

Territory, affective intensities, and how alcohol comes to matter

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Abstract

In response to Jayne and Valentine's (2023) article, we build on their arguments that, like alcohol studies, many more-than-representational geographical accounts of alcohol consumption rely on a priori assumptions, 'expressions', and 'facts'. To do so, we embrace their critique that our previous work fails to fully interrogate how alcohol consumption 'transforms', 'shapes', and 'mediates' emotions and effects. In revisiting our interpretation, we draw on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of territory to employ the interpretative strategies outlined by Jayne and Valentine of de-determination and how unfolding moments of socio-material relationships shape the affective capacity of bodies to act and sense. We illustrate how the concept of territory presents a productive analytical framework for alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness.

Keywords

Alcohol, Deleuze and Guattari, territory, vignette, Australia

Introduction

In this commentary, we respond to Jayne and Valentine's (2023) call to fully exploit the theoretical opportunities presented by assemblage thinking in the geographical study of alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness. In particular, we respond to their critique that many geographical accounts of alcohol consumption to date rely on a priori assumptions, 'expressions', and 'facts', rather than fully interrogating how alcohol 'shapes', 'transforms', and 'mediates' materialities, bodies, emotions, and affective atmospheres (Jayne and Valentine, 2023). To do so, we embrace Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of territory and the related interpretative strategies of de-determination and moments of intensities of (non)human relations, which change bodily capacities to act and sense.

Equipped with this analytical framework, we revisit the empirical material from our fieldwork undertaken in 2011 in the Bega Valley Shire, New South Wales, Australia (Waitt and de Jong, 2014).

Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of territory calls for an interpretative strategy that combines de-determination with moments of affective intensity. Rather than thinking of alcohol consumption as pre-configured by 'measures', 'facts', or 'social norms', the notion of territory points to interpreting the process by which the meaning and experience of alcohol

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consumption emerge as territorial expressions through the course of everyday life. Following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the notion of territory is an experiential concept. Territory refers to the shifting sense and sensibilities of being in a space that has the value of 'being at home'. While drinking social spaces and subjectivities are conceived as relational, emergent, and fluid, certain social relations are conceived to persist over time, while others change, through processes of territorialisation, de-territorialisation, and re-territorialisation.

Thinking with territory, the process of territorialisation refers to the structuring forces of affective intensities that operate as an ordering force of control. Translating the notion of territorialisation as an analytical strategy in the study of alcohol requires addressing the consumption practices that allow people to consume alcohol, including formal and informal regulations about who, where, or when it is appropriate to drink. Subjectivities thus may emerge through moments of affective intensities that dictate what constitutes 'masculinity', 'femininity', 'drunkenness', a 'problem drinker', or a 'responsible drinker' through when, where, and how much alcohol they consume. De-territorialisation acknowledges the possibility of change, ambiguity, and slippage. The process of de-territorialisation captures affective forces that have no logic or clear origin. De-territorialisation is conceived as living without a social order, and thus the sense of chaos or anxiety creates ruptures or cracks in the territory. For instance, changes in drinking desire may occur from witnessing alcohol-fuelled violence, being caught drinking in secret or reading health warnings. The process of de-territorialisation may result in actions that rupture (de-territorialisation) or reconfigure (re-territorialisation) social norms of alcohol consumption. Translating the notion of territory as a de-determination and affective analytical strategy in the study of alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness demands thinking about how alcohol comes to matter, or not, in individual lives, in different times and places.

Revisiting an 'illustrative scene' of young women's alcohol consumption in the Bega Valley, New South Wales

Insights on alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness came through narratives of being 'out and about'

rather than direct questioning. Using a territorial analytical framework, we no longer refer to data organised by themes but employ a vignette (following Galef, 2016: 1) as 'an illustrative scene, a literary sketch' – the creativity of which lies in its ability to map and reveal 'the hidden depths of an interior view'. Mapping leisure territories provides insight into how drinking reasons, worth, and harms are negotiated in ways that consider the individual, social, material, and spatial.

By way of illustrative example, here we consider the case of Audrey, an 18-year-old, single, woman who lives at home with her parents in Tathra, a small coastal village on the far South Coast of New South Wales, Australia. The territorialising process and practice of drinking are influenced by the living routines of an Australian coastal village that lacks public transport and often requires private car journeys of more than 30 km. In sharing insights into going out, Audrey prioritised numerous leisure spaces/times of friendship to enjoy herself and induce feelings of intimacy and relaxation before discussing those related to drinking alcohol. These included playing sports (bodyboarding and rock climbing), photography, bushwalking, and going to music gigs. In her words:

I'm a very beach person. Also, I go rock climbing and bushwalking. I draw, I listen to a lot of music and just randomly walking around Tathra just listening to music, and it is just a nice place just to be able to walk around. Also, I like photography. It's just that nature side of it. And like it's not too bad. It is a bit isolated. I love my music, so trying to find gigs to go to. We do get some good bands though. Like I saw Grinspoon on the 5th of January. At Club Sapphire, a club in Merimbula.

For Audrey, the sense and sensibilities of socio-material relationships that comprise the beach and bush as safe territories were key to her making and remaking friendships and convivial leisure spaces through bodyboarding, walking, and photography. Audrey points to the proliferation of young women-friendly leisure activities and venues in rural coastal New South Wales. However, Audrey underscored that her immobility restricts her

leisure time practices and places, especially not owning a car:

I don't have a car. That also really restricts were I can go and what I can do. I have to basically stay around Tathra 'cause I just borrow it [the car] off my parents.

