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THEMED INTERVENTION OPEN ACCESS

Geography and ‘The New’

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ABSTRACT

This Intervention reflects on the multiple, contradictory and ambivalent relations human geography has with ‘the new’. Some sort of relation with the new is an inescapable and necessary part of all practices of knowledge generation. Newness, whether it be an empirical finding, an idea, a concept or an approach, can fuel the interest, wonder, urgency or surprise that can animate and sustain academic life. Yet, relations with the new are fraught. Claims of newness are enrolled into materially consequential systems and practices of audit, and the desire for newness is inseparable from the digitally mediated political economy of academic publishing. Questions persist about whether contemporary human geography is too beholden to the same or too enamoured by the new. Developing from a plenary panel at the RGS-IBG 2025 annual conference, five contributors reflect on their own and (sub)disciplinary relations with the new in the context of these necessary but fraught relations. In doing so, the aim of the Intervention is to generate reflection and discussion about the place of newness in our research, what kinds of newness geography values, and the political and ethical implications of different ways of relating to and valorising the new.

1 | Introductory Comments: Necessary, Fraught

Ben Anderson, Katherine Brickell, Beth Greenhough

How does contemporary human geography relate to ‘the new’? What kinds of newness are created and valued as geographers describe, interpret, explain and intervene in social spatial relations and forms in an ever-changing world? This collective Intervention responds to these and other questions of human geography’s actual and imagined relations with ‘the new’. Questions that go to the heart of disciplinary practices of knowledge generation, how we encounter and make sense of the world, and the intersection between academia, contemporary capitalism and systems of governance. We explore questions of

the new at a time when human geography’s relation with the ‘new’ is *necessary* but *fraught*.

Some kind of relation with the ‘new’ is necessary. All knowledge practices generate something new, irrespective of whether work is articulated and understood in terms that celebrate, guardingly acknowledge, repress or disavow the constitutive relation with newness. Whether it be a new empirical observation, a new way of working, a new concept, a new finding, a new contribution to a debate, a new critique that unsettles something settled or newly centring hitherto marginalised or ignored voices and lives, human geography is full of the new. Geography journals are testimony to the wonderful plenitude of the new, understood, for now, simply as something that is different from what has gone before. A desire for the new is performed in the formal

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and informal valorisation of originality, experimentation, novelty, creativity, innovation or some other way in which the new is brought into being. We often justify, legitimate and affirm approaches, concepts, modes of inquiry or methods around their capacity to generate something different to what hitherto exists. Claims of the novelty of a spatial-temporal phenomena are also frequently made, as human geography attempts to apprehend a changing world. As well as an epistemological question, the promise of being able to orientate to the conditions of emergence for the new has animated some of the most prominent social-spatial theorising of the past thirty years. Most notably, Massey's (2005) joyful affirmation of space is founded on the claim that to think space is to think the conditions of emergence for difference and thus the new.

Yet despite the inescapable relation with the new, there are no systematic reflections on how the new is produced in human geography (beyond longstanding discussions of 'normal science' and paradigm shifts (Kuhn 1962) and the epistemology of disciplinary twists and (re)turns). Questions of newness blur into a cluster of terms, all of which operate with a degree of ambiguity and pull it into the different vocabularies of art, commerce and science and their modes of valuation—innovation, novelty, originality, creativity, experimentation, to name but the most prominent. Perhaps, this is partly because of the well-known epistemological challenges of recognising and identifying the new, and the variety of ways of identifying the advent of the new, for example, 'breakthrough', 'shift' and 'progress'. In this context, is the totally new possible and could it be recognised if it were? Paradoxically, must the new become the settled and accepted to be recognised as novel? Are some kinds of newness easier to recognise and incorporate, a new method, perhaps, rather than long-term theoretical work that does not immediately generate a named concept? These questions remind us that to recognise and narrate the new is also always-already to (re)narrate a (sub)disciplinary past in a way that may implicitly or explicitly perform a 'canon', with its exclusions and inclusions (Powell 2015). Beyond the question of narration, how might we understand the conditions for the formation of a new idea, concept, method or approach? Does the new follow from a recombination of existing elements or is the logic a cyclical one of recurrence? (see, e.g., Castree and MacMillan (2004) on addition, transformation, supersession and return as modes of novelty). Perhaps newness in human geography involves bringing something different into geography from elsewhere. If so, where should we find inspiration from? Does the new emerge from engaging with another discipline? From activists? From research participants? Does it emerge during empirical work? Or from engaging with alternative or marginalised ontologies, and if so, who is something new for? (see Todd 2016).

Some kind of relation with the new is necessary, but human geography's relation with the new is fraught, echoing longstanding suspicions about the modern desire for the new and questions about the proper relation with newness. There are a lot of reasons for this. Newness exists as an object of governance, enrolled into criteria like 'originality' in research assessment regimes (such as the UK Research Excellence Framework [REF]) and used in competitive grant funding allocation, as well as other systems of audit and valuation. Questions therefore arise of which knowledge practices and ways of working are identified as 'new', as

well as how newness coexists with other criteria in systems of evaluation. When does the question of which kinds of newness are valued become materially consequential for institutions and geographers working lives? Relations with newness can also reproduce authority: Who can speak of the new or as the new? How do relations with the new in the discipline and its pasts and futures vary by career stage, position and location? Additionally, the political economy of academia as mediated through platform capitalism incessantly calls forth the new, often with an intensity that can feel overwhelming—new journals, new sub-disciplines, an abundance of new work being constantly published and circulated and (dis)engaged with. This is likely one of the conditions for what can feel like an ambivalent disciplinary relation with newness. Perhaps the new is structurally overvalued as the event-horizon of the discipline?¹ Periodic claims are made that human geographers have the wrong sort of relation with newness, being too enamoured by newness for its own sake, or that what appears to be new is nothing of the sort. This concern with the desire for the new is expressed in the accusation that work is 'fashionable' or driven by 'fashion' (although see Barnett (1998) for a critique of how 'fashion' is too quickly invoked). Yet, at the same time, claims are made that human geography is too beholden to the same and needs to become unsettled as it makes space for new voices, new modes of inquiry and new forms of engaged praxis. Once new concepts can quickly become ossified refrains,² easily ready to hand to be quickly applied to another case or example. Reflections on the future of the discipline are so often urgency-imbued calls or claims that something different and new is now necessary, as well as disagreements about quite what kind of newness is important (see, e.g., Rose-Redwood et al. 2024).

Across this fraught relation, and returning to our ordinary practices of knowledge generation, a term that implies natality and the beginning of something, there is also a delight and excitement in the new, whether that be a new idea, a new technique, or a new empirical finding. The new is bound up with the relations of curiosity and interest and wonder and surprise that, for some, sustain and can bring joy and purpose to academic life. Newness is also central to claims of the political necessity and urgency of geographic scholarship, as geographers respond to a changing world and make new claims about worlds and the forces (re)making them. Staying with new forces, spatial forms and tendencies is, we contend, necessary as geographers attempt to apprehend, understand, and play a role in cultivating positive change in a world that, for many, is in crisis. But, at the same time, the intensity of the production of the new, and indeed whether and how our ordinary knowledge practices are orientated towards the new, is also at stake in questions about slow, gentle or humble modes of scholarship (Finn and Jeffries 2025). This work reminds us that the often insatiable demand for novelty and progress can be experienced as exhaustion (although such calls themselves cannot escape a relation with the new, in their searching for and naming of new dispositions to complement, transform or replace existing modes of inquiry (e.g., Kanngieser et al. 2024)).

This Intervention stays with and amplifies the problem of the new, and human geography's multiple, contradictory, ambivalent relations with it. Five contributors offer short reflections on questions of the 'new', all of whom were part of a *Transactions*

of the *Institute of Geographers* plenary conversation at the RGS-IBG annual conference, 2025. Inspired by the conference's theme of 'Creativity' (as developed by Prof. Patricia Noxolo; see Noxolo 2025a), the respondents explored the new in their own and other people's work and reflected on broader questions of the new in human geography and contemporary academia. The contributors responded to questions of the new in a variety of styles and tones from different positions, and we have chosen to retain and affirm that multiplicity here. It performs the pluralism that is so central to human geography, as well as *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* as a disciplinary space. All draw the new into specific constellations with a set of terms that aim to render the new operational—innovation, emergence, experimentation, novelty and so on. All wonder about the proper relation with newness amid the political economy of academia, reflect on whether and how to be hospitable to the new, identify mechanisms through which sameness is reproduced and caution against any uncritical celebration of the new. All perform some degree of ambivalence or ambiguity as they reflect on or present their own and other disciplinary relations with the new, as befits a fraught topic. The aim of the Intervention then is to encourage thought and reflection on our own and (sub)disciplinary relations with the new. In this spirit, a set of questions cross between the five reflections:

- How do geographers attend to the 'new' across the spatialities we research, whether that be the glimmers of a new identity, a changed cultural practice, a new urban form, a changed geo-political arrangement or a transformed economy?
- What practices and collaborations enable geographers to orientate towards or indeed problematise the 'new'; how do geographers notice and name what might be new?
- How do geographers generate the 'new' in our own work, whether that be the invention of a new concept, an embryonic idea, the beginnings of a project or a reconfigured method?
- How is newness in geography governed and called forth, and how does it enact and reproduce existing forms of power and authority?

