



University of Maribor Press

# HOLDING OUR GROUND

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American Association of  
Geographers – Qualitative  
Research Specialty Group  
(QRSG) Mini-Conference

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**Book of Abstracts**

Gabriella Subia Smith, Rae Baker, Ken Foote, Chrishma Perera, Mallory Sagehorn & Peter Kumer

E D I T O R S





University of Maribor

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Faculty of Arts

# Holding Our Ground

American Association of Geographers – Qualitative Research Specialty Group  
(QRSG) Mini-Conference

Book of Abstracts

Editors

**Gabriella Subia Smith**

**Rae Baker**

**Ken Foote**

**Chrishma Perera**

**Mallory Sagehorn**

**Peter Kumer**

March 2026

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Paper Session I

# Qualitative Inquiry in Shifting Political Landscapes

RAE BAKER

moderator

This session highlights how qualitative researchers navigate shifting political landscapes while uncovering opportunities for insight, engagement, and impact. Presenters will explore strategies for conducting ethical, relational, and values-driven research alongside communities affected by systemic inequalities, showing how challenges can inspire innovative approaches to methods and inquiry. By sharing lessons learned and practical tools, the session illuminates ways that qualitative research can remain rigorous, responsive, and transformative even in uncertain or politically charged contexts.

# Deconstructing and Reconstructing Worlds – As We Like It

GRAHAM KING

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If “all the world’s a stage,” what part do geographers play? Taking this geographic metaphor seriously, this presentation describes a methodological imperative and strategy for geographers to pull back the curtain on privileged forms, ‘common sense’ assumptions, or other naturalized theories, thereby unveiling the active construction of unequal power relations, a process that all too often operates comfortably behind the scenes. To accomplish this task, the presentation discusses the crucial methodological tasks of theoretical deconstruction and reconstruction. First, it details deconstruction techniques, including mid-level historicization; the critical interrogation of crises commonly depicted as ‘anomalous’ events; and the use of ‘doesn’t fit the theory’ cases. Second, it details the corollary reconstruction techniques, including the reassertion of agency to previously miscast actors; the promotion of processual and actively unfolding theoretical principles that reject the idea of ‘settled’ or ‘in the past’ events; and, crucially, the re-bounding of groups or

events previously considered outside the case that unsettles the myth of the ‘self-contained’ site. In all, the presentation hopes to inspire a methodological prerogative for geographers to use existing cases and their theories as critical jumping-off points, to take a detour through those theories by exposing their behind-the-curtain operators, and to reconceptualize those theories by promoting new, marginal perspectives on old, self-contained or ‘anomalous’ cases. Put another way, in pulling back the curtain on those operating behind the scenes, geographers play their part.

**Keywords:** power relations, critical geography, representation, critical theorization

# The Politics of Access: Reflections on the Ambivalent and Fragile Access to Qualitative Mobility Research

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While methodological debate in qualitative mobilities research mainly emphasises transparency, reflection and building rapport, less attention is paid to how belonging and non-belonging are negotiated in the fragile early moments of field access; particularly when researchers themselves occupy ambivalent positionalities. Drawing on ongoing projects in mobility research, we present two sets of empirical vignettes on the politics of access, which are rather anecdotal and pre-analytical at this stage. The first set follows a white female middle-class researcher who seeks to engage with food delivery riders in Berlin through ethnography and focus groups. The riders are predominantly Indian, students, and male and their work is shaped by platform economies, precarity, and racialised urban infrastructures. The second set reflects on

the access to mobility-biographical interviews with people with migration backgrounds working in mobility production in Munich and Cologne, either in the automotive industry or as public transport drivers – as a researcher whom herself is the (grand)child of migrant automotive producers. Across both cases, we explore moments of resonance and dissonance, inclusion and exclusion, as researchers navigate perceived and performed differences in ethnicity, class, gender, migration history, and professional identity. Rather than offering methodological solutions, we foreground the messy, affective, and relational labour of research access: We reflect on how aspects of identity are appropriated, muted, or amplified; how belonging is temporarily produced and strategically performed; and how these negotiations shape who – and what – becomes accessible. We argue that these early encounters are critical methodological moments, revealing the ethical and political conditions under which qualitative mobility research becomes possible.

