



Facing geography: A new research agenda

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journals.sagepub.com/home/phg**Kerry Gillespie** 

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Abstract

This paper offers a new disciplinary research agenda for a geography of the human face. Locating a research lacuna within the subfield of embodied geographies, the paper highlights existing interdisciplinary scholarship on the face, suggesting avenues through which geographers can both complement and advance such discussions. The overall proposal is to (re)consider the spatialities of the face via three routes: the political and biometric, the aesthetic and facial modification. The paper concludes by suggesting a disciplinary opportunity for a future facialised geography, providing valuable insight into this dynamic bodily site upon and through which the world is encountered and experienced.

Keywords

face, embodiment, disability geography, facial difference, facial biometrics, face transplant

I Introduction

Deployed as both noun and verb, used both literally and metaphorically, the human face permeates everyday language and discourse. We ‘lose face’, we ‘save face’, we may have a ‘game face’, we are often encouraged to put on a ‘brave face’, we may be just a face in the crowd, we take things at face value, we may struggle to put a face to the name. Infinitely reflected through a metaphorical lens of what it means to ‘face’ the world, the face is extraordinary in its ability to communicate a diverse range of meanings and ideas; ‘we are surrounded by faces, and by images of the face’ (Edkins, 2015: 1). Yet the face is also a site of mystery, of the unventured; as Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 172) propose, ‘all faces envelop an unknown, unexplored landscape’. Indeed, this landscape of the human face comprises an intriguing physical and observable *geography*, a place providing fertile ground for investigation.

In what follows I consider such geographies, revealing the face to exist as a meaningful spatial and bodily landscape of intimate narrative, identity and politics. Despite the face existing as ‘a place not like any other in the geography of the body’ (Le Breton, 2015: 3), dialogues about the human face are notable across the discipline of geography only for their absence. In this regard the discipline is ‘faceless’, which is perhaps surprising given the extent to which recent geographical inquiry has sought to, and largely succeeded in, ‘including’ issues of the body and embodiment (see Section II). This omission is all the more curious because beyond academic scholarship the ‘geography of the face’ is not an uncharted idea, with visual artists and photographers, in

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particular, developing portraiture through the framing of the human face as an inherently geographical landscape (Lookman, 2014; Onfray and Volante, 2017). For artist Michael Goodson, who paints images of the human face, he describes such artwork as follows: ‘if one is directly in front of the piece, it is a geography ... a collection of mountains and rivers formed by shifting sub-structures, erosion, and various forces and tensions over time’ (quoted in (Cole, 2019), para. 2).

The aim of this paper is to address this gap within geographic inquiry. My objective is not to trace a full emergence of the bodily in geography, which has been covered elsewhere, but to call attention to the fact that, for all the bringing of the human body into contemporary geographical inquiry, perhaps most intriguingly *unexplored* is the bodily landscape of the human face. Firstly, I trace this research lacuna within the subfield of embodied geographies, while acknowledging the limited ways in which geographers have engaged with the facial landscape to date. I then propose a thematic research agenda, highlighting existing interdisciplinary scholarship on the face. Suggesting several avenues along which disciplinary inquiry could venture, I locate the face geographically: as a substantive materiality, a physical *place* of texture and topography, evident in the words of Goodson above (also see Part 2, Section II); but also charting social *spatialities* of the face as occasioned by the settings that render (certain) faces included or excluded, welcomed or shunned, engaged or policed. By introducing these spatial politics of the human face, I suggest that, while a distinction can be drawn between physical landscapes and social spatialities of the face, as just indicated, such a binary becomes eroded by the face as this curious public geography which connects the lived-in body space to contemporary politics and cultures.

To forward this agenda, I engage more substantially with the scholarship of Edkins (2013, 2015), who produces a thorough and compelling analysis of the diverse political landscapes of the face; for Edkins (2015: 3), the face ‘exists in a particular cultural, geographical, and historical context’. Drawing from philosophical accounts and understandings of the face as a distinct site of politics in itself, Edkins (re)

considers the role of the face as not simply an innate and fleshy part of one’s biology, but instead as a complex spatiality confronted in the encounter with the other (see Part 2, Section II and Part 2, Section III for further discussion). Taking forward these contentions throughout the paper, I conclude that the development of a ‘geography of the face’ would enrich disciplinary thought; such scholarship would provide valuable insight into this dynamic bodily site – interface – upon and through which the world is encountered and experienced.

II Research lacunae – A ‘faceless’ human geography?

I Geographies of embodiment

Issues of the body, embodiment, and corporeality have now been on geographers’ research agendas for more than three decades, and tracing a chronology of the ‘bodily’ in geography reveals the varying ways in which geography scholars have engaged with ‘the body’ and ‘bodies’ (Butler and Parr, 1999; Longhurst, 2001; Longhurst and Johnston, 2014; Teather, 1999). The outset of such scholarship witnessed phenomenological conceptions of the body inspired by humanistic geography; to be supplemented by feminist and Marxist critiques of the body as surfaces of power, labour and identity; moving to intersectional bodies understood through markers of difference such as gender, race, dis/ability, sexuality and performativity; to more recent understandings of non-human, more-than-human and post-human bodies (Silvey, 2017). Throughout this trajectory, bodies have acted as a critical entry point into an widespread array of global and intimate geographical analyses: from matters of body size and shape (Colls and Evans, 2009, 2014; Hopkins, 2008; Longhurst, 2005b, 2012); to the agoraphobic body (Davidson, 2000); to forms of violence aimed at Black bodies (McKittrick, 2000); to trans geographies (Nash, 2010); to uterine geographies (Lewis, 2018); to the margins of the body and exploring bodily hair (Holton, 2020).

