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Becoming a City Body

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Becoming a City Body
Embodying Space in Urban Environments

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Abstract

While urban environments are commonly characterised and studied as nodes in international networks of migration, economics, cultures, and policies, they are also sites for everyday embodied experience through which cultures and identities are performed and produced in dynamic ways. As such, they cannot be understood as fixed entities but as ever-unfolding spatial processes. This paper examines the role that embodied experience plays in this process, taking as its locus the question: *How are cities and city-bodies co-produced and performed by pedestrians?*. Following the work of Elizabeth Grosz (1992) and Manuel DeLanda (2016), I argue that cities are assemblages of intersecting topographies, climates, cartographies, architectures, and bodies. These bodies both make and are made by urbanity, just as urbanity makes and is made by these bodies. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Lisbon, Portugal, I explore how a "Lisbon-body" is produced in the interaction between space and embodied walking practice in geographically and culturally-specific ways. Furthermore, I argue that the flows and frictions that result from moving through Lisbon complicate binary frameworks that are often used to study cities: global and local, past and present, human and non-human (and more). In doing so, I argue that cities are not just physical points of interconnection, but as an object of study, urban assemblages require research approaches and methodologies that challenge the boundaries of academic disciplinarity itself.

Keywords: *interdisciplinarity, performance, space, city, embodiment, walking, assemblage*

Acknowledgement of Country

I would like to commence by paying my respects to the Gadigal people and to Elders past and present, who are the traditional custodians of the land on which I research. Now today, I am speaking about Lisbon and I am presenting in Nafplio, but I will speak about bodies: the place-spaces we move through live in our bodies as much as we live in them. And I live, study, and research on stolen land. Sovereignty was never ceded, and that land always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

Into the Rabbit Warren: Assembling Space

My acknowledgement here intertwines with another story that positions my body in the research I present today. In 1788, when the Southern Continent was invaded, settler-colonialists brought rabbits with them. While there is a plethora of research documenting the damage that this did to the ecosystem there (Mutze et al., 2016; Finlayson et al., 2021), I am interested in how the presence of rabbits in "Australia" has become a part of my body. When I was growing up, my godmother had a pet rabbit living in her house. It had burrowed into her sofa, hollowing it out underneath and lining it with fur, guarding the lounge like a tiny minotaur.

The room was forged in the dynamic interaction of human body and rabbit body, and their varied textures and movements within the architecture of that house. Her home was not just a structure, but a rabbit warren; a straw bed; the smell of droppings in the spare room. It was chewed chords and faulty electricals. It was the different embodiments that we adopted as human bodies in a more-than-human space – careful movements in the dark, a ginger approach to sofas. Thus, my godmother's loungeroom was skin and fur, lounge and tooth, human feet tip-toeing, rabbit feet pelting the worn-down carpet.

This is how spaces are produced: in the interstices of their disparate parts as they move around, rub against, encounter and adapt to each other. And this is how spaces are embodied: in the performances that emerge from these adaptations that then, in turn, become part of that space. Following Grosz (1992), I see this process as an assemblage in which spaces and bodies are implicated in and co-produce each other. This is not just true of my godmother's loungeroom; it is a process that can be observed on a wider scale in the intersections of bodies and infrastructures that produce urban environments more generally. If rabbit fur and careful movement is how that loungeroom and this loungeroom body was co-produced and performed, w*hat does this mean for other spaces and other bodies? What might this look like in the wider urban environment? How are cities and city-bodies co-produced and performed by pedestrians?*

Assembling Lisbon

The next story I will tell begins 18,171 km from my godmother's coastal city on Awabakal and Worimi land in Lisbon, the coastal capital of Portugal. In 2022, I moved to Lisbon for one year of ethnographic fieldwork. When I arrived in Portugal, I was a body with two large backpacks, a yoga mat, Sydney-sider sensibilities for navigating traffic, a nervousness around sofas, and B1 level Portuguese. The city that my human body encountered was many things, including:

- A port city: Lisbon is situated on the Rio Tejo, and like most port cities, its riverside location is integral to the city (Hein, 2011). Its waterfront views are prime real estate, a tourist hotspot, and a historic site that acts both as a reminder of the tragic earthquake-fire-tsunami that took place in 1755 (Voltaire et al., 2006), and as marker of its colonial history, particularly for its role in centralising the wealth of the Portuguese empire in the 16th century (Vogt, 1973)
- An immigration hot spot, literally: its climate is a major motivator for those that move to the city, particularly the American population. It is often called the California of Europe (Arte TV, 2022)
- A mountainous landscape: its hills are famously steep and difficult to traverse. It has a metro system, unreliable buses, and most famously, trams and funiculars that are used to pass-by its mountainous terrain
- A vibrant skyline: populated with colourful buildings, terracotta rooftops, cathedral domes, and miradouros, which are viewpoints that look out over the city.

