



SPECIAL SECTION

Camp methodologies: The “how” of studying camps

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Abstract

This special section contributes to the growing interdisciplinary field of camp studies by examining the ways in which scholars methodologically approach and study camps and camp-like spaces. The characteristics of camps, which render them of interest to scholarship in the first place, simultaneously generate methodological, ethical, and practical questions for research. Yet comparatively few studies have explicitly addressed the methods and methodologies in camp research. How do camp contexts shape our underlying research philosophies and how do particular ways of doing research impact our conceptualisations of camps? The contributors to this special section provide a variety of answers to these questions, drawing on empirical research in/on current and historical camp settings. Overall, we gesture towards “camp methodologies” not as a set of prescribed tools, techniques, or epistemologies to be followed when studying camps but as a shorthand for approaches that consider first, how camp geographies delimit research activities and second, how methodological choices in turn (re)construct the camp conceptually in different ways. Ultimately, this collection aims to encourage critical debates and reflections to shed more light on the methodological effects, positionalities, responsibilities, complicities, and continuing necessities of studying camps.

KEYWORDS

camp methodologies, camp studies, fieldwork, methods, positionality

1 | INTRODUCTION

Camps and camp-like spaces have long sparked interest among geographers, sociologists, historians, architects, political scientists, and anthropologists alike. This scholarship has variously conceived of the camp as a modern technology of humanitarian aid and population management, a thanatopolitical institution, a site of protest and resistance, a metaphor of sovereign exclusion, or a means of colonial expansion, and more. However, comparatively few studies have explicitly focused on the methodologies of actually *doing* research in/on camps. The characteristics of camps, that make them of interest to researchers in the first place, generate methodological, ethical, and practical challenges for conducting research. Consequently, this special section contributes to an already multifaceted and growing body of camp studies literature by dwelling specifically on the “how” of studying camps. It does so by drawing on broader critical methodologies

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in diverse contexts of geographical enquiry. Although camps may exemplify somewhat “exceptional” policies, spatial formations, administrative regimes and practices of in/exclusion, they do not exist in political isolation, but often tend to reveal something more profound about the broader environments and societies of which they are part. What occurs in camps always has repercussions beyond their geographical confines and, vice versa, the sociopolitical landscapes that surround them impact and shape experiences of encampment. Hence, even readers of this special section who do not have a specialist interest in “the camp” per se may find that thinking about ways of approaching the geographies of this ubiquitous space of our time can help to make sense of what lies outside of it. Indeed, all “fieldwork,” and research generally, is inevitably shaped by specificities of place, politics, and their attendant power geometries. By invoking the shorthand of “camp methodologies,” we consciously reflect on the interrelationship of the distinctive characteristics of camps as places we study and our methodological approaches to conduct research on and in such sites. In doing so, our aim is not to create an inventory of methods and methodologies most appropriate to the study of camps but to reflect on ways in which scholars experience, write about, and theorise camps and, in turn, how camp spaces may limit and even define our methodological approaches.

The geographical span of camp studies reflects the proliferation, conceptual elasticity, as well as the perseverance of the “technology of the camp” globally, with much research having concentrated in particular on camps in the Middle East, Africa, Southeast Asia, and an expanding body of work now also focusing on contemporary Europe. Often deemed liminal, suspended, and even exceptional, the unstable terrain of camps between inclusion and exclusion, democracy and authoritarianism, life and death, care and control, has inspired copious amounts of scholarship rethinking their topographies (Giaccaria & Minca, 2011), spatialities (Minca, 2015; Ramadan, 2012), legalities (Janmyr, 2016; McConnachie, 2014), governance (Agier, 2011; Hyndman, 2000), economies (Jansen, 2016; Perouse De Montclos & Kagwanja, 2000), (un)exceptionalities (Edkins, 2000; Kamete, 2017; Martin, 2015; Oesch, 2017), politics (Maestri, 2017; Sanyal, 2011; Sigona, 2014; Turner, 2010), world-building (Singh, 2020), violence and policing (Brankamp, 2019; Mountz, 2011), (post) coloniality (Davies & Isakjee, 2018; Gilroy, 2004), everydayness (Abourahme, 2011, 2020; Feldman, 2015), potentialities as spaces of protest (Brown et al., 2018), eventual closure (Weima & Minca, 2021), and even radical horizons of abolition (Brankamp, 2022a).