This is only to name a limited array of aspects, characteristics, forms, boundaries, areas, parts, functions and secretions or excretions of the body to which geographers have contributed insight. It is

from these observations that Longhurst and Johnston (2014) suggest that embodiment now carries not only a disciplinary-wide sense of *acceptability*, but even *authority* across branches of geographical review. Yet, despite these efforts to ‘bring the body in’ to geographical conversation, certain aspects of the body, and experiences of embodiment, remain neglected. Longhurst and Johnston identify potential ‘spaces of growth’ for engagement with issues of embodiment within the discipline, suggesting that, while geographers now tackle issues of the body that would once be deemed unacceptable¹, other aspects of embodiment are yet to gain recognition or acceptability. The need to engage with the ‘messy materiality’ of bodies, urged by Longhurst (2001) some two decades ago, is still met with reluctance, and as such significant aspects of the spatial experience of embodiment are still omitted.

Of such omissions, perhaps the most startling is the lack of scholarly engagement with the human face. Echoing arguments from Longhurst and Johnston (2014: 274), does the (human) face entail a bodily entity that is ‘too banal, too material, too feminised, too mysterious, too Other’ to be worthy of consideration? In what follows, I unpack this contention, revealing the oversight of the face in human geography as mirroring and being reflective of the generally taken-for-granted nature of the human face. To challenge this taken-for-grantedness, and hence ‘face’ the ‘facelessness’ of human geography, is to recognise the face as a multifaceted site of dynamic embodiment – a site that should not be considered as a universal or natural entity (Edkins, 2015), but instead as a constituent and product of diverse worlds of human encounter and socio-spatial regulation.

2 Geographies of the face

While this lacuna is evident, a few geographical commentaries *have*, if in passing, considered the significance of the human face. In an early piece on what he terms ‘bodyscape’, humanist geographer Porteous (1986: 8, emphasis added) situates the face as a substantial geographical and bodily landscape: ‘the human body has its geography. As in a landscape, some features of the human body, and in

particular of the *face*, immediately catch our attention’. Such an understanding also arises more recently when Forsyth et al. (2013) posit the face as a bodily *surface* upon which engagements and encounters with the world are experienced, reflecting on how the face comprises a material, informative and observable geography; as they suggest, faces can ‘be read like landscapes or maps’ (Forsyth et al., 2013: 1016).

Similarly, in his essay on landscape photographer W.A. Poucher, Lorimer (2015) considers the face as a revealing micro-landscape. Describing Poucher’s facial appearance, Lorimer (2015: 69) captures this particular face as a ‘map of tender care’:

For an octogenarian, there are surprisingly few flaws, precious little mottling, especially for features weathered by seasons spent outdoors ... there are ridges and contours that naturally come of age, but also a surprising smoothness and suppleness of surface; cheeks fresh, crow’s feet only faint, and no great sagging beneath the eyes. Everything has been taken care of.

Lorimer proposes that the topography of the human face – the physical geographies of the face-as-surface – lends clues to processes and experiences that have shaped and altered that facial landscape, indeed that human being as a whole, over time. The ‘face as place’ is revealed – a material and meaningful physical site, composed of countless visible geographies of peaks, troughs, contours, firmness, softness, flatness and more. Locating the face as this physical site allows for the visible geographies upon the face to become aligned with the ‘undulations of landscapes’ (Forsyth et al., 2013: 1016), the material entity of the face deeply textured by landmarks and features visible on its surface.

While these fragments are useful in recognising the face as a geographical ‘place’, human geography has yet to explore *how* such places are geographically and spatially experienced, embodied and encountered; as such, the spatialities of the face – of how it leads to countless spatialised iterations of inclusion and exclusion – are yet to be revealed. Indeed, the only sustained exception to such a statement is

Hawkesworth (2001, 2002), who studies diverse geographies bound up with the skin condition of facial acne. Hawkesworth situates the face as an embodied site of a condition that is spatially experienced, investigating how those living with a visible facial ‘difference’, such as acne, may experience multiple disruptions to their routine inhabitations of and activities in social spaces. Such disruptions result in the (changing) navigation of everyday spaces that are rendered *disabling* due to societal reactions and regulations of such perceived differences, as influenced and controlled by hegemonic societal standards and powers. This claim then aligns with the argument of Philo (2012: 662), who writes: ‘aesthetics of bodies, far from being just the candyfloss of embodied geographies, are written into the very core of who may get accepted or, crucially, not accepted as a presence in given spaces’. Such inclusionary and exclusionary spatialities plainly reveal how the face comprises a fraught, often contested, embodied geography, rooted in questions about gendered, racialised and classed politics of appearance.

