

Making space for a radical trans imagination: towards a kinder, more vulnerable, geography

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This essay makes a two-fold argument. First, that in failing its trans constituents, the discipline of geography falls short of its ethical, intellectual, and imaginative commitments. Second, that the task of developing a concept of space adequate to the diversity of trans experience offers an opportunity to tackle long-standing tensions in the discipline. Taking trans experience seriously requires a transversal conception of space, preferencing neither individual bodies nor societal structures as the principal site of meaning, but situating meaning instead in the ongoing, transformative, and mutually constitutive encounter between an individual and its - their - milieu.¹ The second part of this essay sketches out the provisional contours of such a trans concept of space. Both strands of this argument come together in a call for a kinder, more vulnerable, and more solidary discipline.

In his deeply moving and powerful essay, Jack Giesecking (2023) sums up some of the ways that geography as a discipline is failing trans people;² the ways geography is failing to step through the door that is opened up by what we could call the current 'trans moment' (with scare quotes, because this has in fact been a very long, drawn-out, and painful 'moment' for many of us and thus we should – following Jules Gill-Peterson (2018) – perhaps speak instead of the long trans century³). I am pleased to note that there was a strong trans presence at this year's American Association of Geographers Annual Meeting, where Giesecking first delivered his essay as a talk. When I last attended the conference in New Orleans in 2018, there was virtually nothing trans-related in the programme. But as Eden Kinkaid (2020, 2022) among others has pointed out, this heightened visibility is a double-edged sword for both trans scholars and trans people more generally (Gosset et al, 2022).⁴ The paradox of visibility is something we also see in the current rapidly escalating political, media, and legislative attacks against us, which Giesecking (2023) illustrates.

¹ This argument draws on a trans re-reading of the work of French philosopher Gilbert Simondon (2020 [1964]); a reading I elaborate in more detail elsewhere (Brice, 2020, 2021). An individual in this schema is not necessarily human; the same terms of individuation apply to all entities. For an anthology of process-ontological perspectives on trans, see Cremin (2022).
² These observations were first presented as a discussant's response to Jack Giesecking's *Society and Space* Plenary Lecture 'Notes from a Cis Discipline' at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers in Denver, Colorado on the 26th of March, 2023. The addition of expansive footnotes (please do read them!) enables me to name crucial links to wider literatures and struggles while preserving the integrity of the original script. Thank you Max Liboiron (2021) for modelling what 'good relations' in citational practice can look like.
³ Gill-Peterson's concept of the "trans 20th century" draws on medical histories of gender nonconformity to counter the illusion of novelty attached to 21st-century trans lives. Gill-Peterson argues that historiographic preoccupations with the 'proper' demarcation of trans pasts are themselves "retrospective ideological effects of the medical model of transsexuality" which seek to impose an anachronistic binary on the multiplicity of historic trans lives (2018: 95; see also Heyam, 2022).
⁴ The strategic and ideological consequences of (in)visibility present a persistent quandary for liberation struggles. See, for example: Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983); Wallace (1990); Phelan (1993); Oluoch and Tabengwa (2017); Brock and Edenberg (2020).

Importantly, though, the relevance of Giesecking's essay extends beyond the predicament of trans scholars as a *cause célèbre*. It resonates powerfully with wider calls across the discipline; with a recognition that it is high time for a deeper ethical reckoning in geography. Here I am thinking, for example, of Natalie Oswin's intervention on intersectional solidarities, in which she argues that by working together across difference marginalised scholars might address what she calls "a failure of the collective critical geographical imagination" (2020: 9). I am thinking also of other disciplinary reflections, such as Danny Dorling's writing on kindness (2019), Samantha Saville's (2021) on humility, and my own and others' work on vulnerability (Brice, 2020; Gillespie, 2019; Page, 2017). These are not the only politics I advocate for, but they are also central.⁵

Importantly, disciplinary practices of kindness, humility, and solidarity not only help to render many of us *less* vulnerable (to, for example, exploitation, abuse, neglect, or fatigue), but their exercise also requires the capacity to embrace a degree of vulnerability, especially but not exclusively from those among us in positions of (always-) relative power and stability. These interventions suggest, I think, that a deliberate exercise of vulnerability can be a good thing, especially where it enables geographers to work 'against the grain' of racist, colonialist, sexist, militaristic, ableist, and classist legacies - to name but a few of the long shadows still hanging over the discipline (DasGupta et al, 2021; Oswin, 2020).

