Boundaries under Construction: Linking Body Politics to Space

"[B]y the mid-1990s borders had become such a buzzword that it was difficult to imagine a field or an experience to which the term could not be or was not being applied." (Donnan & Wilson 1999:XIV)

The human body has become very fashionable these days, not only within feminism! Particularly from the moment Judith Butler published her books "Gender trouble" (1990) and "Bodies that matter" (1993), the body seems to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Likewise, spatial metaphors are generally in vogue and flow into a broad range of theoretical considerations - all the while recognised as part of a broader 'spatial turn' (see, e.g., Deutsche, 1996; Kirby, 1996; Pratt, 1992). There are many places bodies and spaces meet each other (to employ this spatial language). In my considerations presented here this place will be boundaries.

As we think about body politics, boundaries and space, there are many associations with identity and identity is inseparable from difference. While in the spatial sciences spatial differences are on the agenda social differences are the object of feminist theorising. And for both the construction of different spaces and embodied identities the presence of the Other is required. Besides, the notion of 'boundary' arises inevitably, both as symbol encapsulating the line of social distinction and as 'real' borderline in space.

In this paper, I argue that the notion of boundaries is fundamental for changing dominant social practices of injustice and exclusion that are explained by bodily differences. First, I will outline the idea that both human bodies and spaces are not a naturally-given entity, but products of discursive practices and relations. From this introduction I move on to boundaries. The points I am making then, are showing their necessity for the construction of embodied identities on the one hand, and contradictorily, destabilising boundaries of distinction on the other. Subsequently, I concentrate on recent approaches of remaking and remarking (spatial) boundaries. Finally, I will not conclude by breaking social boundaries down, but by looking re-conceptualisations that challenge feminist politics.
LOST IN SPACE BUT BOUND TO THE BODY? (DE)CONSTRUCTING HUMAN BODIES AND SPACES

For a long time, the human body has had a character of impermeability, of closure, of distance from others. And, ensuing Cartesian dualisms, it was understood as split off from a person's mind. More recently, bodies became a matter of fragility and difference and they are not longer seen as organically formed, self-evident, autonomous material identities or internally homogenous fields. Instead of being the interior truth of identity the body is regarded as a rapidly shifting movement, as a performatively enacted signification. Drawing on Judith Butler and other feminists, I argue against the assumption that embodied identities are pure, self-identical, unified and internally coherent, persisting through time and space as the same (Grosz, 1995; Haraway, 1991; Kirby, 1996).

Butler's key concerns have revolved around issues of gender and sexual identity, explicitly rejecting ideas of natural, pre-given and fixed identities and (implicitly) elaborating on the criticised mind-body dualism (Butler, 1990). What is more, Butler has developed a linguistic definition of performativity, the constant repetition of norms in citational practices, which reproduce and/or subvert discourse and become known through representations. For Butler, performativity is "the reiterative and citational practice through which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler, 1993, p. 2) and it is thus constitutive of embodied identities and practices. Because identity is always a doing by a subject that does not pre-exist the deed, we have to consider corporeality in practice and as practice. Embodied identities are rather processes than essences and rather effects than origins, i.e. identity is a complex of inter-related processes, rather than an end-state. According to Butler, bodies and identities are produced by the regulatory norms and practices of discourse and power. This is not to say that 'bodies are socially and discursively constructed' (a phrase that is worn out, too often misused and misunderstood), but that bodies are discursive. Moreover, Butler argues that there is no outside of discourse or a before construction. Conversely, it is important to acknowledge that "[t]he subject is not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects" (Butler 1990:145). These substantialising effects that materialise identity and difference are "a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter" (Butler, 1993, p. 9, emphasis added).

