

## Groundings Undergraduate Academic Journal

University of Glasgow | Glasgow University Union

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Source: Groundings Undergraduate, April 2023, Vol. 14, pp. 62-72

Published by: University of Glasgow, Glasgow University Union Publications

**ISSNs:** 1754-7474 (Print) | 1755-2702 (Online)

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## How is trans geography scholarship reframing the concerns of body geographies as a field of enquiry?

## Mollie Kelleher

This paper aims to explore how trans scholarship can be progressed in the field of body geographies by analysing and evaluating trans autoethnographies. I will consider work from Nordmarken to criticise the dualistic lens gender is sometimes considered under in body geographies, and how scholars argue Cartesian dualism played a pivotal role in upholding gender binarism. I will also discuss work from Doan, who details her experience with public bathrooms from a Foucauldian perspective, arguing sexsegregated bathrooms are a materialisation of disciplinary power. I will also discuss Johnston's work on the relation between 'privileged places' and the 'normative binaries' gender perspective and how this is present in the autoethnographies. I will then give criticism to these autoethnographies and find that personal narratives are valuable, but insufficient: there must be more scholars writing to progress the field, and scholars must theorise over these empirical experiences to develop them.

Gill Valentine expresses how 'the body is not just in space, it is a space' (2001, 23), illustrating why geography, a discipline that studies and conceptualises such complex notions of space and place, considers the body as an entity certainly worthy of further study and exploration. Body geographies are not simply concerned with 'inserting the body into geographical discourse' but rather 'making the body explicit in the production of geographical knowledge' (Longhurst, 2010, 103). The field of

enquiry involves examining different bodies in varying spaces but also examining bodies themselves. Some key geographers writing on the body include McDowell (2009) who explores working bodies, specifically examining the embodied experiences of working-class young men and their relationship to an expanded service sector (Wolkowitz, 2010), and Graham Rowles (2017) who writes extensively on older bodies and their changing identity in relation to space. Overall, this area of scholarship

investigates how different bodies are managed and how society operates through them.

Yet another group of body geographers, particularly feminist scholars, have explored how the gender binary is realised - and challenged - in and through bodies. Gender binarism refers to the 'common sense' that a body must be either male or female. As an example of challenging the gender binary, Judith Butler, a feminist philosopher and gender theorist, speaks to the 'disciplinary production of gender' (1990, 172). arguing that gender is often reified in binary terms and offers an alternative way of theorising gender through the concept of performativity. For Butler, transgressing the normative gender binary causes 'disorganisation and disaggregation of the field of bodies' (1990, 173).

However, bodies often perform and practice in certain ways to 'create the illusion of an interior and organising gender core' (ibid). There are many examples which can be drawn on to argue for the performativity of gender. The 'repeated stylisation of the body' (1990, 43) can take the form of gendered ways of speaking, interacting, walking and even sitting down: women are expected to cross their legs while men must sit with their legs apart. In terms of clothing, women are expected to

wear tighter fitting clothes to accentuate certain features of their body while men must opt for looser fitting clothes. These examples demonstrate 'gender as discursively produced' and fundamentally performative 'rather than inherent' (Francis, 2008, 220) – but these notions have become ingrained to such an extent that it has now become the instinctual acquired and custom way to behave. Thus, it is easy to see how this leads to distinct binary ways of thinking.

Addressing the binary imaginations of gender within this essay, it feels fitting to focus on trans people who are directly challenging these binary ways of thinking (Hyde et al., 2019). Therefore, returning to Butler's foundational thoughts, trans scholars have particularly criticised her theoretical ideas around gender due to lack of consideration of trans 'unruly' (Beauchamp, 2009, 359) bodies. However, Gerdes (2014) responds more positively, arguing that Butler's notion that gender 'take[s] place through bodies' (2014, 149) might be useful for transgender studies. By applying a transgender lens to Butler's work, Gerdes (2014, 149) argues that it holds the potential to 'open vital questions about the (re)formation of gender, subjectivity, bodies, and the body'. Gerdes' analysis of Butler's work highlights the possibility for developing an interdisciplinary connection between trans studies and

<sup>1:</sup> This essay recognises the importance of non-binary and gender-nonconforming geography, but will limit the scope of the discussion to specifically trans geography to ensure a detailed and thorough analysis.

body geographies, which has recently been actualised through the work of Todd (2021), March (2020), and Johnson (2016).

The recent overlap between trans scholarship and body geographies has considered how 'unruly transgender bodies' (Beauchamp, 2009, 359) experience space and place. This more contemporary consideration of trans bodies has become, as Todd (2021, 7) explains, 'a distinct body of work within geography which has explicitly explored the spatialities of trans lives' and within this essay, its emerging impacts on the subfield of 'body geographies' will be examined empirically and theoretically.