2 | Fantasies of the New? Two Imaginations

Harriet Hawkins

2.1 | Academic Fantasies

The new is a powerful (if not novel) academic fantasy (Castree and Macmillan 2004). Journal websites and article assessment criteria commonly request we consider our 'novel contributions,' grant applications direct us to articulate moves 'beyond the state of the art', while job adverts and promotion forms ask for outlines of our field shaping work.³ Our academic fantasies, like other fantasies are not something to dismiss, but are rather something to be taken seriously as an organising force, 'a sense of reliable continuity amidst the flux of intensities and attachments' (Berlant 2012, 75). What follows offers some reflections from the midst of the academic fantasies of a research

grant, and my coming to terms with what Kandice Chuh (2012, unpaginated) describes as grant applications' 'materialisation of optimistic relations to a fantasy'. The fantasies of our grant included a trio of claims to novelty; novel accounts of subsurface spaces, evolutions of concepts allied to the new (such as creativity, imagination and speculation) and around what were in 2018 (when the grant was written) still relatively novel relations between geographic research and creative practice based/led research.⁴ Relations between geography and creative practice have, of course, centuries of history, but we were specifically concerned with creative practice-based research, or research-based art practices. We were keen to explore whether geography's disciplinary practices, infrastructures and habits of thought were really ready to be hospitable to creative practitioners with sometimes very different ways of working, aims and understandings of research. Somewhere between the promises of the grant application and administrative challenges of carrying out the work, the fantasies of novelty fell apart as we struggled to get anywhere at all. What did emerge, however, was a sharpened sense of the labours of working towards the new, including the shape and scale of the evolutions required in the spaces, relations and practices of geography if it was to hope to offer a better disciplinary home for creative practitioners. As we continue to wrestle with these challenges, two imaginations of labouring to bring about the new have helped our fantasies come into view, reflections on these imaginations make up what follows.

2.2 | Imagination One: Slow Inchings

The first imagination—of slow inchings towards elsewhere—comes from Monica Huerta's beautiful book *Magical Habits* (2021). *Magical Habits* forges a form of critical storytelling combining autobiography and place-writing in a genre-bending series of reflections on racial capitalism, academic knowledge making, histories and their afterlives. Here, amidst conversations with statues, accounts of childhood gifts lost or stolen, complex migration stories and academic feelings, Huerta writes of her desire to exceed modes of academic knowing that centre 'heroic claims...The first study of its kind. A discovery. A solution, new insight' (xiii). Instead, she writes 'I am invested in insisting...that there are no heroes, just us and the habits we might choose to insist on and inch our ways to elsewhere' (xv). At the heart of this imagination is Huerta's thinking around the challenges of holding together 'the elsewheres' conjured in academic thought with a commitment to 'actively imagining and implementing' that elsewhere as 'livably lived in' (xiv). She reflects on the labours, including the emotional labours, of trying to bring 'close the intimate project of "being honest with yourself" with the more public one of "education" with the more explicitly political one of having and abiding by allegiances, but also to keep going with room for joy' (xv). This is a project that requires, feeling, knowing limits, dwelling in contradictions—'irresolution's affective strain'—all while insisting on attending to what happens in the margins. This involves challenging fictions of 'our own scholarly progression... that somehow our aging begets something better, more, more heroic' (xx). What would academic progression look like, and feel like, if it was less about being heroic, understood as knowing 'marked by accumulation (a propertied affair)' but instead shaped by

'continually divesting previous habits' (xx). How, she asks, do we give up the 'gods hidden over by professionalism's marriage to the way capital, for one, has structured the shape of our fields of inquiry' (xx). How, in short do we challenge the idol of the new with an imagination of academic knowledge making as slowly inching ourselves elsewhere through continual processes of both habituation and but also, equally, of disinvestment?

2.3 | Imagination Two: A Leap

The second imagination is Lauren Berlant's imagination of social change as a leap. It is a powerful imagination that appears almost incidentally in a conversation between them and Michael Hardt, entitled 'No one is sovereign in Love' (Berlant et al. 2011). In the midst of musings on love as a political concept, they reflect on the planning of social change,

You have to imagine the world that you could promise, the world that could be seductive, the world you could induce people to want to leap into...But leaps are awkward, they're not actually that beautiful. When you land, you're probably going to fall, or hurt your ankle, or hit someone.

(Berlant et al. 2011)

Berlant's imaginative leap sits within critical social theory's wider lexicon of leaping (e.g., Fanon 1967; Foucault 1966) in which amidst the powerful simplicity of the image is an insistence on attention to processes of change and transformation. When I hear 'leap' I think graceful parabola, but a Berlantian arc unravels under the travails of both take-offs and landings; a desired future is needed, seductive enough to get us airborne, and, as Berlant reminds us, landings are neither guaranteed nor easy. Leaps might be hesitant, landings are often awkward ungainly and landing into new worlds might be newly uncomfortable and clumsy, causing as Berlant writes, 'dents, incidents, accidents' (2012, 18). For Berlant, love can offer an important affective consistency, a continuity that can cushion the insecurity and uncertainty of the leap.

So, do we inch, or do we leap? What do each of these imaginations of movements toward the new highlight or make differently possible, and what emerges if we think them together? To close, I want to linger with three invitations that these different imaginations offer to thinking about velocity and pace; habits and tethers, and destinations and landings.

2.4 | Velocity and Pace

Firstly, both these imaginations tend us towards questions of the velocity and pace of the new and its labours. I am drawn to the embodied poetics of Huerta's slow inchings, the sense of a scholarly probing, a feeling, pressing, expanding and contracting, that feels humble, respectful and obtainable. It suggests perhaps a feeling out from (and a building on) past practices, as well as an exploration and care for the terrain being moved over and into. There is a vulnerability here and an epistemic humility that feels akin to recent academic registers of the virtuous, the gentle, the kind, the diffident and the failed (Brice 2023; Davies

et al. 2021; Dorling 2019; Finn and Jeffries 2025; Horton 2025). It also seems of a register with wider temporal imaginations of slow scholarship (Keighren 2016) which centralises care and solidarity in a pace-based push back against increasing requirements for 'high productivity in compressed time frames... with more demands on academics' time' (Mountz et al. 2015, 1236).

By contrast, there seems something bold and courageous, even a bit brash about the leap, off register in the midst of atmospheres often characterised by scholarly reticence and restraint. I recently came across the image of pole vaulting offered as a powerful illustration of the need for focused commitment in the face of intractable challenges.⁵ This form of leap requires momentum and pace, charging down a track, digging a pole into the ground, trusting it, launching yourself into the air. There is an intensity, an energy, that perhaps some forms of the new require, when only a break with intractable systems and structures will do? But also without such a leap might the 'new' not be 'new enough'? In the face of serious challenges incremental change perhaps will not do, risking fooling us into thinking change has happened and perhaps even preventing the needed more dramatic change. In their reflections on the need for a deeper critique of the academic project, Meyerhoff and Noterman (2017) caution against romanticising the academic system in ways that might cast it as merely broken, when there is instead an urgent need to recognise that 'it was built this way'. As they continue, 'rather than merely tinkering within the system to fix it, we argue that it is critical to challenge and overcome the material and ideological bases of the university itself' (2017, 220). For them this means rejecting a single-speed (slow) politics of time, to attend to complex space-times of privilege and oppression, asking at whose cost does the slowing down of scholars come? What, they ask, of the need for fast scholarship in response to urgent political situations, scholarship that can centre timely response, mutual aid and collective learning over publication metrics (Meyerhoff and Noterman 2017, 239)? Perhaps, sometimes only the pace of a leap forward will do, but for other challenges slowly inching forward, retreating, reassessing and inching forward again might be a better register? What too, we might ask here, of the need for scholarship that takes seriously the responsibilities of the new, that recognises that sometimes the new is not new enough, and perhaps can never be enough in the face of some situations?

