



# On the geographies of hair: Exploring the entangled margins of the bordered body

Progress in Human Geography  
2020, Vol. 44(3) 555–571

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DOI: 10.1177/0309132519838055

journals.sagepub.com/home/phg



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## Abstract

This paper extends discussions of the geographies of the body by examining hair as a geographical lens that reimagines the body's borders. Hair is a key agent in producing and representing the body, specifically through the presences and absences of hair that influence, disturb, transform and transcend its margins. By examining the materialities, performances and discourses associated with how and where hair is situated (or not) on the body, this paper situates hair as a geographical prism that explores new frontiers of the bordered body, shapes corporeal understandings of appearance and projects identities and power well beyond its physical limits.

## Keywords

bodies, borders, geography, hair, materiality, performance

## I Introduction

This paper seeks to advance previous work on the geographies of the body to examine the role of hair as a new geographical prism through which to view the frontiers of the body as a bordered, marginal space. Feminist and post-structuralist geographers have long read bodies as discursive spaces through which social, cultural and political imaginations are expressed, encoded and deciphered through representations of the body (Butler, 1990; Longhurst, 1995, 1997). Here, understandings of bodies as central to discussions of space are founded upon notions of embodiment – the ways in which something is represented or expressed to make it tangible or identifiable. Yet while approaching bodies as forms of representation attends well to social constructivist interpretations of embodiment, in the last decade non-

representational readings of bodies (Colls, 2012; Macpherson, 2010) have begun to complicate these rather rigid ways of interpreting bodies as texts to be read. Geographers in this vein have questioned the ability for bodies to be understood as solely representational and/or socially constructed, instead encouraging debate that attends to emotions and affects and understandings of bodies as processes of relational becomings (Bondi, 2005; Davidson and Bondi, 2004; Tolia-Kelly, 2006). As such, contemporary geographical scholarship reveals bodies to be bordered spaces, the movements

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of which are shaped by an array of emotional, affective, embodied and material responses (Abrahamsson and Simpson, 2011; Casanova and Jafar, 2013; Lloyd, 2014; Smith et al., 2016). Yet, beyond movement the form of the body is also bordered, being mediated and regulated through its relative size and shape, meaning bodies are bounded by the skin, flesh and volume, that define interpretations of '(un)acceptable' bodies (Colls and Evans, 2014; Evans, 2006). Crucially, these borders are contested through various formal, informal and social structures that marginalise or restrict the imagined or tangible performances of gendered, ethnic, aged, (dis)abled bodies in space (Magenis, 2010). Teather (2005: 1), for example, imagines the body as embarking on a journey that negotiates the 'institutional fabric of social life', meaning, while bodies are central to how identities are defined and performed in places, these are rarely fixed and are subject to negotiation, contestation and re-imagination (Longhurst, 1997; Simonsen, 2000). Moreover, in drawing upon Merleau Ponty's (1968) phenomenological approaches, Verhage (2014: 103) argues that through the intimate proximities of bodies 'we do continually and simultaneously give shape to each other, sometimes violently, sometimes lovingly'. Hence, bodywork has been examined through its 'fleshiness', as well as through the complex material, symbolic, emotional and affective dimensions that, as Butler (1990) claims, produces, as well as defines, differentiates and subjugates bodies in space.

In advancing this, I draw upon Haraway's (1985: 33) compelling rejection of the limitations of corporeal boundaries: 'why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?' While Haraway's question is designed to query the relationship between human and machine, I use it here as a metaphor to stimulate interpretations of how we might reconsider what constitutes the borders of the body as more fluid, permeable, opaque – transcendable even. This paper draws upon hair

– the ubiquitous and seemingly innocuous substance that distinguishes us as mammalian and that many of us spend significant time, energy and money on taming, cutting, styling and removing – to make new contributions to discussions of the geographies of the body by examining how its presences (or absences) can influence, disturb, transform and even transcend the margins of the body.

'Why hair?' you might ask. 'What can hair tell us about bodies that other corporeal dimensions, like skin, have not already?' While scholars have engaged seriously with the skin as an intimate and highly visible spatiality (Ahmed and Stacey, 2003; Connor, 2004; Price, 2012), my focus upon hair as a space that occupies the margins of the body takes a different approach, providing some unique inroads that emphasise hair as a key agent in the symbolic shaping of social and cultural presentations of the body and of corporeal identities. Engagements with hair are therefore becoming increasingly important. Indeed, I learned from the review of this paper that Caroline Faria and Jeffrey Hoelle (2018) had convened a session at the 2018 American Association of Geographers' Annual Meeting in New Orleans that focused specifically on disturbing the nature/culture binaries associated with hair (incidentally, at precisely the same time I had submitted the first draft of this manuscript). Interpreting various hairy and hairless sites of the body therefore provides context for how and why hair can contribute towards a re-imagination of bodies, developing what Lowe (2016: 73) argues as a 'vocabulary of hair' that essentially gives voice to the matter that exists on our skin. Hair is therefore multiply-sited through various spatialities that represent different cultural, ethnic, racialised and gendered identities, and multi-scalar in that it is powerful, yet can also denote suppression, dysfunction and sickness. It can individualise, differentiate and categorise, as well as control and regulate behaviour. Hence, because of its materialities, its relationality, its symbolism, hair complicates the body's borders,

making them spaces that are experienced, understood and produced simultaneously.