My overall argument will evidence how trans aeography adds richness to body geographies by indicating what it has omitted in the past as well as highlighting new spaces and issues in need of examination. Both of these arguments will be framed and supported by analysing trans autoethnographies. Autoethnographers carry out 'cultural analysis through personal narrative' (Boylorn and Orbe, 2020, 1); this method 'dissolve[s] to some extent the boundary between authors and objects of representation, as authors become part of what they are studying, and research subjects are re-imagined as reflexive narrators of self' (Butz and Besio, 2009, 1660). This contemporary method allows the examination of less explored and sensitive topics, like that of trans geography (Jones et al., 2016). Not

only will such work support the idea of the enriching nature of trans scholarship but will also allow a discussion of a contemporary wider debate surrounding whether those who identify as transgender should be the only people considered to have a valid contribution to trans and trans-body geographies. Such deliberation will heavily shape my arguments. Firstly, Nordmarken's (2013) autoethnography will be analysed to criticise body geographies' sometimes dualistic lens when considering gender and sex. This will allow an examination of how trans scholarship is encouraging work on the body to move away from binary ways of thinking. Secondly, another way in which trans scholarship might refocus body geographies that reject the 'normative binaries' perspective of gender, is an emphasis on the importance of exploring 'privileged places' (Johnston, 2016, 674) for those who are cis-gendered, such as public bathrooms.

I will argue that trans scholarship achieves this by exploring how transgender people discipline themselves into certain ways of being and doing through acts of self-preservation. This claim will be developed by using Doan's (2010) lived account, and the necessity of recognising cis-gendered people's privilege in certain spaces will be reiterated through the lens of Michel Foucault's philosophy. To give balance to the contemporary debate regarding trans scholars, criticism will be shared concerning these two autoethnographies which will speak to

the wider controversy surrounding the importance of empirical and theoretical contributions to trans scholarship drawn from beyond the lived experiences of trans people.

Nordmarken's (2013) autoethnography of his experience as a transgender man adds not only important empirical material concerning what it is like to live as someone identifying as transgender on a daily basis but also adds a richness in general to the subfield of body geographies. He achieves this by commenting on an interaction between his 'unruly body' and another that is 'normatively gendered' (Nordmarken, 2013, 44) during a bus ride or in his words 'a geography and gendered transit' (ibid, 37) on his way to work one morning. He details his awareness of other bodies' response to his deviant body - 'the gender-normate to my left tightens her body movements' (ibid, 41) - and then he goes on to say how the passerby feels they must assign either 'Boy or girl? Man or woman?' (ibid, 40) to his body and when they cannot, it has this physical, uncomfortable reaction in their own body. Nordmarken concludes that his gender 'ambiguity' becomes a personal 'assault to their [the gendernormate's] understanding of themselves as omniscient' (ibid. 40).

Therefore, overall, the sharing of his lived experience exemplifies the binary conception of gender is still extremely pervasive and frequently encountered through everyday experiences.

Feminist scholars have argued that such binary ways of thinking emerged from Cartesian dualism, a philosophy which argues the mind and body are two distinct substances, which has allowed 'essentialist thinking about gender differences' (Konopka et al., 2019, 616) to prevail and dominate within society. Cartesian dualism played a pivotal role in producing and reproducing gender binarism due to this cartesian model of thinking that created splits such as 'mind/body, male/female and masculine/feminine' (Holland, 1995, 171).

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For example, Crewe's (2001) work on the 'besieged body' considers how bodies are managed and disciplined through 'fashion, fitness and food', but only cis-gendered bodies are included. The paper delves into the complex fashion decisions women and men have to make as well as breaking her analysis down into 'nails, hair [and] skin'. It is a comprehensive account of bodies and how society lives through them-but Crewe's (2001) analysis assumes the gender binary, critically omitting transgender bodies. Conversely, Nordmarken's (2013) account raises the issue of this arbitrary gender dualism, and by doing so supports and perhaps tries to accelerate body geography's efforts to challenge the gender binary which is reproduced through work like Crewe's. Comparing Nordmarken and Crewe's work illustrates the difference that might be made if 'the voices of transgendered people themselves...[are] granted greater legitimacy than those of academic scholars' (Towle and Morgan, 2002, 491).

The value of trans scholarship using personal narratives from geographers of transgender identities becomes overt, rather than geographers making claims based on 'assumed lived experience' (Browne and Nash, 2010, 6) or exploring transgender lives through less intimate 'ethnographic portrayals' (Towle and Morgan, 2002, 469). Overall, Nordmarken's (2013) account adds richness to body geographies, encouraging a distance from binarised gender perspectives and underlines 'the power of people narrating their own stories of particular forms of prejudice' (Hopkins, 2020, 590).