**Keywords:** field access; positionality; belonging; researcher–participant relations; building rapport

# Hop-Along Ethnography, Fragmented Fieldwork, and the Messy Geographies of Urban Informality

VISHAVJEET DHANDA

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How do we conduct qualitative research alongside communities whose social fabric is itself fragmented – disrupted by eviction, enforcement, and the erasure of informal life from planning discourse? This paper proposes hop-along ethnography – walking alongside participants through their everyday transactional circuits in Delhi's street vendor economy – as a method for studying less-visible, messy, and fractured urban infrastructures. Its central argument is that fragmented and messy ethnography is not a methodological weakness: it is the appropriate and honest response to studying fragmented and messy infrastructures. Drawing on hop-alongs conducted around Delhi's footpath informalities, the paper develops two interlocking arguments. First, the ethnographic record is necessarily partial and discontinuous – no single walk

captures the whole, and the fragments are the data. This fragmentation mirrors the precarity of vendors periodically evicted and displaced by enforcement drives; when a vendor disappears, the fieldwork ruptures in the same moment that their livelihood does. Rather than smoothing over these ruptures, the method holds them as analytically significant. Second, the method embraces messiness in two senses: politically, because the improvisation and disorder of vendor life resists the clean categories of planning discourse; and reflexively, because the researcher's entanglement with participants – the emotional labour, ethical negotiations, and relational obligations of accompaniment – is constitutive data, not noise to be removed. Situated within the mobilities paradigm, Lefebvrian rhythmanalysis, and scholarship on urban informality in the Global South, the paper reflects on conducting relational, values-driven fieldwork under conditions of political precarity – managing participant safety, navigating enforcement events in the field, and producing knowledge that challenges planning's representational erasure of informal urbanism. It offers hop-along ethnography, and the broader framework of fragmented and messy ethnographies, as tools for qualitative geographers seeking rigorous, responsive, and politically engaged methods in hard times.

**Keywords:** hop-along ethnography, urban informality, spatial analysis, fragmented fieldwork, precarity

Paper Session II

**Pedagogy, Practice, and  
Politics: Teaching Qualitative  
Methods in Hard Times**

PETER KUMER

moderator

This session examines practices for teaching qualitative methods amid uncertainty, political instability, and resource constraints. Contributors explore strategies for integrating values, ethics, and relational approaches into both classroom and field-based instruction, highlighting how challenges can foster innovative and responsive pedagogies. Presenters will share reflections on preparing students and emerging scholars to conduct rigorous, meaningful, and socially engaged qualitative inquiry in hard times.

# Insights on Community Engaged Arctic Research from a Large Scale Project in Nunatsiavut (Labrador, Canada)

DYLAN SEIDLER

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Across Inuit Nunangat (the Inuit homelands of Canada) researchers have been called to engage ethically and meaningfully with community members to develop projects that support local goals. This article focuses on understanding such engagement in the context of Nunatsiavut, an Inuit-governed territory in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. In 2022 we conducted 27 qualitative interviews with researchers (both southern- and community-based), Inuit government representatives, and NGO representatives associated with the transdisciplinary SakKijânginnaKullugit Nunatsiavut Sivunitsangit (Sustainable Nunatsiavut Futures [SNF]) Project. SakKijânginnaKullugit Nunatsiavut Sivunitsangit began in 2020 and was designed, in part, to facilitate the co-production

of knowledge between researchers and community members around climatic changes in Nunatsiavut. Through interviews, we explored what ethical and meaningful community engagement means in the context of a large-scale transdisciplinary project. Drawing on an analysis of interview data, we examine how project members and partners engage with Inuit community members, and how members of the project team who are Inuit have experienced these engagements. Based on participant responses, we identified elements needed for, and barriers to, ethical and meaningful engagement. We also heard about possible solutions. University researchers described institutional constraints to long-term engagement, while members of the Nunatsiavut Government staff and Inuit research coordinators emphasized that extractive (one-sided) forms of engagement can negatively impact communities. Interviewees described how a) restructuring academic and funding institutions, b) broadening engagement methods, and c) scaling down within a project can minimize the likelihood of negative effects and lead to more ethical and meaningful community engagement

