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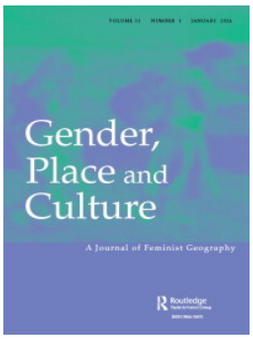
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The gendered body during Covid-19: views from Australia, the United Kingdom, and Japan - Introduction to themed section

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ABSTRACT

The collection of papers we have put together for this special themed section originally emerged from a desire to explore how the rapid and wholescale transformation of everyday spaces brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic might change, challenge and shift experiences and understandings of the gendered body. Since 2020, we have witnessed and experienced the dramatic alteration of everyday mobilities and a concurrent reconfiguration of spatial and embodied relations. The pandemic, and responses to it, has transformed the locations in which subjects routinely situate themselves, and the quotidian bodily practices they participate in, with immediate and lasting impact. Such a moment called for a revisiting of established theoretical and methodological paradigms in feminist geography – many of which developed from within the pages of this journal – which understand the relationship between space and the gendered body to be a mutually constitutive one. If the gendered body is understood as a processual assemblage shaped by the spaces within which it is formed, what do such radical spatial reconfigurations of embodied relations mean for gendered subjects? These papers, then, represent an opportunity to revisit and reflect upon core debates about gender, embodiment, and space in feminist geography, understanding the pandemic *via* a gendered lens.

KEYWORDS

Covid-19; everyday life; pandemic; the body

The collection of papers we have put together for this special themed section originally emerged from a desire to explore how the rapid and wholescale transformation of everyday spaces brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic might change, challenge and shift experiences and understandings of the gendered body. Since 2020, we have witnessed and experienced the dramatic alteration of everyday mobilities and a concurrent reconfiguration of spatial and embodied relations (Clark and Lupton 2021). The pandemic,

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and responses to it, has transformed the locations in which subjects routinely situate themselves, and the quotidian bodily practices they participate in, with immediate and lasting impact. As researchers already working on questions about feminist theory and the body, shortly after the pandemic began to unfold we each independently began research about the impact of lockdown measures on beauty and body work practices.

After seeing Hannah (based in Australia) post online about her work, Rachel (based in the UK) reached out to suggest a collaboration. As feminist researchers we wanted to bring our work into a wider conversation with that of others who were gathering empirical data on gender and the pandemic's corporeal impact. The conversation started over email, and then developed over Zoom. Emblematic of the new mode of academic work under the pandemic, we have pulled this together entirely through virtual communication, still never having met each other in person, and delivering words largely from makeshift domestic workspaces. The result is a collection of papers exploring what the pandemic changes to space and place, interpersonal relations, and everyday routines, mean for the gendered body.

Feminist scholarship has long investigated how gender is negotiated *via* the body in everyday life. The papers in this collection continue this work through asking: how have the ruptures to the everyday caused by Covid-19 impacted bodies in gendered ways? Many of the locations which represent and shape the 'doing' of gender – from the workplace to the gym or beauty salon – temporarily fell away during Covid-19 lockdowns, while other spaces such as the home, the digital realm, local streets, and parks became more central. While some forms of bodily (self) surveillance shifted, others intensified. What happened to identity, embodiment, and daily body practices when the social became largely virtual? How have altered daily patterns of interaction and the centrality of domestic space changed our relationship to gender and the bodily?

The nature of Covid-19 within a globalised and socially dynamic world required a response that shifted regular patterns of human interaction and contact. Measures implemented to prevent its spread in different geographic locations radically interrupted 'socio-spatial relations and socionatures' by constraining mobilities and altering perceptions of place (Rose-Redwood et al. 2020, 99). Social inequalities and vulnerabilities surrounding the ability to 'shelter in place' were also revealed in many contexts, often with deadly consequences (Eaves and Al-Hindi 2020). At the same time as spatial relations were changing, everyday embodied practices were fundamentally destabilised. The re-organised movement and interaction of bodies meant that bodily 'boundaries, mobilities and encounters' with different social and material spaces came to matter in new ways (Clark and Lupton 2021, 1224). Sensorial experiences were made particularly salient during lockdown periods in various contexts, bringing new awareness to smells, tastes, touch, sights,

and sounds lost – and found – during this period (Tullett and McCann 2022). These sensory ruptures highlighted existing inequalities, for example, the rise of 'contactless' delivery of services exacerbated whose 'touch' was already perceived as risky (Satyogi 2021). Some bodies more than others became 'marked' and (re)politicised, from sources of contagion to holders of 'pre-existing conditions' (Eaves and Al-Hindi 2020).

Such a moment called for a revisiting of established theoretical and methodological paradigms in feminist geography – many of which developed from within the pages of this journal – which understand the relationship between space and the gendered body to be a mutually constitutive one (Longhurst and Johnston 2014). If the gendered body is understood as a processual assemblage shaped by the spaces within which it is formed (Johnson 2008), what do such radical spatial reconfigurations of embodied relations mean for gendered subjects? These papers, then, represent an opportunity to revisit and reflect upon core debates about gender, embodiment, and space in feminist geography, understanding the pandemic *via* a gendered lens.