Much energy and care has hitherto been invested in refining our conceptual understandings of camp spaces, gradually veering away from fossilising them as Agambenian “spaces of exception” (Agamben, 1998) towards appreciating them as more nuanced, dynamic, and pluralistic spatial formations with sometimes opposing effects of both repression and political transformation. Rather than essentialising the camp as a uniform political technology, Ramadan and Pascucci (2018) usefully argue that there is, indeed, a veritable “continuum of camps” (p. 212). Accordingly, Martin et al. (2020) propose that institutional and makeshift, oppressive and emancipatory camps exist “in a complementary, almost symbiotic relationship” (p. 744). The articles in this section point to, but cannot fully encapsulate, this diversity of camps as the authors reflect on research in/on sites that range geographically from north-western to south-eastern Europe and from northern to eastern Africa. The camps represented here vary from small and informal makeshift shelters assembled *en route* by refugees/migrants themselves, city-sized institutionalised refugee camps that are decades old, to Nazi concentration camps which served a different purpose altogether.

Remarkably, the unbroken popularity of camp studies outlined above has not been matched with the same rigour in reflecting on research methods and methodologies, although these have been no less diverse. Approaches to camp studies often fail to draw direct connections between methods, positionality, and theory, which include the manifold ways in which embodied practices shape – and are in turn shaped by – our conceptualisations of camps and comparable carceral spaces. More often than not, methodological discussions are relegated to short, designated sections of books, articles, reports, and dissertations. While these are important to contextualise particular studies and sites, they add little conceptual “grit” to camp debates generally. The contributions in this special section in *Area* highlight the ways in which the heterogeneous attributes of the camps we study have had profound effects on how we access, experience, study, depict, sense, historicise, theorise, and write about them.

2 | CAMP METHODOLOGIES IN PRACTICE

Methodology, broadly defined, typically encompasses the philosophical and conceptual underpinnings of research, including the questions asked, the categories employed, the rationale for choosing specific methods (i.e., techniques of data generation), the modes of analysis and interpretation, and how all of it is presented, written, or otherwise shared with audiences. Questions of ethics and power are always key in these processes, not least given the power relations

inherent in academic research and the wider uneven geographies in which scholars and their institutions are situated (Daley, 2021; Peake, 2017). As geographers we consider it especially important to reflect on how the particularities of place and power in varied locations shape our methodological choices and the possibilities of research. For example, attention to ethics and methodology in studies on “closed contexts” resonate with camp methodologies as camps, too, are often “settings... defined by the prevalence of... acts of closure” (Koch, 2013, p. 390; Nelson, 2013). Reflections on research in “sites of human migration where enforcement practices such as policing, interception and detention are transpiring, but often hidden from view,” are also relevant (Maillet et al., 2016, p. 928), particularly because some researchers might theoretically subsume such spaces in the category of “camps.” As in “camp methodologies” highlighted in this section, researchers in both “closed contexts” and “obscured sites” of migration detention may have to obtain official permissions (sometimes in illiberal settings), negotiate complex ethical boundaries due to state surveillance and violence, and wrestle reflexively with uneven relations of power and positionality, including differential (im)mobilities – relying on careful research design and “on-the-ground” changes and (re-)arrangements (Hagan, 2022; Koch, 2013; Maillet et al., 2016; Minca, 2022; Turner, 2013; Weima, 2022).

In practice, the rules and conditions governing and affecting research in and on camps vary greatly. They may include limits on movement within, entry to, or exit from a camp, required permits, curfews, prohibitions of photography or recording, restrictions on informal gatherings, restrictions on activities perceived by authorities as “political,” both actual and perceived surveillance, and even sudden closures. Some camps may not be physically accessible to outside researchers at all, either because they no longer exist or because researchers are denied entry (Neto, 2017). Conversely, people imprisoned in camps may not be able to leave and face a unique set of risks to life and liberty when researching and publishing (see Boochani, 2018). All of this shapes who and what scholars are “able to hear” in camps (Williams, 2012, p. 75) and the risks and ethical questions with which they may grapple in conducting research (see Holzer, 2015; Ramadan, 2009; Vermynen, 2016).

The highly uneven power relations which create and are created through encampment have been central to otherwise sparse discussions of methodology in camp studies. In early interventions, Hyndman (2000, 2001) advocates “studying up” to focus on humanitarian and state actors and their roles in the production of camp institutions, deliberately shifting the gaze from the encamped as the default “objects” of research. More recent scholarly work performs a similar methodological shift by invoking an “infrastructural analysis” of camps that traces the changing practical materialities of such spaces (Feigenbaum et al., 2013, p. 27). For example, Abourahme (2015) “ethnography of cement” is explicitly attentive to the material assemblage of the camp, the politics of homes and inhabitation, and the close entanglement of “agency” in “the very stuff” of encampment” (p. 216). In yet another approach to camp materiality, Benneyworth (2019) archeologically investigates the racialised hierarchies evident in the different camp conditions of forced labour camps during the South African Boer War at the turn of the twentieth century.