Such questions of the face and facial appearance as insinuated in contemporary *political* landscapes are considered by Edkins (2013: 539)², who observes, ‘in terms of politics and the political imagination, we have yet to explore what the face does’. Alongside her monograph *Face Politics* (2015), Edkins elaborates the face as a site unavoidably produced and governed through often imperceptible apparatuses of power, questioning what it means if the face does not simply *exist*, but is *made*. Referring to this facial politics and addressing the machine of ‘faciality’ from which faces are produced (see Part 2, Section III), Edkins considers an alternative politics in which the face is *not* all-embracing; ‘if human beings have a destiny, it is rather to escape the face, to dismantle the face and facialisations, to become imperceptible, to become clandestine’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 171, cited in Edkins, 2013: 551). Edkins raises key questions that human geographers can both complement and extend; there is here a disciplinary opportunity to analyse critically this social production of the face, paying particular attention to the spatial consequences of a faciality machine that ‘spits out those who don’t fit’ (Cushman, 2005: 391).

III Locating the place of the face – an interdisciplinary agenda

In this section, I propose a geographical research manifesto for the ‘complicated place’ (Rutter, 2007: 285) of the face, engaging with interdisciplinary accounts of the differing experiences of facial embodiment and thematising potential areas of inquiry to which geographers can make a distinctive contribution. Firstly, I consider the prevalent understanding of the face as being intrinsically linked to one’s identity, examining how the face can, often problematically, be assumed as the defining token of one’s identity and selfhood. I introduce challenges posed by the existence of such a link, and then elaborate three main disciplinary research agendas for uncovering the spatialities of the human face. I firstly locate the face as a contested *political* site of tension, exploring how the face exists as a landscape that power is both produced from and on to which it becomes mapped. I then reveal how complex spatialities of the face are produced from the existence of the face as a site of *aesthetics*, where the experience of embodying a face that does not conform to a conventional image of the human face can act as socially and spatially disabling. Finally, I propose that geographers could provide insight into the varying practices of *modifying* the human face, drawing attention to spatial performances of cosmetic and aesthetic intervention with dramatically variable intended purposes and outcomes. Throughout all my remarks, I convey how the face is ingrained in everyday social and spatial lives, ‘the locus of many organic functions and social processes’ (Talley, 2014: 13).

I Facing identity, selfhood and communication

As explored earlier, the human face is embedded in everyday language, discourse and philosophy. The face plays a seemingly infallible role in the experience of self and other, as it is commonly understood that the face acts as a marker and symbol of one’s identity; it is believed that the face gives visible clues to *who* its ‘wearer’ is. As Mubi Brighenti

(2019: 6) suggests, the face is the very ‘shibboleth of the human being’; of all the areas, parts, regions and zones of the human body, ‘the face is the one where the highest values are condensed: it is the place of the sense of self, where seduction, the countless nuances of beauty or ugliness, of ageing, of the emotions are fixed’ (Le Breton, 2015: 4). This ‘place-making’ of the face is important, as while bodies can be subject to varying spatialised iterations of stigma from a number of bodily characteristics such as size, colour and (im)mobility, the face itself seems to hold a particular significance in the social and political interpretation and judgements of bodies. Indeed, such a claim becomes evident in the opening lines of Goffman’s key text *Stigma*³, comprised of a fictional epigraph written by a 16-year-old girl born without a nose to a newspaper ‘agony-aunt’:

Dear Miss Lonelyhearts –

I am sixteen years old now and I dont know what to do and would appreciate it if you could tell me what to do. When I was a little girl it was not so bad because I got used to the kids on the block makeing fun of me, but now I would like to have boy friends like the other girls and go out on Saturday nites, but no boy will take me because I was born without a nose — although I am a good dancer and have a nice shape and my father buys me pretty clothes ... Ought I commit suicide?

While the girl speaks of other bodily characteristics that would cast her as ‘normal’ or even beautiful – ‘good dancer’, ‘nice shape’, ‘pretty clothes’ – it is because she was born without a defining feature of the human face that stigma operates against her and, ultimately, forces her to consider taking her own life. So, while, ‘corporeally faces are part of bodies ... they are also different. Unlike other body parts, faces are meaningful sites of interactive matter, simultaneously engaged in the making of the self, other and relationships’ (Martindale and Fisher, 2019: 1517). The face as this meaningful site is hence a significant determinant in the perception of self-esteem, beauty, ugliness and other facets of individual and collective identities. Synnott (1989: 607) agrees: ‘the face indeed symbolises the self ... more than any other part of the body, we identify the face as *me* or *you*’. These

such supposed links between the human face and identity must nonetheless be critically appraised, alongside investigating the geographically uneven consequences of how the face as the locus of human identity (re)produces complex spatialities of ‘sameness’, ‘otherness’, ‘normality’, ‘difference’ and (non) belonging.

The face also becomes intrinsically tied to one’s identity through its operation as a vehicle of expression and communication, both through verbal and non-verbal means; Baylis (2004) reports that two-thirds of human communication with other people is through facial communication. Exploring the face as a communicative apparatus, Black (2011: 22) argues that ‘the face is brought into being by communication, and communication can only exist in the relationships *between* bodies, rather than *on* any one body in isolation’. Notably mobilised in Goffman’s sociological concept of ‘face’⁴, this communicative facial landscape exists as a presentation of one’s public persona to others, as each element and function of the face serves to express subtleties of feelings and emotion. Rutter (2007: 286) emphasises this presentation of self through the face: ‘many of our most powerful human expressions come from facial behaviour, facial movements, facial gestures: we speak, we wink, we stare, we kiss, we cry’. Of course, the role of the face is not simplistic here; there are faces that have limited, or no ability to express emotions on the face⁵, emotions can be *unwillingly* revealed through the face (see Iwasaki and Noguchi, 2016 for discussion on ‘genuine’ and ‘fake’ facial expressions), and emotions can also be hidden or masked from the face⁶. Such framings of the emotional landscape of the human face could be taken forward by geographers considering the embodiment of emotions, and how these are manifested in space. As Davidson and Milligan (2004: 523) contest, ‘our first and foremost, most immediate and intimately *felt* geography is the body, the site of emotional experience and expression’; disciplinary inquiry could venture further into the *felt* and emotional geography of the face.