2.5 | Tethers and Habits

A second set of points to muse over concerns the relations of existing practices and habits of thought and their role within the new, together with the success and failures of holding on and letting go. I find Huerta's (2021) idea of magical habits compelling and in particular its invitation to hold onto the contradictions inherent within the habitual. In other words, that existing practices and modes of thought might both vitally enable the work of magicking up new futures, of creating horizons of the possible, while also, potentially of limiting them, of rendering things that appear new, not in fact novel enough? How, for example, do we know what to hold onto as useful and valuable in the midst of worlds that are often understood to be unravelling, while not misrecognising objects we might be using merely to shore ourselves up? Often, for example, our disciplinary practices can end up becoming so habitual as to vanish from sight, unnoticed their shaping force might thwart forward momentum. Saidiya Hartman articulates a similar

idea when she urges us to recognise the finitude of our methodological projects (even those that have served us well) and how our ‘methodological guilds’ might be holding us back (especially those of us in less powerful positions) (in Copeland et al. 2022, 84). As powerful artisanal governance structures, guilds often function to assert standards and regulations of craft practice in valuable ways, but at the same time, in doing so risk fostering fidelity at the cost of innovation. We might think too of the ways that Berlant (2022) has invited cultural geographers especially to think about the complexities and misrecognitions of our attachments and detachments to promises, objects and speculations (Anderson 2023; Cockayne and Ruez 2023). In other words, it is hard to leap if ideas and practices, known or unknown, tether us to the ground, either preventing our leaping to begin with, or bringing us back to earth with a bump. But at the same time, perhaps in the midst of a world often characterised as shaking and unsettled, common threads of thought and grounds of practice, shared moorings, might come to be newly valuable especially for those on the frontlines of precarity.

How, therefore, might moves towards the new involve both the labours of imagining the elsewhere, which need to be taken seriously, but also of recognising how our habits of thought and practice both enable but potentially also disable our moves? How might we, as Berlant queries, ‘lose, unlearn, and loosen objects and structures that can seem intractable’ and which might also pass unnoticed, whilst also, as Huerta asserts, embracing and insisting on others? Reflecting twenty years ago in the midst of a human geography whose only constant (then too) was intellectual change, Noel Castree and Thomas Macmillan parse out novelty, reminding us it does not always need to be ‘strong’—addition, transformation or supercession—but might equally be about reclamation and reworking, less a phoenix-like rebirth than a finessing of the familiar (2004, 469–470).

2.6 | Landings or Elsewheres

Both leapings and inchings summon the destination, both suggest that integral to the labours of the new is, perhaps understandably, a concern with where you might end up. For Berlant you need at least to imagine a desirable, seductive world for people to leap towards, whereas Huerta (2021, xv) notes that part of the inching is the ‘active imagination and implementation’ of the where to which elsewhere (away from historical repetition) might lead. Yet as both emphasise arrivals in new worlds are not often easy, in Berlant’s words there will be ‘dents, incidents, accidents’ (2012, 18).

I appreciate this recognition of the discomforts of the new, but also their emphasis on our differential positions in relation to these discomforts. In the midst, for example, of emerging relationships between geography and arts practice there are many scholars who have committed to making creativity part of their geographical research, but who struggle to find their creative practices valued on applications for jobs or promotions, or find the significant differences between using creative methods and being a creative practitioner overlooked. We might consider too, the ways that different career stages enable very different relations with the new, where claims to novelty and the need to make them might morph throughout a career, and where we are all differently positioned in relation to the risk taking that some

forms of novelty might require of us. It is imperative we reflect on the unequal availabilities of the fantasy of the new; for some the new is a risk that you cannot afford to take, for others it is a risk you cannot afford not to take.

Given this, perhaps we might query how to make geography a discipline of both soft landings for those who seek bold leaps, and also a haven for those who seek to finesse the familiar? What might it be for us to collectively cushion the landings of those bold enough to leap, but also embrace and envelop those who seek inchings elsewhere? What might taking account of the novelty and challenges of both inchings and leapings mean for us as peer reviewers of papers and applications, as editors, as examiners, appointment and promotion committee members? For Berlant, love is the affective consistency that enables the springboards of needed change, while cushioning the discomforting landings of our bolder leaps (Berlant et al. 2011). It is the consistency that supports the ‘affective strain of irresolution’ (Huerta 2021, xx) enabling dwelling in contradictions. It is love that can support both the leapings and inchings that require the wilder imaginations of elsewhere whilst also, simultaneously, insisting on some habits and practices of old whilst loosening and unlearning others, all the while being plagued by misrecognitions. Is it love then that we as a discipline need to get better at cultivating in our practices of editing and reviewing? Shaping these familiar places and practices as ones of love which can cushion feels an odd thing to call for but there is perhaps an ethical imperative to ensure we meet leaps and inchings with love to ensure we do not end up reproducing a discipline where the new is neither curtailed and confined with the risk of being not new enough, nor pursued unchecked in fetishised heroic form. This is a moving towards the new via both accumulations and divestments as Huerta would have it, attuned to when it is important to finesse the familiar, to build on what has gone before, but when also to make the leap of change to enable what has perhaps never even been thinkable before (Dekeyser 2023)?

For all their differences both these imaginations of the new and its labours offer a commitment to love and to joy, whether the exuberance and seductive desire of Berlant’s leap, or Huerta’s recognition of the need to make room for joy in our inching forward. Both offer an antidote to habits of thought around the new that either fall into line with the academic fantasy and overlook it as such, or which foreground only ennui, disillusionment and even cynicism. Their insistence on the joys and loves, discomforts, disappointments and unequal power relations integral to the labours of the fantasies of the new feels deeply needed amidst disciplinary refrains of reimaginings (Dekeyser 2023; Rose-Redwood et al. 2024) and the ethical imperative for critical thinking on disciplinary and worldly futures.

3 | Spiralling With Breakdown: Geographies of the Possible Amidst the Rubble

Tatiana Thieme

3.1 | Introduction

In dialogue with fellow panellists asked to deliberate on ‘Geography and “the new”’ in this collection, this Intervention thinks with Pat Noxolo’s notion of the ‘spiralling mode of creation’

(Noxolo 2025a) to consider *geographies of the possible amidst the rubble* in times and spaces of breakdown and catastrophic harm (Aijazi 2024). Thinking with a ‘spiralling mode’ offers a way of moving with repetition, return and re-arrangement, rather than fixating on novelty or any pretence of ‘offering the last word’ (Noxolo 2025a, 1). Like the decolonial pedagogy of ‘walking and asking’ (Walsh 2015), a spiralling mode calls for relational movement with others, a practice that acknowledges what Glissant (1997) describes as the ‘right to opacity’, the refusal of capture. The ‘spiralling mode’ is at once epistemological (about what we can know) and methodological (about what we can do), and in its relational mode, it can be about returning, re-seeing, re-telling and re-imagining—making space for the possibility of retracing steps and seeing anew (Bhan 2026; Sarr 2019), of *trying again* with others.

3.2 | It Starts With a Dance and Then a Walk Through Breakdown

To me, Pat Noxolo’s expression ‘a spiralling mode’ invites a reflection on *embodiment* and thinking with dance—as both a practice and a way of sensing and being in the world (McCormack 2008; Neveu Kringelbach 2013). In many dance genres, embodying a *spiralling mode* comes with specific techniques to manage one’s balance: a dancer has to *spot*—fixing their gaze on a point that may shift with changes in orientation. Without spotting, a dancer loses either balance or a sense of orientation. Yet despite practice and intention, a dancer knows the moment will come when the spiral may unravel and the body might fall out of the turn—the point is not necessarily to avoid falling or losing your balance, but rather to find a way to move with the fall such that this too becomes part of the choreography. Sometimes, it is through the fall and loss of balance that surprising movements take form as part of the effort to recover and regroup, and this is punctuated at some point with a moment of stillness too, to rest and take a breath. Then, you try again. A spiralling mode thus offers a way of moving with falls, losses and breakdown, as a form of reorientation from which other possibilities might emerge.

To think about breakdown, I draw on Steven Jackson’s notion of ‘broken world thinking’, an interrogation of industrial modernity and its presumption that things ought to work by asking, ‘what happens when we take erosion, *breakdown*, and decay, rather than novelty, growth, and progress, as our starting points’ (Jackson 2014, 221)? Breakdown is not just about negation and collapse, it is capacious because it begs a question posed by Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2011), ‘what is to be done’? This Intervention imagines walking with this question through the material and metaphorical remains of breakdown, which I will refer to here as *Rubble*. Rubble acts as ‘vibrant matter’ (Bennett 2010), presenting as a blatant manifestation of *breakdown* performing collapse in plain sight. In its accumulated form, rubble can be overwhelmingly impossible to quickly ‘take away’, unsettling insofar as it becomes ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas 1966) that lingers as a reminder of what stood before and what might be reassembled.

‘Geography and the new’ is conceptualised here as *trying anew*: a delicate dance that involves entering into relation with others (Glissant 1997) and other ‘matter’ (Bennett 2010), in a mode of curiosity and concern, *trying* to re-imagine (Benjamin, 2024) an

otherwise, ‘that which exists in the borders, edges, fissures and cracks of the modern/colonial order’ (Walsh 2015, 12). Inspired by Hazlewood et al. (2023)’s ‘geographies of Hope-in-Praxis’, this Intervention considers how we might think of geographies and the new *through* a geographical re-imagining of the possible by walking through trouble (Haraway 2016)—seen here as rubble—rather than find a way out of it (trouble) or desire for it (rubble) to be taken away. By literally and figuratively walking through rubble, we might engage more meaningfully with the entanglements of past, present and future; of here and there; self and other; of human and more-than-human. Entanglements of relation as a mode of engagement (Glissant 1997).