Further critical reflections on camp studies have highlighted the over-dependence of scholars on the privileged access and mobility afforded by the material and logistical infrastructure of powerful humanitarian agencies (Pascucci, 2019). Where informal camps are not served by state or officially sanctioned aid infrastructures, Jordan and Moser (2020) highlight the methodological challenges and opportunities of volunteering with grassroots organisations while conducting research. Another strain of methodological reflection focuses on questions of “voice” and highlighting refugee perspectives, including historical ethnographic work on which “voices” shape the dominant narratives about camps (Williams, 2012). Crucially, a number of recent publications foreground the viewpoints of people with lived experience of encampment themselves (Boochani, 2018; Calais Writers, 2017), and engage creative methods such as participatory photography (Grayson, 2017; Oh, 2012), refugee-created video (de Hasque, 2019), literature (Mbonimpa, 2020), and poetry (Qasmiyeh, 2021) to study and “write” camps. Meanwhile, ethnography continues to be one of the most prevalent approaches to researching and writing about camps, even though the implications of that methodological choice remain glaringly under-theorised (Vermynen, 2016; see also Brankamp, 2022b, Hagan, 2022).

3 | METHODOLOGICAL POSITIONING: THE COLONIALITY OF CAMPS AND CAMP RESEARCH

Importantly, the study of camps today remains inseparable from the haunting geographies of race and empire. Geography as a discipline has not only been complicit in “opening up” non-European parts of the world to oppression, colonisation and continuing economic exploitation, but has remained slow – and sometimes resistant – to address pressing questions of whiteness and inequality in its contemporary circuits of knowledge production (Noxolo, 2017; see also

Radcliffe, 2017). The discipline's contemporary “research terrains” continue to shape and be shaped by “the material and psychological dimensions of the unequal geographies produced by the colonial encounter” with ramifications for research methods and methodologies that are too often invisibilised (Mullings, 2005, p. 274; see also Said, 1989). Camp studies are by no means exempt from these concerns. On the contrary, relevant scholarship has been characterised by an unresolved and often undiscussed tension between the whiteness and privilege of those who drive the academic debates and the racialised “otherness” of their encamped subjects – detainees, refugees, non-citizens, as well as quarantined and others administered through emergency powers. After all, the overwhelming majority of the world's camp populations are found in, or hold citizenship of, formerly or currently colonised countries (as in Palestine). This circumstance reflects much wider geographies of exclusion, not least those that underpin “the racialized refugee regime” (Kyriakides et al., 2019; see also Daley, 2021; Mayblin, 2017).

Camps themselves were originally conceived as colonial spatial technologies, often organised through exploitative and dehumanising racial logics. Even when presented in humanitarian guise, camp logics experimented with governing subjugated populations in colonies before being eventually re-imported for use in the metropolitan heartlands of Europe and North America (Benneyworth, 2019; Lecadet & de Hasque, 2019; McConnachie, 2016; Minca, 2005; Mountz, 2011; Netz, 2010). Thus, alongside many other colonial inventions – like mechanisms of policing and repression – camps specifically designed for housing unwanted subjects have since experienced their own “boomerang effect” (Césaire, 2000 [1955]). Gilroy (2004) hence notes the enduring duality of camps, both as *metaphor* for exclusionary practices of race and nation as well as actually existing *institutions* for spatially ordering, pacifying, and administering human beings in their life or death (p. 85). In a similar vein, Davies and Isakjee (2018) rightfully argue that any scholarly engagement with mobility or camp geographies must necessarily acknowledge and unequivocally understand camps as “postcolonial entities.”

This in turn raises weighty questions about the practices of *studying* camps. Being based at major universities in the anglosphere and racialised as white, the contributors to this special section are cognisant of this difficult reality. Any serious attempt to critically reflect on the “how” of studying camps can hardly omit a sober discussion of “who” researches camps, “where” their research takes place, and “to whom” debates around camp geographies are addressed. While it is increasingly evident that “camps reproduce orientalist mappings of the world that deem some people incapable or unworthy of citizenship” (Rygiel, 2012, p. 807), Euro-American camp scholarship risks furthering the inimical effects of encampment by perpetuating a decidedly colonial gaze (Abushama, 2021). This conundrum may be reflective of the whiteness of geography as an academic discipline, which has notoriously trailed behind in incorporating and acting upon alternative knowledges. However, camp studies bring the contrast between the frequent hyper-mobility of scholars who freely travel and interview government officials or humanitarian actors and the routine immobilisation of their encamped interlocutors into even sharper relief.