It cannot be denied, then, that the face plays an important role in the (re)construction and presentation of one’s identity, but to accept such a link

without criticism is to neglect complex spatialities of the face. To suggest that the face is the primary ‘container’ of the identity of a person through the material appearance of the face is not too far removed from the practice of physiognomy, defined as the judgement of a person’s character or personality from their outer appearance. Emerging from the 19th-century practice of phrenology, facial physiognomy suggests that character can be ‘supposedly extracted from facial features dependent on the underlying skeletal structure,’ as, for example, in ‘close set eyes [being] considered to go with untrustworthiness’ (Cole, 1998: 46). Used as a basis for scientific racism and to justify racial and eugenic theories, facial features have, historically, been scientifically measured as a way to determine character; with, in particular, sizes and shapes of noses becoming part of the very definition of ‘race’ and associated morality (Gilman, 2001). Despite physiognomy now largely being recognised as a pseudoscience (Crampton, 2019), Edkins (2015: 96) argues that ‘there are worrying resonances in contemporary thinking’. For many individuals and groups of people, the focus on the face as a site of identity bleeds issues, where resonances with ‘pseudoscientific’ physiognomy emerge through spatial consequences.

As Siemionow (2009: viii) argues, ‘most of us take for granted the value of our own face. We don’t consciously realise how it reinforces and shapes our identity’. This statement calls into question the embodiment of those faces through which identity is experientially felt, where, perhaps most notably, the metanarrative of *whitely* readings of faces (and bodies) plays a crucial role in identification and recognition (Cushman, 2005). In a recent special section on the ‘face and race’ in *American Anthropologist*, M’charek and Schramm (2020) introduce a call for theoretical and critical conversation about the face, especially in relation to current debates on race and science. M’charek and Schramm note that the biologisation of facial appearance through the prominence of (historic) racial clustering of people based on physical appearance, within which the face took a key role, is under-recognised in social theory; ‘the critical turn to the face [and how it has previously been studied] has not yet been made’.

Similarly, Sekimoto and Brown (2020: 56) argue that, ‘despite the fact that racial differences are first recognised on one’s face, not much attention has been paid to the significance of the face in terms of racial embodiment’. This idea of racial difference being ‘recognised’ on the face means that questions about one’s racial identity are still heavily reliant on the physical appearance of the face – what Cushman (2005) terms a ‘superficial politics’. Crucially, this is indeed not a politics confined to historical practices, since the ‘reading’ and classification of race and identity through the face continues to bring harmful consequences, as I explore later. These arguments, and the overall narrative I adopt throughout this paper, is hence located alongside the claim that ‘attending to the face helps us to understand and situate the politics of race’ (M’charek and Schramm, 2020: 5).⁷

The prevailing link existing between the face and identity is largely down to the presumed *visibility* and *accessibility* of the face; as Lafrance and Carey (2018: 57, emphasis added) observe, ‘the face is the most meaningfully *visible* part of our bodies’. However, the presence and visibility of the face is not a guaranteed experience for many, including for those living *without* sight who cannot visually access either their own face or the face of another. There are also individuals who live without the ability to read, recognise, or remember faces, in the case of prosopagnosics, a disorder in which vision may be intact, but where there are deficits in face-recognition (Cole, 1998; Sacks, 1987). Tetrault (2016: 459) explains that, ‘for these individuals, faces never guarantee identity – the prosopagnosic person must constantly work to know and remember every individual they encounter’. People with prosopagnosia thus navigate everyday spaces and encounters with a certain degree of ‘facelessness’ (Edkins, 2015), where the experience of not being able to access the face through sighted means renders the face essentially invisible.

The presumed visibility and accessibility of the face is also challenged through the practice of (partially or fully) *covering* the face, where exploring this embodied spatial practice of covering the face provides insight into certain socio-cultural geographies of the face: variabilities in how faces, visible or

not, act as vectors in the world are thereby revealed. Geographers have made substantial contributions to such discussions, particularly through scholarship on the geographies of 'veiling' (Dwyer, 2008; Listerborn, 2015; Secor, 2002). Analyses of veiling practices reveal how regimes of covering the face both participate in the production of space and shape the ways in which people, mostly women, experience and navigate a sense of belonging and mobility (Secor, 2002). Indeed, objection to covering their face with dress is a common experience for Muslim women; and, as the main victims of Islamophobic acts in many countries (Najib and Hopkins, 2019: 103), those who choose to wear face-veils are consistently forced to negotiate everyday Islamophobia.

In all of these cases where the visibility of the face is rendered complex, the seemingly infallible role that the face plays in the (re)production of one's identity is both challenged and problematised. As I go on to suggest, following the work of Martindale (2015; also see: Martindale and Fisher, 2019), there is a need to recognise the alternative methods of identification *beyond* the visible face; identity is instead multiply-sited and embedded in multiple dynamic and embodied experiences throughout the lifecourse. Hereinafter, I explore further problematics of the face/identity link, paying attention to faces that may become *hyper-visible* and overly linked to identity. I propose three further geographical research avenues through which the face can be explored: the political face, the aesthetic face and the modification of the facial landscape.

