

“What Is Critical Geography, What Can, and What Must It Be?”: A Continuing Conversation

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Abstract

We return to the question “What is critical geography, what can, and what must it be?” as an ongoing and collective problem and provocation. Taking the ACME Editorial Collective’s “Unpause-ish Statement” as a starting point, we situate this conversation within a conjuncture of overlapping crises that are reshaping both the worlds we study and the conditions under which we produce knowledge. Bringing together five contributions from the 2025 RGS-IBG panel, we trace how critical geography is being reworked across struggles over labour, care, method, and political responsibility. These interventions confront the co-optation of social justice, the urgency of responding to anti-trans violence, the possibilities of speculative and reparative approaches, and the importance of centring situated, embodied, and everyday practices of resistance and survival. Across all five, critical geography emerges as a contested praxis that must continually turn critique inward as well as outwards. We argue that critical geography must make its own conditions of labour visible, remain accountable to those most affected by injustice, and expand what counts as scholarship, method, and intervention. This is not a call to define the field, but to keep it open: to unpause without rushing, to refuse

without withdrawing, and to insist on forms of critique that are inseparable from care, responsibility, and collective world-making.

Introduction

What is critical geography, and what can—indeed what must—it be in a moment when the academy is straining, the world is burning, and the very conditions of intellectual labour are being reconfigured beneath our feet? This special issue takes up this question not as a definitional puzzle to be solved once and for all, but as an ongoing and necessarily collective conversation, one shaped by struggle, fatigue, refusal, and imagination. It is a conversation that must be returned to again and again.

We begin with the provocations and political commitments embedded in the *Unpause-ish Statement* by the ACME Editorial Collective (2023). Rather than returning to “business as usual” after COVID-19, the Statement insists that business as usual *is* the crisis: its pace, its violences, its demands on bodies and minds, and its reproduction of structural inequalities. The Collective reminds us that critical geography is not simply a set of radical theories or political commitments; it is also a practice of labour, care, and world-making enacted under conditions of precarity, exhaustion, and multiple intersecting crises. To think critically about space, the Statement suggests, requires rethinking the geographies of our own work: its temporalities, spatialities, infrastructures, burdens, and solidarities.

It is this provocation that animated the 2025 RGS-IBG panel, *What Is Critical Geography, What Can, and What Must It Be?*, which brought together five scholars whose contributions comprise this special issue. Each of them engages with a different dimension of what it means to inhabit the “unpause-ish” moment: to step forward carefully, sometimes to stand still, and sometimes to refuse movement entirely. Their work reminds us that critical geography is not a stable tradition but a constantly negotiated project, one that must seek to challenge the neoliberal transformations of the university, the entanglement of global crises, and the everyday politics of scholarly life.

In this editorial, we weave together the themes of the *Unpause-ish Statement* and the insights offered by our five contributors. We introduce these as distinct yet interconnected threads in an ongoing conversation that this special issue seeks to expand and invite others to engage with.

Unpause-ish Grounds: Critical Geography After the Pause

The *Unpause-ish Statement* offers the closest thing we have today to a manifesto for the discipline’s infrastructural, ethical, and political commitments. It demands that the labour of knowledge production be made transparent; that publishing processes be reimagined around care, mutual aid, and accountability; and that critical geography remain attentive to the ways in which the neoliberal university reproduces inequality through speed, opacity, and metricized value. Crucially, the Statement situates these commitments within a broader landscape of crisis: pandemic precarity, anti-Black and anti-trans violence, rising authoritarianism, austerity in higher education, and ongoing colonial dispossession. In this context, “unpausing” does not mean accelerating. It means continuing to work in slower, more careful, more relational ways that recognize not only the content of critique, but the

conditions under which critique is produced, within the academy and the structures that shape and sustain it.

Our contributors approach and attend to these themes from different perspectives—methodological, ethical, institutional, and epistemological—in relation to their own scholarship both within and outside the academy thus expanding what a critical geography makes possible. James Esson's opening contribution, *Critical Geography in the Age of the Social Justice Grift*, proposes that critical geography must always turn its critique inward as well as outwards, challenging and exposing "the structural conditions of the discipline itself" so as not to reinforce or reproduce "the very systems it seeks to contest". Esson warns of the danger of what he terms "social justice grift": the co-optation of progressive discourses to further institutional or personal reputations, rather than a commitment to the labour of social action. Resonating with the Statement's provocative tone, this powerful intervention is also a reminder that critical geography should not seek to be pinned down or to be prescriptive. It "encourages asking questions" rather than providing simple answers. For Esson, critical geography is a "praxis and orientation" that is underpinned by a commitment to challenging and transforming structures of oppression, but that "can be dangerous and must have consequences".

Esson's critique of discursive allyship that can mask real political action is a central concern within Jay Todd's intervention, *Trans People Are Facing Authoritarianism and Eliminationism: Is Critical Scholarship Failing to Respond?*, here in relation to the role of critical geography in the urgent struggle against growing anti-trans rhetoric, policies and violence. Taking as a starting point the UK Supreme Court's ruling to change the legal definition of a woman based on biological sex, Todd traces how trans-exclusionary discourses and practices have seeped into multiple sites and services, including those supposedly designed to protect and support marginalised communities. In the context of these devastating shifts, Todd asks: 'Where are the critical geographers?' Aligning and extending the provocations of the Statement, this question is an urgent reminder that critical geography is not abstract or detached from the status quo. Rather, it must continuously respond to and resist the structures and systems that marginalise and oppress, including those that sustain injustices within the discipline itself.

