

<http://somatosphere.net/2014/02/a-home-for-science-the-anthropology-of-tropical-and-arctic-field-stations.html>

## A Home for Science: the Anthropology of Tropical and Arctic Field-Stations

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By Wenzel Geissler, Ann Kelly, John Manton and Noémi Tousignant



While the AAAs were winding up in Chicago, participants in the workshop, [A Home for Science: the Anthropology of Tropical and Arctic Field-Stations](#), started to make their way north to an even colder part of the world. Hosted by the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo, co-organized by [Wenzel Geissler](#), [John Manton](#), [Ann Kelly](#) and [Gro Ween](#), and funded by the ESF- European Science Foundation (ESF), the workshop was held at the [Finse Alpine Research Station](#). The research station, located in Norway's Hardangervidda mountain plateau, regularly accommodates arctic and high altitude biologists, geologists and geophysicists from a range of Norwegian and international institutions. Over a mile from an isolated rail station and for the better part of the year only accessible on skis or by snow-mobile, Finse has also served as a training ground for polar expeditions since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this stormy week in late November, the station and its welcoming staff lead

by Erika Leslie and supported by two students from the University of Oslo, Mari Deraas and Ola Fjellstad, sheltered a group of historians, anthropologists, sociologists and artists who, among other things, sought to test their mettle in the arctic climes.

The workshop's dramatic setting provided its intellectual focus: while the importance of place in scientific practice has received considerable historical and anthropological attention, in Finse, our aim was to explore how these places serve as homes and to shed light on the way in which the far-flung circuits of scientific travel become enmeshed in the mundane practices of daily life. As sites of reconnaissance, appropriation, and adventure — a frontier of scientific and technological possibility — field stations also are productive sites to think through the affective dimensions of science, the longings and hardships, camaraderie and loneliness, homeliness and homesickness that belie the production of knowledge. These theoretical concerns have formed central preoccupations of the research collective, the [Anthropology of African Biosciences \(AAB\)](#), and our hope was to gain some theoretical traction by extending this dialogue across regions and disciplines.

Participants took up the question of the home in a number of interrelated ways. Drawing on historical and empirical materials, [Peder Roberts](#) and [Eric Paglia](#) compared the domestic arrangements at the base of the 1950s Norwegian-British-Swedish Antarctic expedition in Maudheim and contemporary private and public arrangements at the arctic station of Ny-Ålesund. Across these two cases they track the subtle ways geopolitical and intellectual values are materialized in the built-environment of the station and in the tenor and texture of everyday life. Their work reminds us that while field-stations are extra-territorial, belonging to academic institutions in historical centers of exploration and conquest, the work conducted on these sites is rooted in everyday necessities and comforts. Contributions from [Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye](#), [Ashley Ouvrier](#), and [Noémi Tousignant](#) and from [Wenzel Geissler](#) and [Ann Kelly](#) also reflect on the running together of scientific work and domesticity, drawing from material collected in the context of a collaborative project on the [Memories of Medical Research in Africa](#). Bringing together work in East and West Africa, these papers reveal how in which researchers and their local staff  *dwell*  in the scientific sites over long periods and how their engagements with each other and with the particular sites of research change over time.

The contestations that arise during that process of mutual habituation were compellingly illustrated by [Branwyn Poleykett](#) and [Peter Mangesho](#); their archival research in Amani, a laboratory in northern Tanzania, showed the struggles of African scientists whose expectations of Amani as a home, and their aspirations of civic advancement in the new Tanzanian

nation, failed to tally with the colonial notions of 'service' still at the heart of the institutes agenda. The power of imaginaries of the home to support and shape scientific endeavours was further illuminated by [Silvia Tomášková](#)'s research on Russian revolutionaries exiled to Siberia at the end of the nineteenth century. Through impressive ethnographic efforts, these exiles immersed themselves in local life and, in so doing, found a living exemplar of a political vision, which had cost them their home.