**Keywords:** knowledge co-production, qualitative research, community engaged research, documenting climatic change

# Subliminal Methods: Embedding Qualitative Research Skills in Non-Methods Human Geography Courses

GABRIELLA SUBIA SMITH

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Developing training and interest in qualitative research early in students' academic journeys can facilitate greater understanding of the production of knowledge, place, and politics. At the same time, the ability to interpret narratives, evaluate evidence, and engage in one's community is increasingly vital for preparing a well-informed, information-literate, and engaged citizenry for times of political instability and uncertainty. This talk reflects on the design and implementation of a semester-long final project for a non-methods undergraduate human geography course that I have taught online through the University of Colorado Boulder since 2021. The course, Power, Place, and Culture, explores intersections between political and cultural geography while emphasizing how situated and relational knowledge impacts our

interactions with people, places, and information. The course fulfills a general education social science requirement and typically enrolls students with little training or interest in human geography. However, the learning objectives for the course allow for an embedding of qualitative methodological tools across the curriculum and assignments that subtly invites students into the discipline. The final project balances structure with flexibility, allowing students to develop skills within a safe and scaffolded environment while pursuing their own interests and engaging with the people and places where they live. By embedding methods within course themes, allowing a broad range of choice, and encouraging reflection throughout the process, the design supports students in developing confidence, awareness of research ethics, and critical thinking skills needed for socially engaged inquiry in uncertain times. As a result, students leave the course recognizing the power of human geography and qualitative analysis for understanding the world around them, skills they can take with them beyond academic research.

**Keywords:** Undergraduate Pedagogy, Human Geography, Course Design

# Whose Methods? Our Methods! Teaching Qualitative Research for Care and Liberation

MEGHAN COPE

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Radical pedagogies have always been a part of progressive social change, and teaching qualitative methods can offer strong hands-on tools for real-world practice. This presentation identifies three key dimensions to constructing an action-oriented, justice-informed course: 1) untangling the processes of the production of knowledge by critically identifying how knowledge is woven with unequal power, voice, and ‘trustworthiness;’ 2) approaching qualitative methods from a position of expansive ethics, rooted in practices such as centering participant autonomy, dismantling extractivist research structures, and engaging in care-full listening; and 3) amplifying critical reflexivity at every point, including intentional power-sharing in collecting/generating data, cultivating liberatory frames of reference in analytical stages, positioning researchers as scholar-advocates, and generating creative communications to broad audiences. I then draw from experiences in recent

semesters of teaching qualitative research methods at an intermediate undergraduate level, grappling with challenges such as making the case for ‘multiple truths’ in a context of governmental assertions of ‘alternative facts’ and dystopian lies; centering care amidst dehumanizing rhetoric and policies; and thoughts on resisting or subverting prohibitions on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

**Keywords:** production of knowledge, expansive ethics, and critical reflexivity

Panel Discussion

**Responsive Methods for  
Resilient Futures:  
World Building and  
Qualitative Geography**

KEN FOOTE

moderator

This panel highlights how qualitative geographers are using innovative methods to imagine and build resilient futures in the face of uncertainty, political upheaval, and social inequities. Panelists will share their experiences designing and conducting research and pedagogical practice that center care, ethics, and relationality, demonstrating how qualitative inquiry can create spaces for collaboration, innovation, and transformative action. Together, the panel will explore the potential of qualitative geography to not only study the world but to actively participate in shaping more just, resilient, and vibrant futures.

# Panelists

XIAOLING CHEN

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In the panel session, I would like to share my experiences conducting ethnography for two research projects. The first project explores how the Chinese government reconfigured economic, political, ideological and social infrastructures for COVID-19 containment through primarily participant observation in institutions and organizations in 2021 and 2022, such as public hospital, police stations, mass vaccination stations, mass testing sites, and residential communities. The second project examines the lived experiences of Chinese individuals staying abroad (e.g., visiting scholars, faculty, students, postdocs), through in-depth semi-structure interviews, life stories, and participant observation since 2025. This research allows me to explore how infrastructure constitutes both enabling and disabling forces vis-à-vis individual and collective objectives, the roles of different social actors, and how derailments, contradictions, and dilemmas emerge from material, organizational, and affective processes. My participants possess multiple, overlapping, and intersecting social roles and identities, through which power dynamics, hierarchies, and social ruptures play out in complex ways. For me, maintaining field access means making them feel comfortable about my multiple, and at times seemingly contradictory, identities, such as being a Chinese citizen studying in a foreign institute that could be perceived as a risk under the government securitization narratives. I will discuss how I navigate these complicated field sites and engage with participants with different political, economic, socio-cultural, and ideological depositions.

## WEN TING OOI

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Feminist geographers have addressed reflexivity, positionality, embodied identities and care-full considerations of relationality and subjectivity in fieldwork. This paper reflects on the process of navigating practitioner/researcher identities informed by feminist ethics of care. While there has been methodological research on creative traditions, practice-led and participatory action research engaging with researcher positionality and reflexivity, there is still a gap in how researchers who are also creative practitioners navigate and are reflexive of their multiple positionalities. This paper argues for care-full and embodied geographical knowledge that reveals challenges and opportunities as one move between practitioner/researcher positionalities.

