

Being(s) and difference in digitally mediated cities

1. Introduction

Significant recent scholarship within urban and digital geography has coalesced around an interest in embodied differentiation. Urban geographers have cast attention to how diverse bodies encounter and are enrolled into the making of cities (Grant, 2016; Middleton, 2010; Truelove and Ruszczyk, 2022; Wilson, 2017). Digital geographers, meanwhile, have been concerned with the complex embodiments of digitally mediated lives and the (re)production of embodied difference through the digital (Barns, 2020; Bissell, 2020; Bonner-Thompson, 2023; Elwood and Leszczynski, 2018; Koch and Miles, 2021; Miles, 2017). Yet little geographical research to date has systematically drawn these two domains of inquiry into conversation or, more precisely, focussed explicitly on the ways digital technologies are entangled in the emergence of urban difference, despite the digital arguably becoming a core feature of contemporary urban life. In one of the few exceptions, Datta and Ahmed (2020) mobilize empirical fieldwork in the city of Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, in southern India to show that infrastructure, including digital infrastructures, is a form of power differentiated along intersectional lines of gender, caste, class, and so on, experienced in highly affective and emotional ways (for other exceptions, see Degen and Rose, 2022; Rose, 2017; Söderström and Datta, 2023). Since the urban might be understood as “the embodiment of difference and the machinic production of difference” (Simone, 2022: 16; see also Derickson, 2015; Simone and Pieterse, 2018), more of such work, we suggest, is necessary to illuminate how digital technologies are not merely shaping the way different inhabitants live and work in the city but also fundamentally giving rise to new forms of posthuman subjectivity and experience. Indeed, as Rose (2022) argues, new kinds of embodiments and becoming-with are reconfigured by and increasingly co-constituted through the digital devices and flows of data that saturate so many cities around the world (see also Straughan and Bissell, 2022; Yeo et al., 2026).

This special issue brings together five papers, accompanied by an afterword, that interrogate the multiplicity of the everyday experiencing of digitally mediated cities, taking seriously the deepening relationships between diverse digital technologies and different forms of urban life and living. From platforms and apps to tracking technologies to wearable devices to social media, the papers not only foreground “the insolvent place of the body in relation to new media technologies” (Munster, 2006: 12), but they also variously invite us to consider carefully what sorts of bodies and experiences are generated and emphasised and which are hidden and erased in contemporary cities. Accordingly, the papers in the special issue together contribute to current geographical debates on digital urbanism in two ways. First, they offer useful and complementary conceptualizations of how various kinds of digital technologies unevenly produce, reinforce and occasionally unsettle embodied differences, such as age, class, belonging, gender and sexuality, in a range of cities around the world. Such analytical moves, we argue, meaningfully extend and ground emerging calls within geography to unpack “how people make sense and meaning of data and technologies in the spaces and practices of their everyday lives, how they grapple with the effects and consequences of a digital society, and how these effects and consequences manifest differently across spaces and subjectivities” (Elwood and Leszczynski, 2018: 640).

The second contribution builds on the first, and it concerns the lived and felt dimensions of digitally mediated urban difference. Where the first contribution illuminates how digital technologies conceptually and materially produce embodied difference, this

second foregrounds how such differences are inhabited, negotiated and contested in the grain of everyday urban life – for instance, in the corporeal rhythms of walking, the affective charge of a social media post, the erotic pulse of an app and the anxiety of being tracked. In doing so, the papers collectively push “beyond utopian and representational descriptions, labels, policies and plans, and beyond complex, homogenic and progressive processes into other ways in which cities are produced” (Guma, 2024: 926; see also Warfield et al, 2020; Yeo, 2023), insisting instead on the messiness, contingency and multiplicity of what everyday life in digitally mediated cities entails as well as what kind of posthuman urban life is valued in the digital era. In the remainder of this editorial, we develop these arguments by first elaborating a theoretical framework for understanding how digital technologies mediate embodied difference in cities, before introducing the five papers, along with the conceptual threads connecting them.

2. The digital mediation of difference in cities

City life has long been understood as defined by difference. In her now-classic book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Iris Marion Young (1990: 256) advances a view of the ideal city as the “being-together of strangers”, where plurality and heterogeneity are not threats but vital characteristics of urban life. She argues that the political value of city life lies in its refusal of unity or shared identity: difference is affirmed without exclusion and without dissolving into sameness. Against ideals of community that imagine belonging through shared values or cultural homogeneity, Young stresses the democratic and ethical potential of the city as a space of openness to embodied difference. For Young, urban life is valuable precisely because it enables diverse groups to coexist without requiring assimilation, offering opportunities for encounter, recognition and negotiation across difference. In this way, she positions difference not as a problem to be managed but as the very mediating condition that makes urban sociality possible.