2 The political and biometric face

Alongside the increasing engagement with the body within the discipline as a whole, political geographers have also worked to include the body as a necessary form of political engagement, where Mountz (2018: 763) locates the body as a 'crucial locus from which to understand power'. Accordingly, therefore, the *face* also exists as a vital landscape upon and through which assemblages of power are manifest, prompting geographers to address the spatial politics of the human face. Following Edkins (2013, 2015), the face is always political: rendered so

through explicit political means (e.g. biometrical facial mapping, surveillance and identification), but also in terms of an intimate micropolitics of self-governance (e.g. the face/identity link, facial communication, expression and cosmetic bodily practices); '[t]o explore how faces are socially produced and perceived is to gauge the workings of power and resistance in the most intimate of ways' (Benson, 2008: 620).

Such understandings coincide with the writings of Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 181), who situate the human face as socially produced by the abstract machine of 'faciality'. Here, faces are *made* and subsequently contested, with Deleuze and Guattari visualising power as framed by a recognisable face. Partly in response to Levinas (1969), who locates the face as representing a site of ethical obligation towards the Other, Deleuze and Guattari instead propose an inherently political face. For them, faciality is a mechanism that produces normality and difference, and particularly gives rise to a *racialised* gaze of the face, as faces are 'measured by degrees of deviance to the White man's face' (Sekimoto and Brown, 2020: 57; also see Edkins, 2013, 2015). Here, the machine of faciality forces bodies to behave or perform in a certain way, producing a face that conforms to a certain regime of power (Saldanha, 2007). This production of face can have harmful consequences; García (2018: 332) states, 'the face normalises us, classifies us, gives an account of who we are. If what we are corresponds to the stereotype, we have the power system on our side, but if not, we will be classified as an object'. The human face is here rendered a non-neutral field upon and through which a coordinated arrangement of power takes place.

Of course, beyond these understandings of the face *as* a politics, the face is also embroiled in more explicit political regimes and systems, particularly as a site of biometric exploitation⁸. Systems of biometric facial mapping are implicated across space, as modern techniques of political governance such as biometric passports, border control and criminal profiling ensure that exploitations of the face abound. Ajana (2012: 852) emphasises the appeal of such technologies, arguing that it is the ability to *automate* the process of linking bodies/faces to (individual and

group) identities that has ensured an increasing use of biometric systems across Western governance regimes. Within such methods of control, the face comprises a key surface to be exploited; in line with the above contentions of the face as being produced, the face here exists not as an innate and universal entity of anatomy, but instead is manufactured as a complex landscape of power. The targeting of the face in such methods of biopolitical control is based upon the premise that the face is a landscape upon which locational points can be made, ‘rendering the human face as a series of points that could then be mechanically selected’ (Maguire, 2009: 11). Goriunova (2019) argues that this computational face as a method of tracking and identification could become the new fingerprint, where ‘the face is more useful than other biometrics because it *seems* less obtrusive – it recognises people the way other people do’ (Edkins, 2015: 99, emphasis added). These technologies are employed and utilised at several levels, allowing for new forms of global (and local) tracking and governance in digital form (Del Casino, 2016).

In all cases of the face being utilised as a method of surveillance and regulation, the use of such technologies raises important questions. Where the practice of biometric regulation, particularly at borders, ‘implicates us all in the governing of mobility and in the profiling of specific behaviour’ (Amoore, 2006: 348), the operation of these technologies is far from neutral. As such, methods of governance act as a way to extend state power, but, crucially, such power is not enacted equally. Facial recognition technologies – like other artificial intelligence systems – learn what they are taught, or perhaps more significantly *who* they are taught by, generating bias issues with a false sense of technical neutrality (Crawford, 2019). Pugliese (2007: 107, emphasis in original) grapples with such an issue: ‘biometric technologies are *infrastructurally calibrated to whiteness* – that is, whiteness is configured as the universal gauge that determines the technical settings and parameters for the visual imaging and capture of a subject’.

Manifestations of such an argument become apparent through ‘the instances whereby biometric technology “fails” to capture and enrol certain bodies

precisely because of the subject’s race, which does not conform to the encoded white standards of biometric operations’ (Ajana, 2012: 864). Studies have proven instances of the misidentification of people of colour: Harwell (2019) reports that in the United States, Asian and African people were found to be up to 100 times more likely to be misidentified than white men. What becomes apparent is that there are certain faces that challenge the automated ‘logic’ that perpetuates the creation of a ‘normal’, ‘universal’ or ‘ideal’ face to which such biometric and algorithmic systems are calibrated. Such technologies can further entrench already existent social division and racial oppression, the face comprising a complex and produced site of political control and exploitation. Mountz (2018: 765) locates the body as ‘one more tool with which to understand power in a variety of ways’, and the human face – the surveilled, measured, evaluated facial landscape – should indeed be taken as a key diagnostic of how (unequal) patterns of power and control spin out across and between local, national and global spaces.

