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EMBODIMENT

Lesbians, space, sperm and reproductive technologies

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Introduction

The subject of embodiment has now been on gender and feminist geographers’ agendas for more than three decades. Over this period, scholarship in this area has undergone significant change. Work has continued on people’s embodied interactions with space and place, but now there is also research that reflects on the interiority of bodies, for example on how the placenta and uterus can be used to prompt different kinds of geographical thinking. Another area of interest in the body that has emerged in recent years is the way in which the gendered and sexed dimensions of embodiment are fluid. Now, there is also research that moves beyond the gendered and sexual dimensions of embodiment. Intersectional approaches have led to a focus on other axes of embodied subjectivity, not just ethnicity and class but, also, for example, sexuality, age and health. How technology is shaping bodies has made its way onto gender and feminist geographers’ agendas. Also on their agenda is how bodies are imbued with emotion and affect. This chapter examines these trends by turning attention to a recent project that one of us is carrying out on lesbians, space, sperm and reproductive technologies. The project addresses themes such as mothering, social relations, policies, home and public places. Embodiment is a useful concept in helping to cast light on these themes. In turn, these themes help to deepen the thinking on embodiment.

Embodiment, corporeality, the visceral or whatever one chooses to describe this ‘thing’ we commonly call ‘the body’, as stated above has now been on geographers’ agendas for more than three decades. Sarah Nettleton and Jonathan Watson (1998, 1) note:

If one thing is certain, it is that we all have a body. Everything we do we do with our bodies – when we think, speak, listen, eat, sleep, walk, relax, work and play – we ‘use’ our bodies. Every aspect of our lives is therefore embodied.

Every aspect of our lives is, however, not only embodied but also embedded in place. As Heidi Nast and Steve Pile (1998, 1) argue: ‘since we have bodies, we must be some place’. It was important, therefore, that in the mid-1990s geographers began to attempt to understand more
about how bodies create and occupy spaces and places. It was important also to consider how places create bodies with particular desires and capacities (see Grosz 1992 on the mutually constitutive relationship between bodies and places).

In particular, it was gender and feminist geographers (e.g. Longhurst 1995; Rose 1993; Teather 1999) who began to pay attention to the various theoretical and empirical ways in which bodies are a locus for gendered and sexed subjectivities. Bodies, it was argued, are a site of power relations (e.g. see McDowell and Court 1994 on how bodies ‘perform work’) that are always located within a specific time and place.

In addition, many gender and feminist geographers paid attention to how bodies, on account of their long association in Western thought with women, femininity, materiality and irrationality, might offer a way of dismantling the masculinist structures of knowledge production (Rose 1993), which have long been based on men, masculinity, immateriality and rationality. Phil Hubbard et al. (2002, 98) point out that since the time of the philosopher Rene Descartes in the seventeenth century there has been ‘theorizing across the social sciences which privileged the mind as the seat of truth, knowledge and humanity, with the body rejected as an explicit theme in social, spatial and historical analysis’.

Since the 1990s, much of the work on ‘bodies and spaces’, but certainly not all, was published in the journal Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography (GPC) (see Longhurst and Johnston 2014 for a review of work on embodiment published in GPC over a 20-year period). We do not recite this literature here, except to say that some of the common themes addressed in the 1990s and 2000s were: deconstructing binary thinking especially sex and gender (Gatens 1991); sexuality and space (Bell and Valentine 1995); ‘the gaze’ and self-disciplining of bodies (Johnston 1996); sexed and gendered performativity (Bell et al. 1994); and, gendered and embodied structures of power (Krenske and McKay 2000; Nairn 2003; Prorok 2000).