In migrating from bodies to spaces it is worth mentioning that spaces are also socially constituted, that they are discursive. While space was conceptualised as a container for a long time, it is seen as the product of relations more recently (see, e.g., Lefèbvre, 1991; Massey, 1994, 1995, 1999). These relations are the outcome of active human practices, of assigning meanings to spaces in a relational manner, i.e., always in relations towards and against each other. Space, as well as embodied identity, is in a permanent state of becoming, rather than in one of being a fixed but empty 'out there'. Again, very similar to bodies, this relational character of space and its meanings are not given between two pre-existing essences and/or actors, but are rather performed and constituted by repetition (Rose, 1999). By transferring one of Butler's convincing sentences to space it can be read as: Space is also a doing, it does not pre-exist the deed. Embodied identities get hardened and rigid in part because social life takes place in and through space. The 1980s slogan 'Space Matters!' is still - or again - important if we try to understand the way identities are constructed and differentiated. But whereas the early feminist reference to space and place was concentrated on the belonging of different bodies to their 'appropriate' places (e.g. the association of women with home/private places) the underlying idea of 'Space Matters!' has changed. Instead of reproducing Cartesian dichotomies (like man & woman or public & private) more
recent contributions aim at disrupting the public/private divide, inside-outside-as well as mind-body-dichotomies and finally all binary paradigms as such. And especially with reference to the inside/outside-dichotomy, the notion of a boundary becomes obvious. But what is more, by concentrating on the processes of constructing human bodies as well as spaces, their mutual construction becomes evident: Because bodies are discursive, the place(s) where a body was/is marked, offers many insights to its markers of identity. That is to say that the processual constitution of embodied identity is one where space is not an external relation 'taking place' but is part of the constitution. Additionally, while spaces influence or even produce human bodies, performing bodies produce spaces. Or, more general, as Geraldine Pratt and Susan Hanson (1994, p. 25) put it: "Places are constructed through social processes and, so too, social relations are constructed in and through place."

If we are willing to accept that space is produced by and mediative of social relations, then a challenge to identity theory and body politics arises and what is required, is an interrogation of the relationship between the production of space and the construction of identity.

The relation of mutuality between embodied identities and spaces then leads to an understanding of identity and difference, where spatial as well as social difference is more readily recognised as a discursive construction rather than a natural condition. Thus, neither the human body nor space is a naturally given entity, a container. Instead, I argue here that bodies and spaces underlie very similar conditions of constitution and that they are mutually formative. And since spaces, like identities, are relational and contingent, they are open for deconstruction and change.

BALANCING ON THE BOUNDARY: DIVIDING BOUNDARIES OR RELATIONSHIPS OF MUTUALITY?

There are many ways to identify the use of space and place for rethinking identity and difference. As already mentioned above, the use of spatial metaphors has become very common during the 1990s, but as Pratt (1992), among others, has urged us not to forget, is that spatial metaphors are tempting and limiting at the same time. However, I will outline only two out of many, those, which became very prominent within feminism: That is displacement on the one hand, emphasising a position of marginality as location (e.g. Anzaldúa, 1987; Hooks, 1990, 1991), and situatedness on the other, a relational reading of the construction of differences that explores the spatiality of social life (e.g. Haraway, 1991). In this latter concept, each part of one's identity is constructed relationally, in opposition to and yet through the Other.

But space is not only of great importance for the construction of identity and difference. Many have pointed out that the first group of spatial concepts put into binaries (such as core & periphery, centre & margin, heart-land & borderland) - whether used metaphorically or encountered in a true sense - can help to understand the way that difference is produced and reproduced (Smith, 1999). However, this concept runs the risk to stimulate a reversal of the binaries of politics in place, where displacement, for example, is considered to be an act of resistance and borderland a kind of (open) counter-place. In my view, however, the idea or even ideal of the borderland and margin has too often been an issue of celebrating difference and resistance, instead of fighting injustice. Too easily, it turns out to be a replacement of centre and margin, rather than their deconstruction and denaturalisation. Therefore, we run the risk of overlooking that this notion reproduces dualistic thinking as such - in place of blurring the boundaries between those exclusive counterparts. That is why I will focus on 'situatedness and relations' for the following considerations and will start by concentrating (again) on borders as differentiating lines.
WALKING ACROSS THE BORDERLINE - SHIFTING BETWEEN SELF AND OTHER