Alongside the problematics of racial bias, biometric technologies also present issues for those whose faces depart from the infrastructural ‘ideal’ face in other ways. As Del Casino (2016: 850) attests, biometric technologies ‘deny the mutability of bodies, the changes in faces, hands and voices that accompany not only processes of ageing but other more direct corporeal changes’⁹. Biometrics calibrated to a supposedly ‘normal’ face thus do not work when confronted with aesthetic difference and change (Skinner and Cock, 2018). In the next section, I consider just such ‘mutabilities’ of faces, addressing the face as an unstable aesthetic bodily site.

3 The aesthetic face

Vital to the development of a geographical research agenda for the human face is acknowledgement of how the face constitutes a site of *aesthetics*¹⁰, as spatialities are produced and experienced through perceived notions of a conventional facial appearance. Situated within disability geography and disability studies more generally, this section explores these aesthetics of the human face, focussing

specifically on the spatial experience of embodying a 'facial difference'. Through exploration of the disabling spatialities that are (re)produced in line with aesthetic standards, it is revealed that faces (and bodies) departing from conventional social standards and expectations are subject to varying intersecting axes of discrimination, generating a social text that conveys to those with facial differences that they are 'out of place' (Kitchin, 1998).

The aesthetics of disability, or how *looking* 'different' can produce disabling spatialities, is underlined by disability scholar Hahn (1989), who offered early contributions to discussions of disability within human geography, with specific reference to the reproduction of body images. Hahn shows how the appearance of a visible disability – or, better, impairment – may connote a significant deviance from the conventional human form, creating an aversion towards such an atypical aesthetic appearance. Hahn discusses this aversion as a form of discrimination that he labels 'aesthetic anxiety', referring to the fears engendered by those whose appearance is treated as departing from a conventional baseline. Proceeding to disclose the spatial implications of such judgements, Hahn (1988: 42) argues that this aesthetic anxiety is reflected in 'both the propensity to shun those with unattractive bodily attributes and the extraordinary stress that modern society devotes to its quest for supernormal standards of bodily perfection'. Social and spatial divides are duly created through appearance-based discrimination, as aesthetic norms combine with ableism to produce and maintain a spatial politics of exclusion and marginalisation.

The very use of the phrase 'facial difference' highlights the pervasive existence of a conventional image of the human face from which some may differ¹¹. Such markers of difference are difficult to classify, with Le Breton (2015: 11) highlighting the difficulties of establishing *what* constitutes a 'different' face, one sufficiently different to elicit consequences, for different societies in different times and places. He notes that 'disfigurement (like ugliness or beauty) is in no way a universal category, but the effect of a social judgement'. What faces are deemed 'different' is shaped by the very same beauty

cultures that inspire one to 'look their best', and so the definition of difference, disfigurement and facial change depends on an interaction between geographically variant socio-cultural norms and individual attitudes and values (Gilman, 1995; Thompson and Kent, 2001). To return to Hahn's earlier term of aesthetic anxiety, the aversion that exists towards those with *other* faces reveals the social and spatial attributes of embodying a facial difference; Hawkesworth (2001: 300) states: 'nothing is more visible than the face and to be defined in our society as 'facially disfigured' indicates an aesthetic aversion towards those who have a different appearance from specific conceptions of the normal body'. There is hence a need to enquire into the experiences of those whose faces are posited as the embodiment of corporeal insufficiency and deviance (Garland-Thomson, 2019).

Perhaps, then, disability geography would benefit from paying significantly more attention to a *stigmatised* politics of appearance, and more specifically 'ugliness', in order to uncover the disabling spatialities of facial appearance. Where exclusions from space have historically been enacted formally – as was the case with the US 'ugly laws' that functioned legally in the later-nineteenth and throughout the 20th centuries to deny access from the streets of the public sphere for those whose bodies did not 'conform' (Philo, 2012; Schweik, 2009) – harmful practices of stigmatised exclusion continue to pervade and influence everyday spaces and interactions. Geographers have long recognised that altering the physicality of space is not enough to diminish or eradicate ableism, as social exclusion exists beyond the physical environment through the notion of *stigma* (Imrie, 2001). Promoted by Goffman in 1963, the term 'stigma' finds its origins in the Greek practice of the branding or marking of slaves to signify something unusual or bad, where 'signs' marked upon the body revealed a 'blemished person' who is 'to be avoided, especially in public places' (Goffman, 1986: 1). Goffman uses the concept of stigma to refer to the relationship between a characteristic embodied by an individual and the subsequent social devaluation that is then placed on to that individual: that individual (or, often, whole group) is stigmatised (Kent, 2000).

Crucially, these politically charged perceptions of embodied appearance are never separate from wider axes of oppression such as gender, race and class, since stigma operates as an amalgam of negative reactions towards those deemed most ‘unsightly’ (Philo, 2012).

With specific reference to the face, the existence of a stigmatised politics of appearance operates as ‘dehumanising’ in several ways, as earlier reference to the opening lines of Goffman’s *Stigma* attests. ‘By definition, of course, we believe that the person with a stigma is not quite human’ (Goffman, 1986: 5), indicating how a stigma is not only a discrediting or undesirable attribute or absence, but also may call into question an individual’s very status as human. In the case of embodying a facial difference, such individuals are hence subject to stigma because they can induce aesthetic anxiety by ‘reveal[ing] an animality we would rather not see’ (Edkins, 2015: 137); the ‘atypical face is a failed face, perhaps an improperly human, irrationally organised face’ (Garland-Thomson, 2009: 104). A ‘good versus evil’ narrative emerges, with disfigurement, manipulations and distortions of the face featuring centrally in literature and film as a way to reveal the ‘horror’ of evil characters (see Kirby, 2018, who discusses this in terms of an ‘aesthetic geopolitics’). Akin to what Philo (2017) terms a ‘less-than-human’ geography, disciplinary inquiry into the *dehumanising* experience of having an aesthetic facial difference would be an ‘approach alert to what diminishes the human, cribs and confines it, curtails or destroys its capacities ... it is to ask ... about what *subtracts* from the human ... what disenchant, repels, repulses’.

