

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

## Difference Really Does Matter: A Reply to Garrett and Hawkins<sup>1</sup>

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In our paper, ‘Not everyone has (the) balls: Urban exploration and the persistence of masculinist geography’, we offered our critical reflections on the ways urban exploration has been treated by human geographers. We observed that the geographic literature on urban exploration did not, for the most part, question “dominant presentations of exploring bodies found in wider urbex discourse” (Mott and Roberts 2013: 6). We paid particular attention to the ways that geographic scholarship on urban exploration largely avoided addressing the prevalent masculinism of the practice, even as urban exploration is touted as a way of radically reappropriating urban space toward politically progressive ends.

In the *Antipode* paper, one of our primary aims was to question the subjectivity of the exploring body. The nature of exploration - what constitutes exploration as well as who qualifies as an explorer - is a topic that has been treated at length by feminist geographers. It was perplexing to us that any analysis of urban exploration would be carried out without serious consideration of the ways that broader discourses of exploration and the exploring subject mirror discourses of the universal subject - an idealized white, heterosexual, male body.

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<sup>1</sup> We are extremely grateful to Dan Cockayne for his insightful comments, and for his interest and support.

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In their response, Bradley Garrett and Harriet Hawkins explain that they wish to complicate what they perceive as a settlement that we made between “a successful politics for urban exploration and body-subjects sorted into named, known, and represented identity categories”. Of course, like Garrett and Hawkins, we are interested in analyses of subjectivity that are oriented around questions of where bodies begin and end, as well as those that investigate the porous nature of bodies and identities. However, as Elizabeth Grosz (1994: ix) points out, “[t]he body is the very ‘stuff’ of subjectivity”, and we are concerned that a highly abstracted approach to questions of the subject, such as that put forth by Garrett and Hawkins in their response, can serve to deflect critical attention from very real problems of marginalization and exclusion entailed in subjectification.

While the concepts of edgework and meld mobilized by Garrett are certainly interesting ways to think about subjects’ relationships to the spaces around them, it is difficult to see how such approaches can account for the very real questions of privilege and marginalization that were at the heart of our original paper. We did not, in our paper, argue that politics has to “begin from subjects cleaved into social categories” as Garrett and Hawkins claim. We do not posit *a priori* social categories. We began from the position that bodies are differently interpellated; we exist in a world of social categories, some experienced as more mutable than others, and as a consequence, we all access and interact with the world differently. This is what Rachel Colls (2012: 436) calls the “the unavoidable presence of difference”. This is not to say that we do not consider it important to destabilize the social production of difference, or to question accepted notions about embodiment and difference. But, to be blunt about it, we also think it matters that some people are much more likely to be arrested or harassed when engaging in urban exploration than others. The ways in which our bodies are interpellated, variously hailed as gendered, raced,

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and abled, is of real material consequence for everyone, as we each carry with us the weight of these processes (Probyn 2003). Sidestepping such a basic facet of how people engage with urban space and with one another short-changes attempts to understand both “why we explore...[and] why everyone else stopped exploring” (Garrett 2012: np). We are interested, precisely, in how this ‘we’, and the privileges and inclusions it marks, comes to be, and in the exclusions and marginalizations marked by the ‘everyone else’. These are issues that any meaningful answer to Garrett and Hawkins’ question, “what is the relationship of this subject to the world?”, must not avoid.

We appreciated the introduction to Miru Kim’s work and agree that her photography does offer an alternative set of images to those we encountered while writing our paper. We understand and appreciate that images “do ‘work’ ...after the shutter click” and that Kim’s images can be interpreted as opening up the politics of “imaginative space”, as Garrett and Hawkins put it. Kim’s work indeed offers a thought-provoking approach to conceptualizing bodies in urban space. Nonetheless, we stand by our argument that the images we discussed produce tangible effects that work to reinforce the strand of urban exploration that is centered on a particular masculine exploring subject - a point that was not sufficiently refuted by Garrett and Hawkins.

In general, it seems that there is a gap between the way we conceptualize politics, and the way Garrett and Hawkins approach politics. First, we recognize that individual experiences of place (Craggs *et al.* 2013) and experiences of personal liberation (from “the identity trappings of the socially-constructed subject” in Garrett and Hawkins’ terms) in the practice of urban exploration are meaningful to those who undergo them. However, if those liberatory experiences are often only possible for particularly embodied subjects, and if the practice often reinforces the privilege of a certain type of subject, then how does the practice actually challenge or re-work,

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say, the ways urban socio-spatial processes simultaneously marginalize some while privileging others? Second, therefore, and in line with our approach to bodies and subjectivities, we remain much more interested in the multi-layered social relations, or ‘assemblages’ of materiality and affect, that render such transformational experiences possible or impossible, likely or unlikely. We are interested in asking: What are the conditions of possibility for these liberatory experiences, whether they are called edgework or melding or something else?

While, clearly, we do not think their criticisms of our arguments take away from the force of our main points, we would like to close by thanking Bradley Garrett and Harriet Hawkins for their response to our paper. We apologize for the case of misattribution that was brought to our attention.<sup>2</sup> We do appreciate the way their response engaged with aspects of our work and the way they are seeking to open up new avenues to consider in any assessment of the politics of urban exploration and the ways bodies interact with urban space. We look forward to seeing how these ideas will play out in on-going geographical research into urban exploration.

*November 2013*

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<sup>2</sup> In a footnote Garrett and Hawkins point out that we misattributed to Garrett the following quote from the website Sleepycity: “[h]is suggestion that we lacked balls confused us greatly, as those who go head to head with the rolling stock in the grimy, dimly lit, alcoveless metro tunnels are usually not short on testicular fortitude, figuratively speaking.” When we went back and looked again at the post, we realized the quotation should have been attributed to Dsankt, and we apologize for our mistake in attributing it to Garrett. It was the photography in the piece that was Garrett’s, not the narrative. The authorship of this quotation, however, does not change the point we were making, as it serves to highlight a very real emphasis on the male exploring body and the significance of performances of masculinity in constituting legitimate exploration. Perhaps, following Garrett and Hawkins’ emphasis on the political potential of images, we should have instead focused on the two photos at the top of the page, which are credited to Garrett. The first of these features an arm wrestling match, with participants (presumably the explorers discussed in the post) surrounded by evidence of time spent drinking, and the second, graffiti art depicting a penis. The post and images can be found here: <http://sleepycity.net/explore/bradley+garrett/posts/275/Barcelona-Nights>

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