There are many other ways to describe this city, and each of these points offers a different way to move through Lisbon, to think and research Lisbon, and to imagine Lisbon. Even the city's slopes are more than just a topographical feature of this urban environment. These hills are also paved with limestone and basalt cobbles that are slippery in the sun and slipperier in the rain. Public opinion on these pathways differs. One inhabitant I spoke to had sent a complaint to their council about the inaccessibility of the area's footpaths; they received a response that detailed the patrimonial significance of these black and white cobbles, but ignored their concerns. Yet many roads in Lisbon were once paved similarly, and are now covered in bitumen; the topography of this city reveals who gets to move through Lisbon's space, and how. This is urban assemblage: heritage and urban identity, policy, climate, and topography coalescing in the narrow streets, alive in the bodies of Lisbon's inhabitants and in the habits that are their bodies. Cities producing city-bodies producing cities.

Embodying Cities, Citying Bodies

These different facets of urban assemblage are always in the process of adjusting to each other as my jottings from an encounter I had with a group of tourists revealed:

> I step off the footpath, a car looming in my peripherals. Anna is standing tensed on the gutter as the group trundles past, bumping her so that she teeters at the edge of the road. Her breath comes in gasps after the climb. I cannot stop walking, because to stop on these hills is too difficult to start again.
> But the car does not stop either. The space between us is shrinking, and as we are about to pass each other –
> "Ooh! Oooh! Ooooh!"
> Anna flings her arm out, pulling me back to the curb. The car circles past where I had been walking, half a metre away. Anna's mouth is still pulled into a tight 'o', releasing a high pitch squeal that reminds me of the sound a rabbit makes when caught by a predator.

This is not just a story about an encounter between people and traffic, but car, limestone, bitumen, city infrastructure, heritage, topography, and weather. It is a story about the process of encountering other bodies with their own geographically and culturally-produced understandings of how to move, and how to encounter. Anna, a friend from Australia, with her Sydney-turned-Canberra body, was accustomed to wide, flat footpaths and low population density. To my friend's distress, I was emulating the modes of perambulation I saw around me: my Sydney-body was becoming Lisbon.

At the same time, these encounters between my Sydney-becoming-Lisbon body, my friend's Canberra-body, and the other pedestrians' bodies from their own cities, hint towards the networked simultaneity of space (Massey, 2002). We all embodied Elsewhere's in the Here of Lisbon. This tiny moment reminds us that this assembled city exists in an assembled state in an assembled country on an assembled continent in an assembled world that, maybe, eventually, becomes part of "the grand cosmic assemblage, the plane of immanence, consistency, or exteriority" (DeLanda, 2016, p.7). Or, as I like to think of it, Lisbon itself becomes the small mammal living in the couch of our intertwined world.

Assembling Urban Research

The question, then, is not just *how are cities and city-bodies co-produced and performed by pedestrians?*, but *how do we research and facilitate discussions about movement, bodies and embodied encounters that produce urban environments?* Or *what might cities offer for thinking about and researching space?*

Furthermore, I wonder how the research we produce shapes the spaces we live in and move through. Sarah Pink (2008) notes that ethnography, one of the methodologies I have drawn on here, is a generative act that continues to produce, reproduce and co-produce the place-spaces in which research is situated, even after the temporal event of that research is concluded. The stories I tell become enfolded within its assemblage. My godmother's home is human-rabbit co-habitation, but it is also the story I tell about this rabbit, the presentation I give today, my embodied performance of human-rabbit co-habitation in every encounter I have with a new lounge, and the imagined network of fragile tunnels and tiny minotaurs that every one of these sofas may contain.

Thus, Lisbon is the characteristics I described above, and the moment that unfolded in the street, and my friend's visceral reaction to my movements. But it is also the story I tell here in this interdisciplinary space. It is the conversation that unfolds now. In assembling a city, in assembling a story, in assembling research, we are intersecting with, adjusting to, and stumbling against each other; we are always in-process, always co-producing.

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