Through revelation of the face as a site of aesthetic embodiment, stigma and marker of (in)humanity, this section has indicated the need for geographical engagement with a spatialised politics of facial appearance. As ‘ugliness’ continues to function as a social category subjecting an individual to stigma, the disabling spatialities and exclusionary consequences of having an atypically appearing body, and more specifically face, come to the fore. In the final section of this research agenda, I invite consideration into the potentially *changing* aesthetics of the face, through the spatialised practice of facial intervention.

4 The modified face

As has become apparent, tracing a geography of the face reveals the face to comprise both a material and imagined space; as Synnott (1989: 607) argues, ‘the face is physical, and therefore personal and intimate, yet the face is also “made up”, “put on”, and subject to fashion’. The human face is therefore potentially a site of cosmetic and aesthetic intervention, where the observable facial landscape is *modified* – subjectively *improved* – as part of spatially and geographically variant practices and performances.

Pervading practices of facial cosmetic alteration is the naming and production of standards of perfection and beauty, where, as implied in the previous section, aesthetic prejudices are often cast against those who do not conform. Such norms are indeed variable, and, while ‘very little *geographic* attention has been paid to beauty’ (Faria and Falola, 2020: 129), there are emerging insights across the discipline that map out how notions of beauty are inherently spatial and differential according to place (Elledge and Faria, 2020; Farrales, 2019; Fluri, 2009; Little, 2013). Such conversations on the production of beauty and the ideology of ‘improving’ one’s appearance are rooted in gendered, classed and racialised politics, where feminist commentators in particular have long disputed the motivations and social conditions that lead to the undertaking of (facial) cosmetic interventions (Davis, 1995, 1997; Negrin, 2000, 2002). From tribal makeup in Southern Ethiopia (Matema, 2018), to practices of facial and bodily ‘care’ at the beauty salon (Straughan, 2010, 2014), to facial cosmetics acting as political self-expression to resist gender stereotypes (Bell et al., 1994), to various practices of ‘ethnic’ cosmetic surgery (Menon, 2017), to the practice of skin bleaching (Tate, 2016), to Snapchat and Instagram filters that display ‘larger eyes, fuller lips, more angled jawlines, whiter teeth, and thinner faces’ (Wang et al., 2020: 1129), the face comprises a bodily landscape upon which – often contested and debated – aesthetic interventions are enacted.

The process of (re)constructing the facial landscape can take on what can be framed as the most dramatic form of facial modification to date (Pearl, 2017), through the practice of a ‘facial transplantation surgery’. This is a procedure in which a face is surgically removed from a donor and transplanted on a recipient with an ‘extreme’ facial disfigurement resulting from congenital conditions or trauma (Talley, 2014). In the case of facial transplantation, the face is (re)rendered a complex landscape of reconstruction and place-making, as a refreshed and ‘repaired’ site, from which new aspects of identity and experience can be formed. Talley (2014: 35) implies that, although such surgeries are not deemed ‘life-saving’ as such, ‘it is precisely because the human face is defined as a normative facet of human experience that people remain compelled to seek out intervention’. In embodying an ‘extreme’ disfigurement, Le Breton (2015: 19) argues that ‘one loses one’s mouth, lips, nose, smile’, while, following a facial transplant, ‘one eats with the mouth of another person, smiles with another face, kisses with other lips’.

While Le Breton implies that this ‘loss’ and ‘(re)gaining’ of face through disfigurement and transplantation is a process of identity renewal, the surgical procedure is certainly not a simple ‘fix’. Treating it as such neglects ethical issues implicit in carrying out such procedures, wherein a deeper exploration into what it *really* means to wear someone else’s face is required (Baylis, 2004). It also does not take into account other dynamic and embodied influencers of identity, nor the problematic inference that someone with an ‘extreme’ facial difference is somehow deprived of a sense of self (Martindale and Fisher, 2019): a person without a face lacks a self, is indeed ‘faceless’, of no account. Finally, forwarding such facial modifications as a ‘solution’ to the embodiment of a facial difference medicalises such matters as an individual tragedy – essentially a return to the medical model of disability – where ‘the assumption here is that the individual body which is at fault can be treated by largely medical interventions and technologies’ (Butler and Parr, 1999: 3).¹²

Geographers can thus provide insight into the spatialised practices and performances of the ‘making-up’ of the human face, from daily cosmetic practices and

interventions, to more medicalised facial modifications as laid out above. Such (re)constructions and interventions enacted upon the human face signal wider ‘trends’ or ‘norms’ that are often gendered, sexualised and racialised, as the face is further performed and complicated as a site of spatial embodiment.

