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Discussions and interventions

The elastic field and time-space entanglements: insights from ship-time fieldwork in the Arctic

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Abstract

Ship-time fieldwork on expedition cruise ships is peculiar as the field never truly ends. Every moment spent onboard can potentially become valuable data, and the field can spatially expand far beyond the ship itself during landings and activities ashore. Drawing from two fieldwork campaigns at sea, in the Arctic, this paper explores how time and space are continuously changing in ship-time research, stretching and contracting into what is referred to as an elastic field. Temporal elasticity emerges from the disjunction between ship schedules, shifting time zones, and natural Arctic cycles like midnight sun. Spatial elasticity, meanwhile, arises from the placelessness of the vessel, the fleeting nature of landings, and the folding of research into private and shared spaces. Elasticity, thus, raises questions about positionality, ethics, and fatigue. By highlighting this elasticity, the paper invites scholars to rethink how fieldwork might be practiced, narrated, and theorized in contexts where movement is intrinsic to the research encounter.

Keywords: Fieldwork; Geography; Expedition cruise tourism; Time-space elasticity; Arctic.

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Introduction

I wake up in the same comfortable cabin each morning: the same bed and the same blow of the ventilation system above my head. Yet, when I pull the curtain aside, everything has changed. One day the view is a wide fjord surrounded by brown peaks and glaciers spilling into the water; the next day is an open stretch of sea or the vastness of the Arctic Ocean sea ice.

This is the paradox of life (and fieldwork) on an expedition cruise ship. One remains rooted in the same physical space but wakes up to different worlds every day. The ship brings consistency and motion, the familiar and the foreign, temporary home and elsewhere together. It is this paradox of being simultaneously anchored and adrift, that has shaped my reflections on the elasticity of fieldwork at sea. I have conducted two fieldwork campaigns at sea, both took place on an icebreaker – across the sea ice of the Arctic Ocean – and both were ethnographically oriented, during which I conducted semi-structured interviews with passengers and participant observation. In total, I spent 37 days fieldworking onboard.

Drawing from these two campaigns at sea, this paper reflects on how space and time become blurred, can stretch and contract during fieldworking onboard an Arctic cruise. On a moving ship, the field is never still. Its contours expand and contract depending on whether the researcher is in the cabin, on deck, in a zodiac, or briefly stepping ashore (or on ice). In this context, the rhythms of the fieldwork are characterized by overlapping timescales: the scheduled itinerary and excursions, the natural cycles of the Arctic (e.g., midnight sun), the geological time inscribed in glaciers and rocks, the finitude of the sea ice (see Kim et al. 2023), and the ephemeral moments of social encounters.

Nevertheless, as recalled by Valentine (2001: 43), "the way research is written up in academic journals often represents it as a linear, pristine, ordered process. Yet, in practice, most projects are actually more messy, frustrating, and complex". This, in turn, requires researchers to expect and anticipate needs for flexibility while in the field (Billo & Hiemstra 2013; McArdle 2022). While this need for flexibility and adaptability has been highlighted, for example, following loss of access to the field or last-minute changes (Schoon 2025), here I propose to explore the need for adaptability when the field site itself is continuously expanding and retracting, both in space and in time. I use the concept of elasticity, which in material sciences usually "describes the way a solid deforms when external stresses are applied" (Wang 2012: 494). Using this analogy with material sciences, the field(work) can be approached as an object on its own, understood through its elastic properties. In this context, the field becomes a dynamic and tangible entity, with the capacity to stretch and contract, that can hold tension, adapt to pressure and still maintain coherence.

By applying this elasticity to the field, and using the expedition cruise ship context, I aim to invite scholars to rethink how fieldwork might be practiced, narrated, and theorized in contexts where movement is intrinsic to data collection. I first and briefly contextualize expedition cruises in the polar regions, before engaging the concept of elasticity in relation to the time and space of the fieldwork, and finally discuss potential positionality and methodological implications.