In terms of bordering, while Kwint (1999: 9) states that hair exists at the ‘dead margins of the self’, along with fingernails and other excreta, I argue that these borders are lively spaces, meaning hair can be considered a material ‘thing’ with agency (Thrift, 2008). Moreover, Leach (1958: 160) posits hair as ‘a separable part of the body [. . . ], a “thing in itself”’. My analysis seeks to extend Leach’s statement by arguing that hair exists simultaneously as matter *of* the body, and matter that transcends the *boundaries* of the body. These presences and absences of hair, depending on their context, situate it as either revered or reviled, indicating a rich variety of identity expressions, as well as offering insight into how the body as a political space is mediated and subverted.

To make sense of these multi-dimensional geographies of hair, the analysis for this paper is divided into three sections. First, I question the materiality of hair, examining the contestations relating to it as a bodily substance that shapes appearance and identity work. This is important as problematising scientific assumptions of hair as ‘natural’ matter emphasises the issues surrounding how bodies can be bordered and subjugated spaces. Next I investigate how hair is socially and relationally produced in the context of gender and race, and how these generate power dimensions that affect how identities are practised and performed at the borders of the body. Finally, I explore the absences and presences of hair to explain some of the complex and contested connotations that can be attached to hair cutting, hair loss and hair removal and how these position the body’s borders as fluid and permeable. These three dimensions, though not discrete from one another, offer some important new directions for research into geographies of the body. Interpreting these characteristics of hair reveals hair to be a bodily substance that represents new frontiers in understanding the bordered body

through its multi-scalar characteristics that both shape our understanding of appearance as well projecting identities and power in ways that extend well beyond its corporeal limits.

## II Matters of hair

This section questions how, as a material substance, hair is imbued with power and positionality. This reading of materiality as the quality of being composed of matter (Butler, 1993) situates hair – through its intimacies – as a substance that shapes and produces identities and positionalities, yet in doing so can operate as an instrument that colonises and segregates the body. Delving *inside* the body itself helps to explain how its physical margins – the configuration of cells, proteins and chemicals that constitute hair’s structural qualities – contribute towards understandings of affective bodily processes and how these conduce to the bordering of bodies. While I am not suggesting that hair is exempt from power or from positionality, it has, for centuries, been abstracted and presented in ways that position it as value free. For example, in its most primal form, hair, like other excreta, has been viewed as a bodily by-product that operates as a covering for warmth; to protect against environmental damage; to channel sweat and trap water loss; and to be sexually attractive (Stenn, 2016). In these contexts hair is considered a neutral substance or a natural entity that requires the agency of individuals to tame or control it. This view is, of course, problematic and incorrect as it conjures essentialist interpretations of identity, particularly as the constituent components of hair – the scaly cuticle that determines hair’s texture and shine; the protein-filled cortex of the hair shaft that provides structure and contains molecules that give hair its colour, shade and tone; the shape of the hair follicle that determines whether hair is curly or straight – all act as potent cultural signifiers that colonise and socially construct the body and its placement in society (Banks,

2000). Hence, hair, like skin, is socially relational and differentiated (Price, 2013), as well as being a highly visible cultural and political signifier of difference.

The social construction of hair as a materiality that experientially borders the body begins with hair texture – specifically the shape of the hair follicle as the space through which hair forms and grows. For context, hair follicles are not universally shaped and the diameter of each follicle will determine the overall shape of the hair shaft that grows from it, producing curly, wavy or straight hair. Hair follicles that are typically circular in diameter give hair a much straighter appearance as it grows from the skin. Those that are typically elliptical give hair a straighter or wavier texture, whilst curlier hair is produced from follicles that are very elliptical, or even ribbon-like. While this may seem trivial, these textures have carried colonial geographical connotations for centuries, with scientific research using hair texture uncritically to denote and classify race and culture. In this vein, typically circular hair structures are associated mostly with straighter Asian hair, whilst elliptical or very elliptical hair fibre is associated with wavier Caucasian and curlier African hair types respectively (Vogt et al., 2008). William Ripley, in his 1898 study *The Racial Geography of Europe*, famously utilised this classificatory technique to differentiate and organise a cultural hierarchy among European populations according to the characteristics of the body:

The European races, as a whole, show signs of a secondary or derived origin; certain characteristics, especially the texture of the hair, lead us to class them as intermediate between the extreme primary types of the Asiatic and the negro races respectively. (1898: 306)

This simplistic classification of hair type, whilst shocking through a post-modern gaze, demonstrates how the social construction of hair contributes towards a colonisation of the body

(it is no surprise that Ripley's findings were adopted by eugenicists and white nationalists). With links to scientific racism and environmental determinism, this biological rendering of hair is, of course, loaded and essentialist, ignoring the agency of the body and its position as socially produced, performed and regulated in different ways (Salih, 2007). Power is therefore an important vehicle in the production and domination of the bordered body (Verhage, 2014), with hair texture being utilised as a potent weapon in the categorisation and situation of difference and the Other, both in a symbolic and geographical sense. Hair texture and colour were infamously used during the Second World War as a way to classify, segregate and murder those considered to 'look' Jewish. Suedfeld et al. (2002) argue that these tacit forms of othering through the relational stereotyping of bodily appearance render individual identities anonymous – as sets of (un)desirable features that are associated with demographic groups, and that may have lethal consequences for entire populations. This positions the body, and by extension hair, as a weapon of technology which, as Foucault (1977) argues, is performed upon the subjugated body in order to discipline it.