Audrey points to the importance of the car in diversifying the social lives of young people living in Tathra. For young people living at home with parents, a night out that involves alcohol consumption requires planning with friends around transport, designated drivers, and overnight accommodation. Whilst house parties offered an opportunity for many young people in the Bega Valley to drink alcohol, Audrey's friendship group did not view alcohol consumption 'home' territories and drunkenness as enabling embodied registers of sociability and pleasure. For instance, Audrey expressed an ambivalence towards alcohol consumption at some house parties and a moral judgement of those who attend:

A lot of my group of friends we don't really go [to] that many places or go out to parties as such. Like there's a certain crowd that will go to certain parties and we didn't really quite mesh with those crowds.

For Audrey, some house party drinking created an affective atmosphere that didn't feel right. Indeed, Audrey explained that drinking with strangers does not sit comfortably with her close friendship circle and point of difference-making. As Audrey explained:

Occasionally I go to parties. But I like to go to parties that I actually know the people. Otherwise, I feel like I'm just crashing it. And it just seems really awkward if I just crash.

Audrey's narrative highlighted the heightened affective intensities of discomfort attending house parties with strangers. The circulation of affect in relation to learnt ideas of drinking with strangers does not align with her sense of self. Alcohol consumption in the company of strangers for Audrey, rather than an

empowering activity, is sensed through the discourses of respectability, danger, and safety.

Furthermore, the circulation of affect in the social-material relations that comprise house parties was always in relation to ideas attached to the figure of the designated driver:

I'm not keen on drinking [at house parties]. If I think I'm not going to stay the whole night I won't drink. And I think that I would just be the designated driver. I think most of the parties that I go to I'll be designated driver.

Not drinking is felt as the right thing to do to navigate the co-existing subjectivities of friends and designated drivers. Audrey illustrates how friendship, responsibility, and respectability are enabled through her capacity to make herself and her friends feel comfortable and safer when consuming alcohol at house parties in a rural context where there is a dependence on car mobility.

How Audrey's restricted drinking practices are reinforced is illustrated in a highly affective moment where being the designated driver made her happy within a spatial order that carries the risk of harm:

A party I went to just outside of Cabargo, I actually drove a guy to hospital. One guy's girlfriend had been going out with one of a set of twins. Now the guy got really jealous and he actually got really drunk. He actually punched one of the guys except he got the wrong twin. He broke the wrong twin's nose. I drove him to hospital. I was really glad that I was clear total for that 'cause most of the other people...just couldn't walk straight let alone actually drive.

Audrey illustrates how in the context of house parties, jealousy, drinking, and sexual relationships come together to produce possibilities of being 'really drunk'. Following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the physical and emotional pain of alcohol-fuelled arguments may be conceived as generating de-territorialising and reterritorializing forces that evade and reproduce the affective pleasures of drinking. Audrey illustrates that to minimise the

risks of house party territories from drunkenness requires the presence of someone with driving skills. Audrey negotiates the affective intensive moments of alcohol-fuelled violence by becoming the designated driver, which can be conceived to reterritorialise the house party as a safer drinking territory. For Audrey, her desire for respectability within friendship circles is routed through becoming the designated driver within the socio-material relationships of house party territories. Audrey is sensitive to what makes other people feel comfortable by restricting her alcohol consumption. The above quotation shows how the affective intensities of doing the right thing in driving the victim of violence to the hospital may work to reterritorialise house parties from the affective force of happiness generated by sobriety.

Likewise, Audrey goes on to explain her similar ambivalence towards alcohol consumption and becoming a 'clubber' or 'pub person' in commercial venues:

I'm not a big pub person or club person. Like I'll go dancing but it's normally, it's not really that kind of atmosphere unless you have been drinking, so...It's interesting because there was Sunset Sessions [a band] and I think I was the only person who was basically sober, like I'd had a drink, that was on the dance floor. The rest, oh, it's an interesting experience and you get to like observe the behaviour and everything.

Audrey offers empirical evidence that the affective atmosphere produced by the socio-material order of pub and clubbing territories is bound up in dancing opportunities enabled by music and becoming drunk with friends. Sober, Audrey senses herself within the socio-material relations of the club as a detached 'observer' rather than a participant. Audrey went on to explain how she sensed the role of alcohol consumption in enabling drunken conviviality as 'pointless' and 'ruining' her night:

I don't drink very much, so it seems a bit pointless when everyone just wants to get absolutely hammered. And I'm like, I'd rather just dance. And no one's on the dance floor unless they're really really drunk. So, it just ruins the night. I normally don't even bother staying. I'll stay until about one or two and then I'll say: 'I'm just going home'.

Audrey does not desire to share the affective intensities of the drunken dancing reveller in rural clubs that facilitate and enable a sense of corporeal closeness and togetherness. Not sharing the collective experience of the drunken mind-body world, Audrey decides to go home.

Conclusion

Audrey's vignette confirms Jayne and Valentine's (2023) assertion of the importance of spaces beyond alcohol consumption per se to better understand the worth of alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness in individual lives. Audrey's vignette illustrates how alcohol consumption is complex, diverse, and heterogeneous. Troubling a priori ideas of young people's binge-drinking practices in Australia, Audrey does not value drinking more than one alcoholic drink when evaluated against her friendship circles, sports, and pleasures in nature. Similarly, rethinking Audrey's vignette, the work of de-determination and adjustment to heightened affective intensity of alcohol consumption was explicitly present in her accounts of social mixing, the designated driver, and friendship in the context of house parties and commercial venues. As such, in Audrey's narrative, it was not the moralising bio-social measure in alcohol driving policy, underpinned by 'units' of alcohol consumed, that informed Audrey's decision not to drink in the rural social spaces of coastal New South Wales. Rather it is reasoning gathered through the practical experience of attending house parties as the 'designated driver' and her capacity to be sensitive to what makes friends and herself feel safer. We hope that Deleuze and Guattari's concept of territory outlined in this commentary builds on Jayne and Valentine's (2023) critique to advance geographies of alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness.


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