Fieldwork onboard expedition cruise ships, in practice

Expedition cruise tourism is a niche segment of cruise tourism. As opposed to conventional cruises, expedition cruises are characterized by smaller vessels, carrying between 20 and 500 passengers. Rather than calling at new harbors each day, these expedition cruise ships anchor in bays or fjords, from which passengers are taken ashore by zodiacs for hikes and other activities. Itineraries generally take place in remote regions such as the Antarctic, Svalbard, Greenland and the Canadian Arctic. Daily programs are structured around shore excursions and onboard lectures on environmental, geographical or historical perspectives of the visited regions. In contrast to conventional cruises, expedition cruises follow flexible schedules, with routes and landings determined by weather and ice conditions, as well as the presence of other vessels in the area (van Bets et al. 2017; Varnajot & Lépy 2024).

Expedition cruise tourism is recognized as the fastest growing tourism segment in the Arctic (Palma et al. 2019). As more people visit the Arctic and the polar regions in general, expedition cruise ships themselves are emerging as important sites of human interactions, connections and meaning-making in these regions. This growth creates a pressing need for continuous monitoring and research, whereby understanding not only the environmental and logistical implications of expedition cruises is critical, but also the social, cultural and experiential dynamics it brings to light. In line with this, an increasing number of researchers, particularly from the social sciences and humanities, are expected to embark on ship-time fieldwork. Thus, thinking about the elasticity of the field in this context becomes topical, as it may help to capture how the boundaries of fieldwork stretch and contract during onboard fieldwork, and to reflect on what it means to be in the field.

Conducting fieldwork on cruise ships is peculiar. As researchers, we constantly share the field with passengers, guides, and other onboard scientists. Hardy et al. (2025) and Varnajot (forthcoming) provide detailed accounts of ship-time fieldwork in Antarctic and Arctic contexts, respectively. They highlight the challenges of data collection in such specific settings. They note that researchers, particularly from the social sciences, inhabit the same spaces as passengers, sharing meals, activities, gatherings, which can place them in a liminal position where their role and status can appear ambiguous or unclear from the passengers' perspective, which also help feed the reflections around this paper.

Endless days and fleeting hours: elastic time in the field

Life on ships is generally governed by a highly controlled sense of time. Expedition cruise ships follow the same model. Days are punctuated by meals, daily briefings, and the rhythm of excursions and conferences: breakfast at 7, zodiac boarding at 9, lunch at noon, afternoon landing or a conference at 2, recap at 6, dinner at 8. Inevitably, onboard fieldwork is shaped by these routines. Interviews are squeezed between scheduled activities or in evenings, and the days are sliced into repetitive segments. For both passengers and researchers, the time spent onboard, therefore, is both enabling and constraining as it structures activities, but also enforces a rhythm that can feel mechanical and relentless.

Against this backdrop, the Arctic – and the Polar regions in general – offers disorienting times. In those high latitudes, during summer, the sun does not set but traces a continuous circle above the horizon. During the second fieldwork campaign, as we approached the geographic North Pole at the equinox, the sun hung low in the sky all day long. In parallel, onboard, clocks were set back an hour each night to match time zones on the way to Alaska. This gradual adjustment eventually created a 12-hour gap between ship time and solar time, so that, according to our watches, the sun appeared to rise in the west in the afternoon. Onboard, we emancipated from world's timing conventions, and during these days, astronomical cycles, ship routines and human timekeeping all collapsed in confusion in ways that made time feel elastic.

Alongside this sensory disruption, passengers, and researchers alike, are encountering Arctic elements with different temporalities: the geological time of glaciers and some rock formations, the finitude of the ice projected to vanish within a few decades (Kim et al. 2023; Rounce et al. 2023). While we were in Svalbard, in both campaigns, the glaciers we encountered embodied millennia of compression, drift, and eventual dissolution under ongoing climate change, to the extent they even are considered "endangered species" (Carey 2007: 497). During these cruises, both passengers and researchers navigate in between these time scales as they explore, learn or collect data. These varying time scales are not only environmental, but also personal. For the researcher, ship-time stretches and contracts in particular ways. Indeed, days feel long, packed with constant interaction, yet weeks slip by quickly due to repetitions. The distinction between work and rest blurs as every meal, excursion, casual conversation can become potential data (further raising ethical concerns). The absence of private space reinforces the sense that onboard fieldwork is continuous, and fatigue builds from the pace of scheduled activities, conferences and landings. This results in a temporal elasticity whereby moments of intensity, exhaustion, and exhilaration alternate with periods of monotony and drift.

