at multiple different universities, people engaged in climate justice activism, feminist scholarship, racial justice, and human rights were among those who offered the most enthusiastic feedback. The sceptical responses were predominantly from older academics, mostly men – one man asserted with great authority that universities are businesses, so we should never expect them to have a social justice mission.

While I had assumed my ideas about climate justice universities might have generated interest and engagement at Harvard, which had funded my climate justice fellowship to develop these ideas, only three Harvard faculty offered responses to my talk. An economist who attended was sceptical and suggested that I should provide more concrete data and evidence to

demonstrate the connections that I was asserting. A social scientist who studies science and technology congratulated me by saying that I had ‘hit the nail on the head’, and a public policy professor was impressed with the way that I integrated so many provocative ideas. Despite Harvard receiving a \$200 million donation in 2022 to expand its work on climate and sustainability, an administrative leader at Harvard confirmed to me a few months later in a subsequent meeting that the institution is too conservative to focus on societal transformation.

The Climate Justice Universities Union

The beginning and end of the book mentions a new international collective that began at the University of Galway in November 2023 when over 100 people came together from across the island of Ireland to explore how higher education should be responding to the planetary crisis. This initial meeting was followed by multiple other convenings in each of the provinces of the island, and subsequently the Climate Justice Universities Union was formed.¹³ This transdisciplinary collective of university workers, students, activists, and members of the wider community represents a diversity of views, experiences, and expertise – united by a common commitment to transform higher education to advance climate justice principles throughout society.¹⁴ The overarching goal of the organisation is to resist harmful aspects of higher education systems, reclaim the powerful potential of the common good mission of the higher education sector, and restructure the research, learning, community engagement, estates and procurement, and policy impact of higher education to advance climate justice principles.

The Climate Justice Universities Union is organising and taking actions to collectively advocate for higher education to play a larger role in imagining and co-creating transformative knowledge, education, and connection. Members are collaborating and experimenting together, sharing resources and ideas to contribute to larger social movements for justice and sustainability, starting new conversations and encouraging new ways of thinking about systemic transformation. The Climate Justice Universities Union is challenging complacency about inequality and injustice and collectively encouraging disrupting widespread acceptance of dominant economic paradigms and power structures. The Climate Justice Universities Union is made up of individual members, working groups, institutional representatives, and a coordinating team. The organisation is so far based

mainly in Ireland, but international membership is growing, and we are co-designing mechanisms to engage across national boundaries. Membership is free and open to anyone who believes that higher education has a critical role to play in societal transformation toward an equitable, decolonised, stable, and healthy future.

Courage and a feminist lens

Courage is required to let go of assumptions and reimagine higher education. The scale of internal resistance to change within universities is illustrated by this humorous anonymous quote that I mention in the book: *‘Changing a university is like moving a graveyard – you don’t get much help from the inside.’* But with the rise of authoritarianism, it is external political pressure and attempts to control and constrict the independence of universities that demands an additional level of courage.

Fear of how this book would be received within the US academic context was a motivating factor that encouraged me to move back to Ireland before the book was published. As I finalised the book manuscript in 2023, it seemed like an increasingly scary time to be a professor in the US, particularly as someone focused on feminist climate justice.

Well before Trump’s second term began in January 2025 and the Trump administration launched its brutal attacks on universities, silencing and intimidation had become normalised in US universities. Higher education administrators were increasingly using tactics of intimidation and fear to squash dissent among those of us who embrace a human-rights-based, justice-focused commitment to the public good and a better future for all. Before I left, I experienced and observed multiple attempts to control and constrain critical perspectives, including feminist perspectives. And now with Trump in control, those who promote a culture based on patriarchal, misogynistic, racist assumptions are being rewarded. Those who challenge problematic power structures are ridiculed, criticized, and worse.

In the years before I moved back to Ireland from the US, I became increasingly aware of an academic culture that rewards institutional loyalty, compliance, and complacency while discouraging critical perspectives and institutional self-reflection. At both Northeastern University (where I was a professor, director of the Policy School and a member of the faculty senate) and at Harvard (where I was a Radcliffe-Salata Climate Justice Fellow for 2023–2024), I witnessed multiple strategic efforts to intimidate colleagues

and students, and on multiple occasions I have experienced specific attempts to silence me using tactics of intimidation and exclusion.

The most blatant example of administrative bullying I experienced was in April 2024 – just before I moved to Ireland – when I joined a group of Northeastern faculty and staff to support student protesters calling for a ceasefire, voicing their support for Palestinian rights, and demanding an end to the Israeli government’s genocidal acts in Gaza. When another faculty colleague and I approached a senior administrator to ask why there was such a heavy police presence at a peaceful protest, the administrator looked at us both with disdain and said, ‘You seem to have forgotten where your paycheck comes from.’ This comment represents the growing culture within universities of administrative control; this threat is aligned with other tactics of intimidation that I have witnessed in US universities. By rewarding those that comply and by threatening retaliation against those that disrupt the orchestrated complacency, faculty governance is constrained and student activists are villainised.

My move back to Ireland after living in the US for decades has come with deep appreciation for the strong public higher education system here in Ireland. I have found that Irish universities are communities where people can talk openly and honestly about how to confront the challenges facing humanity. But I have also been surprised to learn how private sector influence in Irish universities is growing, and how little awareness there seems to be about the risks of industry funding in higher education.¹⁵ I am concerned that Irish universities seem to be moving more toward a neoliberal focus of individualistic, technology-focused, market-based, corporatised approaches. This constrains what students learn, limits what kind of research is conducted, and reinforces the status quo by stifling our imaginations about what is possible and legitimising the narratives of those who are continuing to concentrate wealth and power.

But at the same time, I see many windows of opportunity for promoting climate justice universities. Here in Ireland, higher education institutions are underfunded, but the public good mission of the higher education sector is more explicit than it is in the US. I am proud to be a member of an academic community at Maynooth University – my new institutional home – where the inclusive and justice-centered mission is explicit in the universities mission statement, which declares the purpose is ‘to imagine and create better futures for everyone’.

Because the Irish university system has not yet been captured by private interests in the same ways it has in the US, academic communities seem to foster and support genuine, compassionate public discourse about how to address the extractive systems and exploitative structures that are worsening death, destruction, and ecological devastation around the world. In my new position here in Ireland, I feel encouraged, supported, and expected to speak truth to power, to advance critical research, to hold powerful actors accountable, and empower students to do the same. And looking back toward the US, it is increasingly clear how the erosion of the public good mission of higher education is intricately linked to the erosion of democratic ideals and democratic institutions.

As the ecological conditions supporting humanity continue to deteriorate, expanding social movements around the world are rising up, demanding change, and forming new global coalitions. Ecological healing and reparations for the injustices of the past are taking place in some places even as destruction and suffering abounds. In solidarity with so many creative and inspiring advocates for social and economic justice, I offer these ideas about climate justice universities with hope and humility.

Jennie C. Stephens is Professor of Climate Justice at the National University of Ireland Maynooth. Her work on which this article is based is Climate Justice and the University: Shaping a Hopeful Future for All (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024). She has published extensively on renewable energy transformation, energy and climate justice, higher education, and gender and race issues. See www.jenniestephens.com.

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