It is important, therefore, to decolonise this essentialist and stigmatising bordering of hair. Thibaut et al. (2007) reject simplistic classifications of hair, arguing instead that hair fibre is heterogeneous, having material shape memory that is independent of ethnic origin. They suggest the composition of curly hair is not discrete but exists among both Caucasian and African hair types. Here, hair texture can be considered dynamic, being programmed through the curvature of the bulb itself, with curlier hair having a retrocurvature (a backwards bend) that influences the overall appearance of each individual hair from birth (Thibaut et al., 2005). Beyond genetic influences, Westgate et al. (2017) propose that the hair follicle can temporarily mutate through drug regimes (e.g. cancer

treatments) or after pregnancy as part of the shedding process, or be permanently changed through scarring. Hence, problematising the stereotypical depictions of hair classifications considers the power of imagined representations of hair upon how the body is (re)produced. So, while hair is a prism through which to view social identities, it must be considered in more heterogeneous and nuanced ways that counter such simplistic and essentialist meanings. In drawing upon Husserl's phenomenological understanding of the body as an assemblage of psycho-physical processes, Behnke (2010) argues that the lived experience of the body positions it as neither natural nor social. Considering hair as agential highlights its position at the margins of the body as potentially enabling bodies to exist as spaces in-between these states. By this I mean that the action of bordering the body is enacted through the interwoven social and biological characteristics of hair, meaning hair is not static and has the capacity to (re)shape identities and positionalities through a combination of genetic, chemical, social and environmental influences.

Alongside hair texture, hair also contains affective and sensuous qualities. Again, this links to notions of the body as an assemblage of biological, social and cultural practices that affect (and are affected by) social, spatial and cultural contexts (Blackman, 2012). This situates hair as a performative substance that is experienced by the body, and to understand this I focus briefly upon 'goose-bumps' – the muscle contractions that make hair stand on end when someone is frightened or aroused. The function of goose-bumps comes from a process called 'piloerection' whereby a release of adrenalin causes the arrector pili muscles surrounding the hair shaft to contract, making the hair stand perpendicular to the skin. This simple bodily function provides a dynamic example of how the affective materiality of hair is, quite literally, performed at the margins of the body. As Anderson and Wylie (2009) infer, the body is not inert but is

perceptive and sensual, acting and reacting to a variety of environmental rhythms. More broadly, this is evident through the tactile relationships people have with hair – the touching, ruffling and running of fingers through hair; playing with (others') hair and the movement of hair – and the rhythms and fluidity caught up in these processes that gives hair personality through a mixture of aesthetics and intimacies (McCracken, 1996). This has implications for how bodies are bordered, and Blackman (2012) states that the notion of the *definitive* body has been superseded by the *differentiated* body, a complex entanglement of psychological, biological, social and ideological characteristics. Yet, through this muddle, hair takes on charismatic qualities that make it a space imbued with affect and emotion. As Holmes (2018) posits, hair has agency, and in the eyes of the wearer hair certainly 'does things' (*it sticks up, it gets greasy, it goes frizzy, etc.*), implying the social meaning and individualistic significance of hair are performed at the borders of the body. Here, bodies have an enduring capacity to subjectively respond to everyday practices (Abrahamsson and Simpson, 2011), further supporting this need to 'rethink the limits of the body, its capacities and thresholds' (Wilson, 2017: 456), particularly in relation to how bodies are performed and encountered.

What makes hair distinctive though is that it grows, meaning identities are not fixed in space and time and may be (re)shaped to complement adaptive identity expressions throughout the lifecourse. While head and body hair may form through unique sets of biological processes, we as agents are capable of altering or subverting its materialities through various forms of modification that (re)form and (re)frame the borders of the body. Body alteration has been reflected upon extensively in terms of tattooing, piercing, branding, scarring, etc., as well as through amputation, the use of prosthesis and the body-work involved in weight-loss/gain, fasting, body-building, etc. (Featherstone, 2003). Modification is therefore an intensely emotional



expression of bodily alteration that articulates identities, fashion trends and social (non)conformities across a broad spectrum. Pitts (2000: 443) argues that 'body modification [is] a practice imbued with agency by subjects', in that it expresses a visible public identity that subverts acceptable social norms. Yet it is the aesthetic disturbances that are felt when presented with alternative or transgressive bodies that is interesting here, particularly in relation to the ideological contexts of producing the 'perfect body'. The social and cultural significances of hair invites opportunities to explore this agency in more critical detail. Anderson (2018) offers some compelling temporalities to this argument through the context of male facial hair and shaving. He suggests that while fashions for facial hair have changed over the centuries they carry varying social, cultural and spiritual connotations – for example, the contestations between the clean-shaven face and the wearing of beards, sideburns and moustaches. Oldstone-Moore (2015: 2) therefore proclaims men's 'face[s] to be an index of maleness' – meaning masculinities that can be expressed and regulated through the cutting or shaping of facial hair are worn at the body's borders *and* act as material that borders the body. Yet, as Peterkin (2001) argues, while hair may arrive uninvited on the face at puberty for many men, the wearing (or not) of facial hair is socially and culturally regulated through societal norms, faith, fashion and taste (see Lowe, 2016). What cuts through this is a sense that the topographical landscape of the body's borders – and not just the head – can be shaped, contoured and transformed by hair. Specifically, the temporalities associated with styling, grooming and depilation present some crucial differences to most forms of body modification. Given that hair is a (mostly) renewable substance, its modification can be viewed as temporary – certainly relative to the permanence of tattoos and piercings. Holmes (2014: 95) argues then that hair carries with it multiple temporalities, making it a chameleon-like