These experiences highlight both the simultaneity and elasticity of time in the field. Multiple timescales intersect onboard. On the one hand, there is the compressed temporality of tourism, in which each day must deliver novelty (another landing, another glacier, another conference). On the other hand, the fieldwork demands patience and sustained attention to detail. On top of that are the many temporalities of the Arctic: the deep time of glaciers, the suddenness of the weather, the finitude of ice. These entangled and overlapping timescales in the field resonate with Barbara Adam's (1998) claim that social life is always structured by multiple temporal dimensions: the immediacy of human schedules, the rhythms of the earth, and the ecological temporalities of environmental change. Her notion of 'timescapes' offers a useful framework for making sense of this simultaneity, the coexistence of multiple temporalities in ship-time fieldwork where time stretches, bends and folds back. In line with this, and building on Adam's timescapes concept, fieldwork in the Arctic can be understood as an elastic timescape with multiple temporal dimensions too.

Floating worlds and fleeting shores: elastic space in the field

Conducting fieldwork onboard a polar expedition cruise ship means being in a paradoxical field site. Indeed, on the one hand, it generates a strong sense of placelessness. Here, placelessness "evokes an environment lacking […] context wherein consumption is

prioritized" and "a place [that] might easily be mistaken for another due to a lack of distinctive features" (Makanse & Huijbens 2025: 1026). The ship, with its dining halls, lounges and cabins, epitomizes this placelessness. Life onboard is highly standardized and could just as easily occur in a Mediterranean or Caribbean resort. On the other hand, the ship constantly moves through unique and hyper-specific geographies. In Svalbard, each fjord or glacier has a name with historical meaning. In the Arctic Ocean, each ice floe or polar bear is singular. Announcements over the loudspeakers highlight these singularities: a walrus colony on a beach, a polar bear sighting starboard side, or a countdown of the coordinates and distance to the geographic North Pole. Fieldwork, thus, oscillates, stretches and contracts between two realities: the floating world of the ship and specific sites of the Arctic.

The cabin, in particular, epitomizes this ambiguity. For the researcher, it serves both as a private retreat and as a field site. It is where notes can be written; daily work conversations and recaps with the cabin mate are going on. In the cabin, the rumble of the ice breaking resonates through the walls and every object, constantly reminding me of the reason for my presence onboard: fieldwork. The cabin, therefore, is never truly a neutral space. It contracts personal and professional roles into 28 sq. meters. In line with this, the field does not start nor end at the cabin's doorstep but stretches from the private quarters to the common spaces.

Landings (ashore or on the ice) further complicate the spatial experience of the field and significantly contribute to the spatial elasticity. For the passengers, they are the highlights of the journey: brief moments allowing direct contact with the Arctic. For the researcher, they are also key occasions when the boundaries of the field open outward into vast Arctic landscapes. For a few hours, the field encompasses this vastness. Yet this expansion of the field is always accompanied by contradictions. Landings are tightly regulated for environmental and safety purposes. Guides mark out safe perimeters and lead passengers along predetermined paths. The experience of the Arctic, thus, remains staged and spatially bounded, reduced to a circuit with marked trails and stops for interpretation at specific sites. From the researcher's perspective, these spatial contractions are palpable as the promise of vastness if folded into a narrow itinerary. This dual spatiality, stretching from vast landscapes and contracting into orchestrated circuits, clearly shows the spatial elasticity of the field. The researcher navigates between the seemingly limitless geographies of the Arctic and the tightly managed choreography of expedition cruise tourism. The elasticity of space becomes an embodied experience where one feels the continuous tension between openness and closure, between immensity and narrowness.

Onboard fieldwork then takes place within what Michel Foucault (1967) conceptualized as heterotopias, where the ship represents a microcosm with its own functioning society within the broader world. These heterotopias are sites that exist in reality but that nonetheless stand apart from everyday social environments. In this sense, the researcher and passengers alike move between the heterotopia of the ship and the outside world when going ashore. In addition, between this floating microcosm and the outside world lie interstitial spaces, namely the zones of waiting and transition. In expedition rooms, for example, passengers prepare for shore landings, put their waterproof boots, parka and lifejacket on before boarding the zodiacs. These zodiacs too are interstitial spaces, as they shuttle people between the ship and the shore, allowing for fleeting chats with guides and passengers. Such spaces represent liminal stages that are also valuable for participant observation. In this context, Victor Turner's (1969) concept of liminality may help us better grasp the spatial elasticity of the field. Indeed, Turner's concept

describes the in-between phase of a ritual, when people are neither in their previous state nor fully into the next one. In line with this, during expedition cruises, these liminal spaces become facilitators of elasticity as they allow the field to spatially stretch and contract.