By considering the “how” of camp research, this special section also aims to initiate a conversation about our responsibilities and (post)colonial entanglements as camp scholars – whether theorists or scholar-activists – and the long complicity of this field of study in maintaining a facade of “white innocence” (Wekker, 2016). We intentionally counter the tendency of camp studies to largely avoid these difficult conversations, and instead encourage critical reflexivity that sheds light on the methodological effects, positionalities, responsibilities, complicities, and continuing necessities of studying camps. This focus on camps comes at a time when research methodologies more broadly are being put under renewed scrutiny, both in geography and beyond (Brankamp & Weima, 2021; Carpi, 2021; Collins & Huang, 2012; Crang, 2003; Krzywoszynska, 2015; Mains et al., 2013; Militz et al., 2019; Sharp, 2005). The contributors draw on and contribute to these subfields of methodological inquiry, and particularly their attentiveness to positionality and postcoloniality; however, our shared interest lies in approaches to a specific type of space – the camp.

4 | CONTRIBUTIONS

The papers in this section consider the complex cultural, political, and everyday sensibilities of “doing” research in/on camps and among encamped populations: from the embodiedness of being present in camps, to our shifting and contradictory subjectivities as insiders/outsiders, intruders, and voyeurs; from witnessing (through) textual sources, to “feeling” subjects of suspicion and hope. We subsume reflection on these varied approaches under “camp methodologies.” Importantly, although employing diverse methods, all contributors attend to the ways in which the camp technology, its governance, and our differently embodied interactions with and within camps, distinctively shape “how” we do research and how we “know” or write about camps.

Richard Carter-White's article (Carter-White, 2022) reflects on the study of Nazi concentration camps through the testimony of survivors, and drawing primarily on the writings of Auschwitz survivor Charlotte Delbo to illustrate the possibilities and challenges of this approach. Hitherto, one technique of camp scholars has been to virtually “mine” witness accounts for cross-verifiable facts. Witness accounts are thus framed as “first hand observational data,” contributing to composite but disaggregated descriptions of historical camps. Yet, precisely because traumatic experiences of concentration camps create difficult, disturbing, and fragmented testimony, the stories of survivors themselves can disrupt analyses driven solely by “data verification.” A testimony's qualitatively disorienting character, which is itself significant in reflecting the shattering violence of camps, may be lost in decontextualised interpretations and representations of only “the facts” of a text. A more literary approach to interpreting and (re)presenting testimony has potential to value the jarring and ambiguous ways experiences of camps are recounted. Rather than lending themselves to theorising a universal camp, Carter-White demonstrates how testimonies make demands of readers in ways that both maintain the exceptionality of concentration camps, while disrupting and drawing connections between their “inside” and “outside.”

The “contingent camps” studied by Maria Hagan (2022) in Tangiers, Morocco, and Calais, France, differently unsettle many existing imaginaries of “the camp.” While camps are often framed as temporary, methodological approaches to studying even informal, contemporary camps have largely relied on their relative material durability in defined spaces, such as the former “Jungle” in Calais. At the sites of Hagan's research, within the intensifying violence of the European border zone, police destroy shelters constructed and reconstructed by migrant people as frequently as every two days. The precarious instability of these encampments disrupts common ontological assumptions about camps' spatio-temporalities and shapes practicalities and possibilities of research. Hagan therefore draws on diverse techniques to generate data, including photography, drawing, video, interviews, “hanging out,” and participating in the regular practices which assemble the camps, such as shelter construction. Employing ethnographic writing, Hagan's attention to the quotidian rhythms and affective atmospheres is evoked “rather than just report[ed]” (Vannini, 2015, p. 318, cited in Hagan, 2022). Her methods, ethics, theorisation, and representation are thus intimately entangled with, and respond to, the dynamic making of place and sociality in contingent camps, as well as their continued violent destruction.