Over this period – 1990s and 2000s – scholarship in the area of ‘bodies and spaces’ gained momentum. Terms such as ‘the body’ or bodies (remembering that there is no one or the body; rather, bodies are always plural), embodiment, and corporeality appeared regularly not just in the pages of Gender, Place and Culture but also in other geography journals, such as Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, Progress in Human Geography, Social and Cultural Geography and Antipode. Also, over the aforementioned two decades, these terms came to be used within a wider array of theoretical frameworks than just feminism. A range of scholars, especially but not only those with an interest in feminist theory, began to pay attention to embodiment, for example those interested in non-representational theory (Thrift 2008), theories of performativity (Nelson 1999) and theories of emotion and affect (Bondi 2005; Davidson and Milligan 2004; Pile 2010).

Having begun this chapter by providing some background information on (feminist) geographical work on embodiment, we go on to examine what we think are some of the most inspiring, challenging and interesting ways that bodies are currently being researched by feminist geographers and others. We do this by considering trends in recent work and by thinking through how these might be useful for Lisa’s doctoral research on lesbian mothers in Aotearoa New Zealand (for the most part, throughout this chapter we use the signifier ‘mother’, but we acknowledge that this term is gendered and that it is important to trouble the binary between mothers/fathers (see later in this chapter, under the heading: From presuming man/woman and male/female to trans bodies and geographies)).

For both of us, Lisa as a PhD student and Robyn as one of her supervisors (the other being Lynda Johnston), writing this chapter was beneficial. It expanded the supervisory relationship into a broader mentoring relationship (see Hawkins 2018 on ‘Reflections on Academic Caring as a Feminist Practice’) that worked beyond the typical PhD student–supervisor boundary.
Embodiment

Lisa and Robyn engaged in lively discussions via email (Lisa lives in Wellington and Robyn in Hamilton) on how themes such as intersectionality, fluidity of gendered dimensions of bodies, emotion and affect can help to deepen understanding of the embodiment of particular sexed and gendered bodies, especially lesbian mothers. As a team, we were able to progress our individual and collective thinking on this topic more than if we were considering this theme in relation to Lisa’s doctoral research questions alone. Our hope is that the chapter will also assist other students and researchers to think through recent trends on embodiment in relation to their own research, and we also hope, given the mutual benefits it brought about for us, that it will encourage other students and supervisors to write and publish together.

By way of positioning ourselves in this research (see England 2017 on how the concept of positionality initially emerged as a critique of omniscient researchers, producing seemingly ‘objective’ research), Lisa has completed the ‘fieldwork’ for her PhD and is now at the stage of analysing data and writing chapters. Her topic emerged out of her life experience, as she was keen to add to the limited pool of information available to her when she began to create her own family. Robyn also did her doctoral research on pregnancy, namely how women were often excluded from public space, but this was completed more than 20 years ago. For both of us, being able to bring past and present discourses about maternal bodies, subjectivities and power relations into conversation has been useful.

The chapter unfolds first with a short introduction to Lisa’s doctoral project. Second, we discuss five trends in work on ‘bodies and spaces’ that we have identified from our reading, as emerging over the past decade. The first trend is a move from considering how the surfaces of bodies are inscribed to how bodily interiors can deepen understanding of sexed and gendered embodiment. Following this, we examine a trend towards understanding more about trans bodies and geographies. Then we examine a move from focusing on sex and gender to focusing on multiple and intersecting subjectivities. This section is followed by a discussion of a recent trend to focus not just on bodies per se, but on how technology is shaping bodies. Finally, we examine how more geographers are now paying explicit attention to the important role played by emotion and affect in people’s lives. In discussing each of these trends, we alert readers to some important research being carried out and also to how thinking about them (and the researchers working in these areas) has helped Lisa to progress her doctoral work. We begin by briefly introducing Lisa’s project.