Concluding discussion: positionality and methodological implications

Conducting fieldwork on an expedition cruise ship is peculiar. Not only is the field a workplace, but it is also a temporary home, a tourist venue and a floating microcosm. As space stretches and contracts, these overlapping roles complicate the position of the researcher and require methodological adjustments. A significant challenge concerns note-taking and privacy. As raised by Hardy et al. (2025), it is crucial to allow time and space for autoethnographic accounts following participant observation during ship-time fieldwork. Onboard, there are only a few places where the researcher can isolate to write. Cabins are shared, public spaces are constantly animated, and schedules are tightly structured. In this context, taking notes requires improvisation. This also means that writing often competes with participation, forcing constant negotiation between being present in the field and stepping back to analyze it (Emerson et al. 2011).

Engaging in this spatial elasticity by sharing meals, joining activities and landings with passengers put the researcher in a liminal position. As discussed by Hardy et al. (2025), the distinction between being a tourist and being a researcher may be unclear. In addition, the researcher also experiences awe at a glacier front or excitement when spotting a polar bear and these affective moments illustrate the elasticity of positionality in the field with roles stretching and contracting, between subjectivity and objectivity; between observer, participant, and contemplator, further impacting data collection (Clifford 1986). This blending of roles brings to light ethical considerations. Indeed, in this microcosm, intimacy develops quickly, and the researcher's presence raises questions of consent and confidentiality as conversations flow in casual settings with passengers and crew members. Maintaining ethical boundaries thus requires transparency and reflexivity (Mauthner & Doucert 2003), deciding when to listen as a fellow traveler and when to record as a researcher.

To think the field with elasticity here is to recognize that time on an expedition cruise is neither linear nor uniform but stretches and contracts across contexts. Shipboard schedules compress experience into predictable units, while Arctic light stretches the day into an endless continuum. Such temporal disruptions are constitutive of ship-time fieldwork in the Arctic. They shape how data is collected, how relationships are formed, and how the field itself is conceptualized. The researcher must work not only with the constraints of passengers' schedules but also with the affective experience of temporal disorientation. Thus, engaging with the notion of elasticity is to acknowledge that time is not a neutral backdrop but an active force in fieldwork as it structures, disorients, and reshapes both research practices and ethnographic writing.

Another implication of spatial and temporal field elasticity is fatigue. As opposed to traditional field sites, in expedition cruises, the researcher cannot step outside the field. Life onboard is continuous, there is no 'off time.' The field is omnipresent, and fatigue is accretive and incremental. While this continuity may allow for rich data collection, it is also exhausting. Indeed, fatigue builds not only from the long hours of

social immersion, but also from the challenge of remaining attuned to the spatial and temporal elastic rhythms of onboard life, where moments of intensity alternate with long stretches of waiting. This resonates with the work of Bissell (2010), who showed that alternation of mobility and waiting phases can quickly produce forms of fatigue among public transport travelers.

Overall, expedition cruise fieldwork epitomizes that the field is not only spatially constructed but temporally entangled, and subject to disruptions that are both material and experiential. On the one hand, to explore the temporal elasticity is to accept that fieldwork is never conducted on a single time scale, but always across multiple and intersecting rhythms. The challenge for the researcher, then, is to write ethnography that captures how the field stretches between the fleeting and lasting, the exhaustion of repetition and the awe of new experiences. On the other hand, acknowledging spatial elasticity destabilizes the very notion of 'the field' as a static bounded site, and reframes it continuously reshaped by movement, routine, and social relations.

This is the last morning of my second fieldwork at sea. I wake once more in the same cabin, beneath the same ventilation. Yet again, when I look outside, the view has changed: the lights of Nome, Alaska, shimmer in the distance. Soon I will step ashore, leaving behind this floating heterotopia to re-enter the world beyond the ship, and carrying with me the elastic space-time that unfolded over these past three weeks.

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