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Bruun, Johanne M.; Guasco, Anna

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# Reimagining the ‘fields’ of fieldwork

**Johanne M. Bruun**   
University of Birmingham, UK

**Anna Guasco**   
Cambridge University, UK

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## Abstract

Fieldwork remains a cornerstone of geographical research. Echoing longstanding critiques, this brief intervention envisions a future of geographical thought and praxis where fieldwork is critically interrogated rather than assumed. Approaching the field as a spatial-analytical category, we point to the creative ways that geographers have engaged and connected with their varied fields of research. Through examining recent geographical works that question the presumed locations of the field, experiment with various creative methods, and bridge pedagogy-practice divides, this intervention asks where and how the future fields of fieldwork might be located, practiced, and extended.

## Keywords

fieldwork, field methodologies, creative methods, pedagogy, knowledge production, ethics

Geography, as a discipline, has a troublesome history with which we will always have to grapple. A central figure is the lone, white gentleman-explorer, pitted against exoticised fields, sacrificing his wellbeing for science. Critiques of racialised, masculinist, colonial, heterosexist, cis-normative, and ableist assumptions embedded in historical practices and imaginaries of fieldwork are so well-rehearsed that they hardly need repeating (Oswin, 2020; Rose, 1993; Domosh, 1991). However, assuming that fieldwork is inherently masculinist is reductive and creates its own oppressive politics (Bracken and Mawdsley, 2004; Zebracki and Greatrick, 2022). In recent years, field practices in geography have expanded significantly, and exciting new pathways for approaching increasingly diverse fields have emerged (Hawkins, 2021). Yet the pedagogy and implicit value of physically going to a field

cast as distinct from the (relatively) safe confines of home/campus still carries significant weight (Guasco, 2022; Oliver, 2022; see also Katz, 1994). Fieldwork remains central to geography’s disciplinary identity. Physical encounter with an externalised field often promises a degree of legitimacy that simply ‘going there’ cannot automatically confer (Guasco, 2022; Howkins, 2010). Fieldwork persists

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## Corresponding authors:

Johanne M. Bruun, Geography, Earth, and Environmental Sciences, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2TT, UK.

Email: [j.m.bruun@bham.ac.uk](mailto:j.m.bruun@bham.ac.uk)

Anna Guasco, Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, Downing Place, Cambridge CB2 3EN, UK.

Email: [aklg2@cam.ac.uk](mailto:aklg2@cam.ac.uk)

as a rite of passage fraught with emotion, with young researchers expected to endure and internalise hardship to prove themselves (Oliver, 2022). Working towards a more equitable future for geographical thought and praxis, we argue, requires ongoing debate on how ‘the field’ is located and how it can be meaningfully worked and extended. In line with similar critiques, we call for more expansive and fluid notions of ‘field’ and ‘fieldwork’ in geography (Hyndman, 2001; Markham, 2013; Bhakta, 2022). We do so by pointing to creative practices and critical work challenging still-engrained orthodoxies around fieldwork.

### Locating the field

Being-in-the-field provides a grounded perspective of places, environments, and human/more-than-human communities involved in a study. This is often invaluable as sources of data, inspiration, and surprise. Whilst fieldwork can be gleeful and productive (Bracken and Mawdsley, 2004), it should not be assumed that ‘getting one’s boots muddy’, in the traditional sense, is necessarily the most academically productive, rigorous, or ethical approach (Bhakta, 2022; Guasco, 2022; Howkins, 2010; Mol and Atchison, 2019). As with any spatial formation (Massey, 2005), firmly anchoring the field in space and time is not as straightforward as unreflective uses of the terms ‘field’ and ‘fieldwork’ might suggest. The field, as Katz (1994: 76) notes, is a politically charged ‘discursive spatial practice’ located in a space of betweenness – between multiple locales, times, scales, people, and non-human others. As such, the field is thoroughly dispersed and fluid (Hyndman, 2001; Bruun, 2022). Framing the field, as a spatial-analytical category, is always a political act impacting how it might be worked and the kind of knowledge that is produced. Reflexivity about where and how fieldwork takes place is crucial to ethically (re)configure fieldwork’s potential locations (Sultana, 2007). Recognising the dispersed and positional nature of the field means recognising that the field can be accessed and engaged from different locales. Howkins (2010), for example, connects with his Antarctic field in the streets and archives of Buenos Aires – the same spaces frequented by many of the people making decisions about the continent.

Similarly, Ragavan (2021) engages hers from the confines of her balcony, sparking reflections on fieldwork, gender, and geographies of home.

Historically, a key attribute of the field is its dislocation from mundane spaces of home. This separation creates distance between researcher (outsider) and researched (insider), constructing space for objective observation whilst reinforcing problematic centre-periphery dichotomies in ‘a new poetics of the exotic’ (Kaplan, in Hyndman, 2001: 263). The demarcation of home and field as separate is, following Hyndman (2001: 265), ‘a device that makes possible the world-as-exhibition’ – something to be gazed upon from a critical distance. As aptly demonstrated by Kobayashi (1994), McFarlane-Morris (2019), Zhao (2017), and others, the tension inherent in field-as-home and home-as-field when doing research in one’s own community can be productive, calling into question some of the formative assumptions about geographical fieldwork. Longstanding scholarship on geographies of seemingly mundane spaces is undoing the field-home schism (Blunt, 2005), illustrating how such lines of separation are socio-politically constructed following still-dominant Enlightenment ideas about the purity of ‘detached knowledge’.