‘You’ve just got to make shit up sometimes’: an overview of Lisa’s project

Lisa’s PhD examines how lesbians’ experiences of conceiving, being pregnant, birthing (and often not conceiving, being pregnant, birthing for one partner) and mothering both reinforce and trouble the normative gendering of bodies and spaces. The research is grounded in feminist poststructuralist and queer theory, both of which recognize the power of discourse and representation to shape reality. A number of Lisa’s participants noted that many of the words, descriptors, forms and legal documents encountered during and after the time that they were creating their families did not capture adequately who they are, their roles and their relationships. For example, Danielle (pseudonyms are used throughout this chapter), who identifies as lesbian, and is in her early forties with one child, says: ‘The terminology can get quite, it’s, you’ve just got to make shit up sometimes.’ For her the language, labels and boxes, or lack of boxes, on forms and legal documents did not align with her experience. This was similar for Hayley, a lesbian mother of one child in her early forties, who says: ‘Even on the antenatal forms there is nothing for [a] partner. I had to keep correcting it.’ Given the prevalence of comments such as these on discourse, language, representation and power during the interviews, feminist poststructuralist and queer theory provided a useful lens through which to examine the data.
Lisa conducted 27 face-to-face semi-structured interviews, 16 with single interviewees (either a sole parent or one partner of a couple) and 11 with couples. The youngest participants were in the 30 to 34 age bracket, and the oldest in the 55 to 59 bracket. More than three-quarters (82%), however, were aged between 30 and 44 years. Over half of respondents (52%) identified as lesbian, while another quarter (24%) identified as ‘gay’. The remainder (24%) identified as ‘queer’, ‘mostly lesbian’ and ‘queer/lesbian’. Nearly all of the participants (87%) identified as Pākehā, ‘NZ European’, ‘White’ or similar. The remainder identified as Māori or of other countries. The interview questions focused on how people started their families, how they decided who the donor was going to be and their experiences with fertility and maternity services.

In order to analyse in more depth lesbians’ experiences of conception, pregnancy, birth and mothering/fathering, Lisa has been thinking about recent work on bodies, including that which considers in more detail the interiority of bodies, troubles the presumption of man/woman and male/female, sees subjectivities as intersecting, understands the interaction of bodies with recent reproductive technologies and highlights emotion and affect. We address each of these themes in turn in relation to ‘lesbians, space, sperm and reproductive technology’. We offer five possibilities for examining these themes in more detail.

Recent trends in research on bodies

**From inscribing the surfaces of bodies to bodily interiors**

While some researchers in the past have tended to focus on bodies as blank pages, unmarked texts (*tabula rasae*) or surfaces that are etched or inscribed by power relations (e.g. Lingis 1984), others (e.g. Grosz 1994; Kirby 1997) have argued that bodies are not just surfaces but a co-mingling of surfaces and depths that are constituted (externally and internally) by gendered, social and spatial power relations. For the most part, however, the interiority or internal spaces of bodies has tended to be ignored, by geographers at least. Rachel Colls and Maria Fannin (2013, 1087) argue:

> Within geographical research on ‘the body’, a focus on the surfaces of bodies has been useful for considering how body boundaries, most often implied to begin and end at the skin, (de)limit, (de)regulate, and (de)stabilize what we come to know as ‘a body’.

Colls and Fannin (2013, 1087) continue by explaining that, while they think there is value in this work, there is also potential for ‘thinking geographically about bodily interiors’. Colls and Fannin do so by focusing on the placenta, and Lisa found there is also value in doing this by considering the movement of sperm out of bodies and into bodies, and sperm without a body.

Contemplating where the boundary is that separates research ‘on the body’ from research ‘in the body’ demonstrates fluidity in thinking about embodiment. The skin is often regarded as the delineator between bodies and the outside world, but contemplating sperm problematizes these bodily boundaries. Sperm is ejaculated through an orifice, not through a layer of skin. In a vagina, the skin potentially demarcating the outside of the body is inside the body – so, is sperm inside or outside that body? Sperm can move into a specimen jar, it can die or transform. Just like bodily boundaries, interiors are also unstable, temporal and mobile.