Elsa Noterman's contribution, *Towards More Speculative Critical Geographies*, also reminds us of the urgent role of critical geography within real struggles against injustice, in this case through reflection on her work on urban inequalities, property speculation and housing (in)justice. Resonating with Todd's and Jacobsen's commitment to expanding the disciplinary boundaries of critical geography to encompass the as yet unimagined, Noterman discusses the potential of speculation as integral to critical geography's commitment to imagining and building alternative futures: what she refers to as 'speculative critical geographies'. Yet bringing the speculative into critical geography is not only about thinking beyond the here and now. Rather, Noterman reflects on what it means to 'inhabit' speculation, whereby it "emerges from lived-in struggles that seek to change material conditions in the present and future." Like other contributors (Behzadi, Jacobsen), expanding the possibilities of critical geography involves methodological shifts as well as ethical, epistemological and structural ones.

Negar Elodie Behzadi picks up on the long histories of critical geographic scholarship to amplify movements fighting for racial, social, and environmental justice. In her powerful

and deeply personal contribution, *Critical Geography from Within*, Behzadi reflects on what it means to do critical geography today by weaving together her own positionality with a broader critique of the discipline's historical and epistemological foundations. Arguing that critical geography has long been shaped by feminist, anti-racist, post- and decolonial, and Global South perspectives—too often overlooked in mainstream accounts—Behzadi repositions critical geography as inherently plural and situated. From her standpoint as a feminist political geographer and migrant scholar, she outlines two key commitments. First, a politics of visibilization, which seeks to expose the systemic and embodied violences of extraction, displacement, and exhaustion; and second a praxis of reparation, which calls on scholars to move beyond critique toward responsibility, creativity, and care. Resonating with Noterman's and Jacobsen's interventions in the issue, Behzadi argues for arts-based, participatory, and autoethnographic methods, to make space for a critical geography that is not only analytical but reparative, one that builds archives of feeling and supports healing, solidarity, and collective world-making.

In the final contribution, Malene Jacobsen calls for *A Different Geography*, one that insists on doing, feeling, and imagining otherwise. Rather than centering critique alone, Jacobsen advocates for a critical geography that “tunes in” to the everyday practices of life-making and care, especially in contexts shaped by war, displacement, and protracted separation. Drawing on her long-term work with displaced Syrians in Denmark, she develops the concept of a “feminist geopolitics of living” to foreground how intimate and relational practices—like voice messages, online games, or legal challenges—are entangled with broader geopolitical forces and hold the potential to subvert and rework them. Jacobsen's contribution pushes us to stretch the discipline beyond its canonical limits and to take seriously abolitionist thought and praxis as tools for expanding our political imagination. What emerges is a vision of critical geography that is both attentive to the violence of the present and, like Noterman, committed to nurturing life-affirming, liberatory futures.

Toward a Continuing Conversation

Together, these five contributions do not resolve the question “What is critical geography, what can, and what must it be?”—nor should they. Instead, they demonstrate that the question itself structures an ongoing intellectual and political project that must remain open, revisable, and collective. Each contribution extends the *Unpause-ish Statement*, translating its commitments into different registers: infrastructural, embodied, temporal, activist, and institutional. Across these interventions, several themes recur:

- **Critical geography must make its own labour visible.** The infrastructures of journals, classrooms, and research projects are not neutral but sites of political struggle and possibility.
- **Critical geography must remain accountable to those most affected by crisis and injustice.** This includes rethinking citational politics, authorship practices, mentoring relations, and the distribution of institutional risk.
- **Critical geography must embrace alternative temporalities.** Slowness, rupture, grief, and refusal are not obstacles but necessary conditions for ethical knowledge production.

- **Critical geography must expand what counts as scholarship.** Public-facing, multilingual, creative, and collaborative forms are not supplements but crucial sites of critique.
- **Critical geography must imagine and build new institutional forms.** The collective itself becomes method and horizon.
- **Critical geography must critique and expose systems of oppression,** but it must also insist on making visible existing and yet-to-be imagined life-affirming and life-building struggles.

This special issue is therefore not an endpoint but a beginning. The 2025 RGS-IBG panel at which these ideas first took shape was a moment of shared reflection, but the issues it raised—labour, care, precarity, solidarity, and the future of radical scholarship—demand ongoing attention. In bringing these five contributions together, we initiate the first publication in a series of continued conversations that seek to interrogate the meanings, responsibilities, and futures of critical geography.

We invite our readers not simply to engage with these texts but to join this collective project: to unpauses without rushing, to refuse without withdrawing, to critique while caring, and to build geographies that can sustain us through the crises that shape our worlds. Critical geography is not yet what it must be. But it can become so—slowly, collaboratively, unpauses-ishly—through conversations like this one.

References

ACME Editorial Collective. (2023). "An Unpauses-ish Statement: An ACME Editorial," *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 22(1), 750-761. <https://doi.org/10.14288/acme.v22i1.2332>