The imperative for change here is both *ethical* and *political*.

Ethical, because geography like any discipline has a responsibility to take account of trans lives and to accommodate its trans scholars.

And political because, as Giesecking has argued, trans imaginations and sensibilities are crucial today in the fight against resurgent fascism in many parts of the world, including Turtle Island/North America.

What I might add to these considerations is a third impetus. I want to talk about how geography, by failing its trans constituents, also fails to make good use of what trans people - trans perspectives, lives, experiences, and sensibilities - have to offer.

To put that more simply: geography's trans failure is a problem because geography is missing out on our amazingness!⁶

⁵ Any appeal to kindness as a politics risks offering an easy way out of reckoning with accountability for structural violence. In naming kindness alongside humility and solidarity, my intention is to counter this risk by framing kindness not as an expression of magnanimity but as a relationship of obligation and reciprocity. This framing owes much to indigenous thought (Kimmerer, 2015; Liboiron, 2021; Simpson, 2011).

⁶ It took some courage to speak this sentence out loud in a lecture hall in Denver, Colorado in 2023. The phrase 'our amazingness!' seems even more awkward in print, but I have chosen to retain it here because it felt necessary at the time,

I want to throw in a few words here about trans joy (though it might not be immediately obvious that joy is what I am talking about).⁷ When I first came out as trans, part way through my doctoral fieldwork, I genuinely feared it would be the end of my academic career.⁸ It turns out I am doing OK, but still in academia I am almost invariably the only trans person in the room, the only trans person in the department⁹ - in fact I know of only one other trans geographer in an academic position in the United Kingdom, where I live and work. It can get kind of heavy sometimes, facing everything alone. But once you put a few of us together in a room, we really start to glow. That is the glow that geography is missing out on.¹⁰

I was listening the other day to Melz Osuwu (a postgraduate student at the University of Cambridge and founder of the Free Black University) speaking at a symposium on imagination infrastructures (Spence and Osuwu, 2023). Osuwu talked of how the practice of imagination is both their *freedom* and their *survival*: how every day they do the work of imagining into being the person they could become.¹¹

I think this speaks to something crucial about trans existence and its relevance for geography. I do not have the space here to elaborate a full conceptual argument, but I hope you will bear with me while I attempt to sketch out very briefly one of the many ways that a trans perspective speaks to entrenched conceptual sticking points in the discipline. I want to gesture here towards the development of a trans concept of space.

I am talking here about the long-standing tension between, on the one hand, taking identity seriously as a factor in geographical analysis and on the other, refusing any fixity or determinacy of identities and resisting their categorisation within naturalised hierarchical orders of legitimacy and belonging. There are many angles on this problem, each with its own distinct stakes and considerations, but here we could consider enduring tensions between theories of matter and discourse, of body and mind, of nature and culture, of object and construct, of ontology and epistemology.¹²

and because I have reservations about performing professional appropriateness, with all that it leaves out. If you wish to quote me on this point, I offer the preceding paragraph for your consideration.

⁷ Here I align with a current push to emphasise trans joy alongside trans suffering and oppression. See, for example: Oakes-Monger (2023); Malatino (2021); and Todd (2021). On the importance of joy to pedagogy, see hooks (1994).

⁸ I am thankful to a solitary trans academic, Rachel McKinnon, encountered through the timely publication of *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves* (Erickson-Schroth, 2014), for the courage to persist in transition at a time (so recent!) when an openly trans academic existence outside of gender studies was barely imaginable.

⁹ I hesitate to commit this phrase to print since, evidently, I cannot know the gender status of the many people, including students, academic, technical, and professional services staff, and (often outsourced) cleaning and estates personnel who make up the average geography department. I retain the wording because it accurately names my experience of both perceived isolation and hyper-visibility in the day-to-day work environments of the academy.