IV Conclusion – ‘Future facial geographies’

As a key interface through which one *faces* the world, the human face comprises an intriguing yet elusive geography; ‘there is nothing so private and yet so public as the face, nothing so personal and yet so social’ (Pattison, 2013: 49). Addressing a stark research lacuna within the field of embodied geographies, I have sought to locate the human face as a complex bodily landscape, and as a locus of diverse social spatialities, that invites exploration from geographers. By attending to the claim from Longhurst and Johnston (2014: 274) that some bodies, or aspects of embodiment, represent ‘that which is too banal, ... too Other for geography’, I locate the face within this claim. Unpacking the contention that the human face is a taken-for-granted, yet paradoxically complex and obscure site of bodily experience, I set out a research agenda suggesting – non-exhaustively – key areas of geographical inquiry into the embodiment of the human face. By thematising and selecting these particular research avenues, there are inevitably opportunities for advancing geographical scholarship on the face that have not been discussed. Namely, there are opportunities for inquiry into the spatialities of the facial *skin*, complementing a growing body of work within the discipline concerned with skin (Adams-Hutcheson, 2017; Lafrance and Carey, 2018; Pile, 2011; Price, 2013), and also into the geographies of (facial) hair (Holton, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2019).

Within the research agenda laid out, I firstly locate the face as a contested *political* landscape and argue that geographers can work to include the face in analyses of bodily governance and oppression, where ‘the face, in particular, is a key surface for strategies of biopolitical control’ (Forsyth et al., 2013: 1015). As Mountz (2018: 766) proposes, ‘now more than ever, political geographers must attend to the analytics and messy experiences, the violence and trauma exercised upon precarious bodies,’ and I propose that ‘precarious’ *faces*

should also receive such disciplinary attention; how does the machine of faciality endure its political significance, and how can geographers, in response to Edkins (2013, 2015), contribute to imagining an alternative politics, a 'dismantled' faciality?

I also consider the face as an *aesthetic* bodily landscape, calling for specific focus on how *looking* or *appearing* 'different' can have spatial consequences (as well as being geographically variable). By engaging with these (harmful) politics of facial appearance, disability geographers in particular may consider how historical practices such as the 'ugly laws' are far from confined to the past, since aesthetic judgements continue to exist as a (geo)political act that attempts to reconfigure both public and private space (Butler and Bowly, 1997; Schweik, 2009).

Finally, I examine the human face as a site of *modification*, where cosmetic and aesthetic interventions exist as place-specific and spatially variant practices. Where cosmetic surgery 'explicitly re-imagines the very spatialities of the body' (Atkinson, 2011: 624), facial interventions should be understood in a similar vein, as inherently geographical practices; the physical geography of the face itself can here be consistently 'made up' and altered through these interventions. To engage further with such interdisciplinary scholarships in alignment with the proposals specified throughout this paper would enrich geographical research focussing on the body. This is relevant and, indeed, urgent, given a new current age of modification with implications for post-human and more-than-human bodies; geographers should attend to the (changing) facial landscapes of power, culture, disability. A future *facialised* geography would further reveal the barely-charted landscapes of the human face.

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Notes

1. Such once-unacceptable bodily aspects include fat bodies (Colls and Evans, 2014; Evans and Colls, 2009; Hopkins, 2012); maternal and pregnant bodies (Longhurst, 2005a, 2006; Nash, 2012); bodies in public bathrooms (Browne, 2004); and bodies that sweat (Waite, 2014).
2. Jenny Edkins is herself not a geographer but is publishing here in a leading journal of social-spatial theory/inquiry.
3. See Part 3, Section III for discussion of Goffman's *Stigma*.
4. Goffman (1967) establishes the sociological term 'face' to define an image of the self that is presented in accordance with the values impregnated in the social spaces where the social interaction is taking place.
5. Examples of this include those living with Moebius syndrome or certain experiences of autism (see: Cole, 1998; and Davidson, 2008, for a geographical consideration of facial communication in relation to autistic culture).
6. See Carbon (2020) for a recent example of how wearing face masks in the context of COVID-19 has impacted the readability of facial expression and emotions. Also see the end of this section for further discussion on the covering and (in)visibility of faces.
7. Such work on the links between facial appearance and the (historical) politics of race can also contribute to and intersect with the field of Black geographies, acknowledging how racialisation has long been implicated in the production of space (Finney, 2014; McKittrick and Woods, 2007).
8. The term 'biometrics' is used here to refer to 'technologies that scan subjects' physiological or

- behavioural characteristics in order to verify or authenticate their identities' (Pugliese, 2007: 105).
9. See Maddern and Stewart (2010) for discussion on such 'biometric geographies' that analyse fallibility of biometric systems for any societal group or individual that deviates from the 'norm'.
 10. I use the term 'aesthetics' to refer to the physical appearance of the face, and body, and how this appearance is judged in line with standards of appearance such as 'beauty', 'ugliness', 'normality' and 'difference'. I also use 'aesthetics' to align with Siebers (2010: 1), who proposes the concept of 'disability aesthetics', noting how aesthetics, and particularly the aesthetics of the disabled body, 'tracks the sensation that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies'.
 11. I use the phrase '(visible) facial difference' throughout this paper to describe a scar, mark, or condition affecting one's facial appearance. I do so in line with the language guidelines of UK charity *Changing Faces*, but do recognise that there are still problems in using such language.
 12. UK Charity *Changing Faces* argue that there has been an unfair prioritisation of aesthetic surgery and intervention for those with visible facial differences. They campaign instead for 'face equality' – where the problems that people with facial differences experience are primarily located in social aversion to those with an 'atypical' appearance.
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Author biography

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