The paper is informed by fieldwork with Singaporean dancers on urban nature experience and my positionality as geographer/dance practitioner. 41 dancers participated in site-specific dance improvisations at urban green spaces and a collaborative body-mapping exercise was conducted. As practitioner/researcher, I draw from practice-led dance and geographical epistemologies during project formulation, data collection, data analysis, translation, and representation processes. My intertwined practitioner/researcher positionality revealed tensions, negotiations, and opportunities in (1) dilemmas, failures, and care for participant's creative freedom during collaborative fieldwork and data collection, (2) unending affectual residual and care work during data analysis, and (3) the need for careful translational and experimental decisions of research outputs. The practitioner/researcher cares for creative interlocutors in ways that shape embodied connections and disconnections. Caring for and considering multiple, shifting but ever-present and complex positionalities is important for researchers to move within and outside of academic communities.

## SAHIL SASIDHARAN

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As an urban geographer conducting ethnographic research into digitally-mediated urban transformations unfolding at India's agrarian-urban frontier that produce new property relations and attendant sociospatial marginalizations in her cities, I will

elaborate on my retroactively assembled and qualitatively committed methodological toolkit through which I am presently conducting fieldwork in India's capital city of Delhi. With my emphasis on understanding the situated technopolitics of India's contemporary peri-urban transformations, my digital ethnographic research includes in-person interviews and participant observations in both physical as well as digital settings linked to Delhi's agrarian-urban frontier where geospatial technologies and digital platforms mediate the planned peri-urbanization of 50,000 acres of agropastoral lands across a hundred-odd peri-urban villages in the peripheries of the capital. By inquiring into socio-cultural and political-economic implications of the processes, practices and politics of digitally producing peri-urban real estate, especially for agrarian-urban communities living at Delhi's edge, my works extends scholarship on how Indian peri-urbanization structures and reproduces existing inequalities by centering rural caste-class relations alongside emerging state-structured technopolitical affordances. With my ethnographic resolve to tracing sociotechnical transformations shaping Delhi's future in relation to her peripheral agrarian present, my research also emphasizes the role played by traditional village governance frameworks and linked social media activism by village youth in digitally re-mediating the politics of Delhi's peri-urbanization. By sharing my methodological innovations, I hope to broaden geography's discussions on the right to the city in the majority world by enabling qualitatively studying the mediational impact of digital technicities alongside the technopolitical inclusion of peri-urban actors.

TOBY SMITH

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Does the work of movements really benefit from contact with the academy? As an organizer involved in community movement work, as well as a scholar with meaningful political commitments writing about many of the issues I organize around, I have often struggled with the question of what, if anything, the academy has to offer a movement. And, by extension, what this paradox means for someone who, like me, finds themselves alternately on either side of that equation, depending on the context. One prominent leftist scholar recently asked, of the common tendency for academics to "nudge in" to organizing spaces, presuming their necessity in "giving voice" to movements: "Can we just not? Our potential contribution doesn't just have to be about writing or giving others a platform. It is simply to join the struggle, learn how to organize, learn how to disappear as a writer

and emerge as a comrade.” I find this drive crucial for building cohesive, generative, and committed organizing spaces, and yet, it feels incompatible with pursuing stable career work as a scholar within the University. I’m interested in thinking with others navigating similar questions around their roles as scholars doing work in organizing spaces and organizers doing work in academic spaces, as well as the stresses such a messy chiasmus produces.

Workshop

**Aligning Values and  
Methods in Qualitative  
Geographic Research  
(Grad Student-Focused)**

GABRIELLA SUBIA SMITH  
moderator

This workshop invites students to engage deeply with their research designs through the lens of their values. Participants will prepare a one-page summary of their project, the methods they hope to explore, and any questions or challenges they are navigating. Through collaborative breakout discussions, the workshop fosters reflective, seminar-style engagement that strengthens connections between methods, ethical commitments, and relational care, helping participants design research that is rigorous, responsive, and grounded in the values that guide their work.

## Biographies of moderators

### Rae Baker

is an assistant professor, policy practitioner, critical geographer, and organizer within movements for housing justice and community safety. Their scholarly and policy work address race, racism, and property relations through action-oriented investigations of urban land use, tenant and property rights, and public agency uses of AI. Rae is an affiliate faculty of the Center for Social Solutions at the University of Michigan. Rae is the chairperson of the AAG Qualitative Research Specialty Group.