substance that is 'all at once changing, changed, yet with constant features'. Moreover, if hair can be considered a palimpsest it can also indicate how the borders of the body can themselves become layered. The cyclical nature of hair, through its growing, resting and shedding phases, teases out these intimate geographies of the bordered body, providing opportunities to reshape and contour the body through these multidimensional qualities that effectively blur the boundaries of identity through its impermanence and temporalities.

### III Hair and the socially and relationally produced body

This next section extends the materialities of hair to examine how, through lenses of gender and race, hair contributes towards the social and relational production of the body's borders. Hair, in these contexts, can be viewed as a tool through which discourses of power, control and authority are inscribed upon, encountered by and used against bodies in space. Foucault (1977) argues that for the capitalist model of social life to function it needs compliant, 'docile bodies' that acquiesce to the ideologies of authorities. Yet this raises questions of how hair might endorse or subvert such corporeal conformities within society and how this contributes towards the political struggles involved in understanding gendered and racialised bodies. This is particularly important in the context of othering, specifically in relation to how the 'lived body' acts as a mechanism through which encounters with 'Other' bodies are mediated (Morris, 1982). Yet, while hair certainly operates as a component of the 'socially shaped body' (Behnke, 2010), it contains synecdochical qualities that allow it to define a person's identity whilst simultaneously categorising entire demographic groups. This has implications for how hair might contribute towards the emergence and suppression of the body's

borders and how these are recognised and mediated in society.

Hair is intrinsically entwined within the social and relational production of gender (Weitz, 2001). This was particularly prominent in Western societies during the 20th century, being articulated through discourses of 'appropriate' hair length, style and colour. The normalisation of acceptable hair has contributed significantly to the problematic categorisation of gender and the gendered ordering of behaviour in schools and workplaces and presents hair as a device that organises and limits the body. Clarke and Bennett (2015) argue that we often inevitably fall into the trap of evaluating others according to standards of physical attractiveness that conform to societal norms, and this is problematic when considering how the borders of the body are socially and relationally produced. For example, Hallpike (1969), drawing on hair in a biblical sense, offers a simplistic but telling definition, suggesting hair that is cut relates to social control, while hair that is left long, or is 'untamed' constitutes being an outsider. Here, the relationality of gender – how gender makes sense in relation to the Other – brings gendered categories into being by constructing an illusion of 'naturalness' (Butler, 1990). In their study of masculinity performances in hairdressing salons, Robinson et al. (2011) propose that the stability of gender can be disturbed through subversive behaviours (e.g. men wearing their hair long or women cutting their hair short). They draw upon Brickell's (2005) reworking of performativity that incorporates Goffman's (1959) more reflexive understandings of identity to argue for the subjectivity of actors to be crucial in how gender is performed and received according to various (competing) social situations. These performances border the body through the relational experiences of 'acceptable' hair. For example, Gimlin's (1996) beautician participants speak of hair as a 'gendered enactment' through which the wearing of one's hair at different stages of the

lifecourse can be inflected with particular anecdotal displays of identity:

[Women] wearing long hair during middle age hints at a falseness, an attempt to deceive, because, Donna [one of Gimlin's participants] says, long hair suits someone younger. (1996: 519)

This rather cutting quote demonstrates how the display of hair at the body's borders is interwoven with what seem to be socially acceptable gendered and aged performances. In this sense, (non)conformist hair presents a barrier of sorts that masks how identities may be managed, presented and practised, blurring the subjectivities and agency of the wearer and fixing hair in time. Yet this binary view of the existence of 'good hair', whereby the wearer is considered likely to engage in positive acts, and 'other' hairstyles that are associated with more transgressive behaviours (Lowe, 2016) is problematic. Weitz (2001) argues that gendered hair can be more dynamic, with women balancing the twin streams of accommodation and resistance when managing social situations that might influence both their position and status, as well as how these are performed at the body's borders. Moreover, Yang's (2014) study of male trainee hairdressers in Taiwan provides further evidence of how the margins of the body can be disturbed. Like Robinson et al. (2011), Yang's participants challenge traditional notions of masculinities through performances of genderfluidity (e.g. men playing with their hair or fixing their appearances in the salon mirror) that reinforce how alternative masculinities are displayed. Hence, the actions of conforming, or not, move hairstyles (and hairstyling routines and performances) beyond being simply fashion statements to actively challenge dominant discourses of gendered identities and the borders of gendered bodies as opaque, fluid and permeable.