Approaches in feminist geography have shown that the spaces, places, and practices of everyday life are crucial to the constitution of gender. Gender is understood as something that is 'lived' in and through bodies as these are located in spatial environments and relations across various scales from home to workplace, city, region, and nation (Longhurst and Johnston 2014). This focus on understanding gender as situated has led feminist geographers to persistently trouble simplistic dichotomies of private/public, global/local, or household/state (Domosh 1998; Hall 2020), all of which have taken on renewed significance since the start of the pandemic. This small collection of papers follows this approach by having a specific sense of place and context, grounding analysis in embodied lived experiences, practices, spaces, and feelings, and showing how these are deeply imbricated within the broader socio-political dimensions of the pandemic.

In undertaking this analytic task, it is important to highlight that the transformational circumstances of Covid-19 are also not completely new and unprecedented. A broader and deeper set of ongoing social, political, and economic crises – which the pandemic has laid bare, intersected with, and exacerbated (Ang 2021) – continue to fundamentally shape the everyday spaces and practices that affect gendered bodies. In this context, presenting a narrative that frames the threat of disease, displacement, deprivation, and instability as entirely 'new' risks obscuring that for many around the world such conditions long pre-date the rise of Covid-19 (Hearn and Banet-Weiser 2020). An intersectional feminist lens is crucial in understanding the power structures shaping the experiences of those who are made to adapt to and cope with this crisis and others, allowing for insight into the root causes for unequal levels of 'vulnerabilities, risks, and adaptive capacities' (Sultana 2021, 450). Intersectional power inequalities place different bodies in vastly

differentiated positions with regard to their abilities to respond to spatial transformations to everyday life and continue to play a foundational role in shaping social and political pandemic responses, who they serve and how (Sultana 2021).

This themed section includes contributions from researchers working across a range of interdisciplinary and international contexts and deploying methodologies including textual analysis and close reading, qualitative interviews, media, legal and policy analysis, focus groups, and survey analysis. The papers address a broad spectrum of topics, including everyday life, body regimes, dating apps, beauty salons, and abortion. Authors focus on specific geographical contexts in Australia, Japan, and the United Kingdom, reflecting the way in which the pandemic has been framed both as a global but also distinctly national crisis, often drawing on gendered nationalist rhetoric of risk, responsibility, and the family (Orgad and Hegde 2022). This themed section has offered the authors an opportunity to think through their questions about the gendered body during Covid-19 through a feminist geography lens, with special attention to questions of space, place, and context. Though our original editorial vision was for reflections across an even wider array of contexts, what we have with this final group of papers are contributions that speak to the transformation of the everyday locations of doing gender. In addition, the papers speak to the intersection of gender with other social inequalities that continue to be highlighted and heightened by the pandemic. Together, the papers form a timely and rich contribution to understanding the places and cultures of gendered embodiment in the time of Covid-19.

A major theme that emerges across the papers, which has long been a concern for feminist geography (Domosh 1998), is the importance of domestic space in the construction and experience of the gendered body. The space of the home took on renewed ideological and material significance at the beginning of the pandemic. International and national health bodies, governments, corporations, and individuals joined a chorus of advice and instruction to 'stay at home' (Kay 2020), to take personal action in slowing the spread of Covid-19. As Laura Emily Clark explores in this collection in the context of Japan, this involved a call for citizens to demonstrate "*jishuku* (self-restraint)". Such directives were imbued with symbolic idealised notions of the implicitly middle-class heteronormative family home as a universal space of safety, security, and comfort that would shield subjects from the risks of the pandemic (Anderson, Lafrenière, and Wood 2022). It has been crucial for feminist scholarship to unpack and trouble these romanticised constructions, highlighting the many risks that gendered subjects face within the home, pointing to the intersectional inequities that dispossess many subjects of a place to call home, and centring debate around the countless forms of gendered labour required to create

and maintain a 're-cuperating' domestic space (Anderson, Lafrenière, and Wood 2022).

The papers in this collection contribute to a growing body of feminist scholarship that has questioned the notion of home as a space of safety, sanctuary, or belonging in the pandemic. These papers remind us that the home is not just a physical location, but a symbolic space that is irrevocably intertwined with not only the bodies that reside within it but also the 'broader discourses and power relations' that shape it (Clark and Lupton 2021, 1225). For example, in their analysis of documents and interviews related to the debate over access to at-home abortion care during COVID-19 in South Australia, Barbara Baird, Prudence Flowers, Catherine Kevin and Sharyn Roach Anleu examine the 'contested meanings of the home as a place of reproductive autonomy'. They find gendered discourses of safety and the home to be both fluid and ambiguous, mobilised in different ways by those with various interests in maintaining or challenging the boundaries restricting access to reproductive healthcare.