Taking forward Young’s account, geographers and urban scholars have shown how difference is not only central to cities but also continually co-constituted through spatial practices, embodied encounters and uneven power relations (Valentine, 2008; Wilson, 2017). Pratt and Hanson (1994), for example, demonstrate how race, gender and class are produced and stabilized, if only momentarily, through the geographies of home, work and neighborhoods. Instead of static and predetermined, Pratt and Hanson reveal that embodied differences are relationally enacted, emerging from processes that variously connect inhabitants, urban spaces and institutions, often with uneven socio-political and geographical consequences. More recent interventions have extended this line of thinking by pointing to the social and material work that bodies perform to build, assemble, service, repair and maintain cities. Truelove and Ruszczyk (2022), in particular, mobilize a conceptualization of bodies as infrastructure to assert that even though gendered bodies, specifically women’s, enable the circulation of critical resources and sustain essential urban networks, their intimate labor often remains unacknowledged and unremunerated. Their work shows how this dynamic reproduces uneven power relations that render some forms of labor and bodies visible and valued while relegating others to invisibility (see also Çağlar and Glick Schiller, 2018; Neville, 2025). Together, these interventions underscore the emergent and co-producing relationship between embodied differentiation and urban assemblages. More precisely, they invite us to recognize embodied difference not as a fixed or stable attribute but as contingent and dynamic, produced through everyday encounters,

infrastructures and power-laden geographies that shape the socio-material and spatial practices of urban life.

These arguments remain significant, but the urban present compels us to also ask how such processes are increasingly mediated by digital technologies, especially amid contemporary policy imperatives to build smart cities and the pervasive discourses surrounding emerging technologies. As Eubanks (2018) incisively notes, digital technologies and infrastructures are not neutral intermediaries but material expressions of power, structuring modes of participation through technical systems that regulate how users and their bodies are registered, categorized and managed, rendering social hierarchies into computational and algorithmic logic. The deployment of technologies in cities including biometric identification, automated verification, predictive analytics and security systems, more specifically, has been seen to underpin and define how urban inhabitants are made visible within digital systems, with consequences for whose existence is recognizable and whose exclusion goes unquestioned (Amoore, 2020; Elwood, 2021; Eubanks, 2018; Fourcade and Healy, 2024). To probe into the relationship between urban difference and digital technologies, we turn to theoretical engagements that reconceptualize embodiment itself.

As a starting point, Karen Barad's (1998) agential realism offers a relational ontology for thinking through the entanglement of matter, discourse and technology. For Barad, entities do not pre-exist their relations but emerge through intra-actions: specific configurations of apparatuses that cut together-apart the world. From this perspective, digital technologies are not external tools but material-discursive media through which urban difference materializes. Algorithmic systems, data infrastructures and predictive models, for example, enact "agential cuts" that delimit what bodies are and what they can do, producing "categories" that are unevenly distributed across lines of race, age, gender, class and sexuality. Digital mediation thus becomes a process of ontological production; that is, it actively produces difference, rendering some forms of life legible, governable and valuable, while displacing others into invisibility or precarity. Barad's work serves as a timely reminder that digital urbanism is not simply about data or code but about the power-laden apparatuses that enact difference itself.

Gillian Rose (2022) develops this orientation through the concept of digital embodiment. For Rose, urban bodies are now always (at least) doubled: they exist materially in space and simultaneously circulate as data within digital infrastructures. This digital double is neither neutral nor merely descriptive but has profound effects on how bodies are encountered and governed. Rose further distinguishes between representational regimes, where digital systems surveil and manage populations, and animatic regimes, where data flows generate emergent and unpredictable subjectivities. Digital mediation, in her view, is both disciplinary and generative, enforcing categorizations while producing forms of difference that may unfold in nonlinear ways. Her account thus demonstrates how datafication reorganizes the multiple spatiotemporalities of urban life, producing assemblages of embodiment that complicate established notions of presence, absence and visibility.