These reflections are grounded in long-term ethnographic engagement in Nairobi (Thieme 2025), focusing here on the aftermath of infrastructural and environmental harms, in the context of the 2024 flooding and subsequent demolitions, where rubble along the riverbanks marks both material and metaphorical breakdown in the already vulnerable under-served and densely populated neighbourhoods of the city. Rubble can be the reflection of catastrophe, magnifying what Gautam Bhan (2026, 427) calls the “geography of ruin” once built form collapses and suddenly turns into a pile of debris. But to live with and amidst the rubble, to reclaim the discards one stone at a time and occupy spaces amidst the rubble in new ways, rehearses a mode of refusal—refusal to succumb to collapse as destruction, and instead reconfigure an agentive mode of *living with breakdown* (Thieme 2021). To do so is not an acceptance of *being broken* as an endpoint. Rather, to stay with breakdown is to see the generative possibilities in the ‘incompleteness’ of the urban form, in the continuous modality of becoming, un-making and re-making (Fontein et al. 2024; Guma 2020; Nyamjoh 2022; Okoye 2026). As DeSilvey (2017) reminds us, there are so many ways to read a landscape—such that what might be perceived as a state of decay and loss could instead evoke the release of something into another state.

3.3 | Rivers and Rubble Speak

On 29 April 2016, an eight-storey tenement structure built along the river in one of Nairobi’s most densely populated neighbourhoods collapsed. The immediate reaction was two-fold: collective solidarity to help the affected families throughout the night and days that followed, and shortly after, an opportunistic recovery of reusable materials encroaching on the ‘danger zone’ in the weeks that followed once the dust had settled. For a window of time, rubble was not merely debris that evoked loss of value, destruction of property and displacement. It was *vibrant matter* that spoke back and invited the imagination of those who would walk through it and wonder what could be done. Before rogue landlords with connections could rebuild another precarious housing block, youth who ran the homegrown waste economy, the front-line recovery workers whose livelihoods depended on seeing the value of waste, were making plans: what if, in this place, an urban farm could grow along the riparian land, run by local youth groups as an extension of their eco-hustles (Thieme 2025)?

Years later, in April 2024, the usual rainy season was especially intense and Nairobi experienced serious flooding. The most affected communities were those living in popular neighbourhoods,

including around Mathare, the same area where that building had collapsed in 2016. Life in Mathare is subject to constant ecological and social vulnerabilities, and during the rainy season, it is at risk of flooding because the Mathare River, a major tributary of the Nairobi River, runs directly through the neighbourhood. The flooding destroyed countless makeshift dwellings. In its aftermath, the government mandated that all structures ‘illegally’ built within thirty metres of the river be demolished. Local chiefs, ‘just following orders’, organised for the bulldozers to come. Officials claimed households were warned weeks in advance, but as many people asked, ‘where were people to go?’. ‘They killed us twice’ people said. ‘First the floods, then the demolitions’.

Amidst the rubble, across the three neighbourhoods in Nairobi most affected by the floods and demolitions (Mathare, Kibera and Mukuru), young people carried stones away one at a time or claimed a cluster of stones as their *baze*—forming new hang out spots by the river. Amidst the rubble, poles were erected, strings stretched between them, as women hung laundry to dry. Many structure owners have disappeared from the scene: some were absentee landlords in the first place, and those who remained had no claims to make, since the structures were illegally built to begin with. The tenants were those left displaced, yet there was a shared experiential privilege in their vulnerability: they could return to reclaim materials for rebuilding elsewhere or sell off the stones and iron sheets to local builders.

At the time of writing this, I reflect on my most recent trips back to Nairobi (Sept 2025 and April 2026) where the slow reclaiming of the rubbelscape along the river continues to unfold. Over the last few years, Nairobi’s plans for ‘River Regeneration’ have had to reckon with the communities who depend on and occupy the riverside in pluriversal ways (Kimari and Parish 2020). One group, the Ghetto Farmers, has continued their efforts to plant bamboo along the river, an initiative they began years ago when rubble had given way to the making of plans. The bamboo mitigates flood damage and has deterred some of the demolitions. One of the Ghetto Farmer members explained, ‘bamboo is adaptive to dry or rainy season, it absorbs water, it also provides shade... it is resilient and it protects’. Another youth group in Mukuru kwa Reuben has been trying to balance self-reliance and collaboration with local government given that ‘River Riparian Renewal’ is meant to be a multi-actor effort. Although community groups waited patiently for local government officials to come partake in a tree planting ceremony back in October 2025, one youth group member explained that they were not passively waiting—they were getting the ground ready, ‘digging the holes and planting the grass’. So the story of rubble and city rivers in Nairobi (and elsewhere) keeps unfolding, as ordinary gestures of relational regeneration continue to affirm a *praxis* of home and place-making in a city whose colonial logics systematically marginalised the urban residents who inhabit and sustain its popular neighbourhoods (Kimari and Parish 2020; Ng’weno 2025).

3.4 | Trying Again: Geography of the Possible

Staying with breakdown suspends the immediate imperative to take rubble away or to rebuild—especially if the rush to ‘fix’ is

itself presumptuous and risks reproducing vulnerability or reinforcing structures of violence, including land grabs and further displacement. What follows breakdown (as it does in music and dance) is a kind of re-arrangement in space and time, a chance for re-seeing, re-configuring, re-imagining and, in the case of Mathare and Mukuru in Nairobi, re-planting. ‘Geographies and/of the new’, then, might be entangled with a geography of the possible: possibility that the re-arrangements could lead to something otherwise.

To think with ‘a broken world’ (Jackson 2014) then is to acknowledge an inherent incompleteness, one that acknowledges intersectional harms but does not dwell on what lacks—it is an incompleteness that opens up a space of possibility (Guma 2020; Okoye 2026). A possibility to notice new formations *in* relation to other humans and more-than-humans (Glissant 1997). What that ‘something’ is, and for whom, depends on who or what tells the story, who or what leads the dance and where we see life even amidst the harms (MacFarlane 2025). Geographies of the new, then, are about the *propositional* rather than the pre-figurative: the first proposes something that feels different to the status quo but remains unknown for now, whereas the second already imagines what could be. Thinking with Pat Noxolo again, what are the affordances of walking with the propositional, in a ‘spiralling mode’?

At the moment, it feels impossible not to be consumed with melancholia, outrage and disappointment in the face of overlapping injustices, violence and ecological collapse. How then do we—as teachers, researchers, comrades, life-long learners, dancers and dreamers—rethink the meaning and purpose of our works and our walks? Across panels at the 2025 RGS conference, a shared theme emerged: A kind of recognition that our research, activism and creative practices might sometimes be doing *too much* and *too little* at the same time. This is an important if uncomfortable sentiment to carry, but we must. In doing so, I have found it helpful to think of staying with, wading through, breakdown not as a starting point, nor an endpoint, but as a midpoint, a ‘spiralling mode’: a moment to pause, regroup, return and revise. Walking through rubble in this way becomes a kind of choreographic and affective manoeuvre, a repeated movement of re-tracing, noticing and trying again that opens up possibilities. As the Palestinian activist and film director Rami Younis remarked in relation to the sci-fi documentary ‘Lyd’, ‘what’s the one thing they can never take? Our ability to imagine. And what’s the first step towards creating a better reality? Imagining a better reality’. It is precisely the capacity to imagine and re-imagine amidst the rubble that a spiralling mode makes possible. Such work is never a linear passage from destruction to recovery; rather, it is a meandering dance that moves with and alongside the cracks, the ruins and the pain.

In Swahili, there is a common refrain people use when asked how they are doing: ‘*Ninajaribu tu*’. I am just trying. It is a prosaic profound pronouncement, to just try, again. To regroup, to find your balance and have another go. I would like to suggest that a geography of breakdown is inextricably linked with a geography of ‘hope in praxis’ (Hazlewood et al. 2023), of trying, recognising that breakdown can all at once acknowledge loss, grief and ‘joyful militancy’ (Bergman and Montgomery 2017), that its affordances include the release into something else, seeing anew.

As a friend once said, 'it's a delicate dance' (Thieme 2021). A dance that requires ensemble work as much as solitary exploration, finding ways to walk through the rubble, in relation.

3.5 | Conclusion

In closing, 'Geographies and the New' signals a necessary recognition that the world is marked by breakdown, and that it might be more important than ever to sit (un)comfortably with what cannot be known or named. For what we have rushed to name as 'new' has too often led to capture, claims to 'mastery' and control (Singh 2018). The task, instead, is the ensemble work of deep noticing, of sensing what new formations and imaginaries might emerge in sites of seemingly unimaginable loss, harm and destruction. It means neither rushing to fix what seems broken (the techno-fix approach), nor turning away with fatalism (the defeatist approach). It means pausing to listen, look around and figure out what to do and with whom. To think with a spiraling mode is to consider *geographies and the new* as a practice of returning on different terms: revisiting sites where harm and other possibilities co-exist, retracing familiar steps knowing that the terrain has shifted underfoot and moving with curiosity and care. To just try again, amidst the rubble, to 'dig the holes and plant the grass', and imagine otherwise without presuming to know what a 'better reality' actually looks like.