Throughout the course of the doctoral project, Lisa has come to think that in relation to heterosexual sex, when trying to get pregnant sperm maintains an association of masculinity and potency. However, with lesbian bodies, sperm tends to be more disembodied, disassociated from
the male body from which it came and, perhaps somewhat ironically, is more associated with femininity (e.g. gentleness, warm flannels and juice) than masculinity. Stacey, who identifies as lesbian and is in her early thirties with one child, comments: ‘it’s all about being gentle with the sperm.’ Kerry, Stacey’s partner, notes ‘we started calling it, just baby-making juice or something’. Tracey, who is in her early forties with one child and identifies as mostly lesbian, says that the donor ‘would sort of run out with this nice warm flannel [laughs] with the syringe in it’. These processes of insemination, which happened at home, can seem a long way from idealized heterosexual notions of getting pregnant through romantic sex and mutual orgasms. They are much more ordinary, mundane and, as Donna, who identifies as gay and is in her early forties with two children, suggests, ‘just clinical’. This is something that Lisa plans to examine further in the thesis (also, for how lesbian couples perceive family resemblances and negotiate the involvement of a sperm donor, see Nordqvist 2011).

Gordon Waitt and Elyse Stanes (2015) pay attention to another bodily fluid – sweat – to deepen theoretical understandings of how gender is lived. Sweat, like sperm, makes its way from inside to outside the body but, unlike sweat, in the case of lesbians who want to get pregnant (but not to have sex with a man), it is then necessary to reinsert this fluid into another body. Sperm as a bodily fluid is highly sexed and gendered, arguably more so than sweat (although, as Waitt and Stanes 2015 argue in relation to men and masculinity, sweat is also highly gendered; for example, it is often considered unladylike to sweat). Paying attention to the visceral fluids and solids (especially in relation to birth) that cross the thresholds that demarcate the inside from the outside of bodies opens up possibilities for thinking geographically about bodies in ways that go well beyond bodily surfaces.

**From presuming man/woman and male/female to trans bodies and geographies**

Another area of interest in embodiment that has emerged in recent years is the way in which the gendered and sexed dimensions of embodiment are ‘fluid’ or cross sexed and gendered binaries. A useful example of this is trans geographies. In 2010, *Gender, Place and Culture* published a series of themed papers on trans geographies (for the introduction to these papers, see Browne, Nash and Hines 2015). The editors explain: ‘This collection spans a range of theoretical fields in this context, including trans theories, queer engagement, feminist geographies, gender geographies and sexualities geographies’ (Browne, Nash and Hines 2015, 573). The series of themed papers also presents empirical studies of trans lives.

The question of how people construct and (re)present complex and shifting subjectivities arose at the outset of Lisa’s project, when she put out a call for lesbian participants. Several women who identified as bisexual immediately contacted her, claiming that the research was exclusionary and continued the trend of making bisexual women invisible. One woman mentioned her sadness at, once again, being too queer for the straight crowd and too straight for the queer crowd. This is one example of how work on trans geographies has been useful in thinking about bodies in relation to the fixing and unfixing of subject positions.

Trans geographies also facilitate thinking around queer families. Queer families are often regarded as disruptive to heteronormative family structures. However, attention is now being drawn to the ways in which lesbian families also conform to traditional notions of family and therefore are implicated in supporting the very structures that can function to erase them (e.g. Nordqvist 2010). Trans geographies, and the attention that they pay to the fluidity of sex and gender roles and relations, are useful for examining the ways in which lesbian families both disrupt and conform to heteronormative family structures.
The other aspect of Lisa’s project that was highlighted by thinking about recent work on trans geographies is the unfixing of maternal bodies themselves. Claire Madge and Henrietta O’Connor (2005, 94) explain: ‘There is no preconstituted “body” on to which motherhood is inscribed; what it means to be a mother is constantly produced and reproduced through varying and competing discourse and practices’ over time and space. This means, if the subjectivity of ‘mother’ is not pre-given, then anyone can ‘mother’ (nurture, foster, take care of children; including a woman [mother] who has not given birth, a man or someone whom society deems to be an ‘inappropriate mother’). Lesbians can ‘mother’ and be mothers. They can also ‘father’ and be fathers (Aitken 2000). Trans geographies offer ways to trace diversity, to contest and trouble binaries, to trace lines of queer kinship and parenthood. The questioning of hegemonic conventions that link sexed and gendered bodies to mothering and fathering is useful for Lisa’s project.