Notions of home as an ambivalent space are also explored in Clark's literary analysis of an online blog collection exploring daily pandemic life in Japan during Covid-19. Focusing on the works of two specific authors, Clark examines how they engage with gendered norms through their playful reflection on discourses prevalent in the pandemic response within Japanese culture. Here the capacity to stay home is revealed as protective within the broader context of viral contagion. Yet, here home also operates as a kind of 'cage' for those privileged enough to have access to this space of relative safety in the first place. Similarly, other papers in this collection show how the closure of certain public spaces during pandemic lockdowns led to a re-centring on the home, but false assumptions circulated in the media about the positives of this for gendered subjects. As Hannah McCann explores, at the beginning of the pandemic media discourse circulated about the potential for lockdowns and the attendant closure of hair and beauty salons to 'free' women from the constraints of beauty norms. As McCann's analysis of a survey of salon clients based in Australia demonstrates, some people did find the shift to the domestic came with a relaxation of expectations of 'keeping up appearances'. Many also played around with their hair and beauty styles, becoming more experimental *via* DIY practices, while others found it difficult and upsetting to let go of their regular aesthetic pursuits. Yet crucially a large segment of responses revealed the impact of the shift from the salon to the home had unexpected consequences, with people reporting feelings of lost identity, missed social connections with salon workers, and a lack of human touch. These papers highlight the often conflicting and contradictory meanings of home and the forced shift to the domestic for many gendered subjects under Covid-19 conditions.

As notable in McCann's work, a further major thread running through the papers in this themed section is how the pandemic has necessitated the (re) negotiation of norms surrounding gendered bodies, practices and behaviours. As everyday spaces – in which gender, sex and sexuality are lived, constructed and experienced – were transformed by Covid-19, so too were gendered subjects required to adapt and respond to these shifts. For example, in their analysis of interviews and focus groups with dating app users in Australia, Lisa Portolan and Jodi McAlister argue that the 'ontological uncertainty' of the pandemic prompted dating app users to adhere ever more closely to the perceived 'safety, security, and certainty' of familiar social and sexual scripts for hegemonic masculine and feminine desires and identity constructions. Similarly, as Rachel Wood highlights, gendered consumer lifestyle advice in the United Kingdom continued to proliferate during pandemic lockdowns, emphasising imperatives to practice self-care. Through analysis of qualitative data, Wood argues that relationships to feminine body work shifted from an aesthetic project to an affective one as subjects sought to stay positive and productive in challenging conditions. Both McCann and Wood cut through assumptions about liberation to consider how a range of social actors have worked upon and understood their bodies during this period. Each of their papers asks: how have practices of care or self-care shifted, and what are the gendered implications of this?

This themed section offers a valuable and vibrant set of reflections on how the transformation of everyday space in Covid-19 shaped a mutually constitutive set of relationships and re-negotiations of the gendered body. Above all else, the papers that follow serve as reminder that the gendered body can never be separated from the spaces, places, and practices through which it is represented and lived. In concluding this introduction, we are prompted to reflect briefly on the challenges and possibilities for feminist scholarship under changing and often difficult pandemic conditions. This collection was conceived, researched, written, and revised over a long period starting in mid-2020 and ending at the beginning of 2023. Though the initial aim of the collection was to explore impacts relating to the gendered body in the pandemic, in setting out our plan for this issue little did we know of how disrupted our own lives would be in the timeline we set out to publication. For us personally the period has included experiences of recurrent illness, for one of us the experience of pregnancy and birth under lockdown conditions, and the shared struggle to continue with the demands of writing and academic work in a shifting and often fear-filled context. This collection was initially imagined as a much bigger – geographically wider – conversation, yet many of our original contributors were also beset with the challenges of pandemic times in ways that delayed or prevented writing. In thinking then about what changed between our original vision, and this final collection of papers, we would like to remind readers of how Covid-19 has often contributed to silences, gaps, paused writing, delays, and interruptions which have specifically gendered and geographic

implications about what and who makes it to print. We end on this note to highlight how the question of writing about the gendered body in pandemic times involves unavoidable challenge of being gendered subjects within these contexts. We hope that the papers gathered in this themed section go some way to starting an ongoing conversation about the impact of this period that will no doubt be felt for decades to come.

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Notes on contributors

Dr Rachel Wood is a Senior Lecturer in Media at Keele University, UK. Her research examines mediated femininities in digital consumer culture. Her recent work has explored ethical and anti-consumerism on beauty YouTube, and the affective labour of beauty and body work in lockdown. Her current research centres on the labour of zero waste sustainability influencers on Instagram, exploring the challenges faced by content creators in communicating ideas about sustainable consumption on a consumer centric platform. Her work has been published in journals including *New Media and Society*, *Cultural Studies,* and *Feminist Media Studies*, and she is the author of the Routledge monograph *Consumer Sexualities: Women and Sex Shopping*.

Dr Hannah McCann is a Senior Lecturer in Cultural Studies at the University of Melbourne. Her research in critical femininity studies explores feminist discourse on femininity, queer femme LGBTQ+communities, beauty culture, and queer fangirls. Her monograph *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism and the Politics of Presentation* was published with Routledge in 2018, and her co-authored textbook *Queer Theory Now: From Foundations to Futures* in 2020, available via Bloomsbury.

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