4 | Being Open to the new

David Bissell

What does it mean to be open to novelty? I'm approaching the question as a cultural geographer and as someone who has been strongly influenced by the non-representational turn in our discipline which has helped me to explore how people navigate challenging life situations amid the dizzying crosswinds of social, economic and technological change. If we consider how non-representational geographies imagine novelty, this might be most accurately described as an 'immanent' sense of novelty. By this, I mean that rather than thinking about novelty in geography as primarily relating to discrete new forms, such as the presence of new technological objects that grab our attention (Wilson 2022), or the discursive, such as how proclaiming something as new helps to construct a sense of novelty (Leszczynski 2014), novelty is instead an essential quality of the open-ended, indeterminate becoming of space. In other words, novelty is an ontological reality. This immanent sense of novelty is, of course, the very heartbeat of Massey's *For Space*, where 'Places, rather than being locations of coherence, become the foci of the meeting and the nonmeeting of the previously unrelated and thus integral to the generation of novelty' (Massey 2005, 71). So, in a world of constant becoming, novelty is everywhere and always. Novelty is an endemic quality of the open-ended nature of space that is constantly and breathlessly in flux.

Yet why is it that, so often, this relentless novelty is not something that we or those we research necessarily feel or believe to be the case? Cultural geographers offer some clues as to why this might be. First, according to geographies of habit inspired by Bergson and Deleuze, it might be because we are too fixated

on consistencies and regularities to perceive and sense this novelty (Dewsbury 2015). So, although our everyday habits enable us to make it through the day, it is these very same habits that can also blind us to the new. Second, and relatedly, according to geographers inspired by Whitehead, it might be because experience rarely rises to the level of conscious perception and, as such, the incessant newness that characterises human experience is only ever dimly apprehended, if at all (Roberts 2024). Third, according to geographers inspired by Derrida, it might be because the new—the unrecognisable movement by which different things differ—radically defies recognition and can only be spoken about retrospectively, when it has been domesticated and brought into current systems of meaning (Harrison 2008). Each of these theories provides suggestions of why, instead of feeling the dizzying crosswinds of social, economic and technological change, we might counterintuitively perceive just sameness and similarity.

This non-perception of novelty, according to a generation of cultural geographers and political theorists, is highly problematic because it prevents people from both developing a proper awareness of transformations taking place as well as preventing people from appreciating how they are themselves part of these transformations. The answer to this problem, or so we are often led to believe, lays in the work of being more intensely affected by a world of becoming, by attuning to this novelty. In the words of political theorist William Connolly who captures our current disciplinary zeitgeist perfectly, this becoming more affected is about extending our political sensibilities by rendering us 'more sensitive to a variety of nonhuman force fields that impinge upon politico-economic life' (2013, 9). Couched in Deleuzian terms that have become so influential to cultural geographers, this is about being worthy of the event, becoming more present and engaged with life's experiences, deepening a sense of our lives and their connections to the assemblages that sustain us. Far from a niche injunction of cultural geography, we find this ethos across so much geographical work that seeks to raise or heighten 'awareness'. Indeed, more than just an awareness, even, this ethical stance of becoming more affected is about deepening an appreciation of ourselves as part of this ceaseless novelty. Attuning to the ceaseless becoming of the world, in the words of Elizabeth Grosz, 'has the potential to make us become other than ourselves, to make us unrecognizable' (2011, 87).

I have advocated for this ethos of attunement in my own research (e.g., Bissell 2011) and there are many political reasons why we would want to champion this ethos. But given how the call to intensify an attunement to the becoming of the world has become increasingly normative in parts of our discipline, from work on care ethics (e.g., Middleton and Samanani 2021) to work on the climate crisis (e.g., Verlie and Neimanis 2023), I am concerned that this call overlooks significant risks. For me, the biggest risk involves the inadvertent creation of a new hierarchy of subjects based on the extent to which they are supposedly open (or not) to novelty. Consider how the subject that is invoked in work on attunement presumes a specific set of heightened bodily capacities for affecting and being affected. In short, a subject that is present, engaged and capacious; capable of being affected (and thereby transformed) in particularly intense ways (and has a desire to be affected) so that one can capably affect back. Jane Bennett draws out the passive affects most persuasively when

she talks about how it's our responsibility to cultivate 'an ability to discern the vitality of matter' (Bennett 2010, 119, emphasis added). Conversely, Nigel Thrift emphasises the active affects involved, claiming it is our responsibility to 'build new forms of life' (Thrift 2008, 14, emphasis added) through fugitive practices on the margins of the known. Indeed, the urgency of the need to generate new capacities for discerning and building is palpable throughout Connolly's oeuvre when he unequivocally demands that: 'we must...'.

What these politically well-intentioned injunctions call for is an enterprising subject that is experimental, takes risks and exploits the degrees of freedom—the wiggle room—that arises in any situation (Masumi 2015, 105), regardless of economic and social constraint. Where others have expressed concern that such a capable subject coincides with the one ideally required by capitalism (Brown 2015), my concern is that our commitment to an enterprising subject sets up a troubling hierarchy based on whether we are supposedly open or not to the becoming of the world. This hierarchy based on openness to novelty is laid bare in Thrift's admonishment that 'what is clear is that all too often in our everyday life we are *not* open to that pressure and do not inhabit the midst of life, and thus live everyday life as, well, everyday life, clipping our own wings because we inhabit cringes that limit our field of action' (Thrift 2008, 14, original emphasis). Expanding our field of action is precisely the ethos that Deleuze (2006) finds so seductive in Nietzsche's figure of the Übermensch which he repurposes as a figure of thought that champions risk, creativity and openness to the new, rather than a subject that clings to comfort, sameness and safety. Others are more consoling, such as Berlant (2011), for whom comforting fantasies are less the cringes that limit us, and more generously thought of as anchors of consistency that help us get by. Yet still, the enterprising injunction remains the same: let go of attachments that ultimately deplete you (depletions that we academics have masterfully diagnosed) and yield to the becoming of the world by creating new structures of feeling. In short, there is celebration for those who are open to this novelty, and contempt for those who are not.

The pronoun 'we' that peppers these admonishments—that we must be open to the new—raises a related problem. A plural pronoun that recognises that this is a collective, rather than individual, task might offer initial comfort. Yet there's a disavowal at play in terms of the lack of willingness to state just who, exactly, it is that supposedly needs to be more open to the new. The unspecific target of address always leaves me wondering: am I your target? Is it us, as scholars, who need to be more open to the new? In which case, such calls could be read as invitations to refine our perceptual antennae to be able to sense what is going on in the world with greater clarity. In truth, though, I do not think that this is what is being called for. Recall Thrift's invitation that 'we' should more deeply 'inhabit the midst of life', for instance. This seems less about championing a discrete methodological disposition and instead appears to be a more general invitation to live a fuller (and therefore better) life. The divider between the social theory and self-help genre feels remarkably indistinct here. In the rear-view mirror, I wince at the final sentence of this paper that bears these signatures: 'Only by tentatively letting go, riding what carries us rather than fighting it can we grasp new movements, new thoughts, with greater finesse' (Bissell 2011,

2663, emphases added). If the target of address is not us as researchers, then who is it? Is it the communities that we are writing about? Is it people who have different political leanings to us? Is it people in positions of power? Or is it, really, everyone? Not being specific about who we are addressing means that such general calls for 'new modes of thinking and living' (Roberts et al. 2022, 137) ring out uneasily, buffeting up against an infinitely complex world of different capacities, different histories, different geographies. Mea culpa.

Indeed, the ethical stakes of the demand to be open to the new change markedly when the crosshairs are positioned elsewhere. What if the ceaseless becoming of the world was not necessarily always something to affirm for some people? What if, for some, being affectively open to novelty is understood an existential burden and a cause of wounding, as Joronen and Rose's (2021) work might suggest? Novelty—and becoming 'unrecognisable'—is far from inherently emancipatory, as geographical work on trauma and fatigue has illustrated so clearly (Todd 2023). Recall Doreen Massey's (2005) reminder too that 'new forms' can reproduce old hierarchies in a different guise and so affirming the becoming of the world might actually just mean affirming harm. In this respect, I wonder whether we might consider experiences of affective closure, of situations of *not* being open to the thrall of the world's becoming, in a less pejorative way? In the case of a traumatised community, for instance, rather than scorning comfort, sameness and safety, being affectively closed might be a tactical response, offering protection if someone is sure that they are being exposed to harm (Bissell 2022). Here there is a minor lineage of thinking about the insulatory role of anaesthetics that joins Simmel's notion of the blasé disposition to affective withdrawal in raced and classed situations of oppression, offering protective sheltering from affective onslaught, such that the harms of the world cut less intensely (see Yao 2021).