Boundaries are inherent in any form of identification. The process of constituting identities is one of hardening boundaries. Consequently, it is politically unproductive to search for 'good' or 'bad' identities because non-essential identities are also boundary projects. They do become stabilised and identities are always constructed through identifying who one is not. Any 'we' is inevitably defined through and against the identification of a 'them' and all identities involve exclusion. Similarly, the body is not a ready-made surface waiting for signification but "a set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained" (Butler, 1990, p. 33). And we have to keep in mind the existence of "the gender border control that differentiates inner from outer, and so institutes the 'integrity' of the subject" (ibid., p. 136, emphasis added). As Butler (1993) adds on, one of the problems with bounded identities is precisely that the construction of the boundaries can be designed to repress the fact of the connections through which all identities are constructed. Nonetheless, as stated earlier, "boundaries matter" (Massey, 1995, p. 68), for the construction of identity operates through exclusionary means, it is a differential operation, depending on an 'outside', the presence of the Other. This 'outside' is not an absolute, ontological one beyond the boundaries of discourse, but a "Constitutive Outside" that can only be thought in relation to that discourse. And that is why "boundaries are important because they help to define identity by marking not only what/where it is, but also what/where it is not" (Rose, 1995, p. 103, original emphasis).

The theoretical framework I have built up so far proposes that identities are contingent, in the sense that their construction is an open and ongoing social process, and relational because they are constructed against and through an always present oppositional moment. Hence, we are aware that identities are constructed through and against the Other, that identities, spaces and boundaries are not fixed but demand an opposition in order to function. But we need a concept to realise the required presence of the Other for both the construction of different spaces and identities, since any identification process depends on a relation, the distinction between inside and outside. Dealing with this problem, the idea of La Différence by Jacques Derrida turns out to be very useful. Following his line of argumentation on the "Constitutive Outside", it becomes clear that any 'we' already carries within it elements of the opposition ('them') that enables its formulation. As a consequence, no identity can posit a purely self-referential standpoint, which hoists itself outside of the social processes of difference. And what is more, all attempts to ground identity are vulnerable to deconstruction (Derrida, 1991).

In this theoretical domain, the relationship between 'us' and 'them' is not a separating boundary but an interrelation. Linking this to human bodies it is this interrelation by which embodied identities are constructed - while fixed social categories are formed by and form exclusion. Because these interrelations are never egalitarian we have to recognise that they are power-relations. Social powers constructing difference(s) are constructed against and through an oppositional moment. Since only the existence of an opposition enables the existence of both counterparts, the Other is always part of the Self and vice versa. Drawing on Derrida's concept of the "Constitutive Outside", we can claim that "[t]he elements of signification function not through the compact force of their nuclei but rather through the networks of oppositions that distinguishes them and then relates them one to another." (ibid., p. 63) Moreover, "the signed concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself. [E]very concept is inscribed (...) in a system within which it refers to the other" (ibid.). And finally: "T]he subject becomes a signifying subject only by inscribing itself in the system of differences." (ibid., p. 68)

Furthermore, by referring to Derrida's concept of La Différence, the dominant meanings of differences could be transformed because the mechanisms of La Différence
deconstruct and soften hierarchies by shifting the relation of Self and Other, of centre and margin. This way of 'thinking relationally' implies that one part of a distinction cannot exist without another or an Other one. And if this 'one part' is called A, for example, then the Other is called Non-A – which is never a simple B! A is rather constituted and maintained by the presence of Non-A and thus, there is no 'true' outside to any category, but a 'constitutive outside'. Neither A nor Non-A are 'originals', A and Non-A are dependent on each other and moreover, their mutual relationship is an ongoing, changing process. Consequently, breaking down the hierarchical differences between 'inside' and 'outside', destabilising the distinguishing borderline, enables one to multiply boundaries and to fragment unities and social categories such as men and women.