Taken together, Barad and Rose provide a framework for analyzing the digital mediation of difference in cities. Whereas Barad theorizes the apparatuses (i.e., digital technologies) that enact and stabilize difference, Rose grounds these insights in the digital urban present, showing how bodies are simultaneously material and datafied. This framework foregrounds the co-constitution of bodies, digital technologies and spaces, insisting that difference is always-already emergent, relational and power-laden. Crucially, it

situates digital technologies not as external overlays on urban life but as integral to the very constitution of embodied difference. In doing so, it frames the task that animates this special issue: to examine how digital mediation reshapes encounters with difference, what forms of inclusion and exclusion it produces, and what possibilities it opens for reimagining everyday living and being in digitally mediated cities. With this framework in place, we now turn to the five papers assembled in this special issue, each of which illuminates, in its own way, how digital technologies mediate embodied difference across a range of urban spaces and lived experiences.

3. The papers

The five papers gathered here by no means offer a comprehensive review of the many ways in which digital technologies of many kinds – as specific assemblages of data, software, hardware and practices – co-constitute different forms of human corporeality. Most explore the mediation of bodily urban experience by an app understood as some kind of digital assemblage, though two also use digital technologies to generate research data about those experiences. All the papers engage with some core concepts of urban and social geography: identity, difference, and belonging. They do so with a strong sense of the emergence of those dynamics through different kinds of movement in urban spaces. Several also explore how urban space becomes reconfigured through those dynamics of digital mediation, becoming muted or connected to other places, configured as infrastructure and atmosphere as much as place.

Analytically, all the papers share an emphasis on contingency, multiplicity and incoherence. Bork-Huffer and colleagues begin with Doreen Massey's much-quoted term "thrown-togetherness" to flag those digital assemblages and their "temporary constellations of trajectories" that require negotiation (Massey, 2005: 153). Bian takes a somewhat different direction, drawing on the born-digital notion of the "glitch" in order to emphasise "the non-linearity, instability, and incoherence of infrastructural lifeworlds," while for Stowe the term of choice is "rhizomatic." All these concepts are deployed to emphasise that there are no deterministic outcomes from any of the assemblages discussed in these papers, though many persistent configurations are described. Social media posts are debated, managed and questioned (Bork-Huffer et al., Nouri et al.), platform algorithms are messed with (Bian), walkers adopt safety or survival tactics (Osborne et al., Stowe), Instagram posts are transgressive of some followers' norms (Nouri et al.). All the papers identify practices that allow digitally-mediated urban life to become otherwise, and this is their first collective – if not uniform – contribution.

Perhaps relatedly, these papers use a wide range of research methods – indeed, most use several, including some newer kinds that are themselves digital: Strava to map routes, eye-tracking glasses, and a wristband detecting temperature, heart-rate, blood volume and skin conductance. Both the papers that deploy what Osborne and colleagues call "biosocial" methods reflect on the specific forms of data and evidence generated by those devices, and insist that such data must be framed by the insights of qualitative research methods. Several examine how social media represent urban sites like parks, but 'represent' is perhaps no longer quite the right term here, given the emphasis on fleshy corporeality as well as the reconfiguration of urban space. Several papers track corporeal responses to social media posts. Bork-Huffer and colleagues' work explores how social media posts can shape perceptions of specific locations: eye tracking shows particular spaces being mapped against the events reported in a post, and they identify a visceral alignment with "politics of

intolerance." Osborne and colleagues track a different kind of corporeal response: elevated heart rate, sweats. Bian speaks to erotic desire as a form of corporeality that cannot be fully assimilated into digital-infrastructureal labour, and Stowe describes neuroqueer research participants evading notions of presence using phones and headphones. There is a radical questioning of embodiment across these papers then, its constitution as both fleshy and informatic always open.

The final theme shared by all these papers is implicit, and it is a question about the digital mediations of differences: difference from, or among, what? Several papers focus on the differentiation of embodiments, as forms of identity are mapped onto corporeal affordances by, for example, social media posts. Others explore moments when embodiment is differentiated from the digital. There's also a kind of spatial differentiation implied in some papers – and explicit in Stowe's and Nouri et al.'s – in which digital technologies shift understanding urban space away from the visual as mappable and towards something doubled and partly sonic.

Collectively, then, in their focus on multiplicity, embodiment and contingency, these papers offer a richly nuanced account of just some of the digitally mediated differentiations currently reconfiguring contemporary cities.

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