Other situations of affective closure might be less tactical, less self-protective and not in the service of self-preservation. Recently, I have been interested in thinking about unwilling forms of affective closure through experiences of being 'out of it', such as in brain fog, where previous bodily capacities for affecting and being affected can become diminished (Bissell 2025). Far from an enterprising subject, what I find so intriguing about these rather different situations of affective closure is that the ethical hinge-moment signalled by Thrift and others—where 'we' are presented with the responsibility to choose whether to be open or not to novelty—is sidestepped altogether. If the choice of whether to be open or not is based on an immanent evaluation of uplift and depletion in a situation, situations of being 'out of it' can scramble our evaluative capacities to make ethical judgements about our circumstances. Any diagnoses of 'false consciousness' in this situation—the myriad formulations of the idea that we're attached to that which depletes us which has become such a cornerstone theorisation of affective complexity in geography—seem insensitive to the fact that these are subjects who are simultaneously ensnared by the becoming of the world and at the same time strangely outside the world. In situations of being out of it, then, the decision to either be open or closed is an impossibility.

To close, my concern here has been with what I see as the widespread advocacy of an enterprising subject in geography who

has a responsibility to be open and attuned to the becoming of the world. Perhaps, there are discrete moments when such enterprising openness is required. Connolly's attention to differential periods of stability and flux might be prescient here. A responsibility to, in his words, 'cultivate the capacity to dwell sensitively in historically significant, forking moments' (2011, 165), might be a slightly less-continuous burden to carry. But still, to affirm one kind of affectively-attuned subject at the expense of a vast range of other kinds of embodiments does our discipline a disservice, because it reinstates the masterful gesture implicit in different formulations of affect theory that we can say with confidence what enhances or diminishes different people's flourishing. What we need, then, are geographical concepts that can better attend to these realities that are or have been suppressed by our current ways of conceptualising subjects and their relationship to novelty. As Grosz beautifully summarises, 'concepts are not premonitions, ways of predicting what will be; on the contrary, they are modes enacting of new forces. They are themselves the making of the new' (2011, 80).

5 | Space for Discomfort and Disagreement

Jenny Pickerill

I am as guilty as anyone else of trying to carve out new academic niches by inventing new terms, seeking to 'unsettle' established practices and, of course, often invoking the 'new' to secure grant funding or higher REF scores. Some of this engagement with novelty is driven by these survival instincts and an ongoing consciousness of the fragility of our academic job security. But I have mostly been motivated by the curious combination of joy and boredom about what is central to geography—how the world works. As geographers we are trained to identify patterns, trends and structures. After a while, you see familiar and entrenched systems everywhere—the predictable outcomes of capitalist extraction on fragile environments, or how the privileged rich get richer while the number who are unhoused or rely on food banks grows. It can feel rather depressing after a while to see how humans have become so adept at destruction—of ourselves and everything we rely on (Sheppard 2022). There is great joy when these behemoths get disrupted, when cracks appear in the predictable, and the possibility of worlds-otherwise emerges, even when only as temporary glimmers. This is the 'new' that inspires me. Yet crucially these disruptions are not always politically palatable or progressive, a point I return to.

It is the breadth of geography that I celebrate here—that there are few disciplinary limits to what I can research, how I do research, and what I might produce (Murphy 2018), what David Bissell has aptly described as an 'open-ended spaciousness'. I have changed my research focus many times as I tired of a topic. I also like to try new methodologies and have loved producing knowledge through alternative creative forms like comics, pamphlets, card games and zines. I have enjoyed the openness of what it means to be a geographer. Despite, or perhaps because of, some of my early encounters with senior geographers—one of whom shouted at me that 'It is people like you who are destroying geography'—that I have understood the discipline as a space of freedom, challenge and disagreements.

Geography as a discipline seems to particularly welcome new ways of thinking and doing. Its interdisciplinary remit encourages a smorgasbord of approaches given how it already incorporates spatial data science, cultural geography and glaciology alongside each other (to name just a few elements) (QAA 2022). To be an academic geographer is to also acknowledge how much of geography as a discipline—our colleagues' research—we might not understand. It is accepting a disunified understanding of the world, where we each have our own strengths in becoming attuned to how the world works, but in ways that differ from each other. This is where we learn, when others notice what we might have missed. The only times I have encountered gate-keeping or disciplinary boundaries has been elsewhere, where it has been made clear that I do not 'fit' the disciplines of Politics or Media Studies. This inclusivity and porous boundaries of geography enables, of course, deeply generative research into numerous complex world challenges such as climate change, poverty, energy and pollution, where a singular academic perspective would likely be unproductive.

Welcoming the 'new' in geography is, therefore, important not just as a form of academic survival, but as a vital disciplinary ethos that encourages an openness, inclusivity, pluralism and porosity in all that we do. In this era of polycrisis, rising fascism, white supremacy and war, this openness to new ways of thinking, being, producing and challenging is crucial. Geography as a diverse discipline is something we should maintain, celebrate and protect. This is even more so as many British universities seek to hive off elements of the discipline into disparate sections within Earth Science, Social Sciences or Environmental Science, in the process destroying the very intersectionalities that generated insightful research into wicked issues like climate change or crumbling food systems.

The trouble is that this celebration of openness often becomes attached to significant judgements about which values, views, research and knowledge are socially and politically acceptable within the discipline. It is very easy to call for inclusivity, but in practice incredibly difficult to find consensus for what that looks like in particular places. Even in those joyous disruptors I research with—eco-communities—who purport to be open and inclusive, there are asserted boundaries as to which values, views or practices are welcome or not (Pickerill 2025).

If geography is a discipline that already welcomes new ways of thinking and doing, how do we maintain such a disparate porous discipline? How can we hold together an intellectual space that can tolerate difference, conflict, discord and dissensus? Indeed, in this increasingly polarising and binarised world, is generating an academic space where we can co-exist without fracture and division, a space of mutual tolerance for difference, actually a deeply radical and necessary act? (see also Back 2016).

On a practical level, I am thinking of some of my colleagues' different research at Sheffield—those who actively embrace using machine-learning models, explore politically conservative approaches to the world or advocate technocratic 'solutions' to world problems—all approaches and standpoints with which I disagree. Yet I also defend their right to do that research and for us to work alongside each other within one discipline.

We could conceive of how we welcome ‘the new’ in geography through the concept of allyship—in that we support the rights of each other to research what and how they/we want, even if we disagree. Although there tends to be a leftist progressive tone to many understandings of allyship, there does not need to be. Allyship does not necessarily imply sameness; there can be unity within or across difference (Bishop 2023; Manekin et al. 2024). Allyship can be interpreted as being a supporter of others’ agendas and rights (Perry et al. 2024). In this case, the right to do Geography and be a geographer in whatever way you want.

The other element of allyship that is useful here is that it does not imply total agreement. I can advocate for an openness to what constitutes geography, without handing down a verdict of what geography should become. I can be an ally and withhold my judgement. Being an ally is about standing alongside, or letting others lead with your support; it is not the same as approval. Allyship is looser and more open than the demands of solidarity. For example, I was an ally in anti-war protests against the Iraq wars and stood alongside my Muslim fellow protestors, without having to agree to the gender politics I saw in some of the Islamic anti-war group spaces. My role as an ally in such spaces was to defend their right to be heard; my role (alongside others) was to hold open the space for pluralism and engagement. This is not to say that there are not moments when intentional solidarities might be required, as MacDonald and Bradley (2025) argue for feminist communities of practice as survival strategies to counter academic antagonisms. But rather these cannot become a disciplinary default because of how they can foreclose the very encounters with others in the world that we need to engage in.

Allyship here is more than a celebration of pluralism within the discipline. As Barnes and Sheppard (2010) explore, even within sub-disciplines such as economic geography, pluralism can often be fragmenting, flabby, polemical or defensive—operating in divisive siloes. Allyship builds on Barnes and Sheppard’s call for engaged pluralism, that there is deliberation, discussion, mutual respect and engagement between pluralist approaches, without any need for consensus, but also calls for more than this.

As Rosenman et al. (2020) argue, more is needed than listening to those we might disagree with, who bring new perspectives, knowledge or methodologies. Without structural change to the infrastructures of how knowledge is produced and published within geography, engaged pluralism is no more than a politics of recognition (Coulthard 2014), an empty signifier that we know is insufficient for meaningful change. Allyship requires work, to generate proactive dialogical engagement *alongside* reworking embedded systems of power and an active reconfiguration of the discipline that enables the ‘new’ to not just be heard, but published, employed, invited as keynotes and actively incorporated into key spaces within the discipline. Allyship calls on those with seniority, positionality and power within the discipline to take on the responsibility of actively creating space for the new through challenging any gatekeeping in publishing, to step aside and lift others up and to advocate with others.