These themes are also apparent in Doan's autoethnographic account concerning her encounters with 'the tyranny of gendered space' (2010). In the same way that Nordmarken's narrative raises important issues surrounding gender dualism, Doan's personal detailing of spaces that exclude certain kinds of bodies reframes and redirects the concerns of body geographies. As Doan speaks to the danger of using public bathrooms as

a transgender woman, she shares how 'each excursion for me into the most private of public gendered spaces risked discovery and a potential confrontation with others outraged by my perceived transgression' (2010, 643), opening up a perspective in body geographies that Johnston (2016) affirms has not yet been addressed. Johnston's (2016, 674) confirmation that 'geographers are yet to consider the normative and privileged places associated with being cisgendered' demonstrates the value of accounts like Doan's.

Body geographies frequently consider the connection and experiences between the environment and our 'sensuous' (Valentine, 2001, 33) bodies, thus adding this perspective from a transgender body is incredibly important because the relationship of a person to space differs significantly depending on their gender. To ground this argument, Doan (2010) details, as a transaender woman, how she chose to shower at midnight whilst sharing female bathrooms at a college conference, speaking to Michel Foucault's concepts of regulatory and disciplinary power. Foucault developed nuanced, pathfinding theories regarding the production of knowledge and associated power relations during the late 20th century. Specifically, he developed the idea that there are different technologies of disciplinary and regulatory power in his 1976 book titled 'Society Must Be Defended' where he refers to a form of control that 'train[s] individuals by working at the level of the body itself' and

subsequently 'achieve[s] overall states of equilibrium or regularity' (Foucault, 2003, 246). To explain this notion further, Foucault wrote extensively on disciplinary power in the context of prisons and how such spaces, with their panoptic design and constant threat of surveillance, control those in these environments (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2016). Bender-Baird (2016, 985) argues for another space that shares these disciplinary qualities, declaring that 'sex-segregated bathrooms are conceptualised technologies of disciplinary power'.

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Under this Foucauldian lens, and adopting Valentine's (2001, 34) position that 'disciplinary power is most effective when it is not eternal but is exercised by, and against, the self', one could determine that Doan's method of avoiding the female bathrooms and exercising judgement of when to enter this space demonstrates her disciplining of self as she strongly enforced this self-surveillance to avoid an uncomfortable situation in such a gendered space. In this instance, one sees the regularising and disciplinary power that society imposes on people's

display of their gender-linking back to Butler's fundamental theory of gender performativity. It is this idea that because society may not have observed Doan as performing and acting in a way that conforms with how other women act within this bathroom setting, she had to discipline herself to avoid openly displaying and diverging from instilled expectations and perhaps preventing subsequent scrutiny from others. Doan's (2010) narrative gives an insight into the sort of strategies that those identifying as trans have to employ to protect themselves from being identified as 'out of place'.

Todd (2022, 771) confirms this notion, asserting that 'trans people are exhausted by their everyday surroundings and encounters', eminently accentuating the privilege of being cis-gendered in such gendered spaces. The Foucauldian lens that Bender-Baird (2016) applies to her analysis of public bathrooms reinforces the extreme behaviours that are adopted as part of trans people's self-preservation as they navigate the significant prevalence of binary gender imaginaries. This makes Johnston's (2016, 674) earlier call for an exploration of these 'privileged places' even more imperative. Research in body geographies could be further developed, offering a different perspective for examining public places. Thus, one can see how an intimate exploration of exclusionary spaces, through the lens of trans experiences is important to progress as well as enrich body geographies. But how does this

important acknowledgement sit within broader debates about how trans geographies should be studied and represented?

As evidenced above, academic work by trans scholars is indispensable to trans scholarship. However, these accounts of lived experience do not always directly develop theoretical frameworks in trans or body geographies. For example, in Nordmarken's (2013) autoethnography, there is a distinct lack of overarching analytical points made that speak to the wider geographical concerns. Thus, it is difficult to envisage how such scholarship could progress the field or initiate new lines of enquiry and prompt future research.

Agerfalk (2014, 596) asserts the importance of how 'empirical findings need to be interpreted and related to theoretical concepts' highlighting the importance of theoretical contributions in order to add purpose to a paper and allow its application to a body of work. To ground this further, Drager (2019) also criticises that trans scholarship is not currently contributing on a theoretical level; he reasons that it is too 'nice' (ibid, 104). This risks trans theory becoming severely limited and ineffectual, as well as possibly facing stagnation.

