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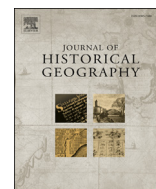
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## Reflections on the first decade of the HPGRG undergraduate dissertation prize: The geography and politics of reward

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## ABSTRACT

The History and Philosophy of Geography Research Group launched its undergraduate dissertation prize in 2008. This paper reflects on the dissertations submitted throughout its first decade, highlighting particular themes in Deleuzian-inspired vitalism and immanence, attention to the politics of knowledge production, and the emergence of critical physical geography. The paper also discusses the practice of awarding a prize, noting evidence that this is both shaped by, and reproduces, structural inequalities in academic work. The prize exhibits a particular geography and politics within the academic prestige economy.

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The History and Philosophy of Geography Research Group (HPGRG) undergraduate dissertation prize was launched in 2008, following the example of other research groups of the Royal Geographical Society (the Institute of British Geographers) (hereafter referred to as RGS-IBG).<sup>1</sup> The prize has consistently attracted submissions of exceptional quality, spanning the breadth of the discipline and paying critical attention to the ways in which geographical knowledge is and has been produced. As Bruinsma argues, the 'small voice[s]' of student dissertations, considered collectively, form a choir that may offer particular insights into the concerns and practices of geographers at particular times.<sup>2</sup> Equally, the very act of offering and awarding a prize is embedded within the context and norms of academic practice both within and beyond geography. This paper offers a reflection on the first decade of the prize (2008–2019) with such themes in mind. It is inevitably a personal reflection – others would undoubtedly offer a different record – and inevitably partial, based largely on memories and notes, having not retained copies of the dissertations (a point I return to at the end). I draw on the full range of dissertations submitted while explicitly acknowledging only those awarded the prize and/or commendations, thus preserving the anonymity of students whose work was not rewarded.

To begin with the dissertations themselves, a comprehensive summary is impossible. The panel generally received between three and five submissions each year to judge between. There has been a dominance of philosophy of geography and interrogation of contemporary geographical knowledge, discourses and practices (whether in academic, public or private spheres) over history of geography submissions. These have ranged from engagements with products and practices of art, film, music or theatre, through to the politics of whistleblowing, housing or flood risk management. Examinations of smartphones, cyberplaces and online communities and networks sit alongside deliberations on river punting, Zen Buddhism or psychogeographical outdoor education. Among the considerably fewer dissertations clearly addressing histories of geography, most are associated in some way with explorations of Other places, Other lands – perhaps inevitably, given British Geography's imperial past. These include examinations of colonial explorer narratives of local populations in South Africa, the hunt for the North West Passage, anxieties and ambivalences of Empire in Byron's Turkish Tales, and historic expeditions and travels to Easter Island, Arabia and elsewhere. At least two of these involved working with primary sources in the RGS-IBG archives.

In terms of what the submission and prize-winning works might tell us about geography through the period 2008–2019, multiple possibilities come to mind. Epistemic pluralism is strong. Geography's attention to scale and connections remains current, the spaces of geography inevitably extending into cyberspace. Geographers are not just paying attention to, but also deploying, artistic practices, the discipline spanning the natural sciences,

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<sup>1</sup> Heike Jöns, then Secretary of the HPGRG committee, is noted in the AGM minutes of 29/08/08 as having been instrumental in establishing the prize.

<sup>2</sup> Mette Bruinsma, The geographers in the cupboard: narrating the history of Geography using undergraduate dissertations, *Area* 53 (2020) 67–75.

social sciences, humanities and arts. But I want to briefly highlight three themes here. The first is a prevalence of embodied and affective geographies and influence of broadly Deleuzian vitalism and immanence, articulating the world as always-in-process. A particularly memorable example was Alexander Bello's exploration of the immaterial, sensory dimensions of playing in a tin-pan band.<sup>3</sup> This work was extraordinary in the way it addressed the challenge of representing the non-representational, articulating the inarticulable: you could feel the rhythm of the music *in the writing* such that, as I read it, I found myself swaying to music I could not hear. Heated debate among the prize panel ensued.