Like gender, hair plays a dynamic role in the construction and performance of race –

specifically in relation to the complex social, cultural, emotional and affective messages communicated through black women's hair (Robinson, 2011) - that, as Kelley (1997) and Tate (2007) argue, positions black hair not simply as a 'thing' in the world. This is particularly important as discourses surrounding black hair have shifted it away from its cultural roots to re-signify it with slavery, colonialism and racism. In this context, hair contains symbolically constructed characteristics that relate to the perceived exoticism of 'Other' hair types and the 'taming' of 'wild' hair. Crucially, this presents black hair as a space through which marginalisation and control are enacted and embodied through everyday hair management practices. The examples drawn upon here provide evidence for how the borders of the body are performed and experienced, quite literally becoming battlegrounds through which lines of identity, history and oppression are drawn. In November 2017, the Mexican-born, Kenyan-raised actress Lupita Nyong'o criticised the fashion magazine *Grazia* for altering the appearance of her hair for the front cover of the publication's winter edition. The magazine 'edited out' her naturally curly ponytail in an effort to achieve what Nyong'o later Tweeted as 'a more Eurocentric notion of what beautiful hair looks like' (Ruddick, 2017). This demonstrates the perpetuation (perhaps extension even) of what Simonsen (2000) argues as the subordination of culture through representations of the acceptable body, particularly in terms of how beauty is packaged, commodified and consumed. As Crewe (2001: 633) infers:

The body – and particularly here the female body – is always inescapably encoded by cultural norms [whereby] the commodification of the body through the fashion and beauty industries presupposes that acutely self-conscious relation to the body which is attributed to femininity.

Crewe goes on to argue that the body becomes engaged in a project of continual

renewal and improvement through which the media perpetuates 'mythical stereotypes' of female perfection by way of highlighting and demonising the inadequacies of Other bodies. This is writ large within the context of black hair, in which its treatment and appearance generate highly divisive and contested debates of how bodies 'should' be performed. Mercer (2000: 117), for example, argues that discourses surrounding black hair have 'sparked off a range of everyday critiques on the cultural politics of "race" and "aesthetics"' that accuses those who chemically relax their hair of 'deracialising' the ethnic body and 'becoming white'. The relaxing of black hair especially is a contentious subject, comprising a set of arguments with many different and competing dimensions. Alongside cultural politics, straightening hair has been viewed as a practical solution for family life – particularly for children (Bordo, 2008); a marker of moving from childhood into adolescence or womanhood (Thompson, 2008); or a way of embodying cosmopolitanism by 'look[ing] smart' (Faria, 2014: 324). Indeed, Linda Hardnett (cited in Ebong, 2001: 78) succinctly protests against notions of selling out in her poem *If Hair Makes Me Black I Must Be Purple*:

Yes, my hair is / Straight / But that don't mean  
that I ain't / Black / Nor proud / All it means is that  
my hair is / Straight

Yet these interpretations are in themselves social constructs, and as Thompson (2009: 831) articulates, '[f]or the vast majority of Black women, hair is not just hair; it contains emotive qualities that are linked to one's lived experience'. Hence, while the relaxing of hair may have practical benefits, the role of chemicals, products, equipment, etc., in shaping everyday bodily performances has implications for how the body is mediated, controlled and ordered in society and how hair is experienced as marginalised by the wearer. This links back to the earlier discussions of how 'good' and



'bad' hair is produced. As Robinson (2011) and Nichols (2013) argue, the practices involved in black female hair (and body) maintenance outlined above emphasise how the expectations of the 'white body' project (i.e. of projecting white female beauty as the aspirational norm) by extension visibly, emotionally, and socially inscribes and controls Other(ed) bodies as marginal and bordered.

Notwithstanding this, when considering the body as a bordered space there remains plenty of discussion that frames 'natural' black hair as a form of resistance against oppressive white beauty norms. A participant in Tarlo's (2016: 144) study states that: 'we're not just battling against chemicals but against other people, our own families and the comments of people in the street', alluding to the psychogeographical implications involved in viewing hair as a relational set of internal and external symbolisms that are enacted at the margins of the body. As Banks (2000: 49) emphasises, while claims may be made to manageability, once this moves from the body and into the social realm, hair can '[go] beyond the mere act of combing' to produce feelings of stigma and self-hatred through wider constructions of beauty. These notions of hair as (de)limiting gendered and racialised bodies positions it as a significant agent in the relational production of bodies through various emotional and affective forms of contact with the social world. This has consequences for the bordering of the body, particularly as Ahmed (2013: 2) argues, that national borders are repeatedly (and metaphorically) connected with the intimacy of the skin, in ways that suggest bodies are 'soft, weak, porous and easily shaped or even bruised by the proximity of others'.

#### **IV Absences and presences – hair at the margins . . . and beyond**

This final section focuses upon the presences and absences of hair that symbolically, politically and emotionally (re)produce the body and

provide important dimensions in understanding the implications for how the borders of the body may be considered fluid and permeable. For example Dawney's (2011) reading of embodied imaginations explains how the 'historied body' has capacities to act in accordance with its imaginary experience of the world. This alludes to the power and agency of hair in defining nations, races, cultures and ethnicities through its existence (or not) at or beyond the borders of the body. These notions of presences and absences first relate to the conflicting senses of desire and revulsion that may result from hair existing 'away' from the body. For many, cut hair (trimmings) may be considered waste, as a by-product – as dirt or 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 1966). While the removal of hair (and conversely the presence of unwanted hair) can be viewed as contravening the ordering of space, cut hair can take on quite contrasting identities once it is removed from the margins of the body.<sup>1</sup> Hair may, in some ways, lose material value when it is cut, becoming a consumable product to be disposed of. Yet, beyond waste, hair contains other dimensions, in that cut locks may also be agential, being ascribed symbolic value that connects loved ones over space and time. Holm (2004) writes of the fashion for mourning jewellery in the 18th century through which locks of hair were encapsulated within lockets and brooches worn on the body. This act of wearing the artefacts of loved ones provides social, cultural and material linkages to what Leder (1990) conceptualises as the 'absent body', essentially the existence of the body outside of its lived realities. This transcendence of the *lived* body to the *object* body – to an artefact that is imbued with intimate identities – is therefore viewed and mediated from a distance. Yet this geographical 'distancing' of hair from the borders of the body may be problematic as hair in this sense can be thought of as stripped of its social identities. Its deeply interpersonal value means it becomes 'necessarily anonymous to all but its intended bearer'