More specifically and to give a pertinent example, he details how 'it would be absolutely unfounded to imagine a trans studies scholar saying that perhaps, actually, trans children should not be given hormones. As a field we do not allow for those kinds of disagreements' (ibid, p104.). Chu (2019) elaborates on this idea, confirming how those types of disagreements are what allow theories to be born, outlining an explanation of why theoretical implications are missing in personal narratives concerning trans geography. Drager (2019, 104) also shares how 'among trans scholars... no-one wants to talk about how anticlimactic surgery really is or how dysphoria maybe never goes away' in fear of slowing momentum in this field (ibid).

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This reiterates the negative implications of this field being dominated by trans scholars as it will not only restrict new theories arising but also, as Drager substantiates, key parts of transgenderism will be missing.

These ideas weaken my above claim that trans scholarship's call for lived experienced accounts will add a definite richness to 'body geographies''; instead the weighing up of this contemporary debate has evidenced how trans geographies, reported on in this way, does not allow for disagreement and thus does not communicate new ideas. In

addition, the fact that certain discussions, for example, surrounding dysphoria, are prohibited, gives a general sense of stagnation to trans scholarshi Despite the fact that personal narratives certainly add an authenticity to scholarship, and it is easy to agree with Towle and Morgan's (2002) earlier assertion regarding the legitimacy of transgendered people's accounts, exemplified by Nordmarken's and Doan's insights, it is not enough. Too much emphasis on trans people's lived experience within this scholarly work slows progress and evolution for body geographies as this emerging field of inquiry. Doan's (2010) scholarship will similarly be evaluated.

In support of Drager and Chu's (2019) earlier outlined limitations of trans scholars' work, Doan's (2010) autoethnoaraphic account can also be criticised for its lack of theoretical contribution. Her experiences raise important questions that are relevant in relation to Foucault and Butler's seminal theories but the accounts themselves do not add any new theoretical ideas. Comparing Doan's (2010) work with that of Browne's (2004) allows one to see the restricted contribution that solely empirical work gives to this type of geography. Browne (2004) has used a plethora of trans people's experiences when using public bathrooms, like Dogn's (2001) account, to establish the new term 'genderism' and explore surrounding theoretical work. Browne (2004, 342) defines her new term as 'the discriminatory encounters individuals experience when they are read as the opposite sex than the one they identify with or they are 'read' as out of place in sites that are single sexed'; this is very insightful. Not only does Browne's work include empirical evidence of trans people's daily lives but also it builds on such experiences to create an idea rooted in those authentic accounts. By providing this term to experiences that often go unnamed as well as unnoticed, it 'highlights that there is hatred and pain associated with maintaining gender norms' (Browne, 2004, 336) granting areater attention and examination to experiences that transgender bodies have to withstand

Such a contribution will certainly contribute to growth within trans scholarship as well as 'body geographies' more broadly by creating new lines of enquiry and research. This is important because this field of inquiry must become well-developed and comprehensive in order to acquire an understanding of the full extent of human nature and behaviour that goes beyond the set assumption of the gender binary (Towle and Morgan, 2002). Towle and Morgan (2002, 491) even go so far as to say that examining trans bodies will 'shed light on normative gender relations' in a powerful and remarkable way. Therefore, overall, Browne's concept of 'genderism' has highlighted that personal narratives are insufficient, there needs to be other scholars writing on trans bodies in order to form theories and catalyse progress in this area of work.

To conclude, it is clear that trans aeographies can make a significant contribution to 'body geographies'. Work by trans people authentically sharing their lived experiences gives a profound insight into how society lives through a non-binary body. Doan (2001) and Nordmarken's (2013) personal narratives pressed body aeographies to move away from previous work underpinned with gender dualisms and unearth new greas such as cis-aendered bodies' privilege in certain spaces, exemplified by Doan (2001) and Bender-Baird's (2016) discussion of public bathrooms. Speaking more to the wider debate at play here, autoethnographies and work by trans people are vital for trans scholarship and 'body geographies' in an empirical sense. Circling back to Towle and Morgan's (2002, 491) comment that 'the voices of transgendered people themselves should be granted greater legitimacy than those of academic scholars' should

be affirmed as these perspectives offer body aeographies a fresh perspective. However, in order to develop trans scholarship and body geographies in general, the focus of trans geographies should be rebalanced so as to make more significant theoretical interventions. One could assuredly say that trans aeographies must build on and theorise these empirical experiences, developing and multiplying the theoretical trajectories made possible by work such as Browne's (2004) on 'genderism'. Nevertheless, the way that Doan and Nordmarken's personal narratives have contested body geographies concerns and attempted to reframe its perspective should not be downplayed. Instead, the opportunity for great progress and growth within these fields of inquiry that could be achieved if such empirical work was combined with theoretical contributions from other scholars should be the take-home message.

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