¹⁰ Students, too, deserve the joy of being taught by a diverse faculty in whose composition they can find a reflection of their own various identities and lived experiences.

¹¹ On the labour politics of trans becomings, see also Zazanis (2021).

¹² See e.g. Longhurst (1995) for an early exposition of this tension.

Geographers have a tendency to take up defensive positions on either side of this fault line. Trans people cannot afford that luxury. We cannot settle for a philosophy or a politics that accepts Aristotle's hylomorphic premise; that prioritises either matter or form as its principal engine of individuation.

To be sure, trans and nonbinary people are gloriously diverse, but most of us insist that concepts such as congruence and continuity matter with regards to questions of gender and identity. That we *are* who we say we are, and that this is a meaningful statement. The struggle over trans liberation is not only about freedom as a measure of what we are permitted to *do*, but about who we are permitted to *be*. Even for those of us who do not insist on self-identity in the form of a straight-up origin story (for example, the narrative of 'born this way'), still we almost invariably experience trans identity as in some way inherent or integral to our existence and continuity as individuals (Salamon, 2010).

At the same time, by virtue of our persistence in this binary-gendered world, we pose an existential challenge to any naturalised order of belonging and identity.¹³ We have come to embody the ultimate refusal of fixed and binary social divisions.¹⁴ Taken in isolation, some specific forms of trans and nonbinary expression may fit reasonably well into a politics of either recognition or refusal. However, *taking all of us seriously at the same time* demands an ability to 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway, 2010), to straddle the impossible tensions I have outlined above.

Crucially, I would argue, taking trans experience seriously requires an entirely different conception of space - one which locates meaning neither in the body of the individual nor in the structures of social hierarchies but in the mutually formative relational process through which both individual and milieu are constituted as entities.¹⁵

A trans concept of space would work transversally across bodies, individuals, and collectivities. It would look to ontologies that emphasise process; both Western and Indigenous ontologies that understand individual *being* as a provisional and contingent expression of collective, distributed, *becomings*. Importantly, though, it would do so without abstracting that process of collective becoming into a

¹³ Angela Davis (2020) highlights the importance of trans and nonbinary struggles to wider projects of abolition. Care should be taken, when acknowledging this aspect of trans existence, not to instrumentalise trans lives as exceptionally and disproportionately responsible for the burden of dismantling the gender binary and other structures of categorical violence (Gleeson and O'Rourke, 2021).

¹⁴ This statement is potentially controversial, since trans people align themselves in various ways within and against the gender binary. I take the position that this statement remains true in a sense not contingent upon subversive intent, since transition constitutes at minimum a refusal to be constrained by a prescribed correlation between sex assigned at birth and gender identity. As observed in footnote 13 above, care should be taken not to derive from this observation a normative imperative to be always *against* gender.

¹⁵ See note 1, above.

universal, horizontal, and undifferentiated field (Massumi, 2015). Crucially, it would locate identity concepts such as gender not within the body or mind of a sovereign individual subject, but in the emergence of the individual and its milieu through ongoing encounter within a shifting and always-negotiated field of possibilities and constraints.¹⁶

Such a conception of space is not uniquely the product of trans lives and experiences, but I argue that, in doing the work of theorising trans space, geography has the opportunity to grapple with its own historic ambivalence over questions of identity and difference.

This point brings me back around to my earlier, more prosaic comments on disciplinary vulnerability. The conditions which can and should make geography a welcoming home for trans academics are not special measures, but precisely the same things that we all are fighting for.¹⁷ In the UK where I am based, academics have been striking on and off for many weeks, as they have been doing for years, over falling pay, precarious labour, unsustainable workloads, and a yawning race and gender pay gap, as well as cuts to pensions (University and College Union, 2023). Yes, pronouns on e-mail signatures are nice, but these things impact us much more urgently.¹⁸

To take one example: repeatedly uprooting our lives and relocating for short-term insecure contracts is a challenge for anybody. But it hits particularly hard when at each new juncture you have no idea whether or when you will be able to access healthcare, housing, or even just safe access to toilets in the workplace. When you do not know if you will encounter hostility from your institutional leadership, or in the labour union that is supposed to protect you. When your employers host public speakers who agitate against your basic human rights and dignity. When you know you might wake up one morning - any morning - to find yourself splashed over the front page of a right-wing tabloid, the next hack-job victim in a raging culture war. When it might take months or even years to find other trans and nonbinary colleagues in your workplace, by which time you will likely be leaving again.