(Holm, 2004: 141). More contemporary examples demonstrate how the purchasing, possessing and ownership of one's hair by another adds extra layers of complexity to these notions of the body's borders as malleable and transcendable. In 2011, a lock of the singer Justin Bieber's hair was sold for more than £25,000 in a charity auction on eBay. The lock of approximately 200 one-inch hairs was encapsulated in a plastic container and was autographed by Bieber for authenticity (Telegraph, 2011). While the purchasing, or indeed reifying, of another's hair may appear odd (for context, Lowe (2016) writes that there exist countless locks of hair in religious sites around the world that purportedly belong to the prophet Mohammed that worshipers are encouraged to kiss), this example positions hair as more than simply waste or a memory. Through ownership, a lock of hair can take on its own personal identities, perhaps presenting a borderland of sorts, an area of overlap between the bodies of the provider and of the recipient. This suggests that cut hair may become an imagined entity in itself, albeit in the form of a relic of another's body, that possesses considerable emotional value, and that may instil some potentially quite disturbing interpersonal connections between supplier and receiver. These examples of hair operating away from the borders of the body may therefore imply its capacity to be imbued with supernatural qualities. This extends Miller's (1982) notion of the fetishisation of hair by proposing that through this diffusion of the borders of bodies, hair becomes imbued with unique personalities and identities that mark it as a multiplicitous substance – as both cherished and disposable, beautiful and dirty, memorable and anonymous.

Beyond notions of consensual cutting, hair absences, particularly through the forced removal of hair, provide evidence of more unsettling hair practices that relate to how biopolitical process of suppression and control are performed at the borders of the body. Foucault

(1986: 140) argues that society has witnessed 'an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations' and hair, through its materialities, its social construction and its relational positioning, has played a central role in achieving this. This echoes Suedfeld et al.'s (2002) notions of stigma and stereotyping that infer hair as occupying a geo-political space through which racist and sexist forms of cultural stereotyping through hair colour and texture are performed. As a practice of bordering other bodies, hair becomes a technology of war and through its removal a symbol of control that dehumanises the subject. Examples of this are littered through history. Byrd and Tharps (2001) and Thompson (2008) recount the indignities and erasure of cultural identities experienced during the slave trade by West Africans whose heads were shaved as they were cargoed to the Americas. Ephgrave (2016: 22) writes on the dehumanisation during the Holocaust of Jewish women whose heads were forcibly shaved and the subsequent degradation this caused through the loss of individual, feminine and cultural identities whereby '[a]ge and other personal differences melt away'. What these practices of forcible hair removal demonstrate is a capacity to re-inscribe other bodies as powerless and vulnerable. While Butler (1993) argues that gender and sex are written onto our bodies in complex ways, the process of forcibly removing hair attacks this sense of identity, exposing the vulnerable margins of the body, thus rendering it 'identity-less' (Ephgrave, 2016). Lowe's (2016) depiction of Samuel Mullet – who, in 2015, was convicted of federal hate crimes in the US state of Ohio for the hacking off of the beards and head-hair of members of the Amish community – contextualises this further. This story has significance for understanding the cultural implications of bordering other bodies as uncut hair (both beard and head-hair) carries great spiritual importance among the Amish faith. As Lowe (2016: 61) argues, the action here of forcibly

cutting hair meant that Mullet and his gang were essentially ‘judging, sentencing and punishing their victims, whose disfiguration, while only temporary and largely symbolic, was uniquely humiliating within their closed society’.

Humiliation is fundamental in understanding how the multi-scalar power of hair – specifically its removal – disturbs the margins of the body as acceptable and/or accepted. Here, the forced removal of hair acts as a mechanism through which the threshold of the body can be transcended, and whereby the power of the individual is rescinded through violence and humiliation. This is multiply scaled from the individual up to the nation-state, and as Moisi (2010: 57) argues: ‘[w]hen it is transcended and mastered, humiliation acts on nations as it does on individuals’, meaning the act of humiliating another’s body through forcible hair removal not only inflicts pain on the person but inflicts a symbolic act of defilement upon entire communities, states, nations and cultures. This subsequently reimagines the body as ‘becoming’ the border – as a visual representation of its (un)acceptability in space.

