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Wi: Journal of Mobile Media 2014 8:01

The online version of this article can be found at:

<https://doi.org/10.65968/KKV8485>

Halegoua, Germaine and Allison Ferry. "Germaine Halegoua:
Performativity and the Spatial Self". *Wi: Journal of Mobile Media*. 8.01 (2014). Web.
<https://doi.org/10.65968/KKV8485>

Performativity and the Spatial Self

Germaine Haleboua

Interviewer: Allison Ferry

Germaine Haleboua is an Assistant Professor in the Film and Media Studies Department at the University of Kansas. She received her PhD from the Media and Cultural Studies program at the University of Wisconsin - Madison. Her research interests focus on relationships between urban environments and digital media, social media and location, experiences of place and space through digital media, emerging technologies, and cultural geographies of digital technologies and practices.

How do you use mobilities in your research?

I think how I use mobilities in my research might go back to how I think about mobilities in general. For me, mobilities are related to the ability to move, or the ability for movement. Also, the practices and processes of movement, and knowing or realizing that that movement is never neutral, that there's always constraints, there's always resistances, and there's always grey areas in between stillness and movement. And once you consider that mobilities are never neutral, all these other questions open up about representations of mobilities and the symbolic aspects or performative aspects of movement. As well, the actual physical movement itself, or the politics of movement, or the fluctuation between points or situations or contexts. And of course, there are a lot of different types of movements, some more visible than others, that occur in everyday life, that are worthy of examination.

Most of my current research looks at privileged mobilities, by people who use digital technologies, have access to digital technologies, archive their physical and/or virtual

movements, and the digital expressions and representations of that movement. I tend to study people who are moving in physical space, usually in a swift or very fast-paced manner and are archiving memories or experiences of that movement: archiving places they've been, places they want to go, or imagining and curating their movement in ways that they would like to have it represented. Right now, most of my research is focused on location-based social media services or other social media platforms that rely on user-generated content about physical locations or experiences of place. But I also study creative misuses of these technologies that are usually intended for privileged or particular types of users, paying attention to the people who might not be able to move in the way that the designers of those technologies intended. Keeping in mind that many people can't, or choose not to, represent their mobility in a universal way, and won't always seamlessly fit with the ways that software and hardware designers and platform designs invite them to upload their place-based and mobile experiences. The fact that mobilities are plural, place-based, and dependent on a variety of socio-economic and cultural factors can lead to really interesting conflicts for designers and users of location-based services, and tensions between participants who might use these location-based social media services in different ways. So, I guess, to sort of sum up, mobilities in my research are about the digital expressions and representations of mobility and the digital traces people leave to represent their imagined or their actual physical mobility.

What is the spatial self?

The concept of the spatial self (and what the concept represents) is not necessarily new or unique to digital media, but is something that Raz Schwartz and I came up with to describe practices we see proliferating on social media and location-based social media now. A very brief explanation of what we mean by the spatial self is the practice of harnessing place and space in the service of self-presentation or identity performance. And again, that's not specific to new media. But I think the way that we inscribe or reinscribe ourselves within public space is changing and that the spatial self could be one of the theoretical frameworks used to understand those changes.

The examples we're looking at in the paper presented for *Differential Mobilities*, focuses on how people enact the spatial self or use representations of places and practices of physical mobility to perform identity in digital media environments, particularly location-based social media environments like Foursquare or Instagram or Twitter and Facebook Places. So, we're looking at a specific incarnation of the spatial self and taking a closer look at the ways people harness and articulate representations of space and place to a preselected audience, or to an imagined audience, via social media. We want to consider not only the texts produced but also the production, processes, and practices around the spatial self, in order to develop the concept as a framework for scholars to further understand location-based social media as well as the context under which these social media traces are produced.

We're also interrogating the ways that some scholars, urban planners, and public officials, think of geo-coded and location-based data, or these digital traces of physical mobility that are produced over location-based social media services. Often, huge samples of geo-coded and location-based data are scraped and aggregated and collected and analyzed, and researchers use of this information as indicators of accurate movement. We want to question this assumption and recognize that this data may be more performative than precise. We're suggesting that researchers should recognize location-based social media traces as digital expressions of physical movement, curated and calculated expressions of movement, but maybe not always accurate movement.

We're trying to build on conversations that are happening around location-based digital media about the performative aspects of these digital traces and the contexts in which they are produced as well as the technologies and apps through which they are produced. So, we offer recommendations to scholars to use methodological caution as well as ethical caution when analyzing this data and also take into account what these big data sets can actually tell us about the city, about movement, about the self, and about social media, without falling into the trap of seeing patterns where they don't actually exist, which Kate Crawford and danah boyd talk about in their "Six Provocations for Big Data". To caution researchers against thinking that geo-coded data represents something that it doesn't. We're not suggesting that these traces can't be used for very valuable qualitative and quantitative studies about urban environments and patterns of physical mobility, but we're encouraging a different sort of consciousness about this data

and encouraging researchers to recognize the performative aspects and identity work that goes into representing place online.