### Creative, experimental, and expanded fields – or no ‘fields’ at all

Reimagining ‘the field’ requires creatively reconfiguring fieldwork’s methods and mediums through experimental, innovative, and perhaps unexpected methodologies (Hawkins, 2021). From Patchett’s (2017) patchworked taxidermic animal archives as manifestations of historical ‘fields’ to Yusoff’s (2010) analysis of photography as a form of fieldwork *and* as something bringing the field into being, such methods creatively approach the ‘where’, ‘what’, and ‘when’ of the field. Digital and remote methods further enable innovative approaches to both the field and fieldwork. Rather than bypassing or devaluing fieldwork or the field, these methods broaden what it means to work in the field. Digital methods also allow novel, creative mappings – or ‘unmappings’, to use Goffe’s (2020) term. Goffe’s ‘Unmapping the Caribbean’ project brings students and technologists together to create

digital audiovisual story maps, using sensory-focused remote field-methods to unsettle standard cartographic practices. Goffe's approach to creative diasporic Caribbean cartographies resonates with Noxolo's (2015) work on dance and literature as well as with Katz's (2001) conceptualisation of 'counter-cartographies'. Creative practices are often collaborative and interdisciplinary, such as Tolia-Kelly and Raymond's (2019) geographer-artist collaboration in decolonising museum praxis. These varied experimental methods extend access to 'the field' by expanding what counts as 'fieldwork', whilst bringing attention to researchers' differing embodied field experiences. These methods also demonstrate how fields are entangled with other sites of knowledge production: archives, lecture halls, labs, museums, and more (Katz, 1994; Bruun, 2022). All these sites – past or present, digital or 'in person', near or far – are valid and significant sites for creative, experimental field-practices.

In addition to broadening what counts as field and field-methods, some have approached longstanding problems of fieldwork by rejecting 'the field' altogether. Liboiron (2021) and the CLEAR Lab (2021) propose rejecting the language of 'field' and 'fieldwork' because these terms are inextricable from the broader ideologies and structures shaping them. Instead, they use alternative language, arguing that revising the terminology used to delineate the 'where', 'how', and 'with whom' of research is crucial. This shift in language is not only nominal; it represents a fundamental shift in research orientations and commitments.

## Research and pedagogy

A final challenge of geographical fieldwork concerns connections between research practice and pedagogy. Recent innovative work abounds on fieldwork in geographical teaching, particularly at the undergraduate level. Pedagogical work includes digital and remote approaches as well as efforts to make field courses more accessible, inclusive, and equitable (Lawrence and Dowey, 2022; Yorke et al., 2022). Yet there often seems to be a gap between literatures on teaching and research. Geography must bridge this divide because such a divide implicitly fosters exclusionary assumptions

about who can be a professional academic geographer and produce valid geographical knowledge.

Despite tendencies to silo teaching and research, promising avenues are emerging. CLEAR Lab's (2021) accountability-focused approach is foundational for both the Lab's teaching *and* research. Patchett (2022) also bridges pedagogy and research, weaving together speculative taxidermy methodology and practice-based student workshops. Goffe (2020) demonstrates how innovative research can emerge through teaching and can cite students as contributors to knowledge production. Reimagining both fieldwork practices and education holds potential for challenging taken-for-granted sites of knowledge production (Jazeel et al., 2022).

## Conclusion

When justified, approaching the field as a physical space and being-in-the-field remains valuable and important. Yet the field, as a spatial-analytical category, is a crafted geography. It does not exist independently of our engagements with and enactment of it. Recognising that the field is dispersed and fluid – that it cannot be easily fixed on a map – requires recognising that fieldwork can take place across many locales and the field itself can be creatively extended and reconfigured. Seemingly mundane spaces of academic work and life, including archives, libraries, and museums, are all entangled with geographical fields, and are also fields in their own right. Rather than bypassing fieldwork, digital and remote sensing methods (including archives) can provide means of extending and reframing it. In this intervention, we identify three key avenues for reimagining the future of geographical fieldwork. First, geographers must keep questioning where and how the field is located and extended. Second, creative experimental methods are essential to expanding field access by diversifying modes of engaging the field and pluralising the field itself. Finally, bridging divides between research and pedagogy is crucial, given these schisms' implications about who can be a professional geographer. Perhaps the future of geographical thought and praxis is one where the questions 'will you be doing fieldwork?' and 'will you be

going there?', including the values and assumptions embedded herein, are replaced by the more poignant question of 'how are you engaging your field of research?'



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### ORCID iDs

Johanne M. Bruun  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7910-2696>  
Anna Guasco  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1659-9057>

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