The second is a direct concern with the politics of knowledge production and amplifying hitherto marginalized voices. Olivia Russell's study of the work (1913–18) of Gertrude Bell in Arabia offers one such example, highlighting not just the role of a woman in the development of geographical knowledge but also the invisible contributions to her work of local intermediaries and Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) functionaries.<sup>4</sup> Russell thus argues a case for a historiography of geography of *all* marginalized knowledges. Contemporary concerns with decolonization are also reflected among the prize winners, in Sophie Buckle's engagement with – and poetic exploration of – the work of Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson.<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously ambitious and highly reflexive, this was a particularly nuanced account addressing both theory and practice.

Thirdly, while submissions have undoubtedly been dominated by human geography, a small number have engaged with physical geography. A particularly memorable example was Sebastian Koa's 'Propositions for a radically empirical geomorphology'.<sup>6</sup> This work drew on a huge range of literature from across geomorphology, science, science & technology studies, and philosophy to critique the usual knowledge-making practices in geomorphology. But Koa also pushed beyond critique, offering new ways to attend to research practices and processes, and challenging what notions of design and execution of a project could or should mean in geomorphology. It is striking that this dissertation was written in the same year that Rebecca Lave and colleagues brought the term 'critical physical geography' into the public domain.<sup>7</sup> The HPGRG dissertation submissions can thus anticipate where the discipline is heading, not just follow its latest currents.

Offering and awarding a prize is both a common practice and seemingly in tension with cultural (including intellectual) endeavour, extending a competitive and economic logic to cultural activity.<sup>8</sup> Prizes are positional goods, part of the system of honorific

rewards of science, in which public recognition is granted for distinctive, novel contributions.<sup>9</sup> Undergraduate dissertation prizes offered by the RGS-IBG research groups effectively extend the much longer-standing reward system of the Society's medals and awards 'downwards', offering a rung in the prize hierarchy between those and the more local prizes awarded by institutions and departments.<sup>10</sup> The sign value of the prize confers prestige, signifying social (academic) status or power, and such signifiers of prestige can be traded for status in the 'academic prestige economy'.<sup>11</sup> Alongside conferring prestige on the prize-winning individuals, who may or may not remain in academia, this is surely relevant both for the HPGRG itself and for the departments submitting the winning dissertations.<sup>12</sup>

For the HPGRG, the prize communicates that the research group is sufficiently well established to award a prize year-on-year and has the authority to do so – comparable to the many other RGS-IBG research groups that award dissertation prizes. It thus signals the status of the group. It is a mechanism of visibility, where visibility is a social process combining the domains of aesthetics (perception) and politics (power).<sup>13</sup> HPGRG is visibly listed among the prize-awarding RGS-IBG research groups. Sponsorship of the prize by SAGE from 2019, in the form of a year's subscription to either 'Progress in Human Geography' or 'Progress in Physical Geography' for the prize winner, further institutionalizes the prize and reinforces its status, and thus that of the group. The dissertation prize web page has consistently been the most visited of the HPGRG website across multiple years, a fact noted in the group's Annual General Meetings. Whether this increased visibility promotes engagement with history and philosophy of geography among different constituents (academic staff, students) is more difficult to judge.

Submissions to the prize are made by academic staff, usually a dissertation coordinator or Head of Department. Through 2008–2019 submissions came from seventeen different universities: fourteen in England, two in Scotland and one in Wales. The prize is open to international submissions but received none during this period, despite being advertised via at least one mailing list with international membership.<sup>14</sup> Of those seventeen universities, fourteen are members of the Russell Group, the self-proclaimed 'leading' UK universities.<sup>15</sup> The cause of this apparent bias is not clear. Possibilities may include: differences in content between degree programmes, giving greater prominence to history and philosophy of geography in some than in others; particular interests of staff members (individually or collectively) in particular