From sex and gender to multiple and intersecting embodied subjectivities

Peter Hopkins explains:

Intersectionality is an approach to research that focuses upon mutually constitutive forms of oppression … [it] is not only about multiple identities but is about relationality, social context, power relations, complexity, social justice and inequalities.

2017, abstract

It is most certainly the case in Lisa’s project that different axes of embodied subjectivity intersect to give rise to a wide range of experiences for lesbian mothers. Jacqui Gabb (2004) has also found this to be the case and calls for more research on how the intersectionality of ethnicity, socio-economics and geographical location affect the choices available to lesbians when trying to get pregnant. Lisa, in her research, found that some of her participants were highly aware of the way in which particular axes of their subjectivities afforded them privilege in Aotearoa New Zealand. Danielle, for example, in discussing her experience of being pregnant and using maternity services notes: ‘It helped that I’m a middle-class, educated White lady, so I kind of just shuffled along … and I’m a New Zealander.’ Another participant, Kitty, a lesbian mother of one and in her late thirties, comments that she had a positive experience with the fertility clinic but reflects that this is probably because she is ‘reasonably feminine and, yeah, could pass as straight’. She continues explaining that ‘butch friends’ of hers were having trouble and that ‘maybe that’s part of … of the cold shoulder you’re receiving from [the fertility clinic]. You don’t look like [you] fit the mother role.’

In Lisa’s project, it quickly became apparent that it was not just the axes of subjectivity of being a lesbian mother that mattered, but also other axes such as being feminine, being a New Zealander rather than a migrant, being read by healthcare workers and others as middle class and having White skin; that is, being European or Pākehā. For example, in relation to ethnicity, in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, not only do birthing spaces and other spaces tend to be heteronormative and patriarchal but also deeply colonial (see Longhurst 2008 on ‘colonizing and reclaiming birthing space for Māori women’). Also, for Māori, women’s pregnant and birthing bodies tend to be constructed differently from those of Pākehā; that is, they are constructed as tapu, or under the influence of the spirits or gods (August 2005). It is not enough to simply consider lesbian mothers without also considering these other intersecting axes of embodied subjectivity and the power relations that they generate (Hopkins 2017).
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From human to technology shaping bodies

In recent years it has become apparent that numerous and varied technologies, both digital and non-digital, are shaping contemporary spaces and bodies. Geography, technology and bodies are intimately linked (Warf 2017). Bodies are interpellated through technology within specific spaces. It is worth noting, however, that this link between geography, technology and bodies is not entirely new. As Stanley Brunn, Susan Cutter and J.W. Harrington Jr (2004) point out, new technologies have long been important in advancing geographic understanding. The point we are making here, though, is that over the past decade the transformation of society through rapidly changing technologies, especially digital technologies, has arguably been profound, prompting geographers to rethink categories such as bodies, matter, technologies and objects (see Ash 2013).

In the case of Lisa’s research, this has become evident in the assisted reproductive technologies currently being used by some lesbians to conceive. Assisted reproductive technologies can be examined at different geographical spatial scales, which reveals some interesting ways in which these technologies are gendered. So-called ‘high-end’ technologies, such as in vitro fertilization (IVF), are often represented within the discourse of ‘rational science’. IVF is a process of fertilization in which an egg and sperm are combined outside the body. This process takes place in highly medicalized and clinical spaces (often available only in cities) and tends to be carried out by male doctors and fertility specialists. So called ‘low-end’ technologies, such as home ovulation tests or predictor kits (TPKs), are often used in domestic spaces and are predominantly the domain of women. These kits, unlike IVF, are relatively cheap to purchase.

In thinking about bodies and assisted reproductive technologies, it becomes apparent that different technologies are not neutral in the way that they are incorporated into bodies, but reinforce the dominant power structures by being more readily available to particular people, for example IVF being more readily available to those who can afford it and those whose Body Mass Index (BMI) (BMI is a measure of body fat, based on height and weight) is ‘acceptable’ to healthcare and medical professionals. Participants in Lisa’s study also reported that they feel that the interactions that happen in the course of undergoing IVF are easier for those who look like a ‘mother’ (read: feminine).