Furthering these forced absences, the presences of hair upon the seemingly ‘unconventional’ margins of the female body (e.g. the legs, armpits, face or pubic area) can produce similarly shocking examples of contestation, disgust and violence against women. In contrast to the value attached to head-hair, through a contemporary Western capitalist lens feminine body hair is characterised as unwanted, an excessive or needless substance. Lesnik-Oberstein (2006) describes body hair as the ‘last taboo’ of women’s bodies, insofar as attempts to raise meaningful discourses of body hair are often met with silence or aggression. In October 2017, the Swedish model Arvida Byström posted a photograph on the social media site Instagram of her wearing a pair of Adidas trainers. In the image, Byström’s unshaven legs were prominently displayed, and in a resulting set of messages the model reported being sent

threats of rape for apparently contravening the social norms of the body: ‘Me being such an abled, white, cis[gender]<sup>2</sup> body with its only nonconforming feature being a lil [sic] leg hair [...] literally I’ve been getting rape threats in my DM [direct message] inbox’ (Kahn, 2017)

What is important to note here is that feminine body hair (alongside weight, image, appearance, etc.) is articulated through patriarchal ideologies of female perfection that are designed to regulate and control the body – essentially creating bodies bordered by others. There are stark differences here between the acceptability of the placement of non-head hair on men’s and women’s bodies. Oldstone-Moore (2015: 2), for example, proclaims that for men ‘the language of facial hair [is] built on the contrast of shaved and unshaved’. For women though, these binary terms clearly – and unevenly – weigh shaving as a positive act against the negative connotations of not shaving (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2004). This adds to the normalisation of female body hair removal in Western contexts (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003), alluding to notions of the civilised body and the conformist ‘hairless ideal’ (Terry and Braun, 2013) that naturalises hair removal among women. Indeed, MacDonald (2006) suggests that media images of hair removal never focus on the hair itself,<sup>3</sup> depicting the shaving or depilation of already smooth skin, further fetishising hairlessness as natural. Moreover, Lesnik-Oberstein (2006) argues that feminine body hair is unique in producing simultaneous and contradictory reactions, being at once *meaningless*, in that it is depicted only in the context of removal, and *meaningful*, in that it produces discourses that forbid its appearance on the body. This implies unequal interpretations of the propriety of the body as a bordered space. As Merleau-Ponty (1968) writes, the body does not belong exclusively to either the subject or the world, insofar as they are mutually relational – the body is an intertwined state between the perceiver and the perceived.

Yet, in the context of women's body hair, this renders the margins of lived bodies invisible – in that bodies can be recognised as taken-for-granted, or normal, only when they conform to the norms of society (Morris, 1982). The terrain of the smooth body therefore becomes fetishised against the disturbances of troublesome hair.

The final dimension within this section examines the implications for hair loss upon how the body's borders are physically experienced. While this draws comparisons with the earlier symbolisms associated with non-consensual hair removal, this discussion moves on to examine how the process of 'losing' hair – the absence of hair as a consequence of biological or medical issues – may impact upon how 'different' bodies are viewed, performed and bordered. Hair loss takes on many guises, the most common being androgenetic alopecia, a permanent form of baldness more commonly referred to as male/female-pattern baldness, and alopecia areata, or 'spot baldness', an often temporary condition whereby hair loss may occur from some or all areas of the body. While androgenetic alopecia in men is a combination of genetics and hormones (the cause among women is unknown), alopecia areata is an autoimmune response of the body against its own healthy cells and tissues (Vary, 2015). To be clear, alopecia areata is not a dysfunction of the hair follicle – indeed hair will still grow and perform the cycle of resting and shedding as normal – the issue is with the body itself and its failure to recognise its own cells. This provides context for how the bordering of the body can be simultaneously a function of the body that is then performed at the *margins* of the body. While the diagnosis, treatment and duration of these forms of hair loss differ greatly, the impact upon body image and self-esteem – specifically the ways in which the margins of the body are experienced – is profound (Cash et al., 1993). For example, Kranz's (2011) study of young men experiencing premature hair loss reveals

how coping mechanisms, such as compensation (improving other aspects of appearance) and avoidance (pretending the hair loss is not happening), can be dysfunctional masculine approaches of dealing with hair loss that contribute to social stress.

In relation to the body's borders, Leder (1990) states that we only really ever notice our bodies when our understanding of wellbeing is disturbed. Leder infers such dysfunctional approaches to have implications for how the body's borders are expressed in space. For example, while self-awareness of the body can prompt support or repair, hair loss, in this context, can visibly signify the body as a neglected or decaying space (Merleau-Ponty, 1968), exacerbating the person's anxieties.

Moreover, absences of hair through cancer-related hair loss can challenge identities and senses of selfhood through the embodied stigma surrounding sickness and death among patients, particularly in relation to how the edges of the body are experienced and 'felt'. Ploug Hansen's (2007) account of women dealing with hair loss suggests the use of makeup, wigs and headwear become technologies that embody illness and treatment in an effort to help minimise, and perhaps even 'normalise', the effects of hair loss and retain a sense of status quo. Moreover, Rosman (2004) articulates how bodies can be bordered by illness and disease, acknowledging the dualisms involved in practices of displaying (or not) hair loss during treatment. This considers how the stigma associated with hair loss through treatment might disrupt how bodies are performed in both public (of divulging information and of receiving reactions from others) and private spheres (of inhabiting/embodying hair loss). This links to Merleau-Ponty's (1968) discussions of visibility/invisibility, highlighting how gender operates as an important marker of how stigma may be embodied and performed through the body. Among Rosman's (2004) participants, women were more likely to camouflage their hair loss while men banalised it, or

expressed it as an inevitable consequence of their treatment. This implies differences in how the stigma surrounding absence can be simultaneously publicly/privately, visibly/invisibly performed through, experienced by and worn on the body. Hence, absences of hair, and the subsequent revealing or camouflaging of such absences, may provide more visceral indicators of trauma that exist within the body, suggesting hair and the body as operating in interdependent, but not necessarily simultaneous, ways – influencing how identities, behaviours, etc., are both performed and experienced.