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Bello, Sensing the 'non-representational': a bodily exploration with the immaterialities of 'playing pan' using a 'research-in-practice' approach to creatively intervene in the folding of the world, unpublished undergraduate dissertation, University of Bristol, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Olivia Russell, Geography, cartography and military intelligence; Gertrude Bell's cartographic work for the Royal Geographical Society in 1913–1918, MA dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2019 <https://hpgrg.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/olivia-russell-dissertation.pdf>, last accessed 12 April 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Sophie Buckle, Writing between worlds: an audiencing of Leanne Simpson's stories as theory for decolonising academic writing practices, undergraduate dissertation, University of Bristol, 2019. <https://hpgrg.files.wordpress.com/2018/09/buckle-writing-worlds1.pdf>, last accessed 12 April 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Sebastian Koa, Propositions for a radically empirical geomorphology, unpublished undergraduate dissertation, University of Oxford, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Lave, Matthew W. Wilson, Elizabeth S. Barron, Christine Biermann, Mark A. Carey, Chris S. Duvall, Leigh Johnson, K. Maria Lane, Nathan McClintock, Darla Munroe, Rachel Pain, James Proctor, Bruce L. Rhoads, Morgan M. Robertson, Jairus Rossi, Nathan F. Sayre, Gregory Simon, Marc Tadaki and Christopher Van Dyke, Intervention: critical physical geography, *The Canadian Geographer* 58 (2014) 1–10.

<sup>8</sup> James English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> B. Zorina Khan, *Inventing Ideas: Patents, Prizes, and the Knowledge Economy*, OUP, 2020. Robert Merton, Priorities in scientific discovery: chapter in the sociology of science, *American Sociological Review*, 22 (1957) 635–659. Robert Merton, The Thomas theorem and the Matthew effect, *Social Forces* 74 (1995), 379–424.

<sup>10</sup> Medals and awards of the Royal Geographical Society (with Institute of British Geographers) date back to the 1830s. Royal Geographical Society, *Society Medals and Awards*, <https://www.rgs.org/about-us/our-work/medals-awards-and-prizes/society-medals-and-awards> [accessed 20/03/24].

<sup>11</sup> James Sidaway, Recontextualising positionality: geographical research and academic fields of power, *Antipode* 32 (2000) 260–270; Paul Blackmore and Camille B. Kandiko, Motivation in academic life: a prestige economy, *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 16 (2011) 399–411.

<sup>12</sup> No record exists of prize winners' graduate destinations. Online searching indicates that at least five of the individuals awarded prizes or commendations to date are in academic institutions (as of March 2024), and at least seven in fields outside academia.

<sup>13</sup> Andrea Mubi Brighenti, *Visibility in Social Theory and Social Research*, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke (2010).

<sup>14</sup> The 'Critical Geography Forum' hosted by JISCMail. JISCMail is the national academic mailing list service in the UK, providing a means for university staff to establish and manage email discussion lists. The Critical Geography Forum is available at <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/crit-geog-forum.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Vikki Boliver, Are there distinctive clusters of higher and lower status universities in the UK? *Oxford Review of Education* 41 (2015) 608–627 (p. 624).

**Table 1**  
HPGRG undergraduate dissertation prize winners and commendations, 2008–2023, as listed on the History and Philosophy of Geography Research Group website.<sup>16</sup>