The station as a micro-polis was a leitmotif of discussions. Drawing insight from Latour and Sloterdijk, [Martin Skrydstrup](#) shed light on the aesthetics and layout of *North Greenland Eemian Ice Core Drilling* (NEEM) to reflect on the ideological commitments of climate research, to forge both ideal citizen-scientists and responsive publics. [Barbara Bodenhorn](#)'s long-term ethnographic work with whaling Iñupiaq communities living in Barrow, Alaska, suggested the ways in which the siting of the research station – here, The Naval Arctic Research Lab (NARL) – can open a space for collaboration, transforming the interesting of visiting scientists to dovetail more closely with their local hosts. Those expressions of hospitality can also replicate historically sedimented asymmetries of epistemological, cultural, and political power; as [Ferdinand Okwaro](#)'s work on international research partnerships in Kenya made clear. While the value of knowledge may be framed as a common good, Okwaro reminded us that research is mediated by everyday practices of reciprocity and material exchange and delicate negotiations around access to sites and population, bodies and labour.

The papers drew from a diverse range of geographical expertise – from [Guillaume Lachenal](#)'s historical reflections on an ecological station in Cote D'Ivoire to [Götz Hoeppe](#)'s work with visiting astronomers at an Observatory in the Chilean Atacama desert – but the spur of discussion was comparative. The arctic and the tropics represent radically distinct spaces of nature, conquest and imagination and yet these antithetical landscapes are similarly anchored in the research outpost, scientific fieldstation and ethnographer's tent. Giving the ethical questions and geopolitical concerns attendant to circumpolar and equatorial a mundane material focus we hoped to elaborate new conceptual vocabularies that link northern and southern marginal spaces. [Peter Redfield](#)'s discussion of medical kits and offered a clear entry point into that creative dialogue, suggesting how research infrastructures extend temperate milieu's across space. [Rémy Rouillard](#) and [Vanessa Heggie](#), describing processes of acclimatization undertaken by Russian oil workers and Alpine Research respectively, showed how the body can also perform that work of stabilization and extension in extreme climates. [Gro Ween](#)'s collaboration with the artist [Sabine Popp](#) described experiments of embodiment work to reflect upon the many meanings of physical presence in extreme contexts.

Sabine Popp was one of a group of artists who in the evenings following dinner (often involving elk and reindeer meat) showed their work. [Evgenia Arbugaeva](#), a Siberian photographer presented some startlingly beautiful images from her childhood home, [Tiksi a once-important Soviet military and scientific base](#). [Mariele Neudecker](#) presented work from a recent trip to Greenland, encouraging the audience to speculate about what defines the line between nature and landscape, and contemplating on how to define the *contemporary sublime*. [Deborah Robinson](#) presented work conducted at the Wellcome Sanger Institute in the UK; her multi-screen installation [Parasite](#) created in response to malaria, raised a number of questions about the disentanglement of research populations from the sites of knowledge production. We also had the pleasure of hearing about the work of Hugh Broughton Architects from [Gianluca Rendina](#) and marveling over the recent designs of mobile arctic stations and watching a screening of [Lars Einar Skageberg](#)'s documentary, [An Arctic Space Odyssey](#), which provides a window in the isolation and political pressure of research in the arctic station Ny-Ålesund, on the remote island of Svalbard during the height of the Cold War.

Skageberg's project as well as that of the other artists gave expression to the visceral dimensions of life at the fieldstation, which often escape scholarly analysis. From photographs and super-8 films, installations and multi-media interventions, we were able to reconceptualise the unpredictable forms of contact between humans and their surroundings in these 'dark' and 'unspoilt' areas and begin to come to terms with the multiple ways in which the fieldstation yokes laboratory to outpost, exploration to domesticity, inquiry to survival. A *domus* of a very particular kind, field stations generate zones of shared living between humans and landscape, scientists and their local collaborators. An experience that we were privileged to sample during our week together in Finse.

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Image: [Halley VI Research Station. James Morris](#)

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