## V Conclusion

Through this paper I have sought to advance discussions of the geographies of bodies by examining the role of hair as a new geographical prism through which the frontiers of the body as bordered, marginal spaces can be extended and re-imagined. This analysis has demonstrated how the placement (or not) of hair on the body can produce powerful and emotive understandings of how bodily practices are socially and relationally produced. Comprehending the spatialities of hair reveals how its materialities, symbolism, subjectivity and agency provide unique articulations of how bodies are experienced, performed, projected and understood in space. This is expressed through the notion of hair as a borderland space that overlaps and influences the spatial and temporal dimensions that exist between the wearer and the observer. At the beginning of this paper I drew on Haraway's (1985: 33) question: 'Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?', and this critique of hair as a more-than-bodily substance certainly conjures interpretations of the margins of the body as permeable, dynamic and transcendable. Drawing on Thrift's (2008) notion of glamour – the treatment of hair through the material qualities of hair-styling, the weaponisation of hair in the context of removing

desirable hair or the placement of hair in undesirable places – demonstrates how hair (loss) can manipulate the surface of the body in chameleon-like ways. These transformative qualities act as powerful identifiers that situate bodies at different stages of the lifecourse, as well as symbolically positioning them in time-periods through fashions, events and social expectations. In some ways these borders are expressed through the agency of the wearer, but in others they are exerted through the power of society, or through the violence of an oppressor. Yet, while Holmes (2018) quite rightly asserts that hair holds its own agency through its identities, power and subjectivities, these must be negotiated carefully when determining the relational and somewhat imbricated ways in which bodies are situated in – and belong to – the world. The spaces at the edges of the body must therefore be considered not simply as two or three-dimensional but as containing multiple and unspecified dimensions within, and through, which bodily practices are performed.

Moreover, focusing on the supernatural qualities of hair extends Leach's (1958: 140) argument that hair is 'a separable part of the body [...], a "thing in itself"', suggesting that hair's multi-scalar capacities contain multiple intersecting and conflicting spatialities and temporalities. This asserts hair as a bordering (and bordered) substance that both shapes embodied understandings of acceptable appearances and where/how these might be positioned. Hair (like clothes, make up, tattoos, etc.) places individuals and bodies in space and time, yet also within various differentiated and relational social circumstances that, depending on the positionalities of the wearer or viewer, can galvanise or challenge senses of being in the world. Hair also projects identities and power in ways that extend well beyond what might be considered the limited borders of the body – the 'matter' of skin, flesh and bones. Exploring the absences and presences of hair through cutting, forcible removal and loss reveals hair to be integral in



how sentient bodies are symbolically, politically and emotionally produced. Moreover, recognising absence and presence as geographical dimensions acknowledges the emotional work that is invested into hair as a substance with particular mobilities and agency. Hair has unique capacities to move beyond the borders of the body to take on different qualities associated with loss, theft, dirt, stigma, etc., yet its highly contested (invisible even) positioning at the unconventional margins of the body emphasises discourses of the intertwined public/private body (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). This recognises the paradoxical nature of hair, being simultaneously fetishised and detested, as well as anonymous yet thoroughly humanised through its imaginative, material and symbolic qualities.

To close, I draw on Synnott (1987: 381), who writes:

Hair is perhaps our most powerful symbol of individual and group identity – powerful first because it is physical and therefore extremely personal, and second because, although personal, it is also public rather than private.

This passage sums up the multiplicitous dimensions of hair discussed throughout this paper. Synnott's assertions of the relationality of hair – its capacities to be simultaneously personal *and* public, individual *and* general, physical *and* symbolic – get to the heart of this argument about the importance of focusing attention at the extreme edges of the body (and beyond). These discussions invite opportunities to explore further the intersectionalities involved in hair practices and performances in relation to sexuality, disability, age, faith and ethnicity, and how hair can contribute towards the shaping of contemporary understandings of identity. Moreover, discourse is welcome that prompts further engagement with other modifiable bodily (e.g. eyebrows, teeth, fingernails, etc.) or sensual (e.g. through hearing-aids, spectacles, prosthesis, etc.) dimensions that position bodies in space and time. Notwithstanding this,

beyond identity, more can be said of the contributions hair can make in shaping understandings of mobilities, migration and citizenship. I finish then with a recommendation that we attend to the body not just as a subjective entity that transitions through space and time, but as a persistent project of Self (and relational) identities that is continually re-inscribed, reshaped and re-sculpted.

### Acknowledgement

Thank you to Prof. Nina Laurie and the anonymous reviewers for their encouraging support and feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Notes

1. See also Faria and Dimpfl's (2018) exploration of the geopolitical perspectives of cut hair from the 2018 American Association of Geographers' Annual Meeting in New Orleans.
2. Cisgender refers to people whose gender identity matches the sex that they were assigned at birth.
3. In July 2018 the US company Billie was the first to depict women with body hair in their adverts for razors (Belam, 2018).

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