Assisted reproductive technologies blur the boundaries between body and matter, and bodies that matter. The construct of ‘family’ (bounded by blood, two parents, children created through sex) is troubled in and by lesbian families, where not all family members are genetically related, where there may be more than two parents and where insemination is not a private, romantic event but a clinical process that may involve a number of people. Interestingly, in Lisa’s research with 27 lesbian families, there were 17 different ways used to create families, and yet their choices were often overshadowed by hegemonic definitions of family represented through laws, regulations and forms that retain archaic notions of heteronormative and patriarchal power.

From rationality to emotion and affect

Geographers over the past decade have turned their attention to emotion and affect and how these are lived in and through bodies (see Bondi 2005; Davidson and Milligan 2004; Pile 2010 as examples of the ‘emotional turn’ in geography). It could be argued that this is not exactly a new perspective, given that humanistic geographers in the 1970s and 1980s adopted approaches that rejected mechanistic models of spatial sciences, instead putting people at the centre of their work. However, much of the research undertaken by humanistic geographers during this time did not differentiate carefully between individuals and groups. Instead, it attempted to capture
the experiences of everyone under the umbrella of ‘Man and his environment’ (Tuan 1974). Embodied power relations were often ignored. Recent work on emotion and affect, especially by feminist geographers, has tended to focus more squarely on what different bodies can do and feel, and how this provides insights into the gendered, sexed, raced, (dis)abled, and so on, lives of people as they move through different spaces.

In relation to Lisa’s research, considering emotion and affect is a useful reminder that medical and legal practices, and changes to these, can prompt a range of feelings for lesbian mothers. For example, in 2006 it became legal in Aotearoa New Zealand to list two mothers as parents on the birth certificate. Nicola and Noni (in separate interviews) both expressed feeling very pleased about this change, yet had different reactions. Nicola recalls: ‘I sobbed while filling out the birth certificate … that whole “other parent”, I get to be “other parent”. I’m still utterly wrapped with that. It makes me so happy.’ Noni, who identifies as queer, is in her late thirties and has two children, says:

> When [the birth certificate] arrived … [it was] one of my … proudest moments as a New Zealander. To be, like, our country actually recognizes, in the law, our family, and we have the protections, the rights and protections, that come with that. And I’m pretty, sort of, suspicious of patriotism, but at that point I was, like, this is precious.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter we have highlighted that research on bodies in the last 10 years has moved in new and interesting directions:

> Twenty years ago the mere mention of bodies, especially their messy materiality, could prompt a sense of dis-ease amongst geographers (at least some!). Bodies were largely ignored in the discipline of geography.

*Longhurst and Johnston 2014, 273*

Today, however, terms such as the body, bodies, embodiment and corporeality are used within a wide range of theoretical frameworks and empirical studies, often seemingly without a second thought. They now sit more easily within the frame of acceptability, although some of the new areas of scholarship discussed in this chapter, such as the interiority of bodies and trans bodies – especially when this involves invoking the fleshy materiality of bodies – may still prompt some question of their legitimacy as a ‘proper’ topic worthy of geographers’ attention.

We have argued that bodies, recently, have been used as a frame of reference in relation to bodily interiors, trans bodies and geographies, intersectional approaches to embodied subjectivity, bodies being imbued with technology and embodied geographies of emotion and affect. We have touched briefly on these five areas, reflecting on what they might have to offer in relation to casting light on lesbians’ experiences of becoming mothers in Aotearoa New Zealand. There are likely other areas of scholarship and activism around embodiment that we could also have mentioned, but we trust that others will add to this conversation. Bodies have now been on feminist geographers’ agendas for more than three decades, and this interest does not appear to be waning. Instead, bodies are being (re)presented in new ways that are helping to develop an understanding of how gender is thought about and lived on a daily basis.
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Key readings


References

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