I should pause to acknowledge here that I, personally, am fortunate in most of these respects. Though

¹⁶ The work of opening up space for a transversal subjectivity is ongoing and everywhere in trans circles, if not necessarily in a coordinated project. The argument is most compelling when intersecting identities are thought together, as in the work of C. Riley Snorton (2017) and - outside of academia - Travis Alabanza (2022). Some relevant anthologies are Stanley and Smith (2016), Gleeson and O'Rourke (2021), and Cremin (2022).

¹⁷ This observation extends beyond academic spaces. David Seitz (2017), writing on queer asylum seekers in Toronto, argues for theorising queerness *as* precarity rather than through the lenses of identity or diversity.

¹⁸ Shon Faye, in her book *The Transgender Issue: an argument for justice* (2021), makes the related observation that while "poverty and homelessness are rarely framed as 'trans issues' in the media or even by large LGBTQ+ lobby groups," the introduction of Universal Credit as part of an austerity programme in the UK in 2013 "had perhaps the most damaging impact on vulnerable trans people of any policy in recent memory." The specific discriminations faced by trans people compound and are compounded by conditions of precarity and precariousness which we share with other marginalised groups.

I am on a fixed term contract, it is a generous one. I have wonderful colleagues, a strong and inclusive union branch, a thoughtful head of department, a stable home, and a care web that includes a fantastic partner, friends, and family. Even so, I can feel the exhaustion in the very marrow of my bones from the cumulative extra labour and anxieties of working and surviving as a precarious trans scholar in a cis discipline. I know the deep resources it's taken to get me this far. And crucially, I want others in the room with me who do not currently have access to those same resources.¹⁹

Which brings me back around to my earlier comments about kindness. Because when your future is on the line, you are especially vulnerable to academic cultures marked by territorial sparring, professional feuds, cliques, factions and in-groups, gatekeeping, departmental rifts, and institutional politics. Academic cultures that cast the labour of the intellect on the model of heroic individualism and market competition rather than a community of collective endeavour are particularly harmful and exclusionary towards marginalised scholars, and here trans scholars are not the exception. These cultures are also intellectually stifling; they constitute a failure, as Oswin (2020) has it, of the geographic imagination.

Making space for trans imagination is a joyful act because it affirms our power to insist on terms of relation outside naturalised hierarchical orders; it reminds us that becoming uncompromisingly ourselves enacts a transformation in the world (Berlin and Brice, 2022).²⁰ This is the spirit in which I want to call us back to joy: the joy of sharing an idea in the vulnerable stage before it is polished or published; the joy of watching new insights spark in a students' eyes; the joy of untangling a knotty question with a colleague; the joy of working relationships built on trust, reciprocity, and care (Malatino, 2020; The Care Collective, 2020).²¹ I truly believe we can create a kinder, a more humble, a more generous, and a more solidary discipline. And I think it is high time we did so.

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¹⁹ Philosopher Olúfẹ̀mí O Táíwò (2022, page 78) is critical of strategies that seek to address social injustice by centring and uplifting 'marginalised voices' within spaces such as academia, observing that "the social mechanisms that determine who gets into the room are often exactly what needs to change - for example, the fact that incarcerated people cannot participate in academic discussions about freedom is intimately related to the fact that they are physically locked in cages." It is important not to entertain delusions about the capacity of such strategies to effect meaningful change. It is nevertheless good practice to keep asking who could and should be in the room, what mechanisms are keeping them out, and how we can change that. Not simply on principle of inclusivity, but because if research and teaching matter, it matters also who is doing the research and teaching.

²⁰ This sense of the word joy invokes the work of heretical Jewish philosopher Spinoza (1675); a joyful affect is one that amplifies an entity's capacity to affect and be affected by others.

²¹ This paragraph has been expanded to reemphasise the work that trans imagination and joy can do in geography.

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