Name	Dissertation title	Institution
<b>2008:</b> one prize, two commendations:		
Tom Croll-Knight	Every word that's understood is a transaction: spacing citation and sampling in US rap music.	University of Sheffield
Thomas Lowish (commendation)	The 1882 British married women's property act and the property holdings of women in Victorian society.	King's College London
James Riley (commendation)	Students' perceptions of the relevance of the secondary school geography curriculum.	University of Bristol
<b>2009:</b> two prizes		
Mark Hardwick	The Hottentot and the discursive impact of the Linnaean watershed.	University of Edinburgh
James Macadam	A maritime philosopher's stone: Arthur Dobbs and the Northwest Passage during the Enlightenment.	University of Oxford
<b>2010:</b> one prize		
Alexander Bello	Sensing the 'non-representational': a bodily exploration <i>with</i> the immaterialities of 'playing pan' using a 'research-in-practice' approach to creatively intervene in the folding of the world.	University of Bristol
<b>2011:</b> one prize		
Frances Rylands	Flying with 'only one wing': rethinking mobility and place in contemporary theatre.	University of Nottingham
<b>2012:</b> two prizes		
Emily Foulger	A woman's eye: Isabella Bird Bishop's travels in the RGS-IBG archives.	University of Nottingham
Matthew Jones	Ordering mysteries? An historical geography of the Routledge expedition to Easter Island, 1913–16.	University of Oxford
<b>2013:</b> one prize		
Emily Nash	'On the wild side': the Geography Collective, public geographies and exploration.	Queen Mary, University of London
<b>2014:</b> one prize, one commendation		
Sebastian Koa	Propositions for a radically empirical geomorphology	University of Oxford
Max Kirchner (commendation)	Speaking truth to power: theorising Edward Snowden's whistleblowing through Michel Foucault's concepts of parrhesia and the event.	University of Bristol
<b>2015:</b> one prize		
Kirsty Matthews	Mattering the mind: subjectivity and not knowing within Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.	Durham University

departments influencing students; the generally higher admissions requirements for students to enter Russell Group institutions meaning they are more likely to produce work of national prize-

<sup>16</sup> HPGRG, Undergraduate Dissertation Prize, <https://historyphilosophyofgeographyrg.co.uk/dissertation-prize/> [accessed 20/03/24].

**Table 1 (continued)**

Name	Dissertation title	Institution
<b>2016:</b> one prize, one commendation		
Mirjami Lantto	Experiencing river landscapes: the affective capacity of landscape and its potential in environmental management.	University of Glasgow
Samuel Nutt	The anxieties of Empire in Byron's Turkish Tales: exploring the fiction in postcolonial Geography.	Durham University
<b>2017:</b> one prize		
Hope Steadman	The neoliberalisation and responsabilisation of flood risk management in Swindon, UK.	University of Birmingham
<b>2018:</b> one prize		
Sophie Buckle	Writing between worlds: an audiencing of Leanne Simpson's stories as theory for decolonising academic writing practices.	University of Bristol
<b>2019:</b> two prizes		
Olivia Russell	Geography, cartography and military intelligence: Gertrude Campbell's cartographic work for the Royal Geographical Society in 1913–1918.	University of Edinburgh
Mitchell Wilson	Expanding the empirical repertoire of non-representational theory through a methodological reflection on creating a documentary film.	University of Bristol
<b>2020:</b> one prize		
Daisy Nichols	The micropolitics of filmmaking otherwise: the Karrabing Collective.	University of Bristol
<b>2021:</b> one prize		
Chiara Ruggieri-Mitchell	The more things change, the more they stay the same: trends in conservation focus, 2010–2019.	Royal Holloway, University of London
<b>2022:</b> one prize		
Nadja Lovadinov	Deterritorialising Dayton: reconfiguring Bosnia and Herzegovina between Dizdar and Deleuze.	University of Bristol
<b>2023:</b> one prize		
Shona Galloway	Decolonising the Scottish Higher Geography curriculum colonial narratives and key barriers to change.	University of Edinburgh

winning standard; or whether those institutions are simply more likely to enter students' work for the RGS-IBG dissertation prizes more broadly, functioning as stronger players in the institutional academic prestige economy.<sup>17</sup> Quite probably there is some combination of these and other factors at work.

All but one of the prizewinning submissions have come from Russell Group institutions (Table 1), the exception being in 2021, and this undoubtedly reflects their dominance among submissions. The role of cumulative advantage in the academic prestige

<sup>17</sup> For evidence that degree classification outcomes are more strongly predicted by entrance grades than by other characteristics see Emma Smith, Can higher education compensate for society? Modelling the determinants of academic success at university, *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 37 (2016) 970–992.