As I have shown, the terms 'boundary' and 'border' arise as symbols for the line that distinguishes, differentiates, defines and signifies. Both borders and boundaries, although different in their meaning, are symbols for 'real' spatial borders, but also constitute 'facts' of differences, hierarchical distinctions between embodied subjects, create insiders and outsiders and finally social exclusion. Because the processes of constituting bodies and spaces are not only similar but interrelated, I propose that the construction of (spatial) borders and (social) differences follow the same mechanisms and that perceptions of both types of boundaries have the same consequences for social life, i.e. inclusion and exclusion. For that reason, the following paragraphs make borders, boundaries and frontiers a subject of discussion.

NEW FRONTIERS IN BORDER STUDIES: LINKING BODY POLITICS TO SPACE

Comparisons with borders as well as the consequences of recent ideas about cross-border interaction play a fascinating role within feminist debates on destabilising categories and shifting identities. What I will do below is to apply theoretical considerations on the notion of boundaries to embodied identities. In particular, I will take the way over spatial metaphors to re-conceptualise the increasing (feminist) significance of border-crossings through a different understanding of boundaries and their meanings.

Although there is an interest in theorising space in feminist theory on the one hand and border studies are influenced by feminist and post-colonial theories on the other, feminists often do not bring back the findings of the latter to their own inquiries. Especially concepts such as the Self/Other-distinction have been applied in a sense that the Other often was created as an external entity 'beyond the border'. In general, the discourse on the Other is concerned with philosophical debates in the Western tradition, especially the dualistic structure of identifying through emphasising difference. In this context, the discourse on the Other relates to the (never-ending) process of social inclusion and exclusion which differentiates embodied identities in 'us' from 'them'. Keeping the earlier elaboration on embodied identities in mind we can transfer this structure to spatial borders and apply the insights about the social construction of borders on boundaries of social distinction in the meantime.

By understanding the construction of spaces and places and transferring this knowledge to the construction of identities, I hope to blur the boundaries between embodied identities and social categories, to make them porous and permeable. The first step is to transfer the view on space and embodied identities as discursively and relationally constructed to the issue of borders. The second step is to transfer the social construction of spatial borders to that of boundaries of social distinction. Finally, realising the operational mechanisms of borders on the one hand and their effects on the other, the particular aim of this paper is to destabilise those boundaries of distinction.

Concentrating on the social construction of borders and their conception in spatial sciences and border studies, I start with differentiating the terms border, boundary and frontier. Their meanings are distinctive and overlapping at the same time and that is why
they are often (mis)used synonymously. Whereas linguistically, the most common use of border is for edge and margin, boundary signifies limitation and demarcation in general. But boundary is first and foremost the figurative sense of border. The original meaning of frontier, however, is territorial border in a literal sense and new ground in a figurative one (e.g. new ground of research). Nevertheless, all three terms stand for spatial borders, either as frontier, as border(-line) or as boundary(-line).

Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson (1999) describe frontiers as both institutions and processes: As institutions they provide a broad range of boundaries which are important to states, including the real and symbolic enclosure of territory and citizenry, as well as the boundaries necessary for the definition and maintenance of individual or collective identities. Thus, frontiers are both signs and agents of identity. Identities themselves are central ingredients in the construction of frontiers as dynamic fields of social, economic and political relations. As processes, frontiers are multidimensional and likewise, the meanings people ascribe to frontiers can change through time, depending on the personal and socio-political context.