Differently located in the European border zone, Claudio Minca (2022) reflects on how the dynamic and changing context of the Serbian “archipelago” of formal and informal camps shapes methodologies in often-troubled ways. Diverging governance practices that create these sites shape access and ethical considerations. Researchers' positionalities sway the fragmented or seemingly scripted stories they are told, as well as silences, and their interpretation. These camps, therefore, pose methodological challenges, requiring ad hoc, on-the-spot decision-making, or “makeshift methodologies.” As people move, and camps are abandoned or destroyed, the research team is faced with the question of how to study particular camps and their socialities when they no longer exist. Here Minca draws on Tazzioli's (2020) proposal for a “minor cartography of vanishing refugees' spaces” (p. 150, cited in Minca, 2022), “in order to engage with the partial, fragmented and overtly heterogeneous information available during our fieldwork and, moreover, with the interplay between visibility and invisibility of those very informal spatialities” (Minca, 2022).

In her paper, Yolanda Weima (2022) also draws on Tazzioli's (2020) proposal for minor, “counter-cartographies” (p. 150). She applies the concept, however, within a very different context: the western Tanzanian campscapes in which formal humanitarian sites host tens of thousands of Burundian and Congolese refugees and asylum seekers. While these large camps seem quite “fixed,” the officially gazetted boundaries have always been permeable in practice. Recent camp research has championed the politics of challenging state boundaries and categories created to “manage” and control people-out-of-place. Yet, researching boundary-crossing may increase the visibility of people who wish to remain clandestine, particularly in places like Tanzania where camp boundaries are “hardening.” Weima therefore limits her research with Burundian refugees to within the formally defined space of camps. Nevertheless, rather than reifying camp boundaries, the stories refugees recount trace counter-cartographies which cross boundaries and defy easy categorisation.

In the final paper, Hanno Brankamp (2022b) emphasises the “emotional space” of camps and argues that there is value, methodologically, in considering emotions and affect (together conceived of as “the affectual”) in camp research. Brankamp applies a “feeling”-lens to reflect on his ethnographic research in the decades-old Kakuma camp, which currently hosts over 150,000 refugees in north-western Kenya. The production of camps, he argues, is itself a spatial expression of feelings, ranging from fear to care to antipathy. Camps both “incubate” and are shaped by varying experienced emotions – from hope and solidarity to loss and despair – among those they seek to contain, as well as other actors in camps. By focusing specifically on the circulation and feelings of suspicion, Brankamp illustrates how attention to “the affectual” not only enriches discussions of camp methodologies but can contribute to conceptual understandings of the camp as well. He traces differentially experienced suspicion towards refugees, towards researchers, and among

refugees in the camp, as well as the ways in which “different suspicions tend to blend, overlap, and converge in the camp” Brankamp (2022b).

Collectively, these papers point to challenges of researching diverse camp(scape)s, but equally to the methodological possibilities that arise from critical reflection and negotiation of these situated challenges. In confronting an extensive typology of vastly different camp spaces, Abourahme (2020) weighs whether the term “camp” retains “any definitional rigor” (p. 35). “And yet,” he considers, “something connects all of these senses and form” (Abourahme, 2020, p. 35). In these papers we find methodological connections in research across extraordinarily diverse camp settings and research methods. One of those links is the shared theme of “blurring boundaries,” which resonates through all contributions: Minca highlights how observed practices in both formal and informal camps blur the boundaries between informal and formal practices of refugee mobility; Hagan questions what, where, and when a camp *is*, when it does not have a clearly delimited space; Brankamp demonstrates how the stickiness of circulating emotions exceed bodies and the formal camp space; the unsettling testimonies shared by Carter-White disrupt and beckon readers to witness concentration camps across time and space; finally, Weima engages with the performative power of camp boundaries, their innate politics, and their crossing. In a similar vein, several contributors reflect on power, place, and interpreting silences in the narratives generated within and about camps (Carter-White; Minca; Weima), on change and contingency in camp research (Hagan; Minca; Weima), and on encounters with authorities in negotiating access to and conditions of their camp research (Hagan; Brankamp; Minca; Weima).

Importantly, although we identify common themes across the contributions, this section neither prescribes specific methods, universal techniques, nor exceptionalises camp methodologies per se. At the same time, the articles that make up this collection cannot reasonably do justice to the actual diversity of existing camps, nor the wide range of methods and methodologies used across the field of camp studies. Further, the research conducted for these articles was completed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and so these contributions do not consider the methodological issues that may arise through remote or distanced research protocols – though critical considerations of the make-shift, contingent, and affectual nature of camps, and the role of testimony in disrupting commonplace interpretations across time and space, will certainly be relevant for discussions on remote methodologies. Lastly, the findings of these articles equally resonate with research concerns in non-camp contexts, highlighting not only the importance of critically interrogating the *camp boundary* that supposedly separates the camp from its “outside,” but also the fact that the idiosyncrasies of research sites and their relations of power typically shape methodological potentialities whether in camps or elsewhere.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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