economy needs to be considered here. Elite institutions are likely to have the resources of larger staff numbers, with more time for research, and a greater concentration of high-entry students providing a ‘microenvironment’ of excellence, than other institutions, giving students in those environments ‘enlarged potential of acquiring differentially accumulating advantages’.<sup>18</sup> But there is also a possibility that the ‘Matthew effect’, whereby individuals with higher status are perceived to perform better than others, may extend to departments/institutions.<sup>19</sup> If so, dissertations from departments with leading reputation may be more likely to be awarded prizes because of that reputation. Cumulative advantage for the individual and for the department are mutually supportive.<sup>20</sup> The possible influence of cumulative advantage is likely easier to address in the award of the prize than at the point of submission: anonymisation of both the student and the submitting department could mitigate against the ‘Matthew effect’.<sup>21</sup>

It is also important to acknowledge the individuals serving on the prize panel (Table 2), without whom the prize would not function at all. Of the eight panelists to date, a majority were *not* based in Russell Group institutions (at the time of serving), and a majority were female. The work of assessing the dissertation prize thus perhaps reflects trends in academic labour division more broadly, with student-focused and less prestigious service work (less tradeable in the academic prestige economy) often being undertaken disproportionately by female staff.<sup>22</sup> There is, then, a geography and a politics to the HPGRG dissertation prize.

To conclude, on a personal level the HPGRG undergraduate dissertation prize was a delight to be involved in, and I am sure it remains so for those currently serving on the panel. The dissertations themselves reflect and challenge the focal concerns and practices of doing geography of our times. One of the challenges of writing this reflection has been a patchiness in records, as no comprehensive record of all submissions has been kept that I am aware of. If we are persuaded – as I am – by Mette Bruinsma’s argument that the ‘small voices’ of undergraduate dissertations

**Table 2**  
HPGRG Dissertation Prize Panel members.<sup>23</sup>

Coordinators
Heike Jöns, 2008–12
Richard Powell & Heike Jöns, 2012–13
Mathilde Leduc-Grimaldi & Pauline Couper, 2013–2015
Pauline Couper, 2015–19
Emily Hayes, 2019–present
Other assessors
Mathilde Leduc-Grimaldi
Paul Simpson
Thomas Jellis
Vanessa Schofield

leave a trace for future historiographers of the discipline, ensuring this trace is archived somewhere would be worthwhile.<sup>24</sup> Simultaneously, seen in the context of the academic prestige economy and the reward systems of science, undergraduate dissertation prizes are more than just a means of raising the profile of a disciplinary sub-field and its research group. The HPGRG prize has a geography and politics that appears to reproduce broader academic hierarchies and gendered labour. And if there is a geography and politics to this dissertation prize, the same may well be true of the RGS-IBG research group dissertation prizes more broadly.

#### Declaration of competing interest

None.

#### Data availability

The only data used are publicly available online. Web link has been provided in notes.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Merton, The Matthew effect in science, II: cumulative advantage and the symbolism of intellectual property, *Isis* 79 (1988), 606–623 (p. 615, p. 616).

<sup>19</sup> Robert Merton, The Matthew effect in science, *Science* NS 159 (1968), no 3810, 56–63 (p. 58).

<sup>20</sup> Robert Merton, The Matthew effect in science, II.

<sup>21</sup> Evidence that non-anonymous assessment can be influenced by unconscious bias is provided by John M. Malouff and Einar B. Thorsteinsson, Bias in grading: a meta-analysis of experimental research findings, *Australian Journal of Education* 60 (2016) 245–256.

<sup>22</sup> Petra Angervall and Dennis Beach, Dividing academic work: gender and academic career at Swedish universities, *Gender and Education* 32 (2020) 347–362; Kelly Coate and Camille Kandiko Howson, Indicators of esteem: gender and prestige in academic work, *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 37 (2016) 567–585. In considering the gender mix of the prize winners, there is clear danger in assuming gender on the basis of names alone, but there appears to be a good mix despite the prominence of traditionally male names in the early years.

<sup>23</sup> Informed by minutes of the History and Philosophy of Geography Research Group AGM, 29/08/08; 04/07/12; 30/08/13.

<sup>24</sup> Mette Bruinsma, The geographers in the cupboard, p. 73.