Similarly, James Anderson and Liam O'Dowd (1999, p. 594) claim that borders "have a great variety of material uses and symbolic meanings and display an apparently bewildering diversity of characteristics and relations". Borders signify power, control and exclusion - and simultaneously, empowerment, and inclusion. Therefore, they express contradictory meanings and, in turn, encapsulate asymmetrical relationships. Moreover, borders "are at once gateways and barriers to the 'outside world', protective and imprisoning, areas of opportunity and/or insecurity, zones of contact and/or conflict, of co-operation and/or competition, of ambivalent identities and/or the aggressive assertion of difference" (ibid., p. 595). But borders are also seen as porous or permeable filters.

Against the background of realising that territories and regions are social constructions, the Finish geographer Anssi Paasi focuses on the social construction of boundaries as part of the nation-building process and on their changing representations in varying social practices. The aim of his investigations is to find out how boundaries are produced and maintained. Following Pierre Bourdieu, Paasi (1996) argues that the (re)production of territory and identities is part of the continual struggle over social classifications, a struggle over power to make people believe stories and to create legitimate definitions of the divisions of the social world. The social identity of a being is constructed in relation to all the numerous groups, acting on various spatial scales and in various places. According to Bourdieu (1991) to institute or assign a social definition and identity is also to impose boundaries. And Doreen Massey's arguments follow the same way for space when she states that borderline do not embody any eternal truth of places, but are rather socially constructed lines that enclose open and porous places – and both the construction of places and boundaries are the product of social relations (Massey, 1995). Finally, one must not forget that the (re)production of space is at the same time the construction of social distinctions. This is especially true for spatial boundaries. As early as at the beginning of the 20th century, the sociologist Georg Simmel emphasised that a territorial border is not a spatial fact with social impact but rather a social fact in spatial shape (Simmel, 1992).

In my understanding, the terms 'boundary' and 'border' include both the legal borderline between nation-states and the frontier of political and cultural contest, but they are also refer to various social mechanisms and symbolic forms, representing narratives of both visible and invisible lines. Boundaries create zones that are simultaneously contested and accepted and constitutive of forms of identification, they are ordered and disordered and protect and confine at the same time. They are sites of feeling, relating and imagining and they suggest those spaces where difference is manifested – and where existing lines of demarcation can be crossed, blurred and disrupted.

Spatial and social boundaries are always the outcome of a two- (or more!) sided process. A boundary occurs only as a reaction of one system to another, and is thus necessarily relational. It needs to be constantly main-
tained and socially reproduced through particular practices and discourses which need and emphasise the Other. Place, shape and nature of the boundary are never pre-determined or always-already there, but differ from their historical and cultural context. What is more, borders exist at many different levels, and may be cultural, social, territorial, political, sexual, racial and/or psychological. Thus, border metaphors are often seductive and involve the risk of being insensitive to power structures, and, paradoxically, reinforcing them at the same time. Nevertheless, places, as well as embodied identities have permeable boundaries. And it is not only from this perspective, that boundaries of human bodies become analogues to the borders of nation-states. Both are vulnerable to penetration and contact, demarcation and encounter. Not only feminists and border scholars agree that "[a]ll frontiers, including the membrane of living beings, including the frontier of nations, are, at the same time as they are barriers, places of communication and exchange. They are the place of dissociation and association, of separation and articulation." (Morin, 1977, quoted and translated in Paasi, 1996, p. 24).

Building on this idea of the 'membrane of living beings as boundaries' the skin covering the human body is used as a metaphor for separation and demarcation, as boundary between individual and world, Self and Other. Obviously, skin is not only the bounded surface of human bodies containing an interior and defining personal identity, but skin also symbolises a wall, a barrier. Associations with a very famous boundary, the Berlin wall, are more than obvious here. Skin covering the human body acts as a prison - and contradictorily stands for protection and the place where people get in touch with each other. Similarly, the concept of a territorial boundary as a separating line has been substituted by that of a contact zone with sufficient permeability or even a porous filter. Within border studies, national boundaries are compared to membranes of cells and human bodies frequently because both boundaries and membranes are separating and permeable at the same time. The changing understanding of (spatial) boundaries moves towards the idea of sieves and areas of contact and communication, rather than being only exclusive lines of separation or limit.