### Peter Kumer

is a critical human geographer and assistant professor at the Department of Geography, University of Maribor (Slovenia). He uses interviews, surveys, and focus groups to explore questions of identity, marginality, and social justice, including queer geographies in both urban and rural environments. More recently, his research has focused on the sustainability of everyday mobility, community climate resilience, and quality of life.

### Ken Foote

(University of Connecticut) is a cultural and historical geographer who focuses on the relationships between landscape, memory, and commemoration. Much of his work relies on archival documents and photographs to explore how communities remember difficult histories and how memorial landscapes evolve over time in response to social and cultural change. He also uses interviews, surveys, and focus groups extensively for his other research interest in improving professional

development issues for early-career and non-tenure-track faculty and department leaders.

## **Gabriella Subia Smith**

is a postdoctoral researcher with the Innovative Genomics Institute at University of California, Berkeley. Her interdisciplinary qualitative research explores relationships between science, agriculture, and society through community-engaged methods. Working with agricultural communities in Latin America and the United States, she studies how scientific knowledge is interpreted, negotiated, and governed in practice. Her work draws on traditions in critical cartography and political ecology.

# Program

**8:00am – 2:30pm Pacific Daylight Time (PT)**

## **8:00am PT** **Paper Session I**

### **Qualitative Inquiry in Shifting Political Landscapes**

**Presenters:**

**Graham King** (University of British Columbia, Canada)

**Esma Gelis** (Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Germany)

**Anke Elisabeth Kläver** (Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Germany)

**Vishavjeet Dhanda** (University of Delhi, India)

**Moderator:**

**Rae Baker** (University of Cincinnati, USA)

## **9:30am PT** **Paper Session II**

### **Pedagogy, Practice, and Politics: Teaching Qualitative Methods in Hard Times**

**Presenters:**

**Dylan Seidler** (Dalhousie University, Canada)

**Gabriella Subia Smith** (University of California, Berkeley, USA)

**Meghan Cope** (University of Vermont, USA)

**Moderator:**

**Peter Kumer** (University of Maribor, Slovenia)

**11:00am PT**  
**Panel Discussion**

**Responsive Methods for Resilient Futures: World Building and Qualitative Geography**

**Panelists:**

**Xiaoling Chen** (National University of Singapore, Singapore)

**Wen Ting Ooi** (Clark University, USA)

**Sahil Sasidharan** (University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA)

**Toby Smith** (UC Davis, USA)

**Moderator:**

**Ken Foote** (University of Connecticut, USA)

**1:00pm PT**  
**Workshop**

**Aligning Values and Methods in Qualitative Geographic Research (Grad Student-Focused)**

**Workshop participants:**

**Wen Ting Ooi** (Clark University, USA)

**Esma Gelis** (Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Germany)

**Vishavjeet Dhanda** (University of Delhi, India)

**Arven Peek** (Heidelberg University, Germany)

**Edgar Garcia Velozo** (University of Kentucky, USA)

**Jared Saef** (Haverford College, USA)

**Adele Birkenes** (The George Washington University, USA)

**Fiorella Loli** (University of California, Davis, USA)

**Debanjana Ghosh** (University of Delhi, India)

**Shreela Chakrabarti** (Consultancy)

**Francesco Buscemi** (University of Bologna, Italy)

**Carley Dove-McFalls** (Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand)

**Samantha Saona Sarabia** (Columbia University, USA)

**Noemi Santo** (University of Maribor, Slovenia)

**Moderator:**

**Gabriella Subia Smith** (University of Colorado Boulder, USA)

# HOLDING OUR GROUND: AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF GEOGRAPHERS – QUALITATIVE RESEARCH SPECIALTY GROUP (QRSG) MINI-CONFERENCE, BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

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The publication *Holding Our Ground* presents a collection of abstracts from the mini-conference of the Qualitative Research Specialty Group of the American Association of Geographers. The contributions explore the role of qualitative methods in human geography in times of political uncertainty, social inequality, and institutional challenges. The sessions address themes such as conducting research in shifting political landscapes, teaching qualitative methods in difficult contexts, and developing responsive and ethical approaches to research and pedagogy. The authors reflect on issues of power, positionality, access to the field, community engagement, and the ethical responsibilities of researchers. Together, the contributions emphasize the importance of relational, values-driven, and socially engaged qualitative inquiry. The publication highlights how qualitative geographic research can remain rigorous and innovative while supporting more just, inclusive, and resilient futures.

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community engagement,  
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