This allyship to openness and engaging with the new strengthens our discipline. It creates a space for all types of geography, even the types which I personally might dislike or find uncomfortable. Geography always has had this breadth and

disagreement—we have military geographies and religious geographies, and we have geographers who work with defence organisations or take corporate sponsorship (Bryan 2016; Wainwright and Weaver 2021). In order to avoid becoming dogmatic and exclusionary—a performance of leftwing political positions of who can be considered the most ‘radical’ geographer—we need to retain this openness to difference, new interpretations and perspectives in the world *and* enact practices that enable ‘the new’ to be heard within our disciplinary knowledge production processes. This is ‘a responsibility to reciprocate what we have been given, beginning an active effort to dilute the power of the “center” by transferring some of the power to those outside this lineage’ (Rosenman et al. 2020, 527).

Indeed, I worry when I become too comfortable in geography as a discipline, when I come to geography conferences and hear views I broadly agree with. I worry about who we have excluded, who we have pushed out with our supposedly ethical judgements and left-leaning performances, and what we might not be understanding about the world as a consequence. While I recognise David Bissell’s call for a tactical withdrawal and closure to harm (again, as many of the eco-communities I work with have employed), for a discipline I want to defend a need for openness, a porosity, a pluralism, with the world despite its potential toxicity.

In my daily life, I often encounter political views I dislike—perhaps you too have family members who like to share their anti-immigrant, pro-capitalist views or live under a Reform-run Council? It is easy to rush to judgement, but me telling them how wrong they are does little to progress understanding. Alternatively if I can listen and hear them, make space for them to be heard, noticing what it is underneath these views is far more revealing and useful to all of us. As much as I would like to tear down the St George flags that now line my local streets, or paint over the St George cross painted on the roundabout, as much as I want to express a simple politics of outrage at these acts, as a geographer, I want to first understand why this corner of the world feels so forgotten, marginalised and fearful (Hochschild 2024). I need to be in active dialogue with these uncomfortable ideas. This type of engagement is slow, as Harriet Hawkins notes, a temporality of inching and creeping, rather than conceptual leaps. There can even be a sensation of going backwards when engaging with some of these politics, echoing Tatiana Thieme’s exploration of going back in order to reclaim and repair. Listening to pro-Reform arguments feels like a breakdown of all that feminism, multiculturalism and anti-racism fought for (Rose 1993; McKittrick 2006). Yet time is non-linear, it is cyclical, dynamic and fragmented, and exploring why some are reaching for ideally discarded values of the past is vital to understanding the contemporary moment and possible futures.

The new in geography should not, therefore, be a celebration of ideas that merely sound different and novel, but which actually continue to make us all feel comfortable. The new in geography is an openness to discomfort, challenge, withholding judgement and listening. This newness is still driven by curiosity, by pushing at the edges of our learning, and of being inquisitive of others and the world. But it explores, listens and discusses before it judges. It refuses to immediately default to a normative politics and holds open the possibilities of engagement and space within a diverse discipline for potentially disagreeable opinions (Chatterton 2006).

Indeed, allyship requires those of us with seniority and power to actively open up disciplinary spaces for ‘the new’.

This type of new prevents us becoming irrelevant academic bubbles of political smugness and ideological self-satisfaction. The new is what makes geography as a discipline exciting, unknown and inventive. This is not an advocacy to value all political ideas unchallenged, but rather to hear those ideas in order to debate and challenge them, rather than dismiss or disregard them outright. It is about generating new ways to gather together across difference and disagreement, be that through allyships, listening, or holding a ‘generous spaciousness’ that refuses to foreclose what might be possible, progressive or political. Holding this space as a discipline is novel in itself, but more than that it is precisely what is needed in this era of increasing polarisation and authoritarianism, a space that retains the capacity for critique that can occur in ways that are not immediately divisive, corrosive or foreclose discussion.

Maintaining, celebrating and protecting what is ‘new’ in geography in these ways reminds us how little we know and understand about the world, especially in such a smorgasbord of a discipline. Opening to the ‘new’ is premised on always acknowledging the possibilities of unexpected change and knowing how to hold the space for this potential, alongside critique, challenge and being perpetually inquisitive about the world.

6 | Black Geographies of Kings Hill Dominica: A ‘New’ Politics of Free Dissemination in Creative Geographic Practice-Based Research

Nathaniel Telemaque

This Intervention will see me introduce a conceptual idea and practice I call a ‘politics of free dissemination’, which underscores my ‘new’ practice-based contributions to the geographic discipline. It will also discuss the creation and sharing of a visual arts newspaper I created to disseminate autoethnographic and geographic fieldwork research findings (see Figure 1). In this respect, my contribution is on a different register to the others in this collection. Supplementing their reflections, I present my practice and allow the reader space to wonder about what counts as ‘new’ and how we recognise the new. In April 2024, I visited Kings Hill Dominica, the island of my descent and home to my extended family since 1962, to reflectively and reflexively focus on ideas of home, heritage and belonging. During my initial visit to Kings Hill, I committed myself to practice-based Black Geographies activities in an autoethnographic and photographic fieldwork project that saw me combine my audio-visual arts practices in photography, soundscape recording and filming, with rigorous autoethnographic and geographic writing, field note observations and archival research activities. Situating this body of work as a creative practice in Black Geographies (Noxolo 2025a, 2025b; McKittrick 2006; Glissant 1999) has effectively allowed me to audio-visually attend to Dominica’s natural poetic landscapes. Originally named Waitukubli by the island’s indigenous Kalinago people (Philogene and Esprit 2025), my attendance to the island’s landscapes also facilitated the sharing of Black diasporic reflections and observations situated between Dominica and the United Kingdom.

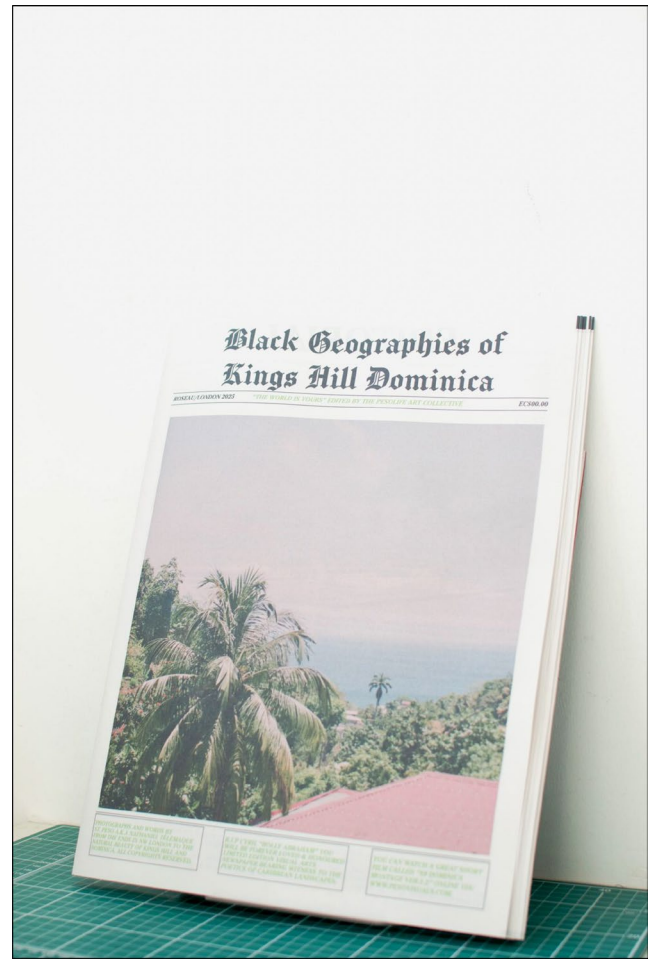


FIGURE 1 | Black Geographies of Kings Hill Dominica is a visual arts newspaper, designed to be an accessible format and means of sharing practice-based autoethnographic and geographic fieldwork findings focussed on the notions of home, heritage and belonging.

Upon my return to London, I began intermittently analysing my field notes, drafting journal articles, editing and sequencing a short film, all while creating a visual arts newspaper publication, alongside the organising of a public exhibition which took place in September 2025. All of this work has slowly but surely come together to form a developing eastern Caribbean-based strand of practice-based Black Geographies research and audio-visual art activities that are focussed on Dominica and the wider eastern Caribbean region. Part of that practice has involved a visual arts newspaper I created, entitled *Black Geographies of Kings Hill Dominica* (see Figure 1), which allowed me to share this body of work with public audiences in Dominica and Britain. During my second fieldwork visit to Dominica (which took place in July 2025), I became a humble ‘newspaper-boy’, as I began to freely deliver the newspaper to libraries, archives, radio stations and small businesses situated in and around Kings Hill. Most importantly, I also shared the newspaper with local people of all ages who lived and worked in the neighbourhood. All of these activities occurred during my second fieldwork visit to Dominica, where I began a visual ethnography and series of interviews focussing on the everyday understandings of natural open spaces on the island.