BOUNDARIES UNDER CONSTRUCTION: OPENING DOORS FOR CHANGE

The remainder of this article focuses on the denaturalisation and destabilisation of boundaries to blur the hierarchical distinctions that are made between embodied subjects. Besides, I will discuss the question of whether the acknowledgement of the permeability of territorial borders might be used as an example for deconstructing boundaries of social distinctions, for mediating contacts and for enabling people to get in touch with each other.

Summarising, I would like to emphasise again that bodies and spaces exist both as practices and effects rather than as origins. Furthermore, the boundaries between subject and space as well as among subjects and spaces are always borders between inside and outside. In my view, these body-space relations and their denaturalisation opens up a politics that constantly challenges processes of inclusion and exclusion that are legitimised by so-called natural social differences.

I have explained that embodied identities as well as spaces and places are constructed through interrelations. This thought challenges not only notions of authenticity but also unfolds possibilities for re-conceptualising border-crossings and, ultimately, social change. Still, the focus on interrelations and connectedness does not imply that all those relations are egalitarian. They are 'real relations', material and social practices that can change over time. Recognising the interrelatedness means recognising that these relations are power relations that may as well be in some sense unequal or oppressive. For a non-essentialist interpretation of social differences and difference-as-change - or différence-as-change - change must
emerge from interrelations, and for there to be interrelations multiplicity must be acknowledged (Massey, 1999). Taking multiplicity as bedrock for this change, we need a new form of identity politics. One that rests on diversity as unassimilatable Otherness and not on exclusionary essentialism. Reworking on Derrida’s explanation of La différence, the mechanism of interdependent differentiation, this concept allows to disrupt hierarchies, to shift the relation of margin and centre and to fragment categories by multiplying boundaries. Thus, the unity of bodies and spaces is decentralised and dissolved. This constitutes the basis for deconstructing and denaturalising the boundaries that lie at the foundation of social exclusion and oppression.

Following also Derrida’s ‘difference to oneself’, Chantal Mouffe (1995, p. 265) states that in this understanding identity accommodates otherness, demonstrates the porosity of its frontiers and opens up towards the outside, the exterior that makes it possible. If we recall and accept that boundaries are inherent in any identification, then new social boundaries are constructed even as borders are crossed or blurred. For, in the same moment where boundaries are deconstructed, they are reconstructed. Dividing boundaries are by no means trivial; the recognition that these boundaries are constructed by power relations also means that they can be reconstructed in new ways.

Moreover, these considerations refer back to the conception of territorial boundaries as porous and permeable and to their function as contact zones and I argue that the underlying ideas can be transferred to those boundaries that act as social distinctions.

According to Mary Louise Pratt (1992) the term contact zones refers to a space in which geographically separated people come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations that are often characterised by conflict. They are “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (1992, p. 4). This notion of contact emphasises again that social identities are constituted in and by power relations that are separating on the one hand, but require copresence and interaction on the other.

What is at stake, is the kind of politics the "Constitutive Outside" and the mediation of border contacts enable. Borders as markers of difference might work as a starting point, but rather in the sense of différence, as interrelation. Against this background we are able to conceptualise boundaries not as (re)producer of separated, naturalised and depersonalised stereotypes about the people on the other side as Others. Instead, the excluding and exclusive character of boundaries is challenged and undergoes a transformation that makes boundary constructions and the production of difference not only obvious, but visible. The visibility of and sensitivity for various spatial and social boundaries that both produce and hem people’s movements and embodied identities reveal the necessity and possibility to multiply the process of boundary construction and to keep it open and alive. This idea of openness and liveliness, finally, makes it easier to imagine and live social boundaries as permeable contact zones where people do not exclude, but get in touch with each other.

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