In taking up daily visual art newspaper-boy activities in Dominica, I aimed to freely disseminate this visual arts

newspaper on the island, so that it may be primarily shared with the people and natural poetic landscapes where the photographs and autoethnographic reflections were originally made. It was important for me to enact this sharing first in Dominica, so that I may adopt a slow research approach to the development of this eastern-Caribbean strand of practice-based scholarship (Rhiney 2025).⁶ By sharing this visual arts newspaper with different locals in and around Kings Hill, I was able to introduce myself, my research and my creative practices to different organisations and individuals. For those who attentively read the newspaper, they were able to engage with the autoethnographic reflections I penned during my first visit, as well as the photographs I made with the island. The aim in sharing this work was therefore two-fold, as the newspaper served as a means of introduction, as well as a means of sharing my research findings in an accessible and democratic manner.

Furthermore, it was important to share the newspaper in Dominica, prior to the newspaper being freely disseminated in London as a means of resisting the extractive, parachute-in-parachute-out fieldwork cultures that underscore a significant amount of geographic fieldwork activities (Lawrence and Dowey 2022). In sharing this newspaper in my initial two weeks, I was also able to revisit different individuals who maintained an interest in the work I was doing in and around Kings Hill and conduct photo-elicitation interviews based upon the newspaper's framings. Freely sharing the newspaper allowed me to position the photographs I made and autoethnographic reflections as materials that were highly capable of facilitating in-depth geographical dialogues about people and places in Dominica. Enacting a politics of free dissemination in my practice-based geographic works has enabled me to generate what may be considered a 'new' and or original approach to my contributions to the discipline of geography, as I've freely disseminated zines, pamphlets, photobooks and most recently a newspaper as a way of sharing my research findings and artistic activities in public manners.

The main idea and practice in establishing a politics of free dissemination within geographical research, is to freely share, distribute and disseminate research and self/published works so that people and educational organisations (i.e., libraries and archives) can engage with them in educational capacities both within and beyond academic or visual art spheres. A politics of free dissemination is highly inspired by the colloquial African American Vernacular English phrase and notion of 'free game', that is, the act of an individual giving someone free advice or insights, as a way of teaching them particular skills or to raise their awareness about specific topics (Urban Dictionary 2021).⁷ I received a substantial amount of 'free game' in the places I was raised in during my formative years between the geographies of North West London and Bridgeport, Connecticut. I then grew to fold this notion into my research and audio-visual arts activities in my latter years, by treating the free disseminations of my publications as a practice providing free game to interested individuals.

In light of my notion of enacting a politics of free dissemination in geographic and audio-visual arts activities, my answer to the question: How do geographers generate the 'new' in our own work, whether that be the invention of a new concept, an

embryonic idea, the beginnings of a project or a reconfigured method? My answer is fairly simple and yet paradoxically complex. In my geographic works thus far, I generate the 'new' by establishing and underscoring my practice-based research activities with a politics of free dissemination as both concept and practice. Conceptually, this idea seeks to curtail and subvert the neoliberal, elitist commodifications of knowledge production and artistic practices (Mason and Megoran 2023; Trumble and Van Riemsdijk 2016), by foregrounding ideas of equity in seeking to make practice-based geographic research and artworks freely accessible to variety of educational and archival organisations as well as individuals these works may be relevant to. A politics of free dissemination is also fundamentally inspired by Black Studies quintessential notions of resisting institutionalisation and substantively engaging with public spheres (Alkalimat 2021). In extension to this, a politics of free dissemination purposefully aims to facilitate public engagements in similar manners to Walter Rodney's critical pedagogical notion of 'Groundings', which witnessed him facilitate educational dialogue sessions with working-class people in the Caribbean (Rodney 2011).

Rather than staying within the realm of intangible esoteric theory and conceptualisation, in practice, a politics of free dissemination also sees researchers and artists enact slower, tangible and practical means to sharing their works in site-specific grassroots capacities. As opposed to simply sharing geographical research works in impersonal manners on mailing lists and websites as outputs of research projects, a politics of free dissemination sees that works are shared in highly interpersonal manners. Works are hand-delivered to individuals, organisations, the communities and locals where the research and audio-visual art practices were made.

Although this form of dissemination and the creation of a visual arts newspaper may have the potential to be a 'new' idea and or original addition to geographic research dissemination, it is important I acknowledge that freely disseminating my work is an entrenched practice-based activity I have folded into my research activities. So, while this practice of free dissemination may seem 'new' academically speaking, outside of the regimes of the academy and the incessant demands for 'new' scholarship, a politics of free dissemination has always been practiced by artists and practitioners who seek to share their works with the world, as a means of raising awareness on any issues they are creatively focussed upon. Think of the countless pamphleteering activities taken up by artists and activists who produced hundreds and hundreds of xerox copied zines, risograph prints and newsletters composed of images, prose, poetry, interview dialogues, manifestos and so much more. The idea of freely disseminating publications amongst different spaces and only if ever, charging people for these publications, as a means to reprint them in the future, is an age-old historical practice that gained renewed prominence in the late-twentieth century with the introduction of the Xerox machine (Eichhorn 2016).

Even the visual arts newspaper format I adopted was inspired by multiple geographic, photographic and journalistic visual arts references. The most significant of these was a series of archival encounters (Camp 2017), I experienced with Dominica's national newspapers when conducting research in the island's national archives and documentation centre.⁸ Another noteworthy inspiration was a NYC PS1 MoMA-based installation, which focussed on

a group of women who formed a Queensbridge photography collective, 'We Are Queensbridge' (MoMA 2022; Queensbridge 2018). This collective created a newspaper entitled 'Still Like Air I'll Rise' which featured the utilisation of photography, oral history and archival research centred on the livelihoods of women in the collective.⁹ Finally, the creation of my 'new' visual arts newspaper was also inspired by a series of collected newspapers. I share these references to argue that what I am doing in combining geographic research activities with audio-visual arts practice, is not necessarily 'new' or novel. Rather, although it has the potential to be 'new' to the discipline, the free dissemination of this newspaper in Dominica came about through what I would call a creative implementation of multiple inspirations, conceptual approaches, artistic principles and aims that guide how I conduct and disseminate my research and artworks.

Above all else the practice-based and geographic research activities I am taking up in and around Kings Hill, are a slow research project that requires time to retrospectively reflect on my positionality as an individual of Dominican descent, as well as commit myself to successive visits, as a means to build a substantive understanding of everyday life and the meanings of natural open spaces in the nature isle of the Caribbean. In doing so, I aim to slowly extend my research foci to the legacies of transatlantic slavery that continue to affect the island to this very day. I also aim to critically examine Dominica's green imperialist and botanical histories relative to its National Botanical Gardens' past experimentations with economic plants. Creatively establishing a politics of free dissemination in this body of work allows me to slowly but surely come to understand the people and places of Dominica not as a form of distanced fieldwork, but rather as a form of sincere and shareable heart work. It is a practice, perhaps like so many in geography, which is both new and not new, built from multiple legacies and inheritances, while also constituting a difference in comparison to other practices.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Endnotes

¹ Our thanks to a referee for encouraging us to pose the question in these terms.

² We thank one of the referees for the phrase 'ossified refrains'.

³ See, for example, *Transactions'* own 'Author guidelines' <https://rgs-ibg.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/hub/journal/14755661/homepage/forauthors.html>; movement beyond state-of-the-art is a common question in European Research Council applications, including the MSCA postdoctoral fellowships, <https://marie-skłodowska-curie-actions.ec.europa.eu/actions/postdoctoral-fellowships> (last accessed 16 October 2025).

⁴ <https://www.royalholloway.ac.uk/research-and-education/departments-and-schools/geography/research/explore-our-research/thinking-deep/> (last accessed 16 October 2025).

⁵ In a talk given by Conrad Rasmussen, 2 September 2025, Firm Foundations Series, City Rise. Accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BpaJPVfUX24> (last accessed 14 May 2026).

⁶ This slow research approach is greatly inspired by Kevon Rhiney's (2025) research on hurricane rebuilding efforts occurring on the eastern-Caribbean island of St. Martin. Visiting at least once a year since 2018, Rhiney has committed himself to a slow research approach focused on tracking the rebuilding efforts over time.

⁷ The late fashion designer Virgil Abloh has a website <https://free---game.com> that serves as a memorial and dedicated space used for sharing advice on how to start a brand, which is titled and based upon the notion of free game.

⁸ The phrases 'archival encounter' is utilised by Tina Campt as a means of delineating her interactions with photographic archival materials, which she draws upon to produce critical points of reflection in her archival research on Africans in Europe (Campt 2012).

⁹ The title of this newspaper 'Still Like Air I'll Rise' is inspired by Maya Angelou's poem 'Still I Rise'.

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