

# Frigid flows

## Containment and excess in the sociospatial production of studentification in Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand

**Holly Randell-Moon**

Splash, groan, gurgle, smash, pierce, exhale, sirens.

Residential students at the University of Otago in Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand have a notorious reputation for vandalism, rubbish, offensively themed parties and flat names, and the excretion of bodily fluids over private and public properties. The University is located in Dunedin or Ōtepoti at the bottom of the South Island (or Te Waipounamu) in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is the oldest higher education institution in New Zealand and is typically ranked in the top research performance metrics, think an Oxford for the arctic. Due to its perceived isolation in the South Island, away from the major capital cities and more populous North Island, the University's student experience involves young adults being away from home and family (see KILROY 2012). This transitional period and geographical remove fosters enclaves of experimentation or bubbles of boisterousness, with a perception that student time exists in a state of suspension before being burst by capitalist exigencies. Frigid climates meet hot messes in the liquid flows of alcohol consumption which create waste across spaces in Dunedin that connect and contribute to broader strategies designed to capture overflow. Attempts to fortify the fluvial dimensions of student culture by University and municipal authorities further reinforce the sociospatial practices of studentification. A concomitant fluvial governing response however, might recognise the flows of capital and mobility that contextualise students' relationship to the city as transitory and exploit that transition as the basis for transforming city-student relations.

Splat, smack, bursting.

Student life at the University of Otago is materialised against a series of processual constraints that inevitably overflow ostensibly settled and dry infrastructure. Students who are not local to the area generally take up one of two forms of residential living: enrolling in the residential colleges maintained by the University or seeking private rental tenancy. Due to Dunedin's poor public transport and hilly terrain, it is more affordable and expedient for students to live close by the University. Student flatting is concentrated predominantly around Castle, Leith and Dundas Streets, and south of the campus, surrounding Frederick, Leith, Grange and Albany Streets.<sup>1</sup> These areas exemplify studentification. Where gentrification generates flows of income into neighbourhoods that work to push out lower income residents, studentification leads to the deterioration of 'the physical environment . . . as the students are temporary residents with minimal commitment to the area' (Avni and Alfasi 2018: 1250). A reverse make over, studentification dislodges through degradation. As transitional residents with minimal disposal income due to debt-financed education, students generate sociospatial

Holly Randell-Moon is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Indigenous Australian Studies, Charles Sturt University, Australia. Her research focuses on cultural geography, digital infrastructure and biopower. With Ryan Tippet, she is co-editor of *Security, Race, Biopower: Essays on Technology and Corporeality* (2016, Palgrave Macmillan). She co-edits the *Somatechnics* journal.

[hrandell-moon@csu.edu.au](mailto:hrandell-moon@csu.edu.au)

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<sup>1</sup> For a visual accompaniment to the above description, please refer to the image (compiled using Google Maps), see [Figure 1](#).

distinction in the student area through scarfie culture. Thought to derive from the frequent use of scarves to combat frigidity, scarfie culture has generated significant media and public interest. The popular independent film, *Scarflies* (1999), documents this southern subculture of excess. Subcultures might chafe against social norms but can produce their own internal forms of mobility. Subcultural capital refers to the social privileges that accrue to subcultural group membership (Thornton 1995). For scarfies, subcultural capital derives from the capacity to produce waste.

Such waste is an overflow from the consumption of alcohol that overlays Dunedin's already rain-soaked environment, taxing municipal systems designed to contain the city's liquid flows. Dunedin's settlement is fraught with infrastructural wetness. Large areas were built on recaptured swamp lands and portions of the harbour, resulting in parts of the current city being below sea levels. As Pamela Wood outlines in *Dirt* (2005), sewage, dead bodies, and refuse commingled in the street surfaces of the early town. Aridity in Dunedin is a futile if hopeful endeavour. In drying out public space, municipal systems putatively distinguish between the privately disposed and intimate flows involved in bodily digestion and the publicly ordered channels for industry and climate flows. Scarflies cultivate public liquid-scapes of overflow as a means of organising a distinctive sociality. Students have been expelled for flat hazing rituals where initiants are encouraged to drink until they vomit (Lewis 2018). A notorious element of scarfie culture, couch burning, has been outlawed by the city, making its occurrence even more conspicuous (Elder 2017).

Condemnations of this waste only further reinforce the production of more waste as a transgressive activity subject to attention and spectacle, facilitating subcultural capital. Corporeal excretion of bodily fluids is not the only unsavoury aspect of scarfie culture. Often flat names and flat themed parties use deliberately offensive language as well as racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, and Islamophobic rhetoric (see Randell-Moon 2014). These elements of scarfie culture are sociospatial because both the geographies and economies of student flatting work to produce flows of students into these areas and corral them there. Nufar Avni and Nurit Alfasi describe the sociospatial flows of studentification as a 'vicious cycle'. This is because the transitory nature of study and impending graduation mean there is little incentive for students to engage with the broader city as permanent residents do (2018: 1249). While the content of the matriculating student cohorts differ, 'their presence as a group . . . is long-term' (1250). Repetition not specificity is foregrounded in cycles of flows.

Smooth, burning, sweet, heavy, buzz.

In the liquid-scapes of studentification, alcohol lubricates overflow. Local ordinances regarding public alcohol consumption canalise scarfie practices away from the city centre and into student neighbourhoods. The current liquor ban (of public alcohol consumption) in the centre of the city ensures pedestrians consume alcohol in the cluster of pubs and clubs in the area (Dunedin City Council n.d.). Such ordinances also serve to push out unsheltered populations from the city centre. Recently the Dunedin Local Alcohol Policy was approved (Dunedin City Council 2019) which introduces lockout ordinances regarding alcohol consumption, such as a one-way door policy after 2.30am and other reductions in trading hours at night. Dunedin's liquor ordinances have the combined effect of making the city centre increasingly unattractive for student patronage. The location of a Liquorland chain store directly opposite the University on Albany Street and near to student flats serves as a more economically feasible alternative.<sup>2</sup> Here the city's systems for diverting the flows of alcohol consumption and their secretion into properly private reservoirs discloses the moist contradictions of urban planning premised on capitalism. Students are exhorted to consume but not publicly discharge consumption's smelly consequences.

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<sup>2</sup> For a visual accompaniment to the above description, please refer to the image (compiled using Google Maps), see [Figure 2](#).

Corporeal liquidity unleashes subcultural capital but finds an inverse in the housing economy's valorisation of aridity. Where dryness is paramount to preserving housing integrity in Dunedin, market liquidity is threatened by the excesses of scarfie culture lowering the value of surrounding property (see TVNZ *Sunday* 2015), connecting the private hydraulics of bodily waste to public solvency. The reason for repeat student tenancies in these locations is that the residential infrastructure is often cheap due to lack of insulation and degraded amenities. Without discounting the damage student parties have caused private and public property, it's worth noting that significant parts of the infrastructure of these areas is already trashed (see McNeilly 2018, O'Mannin 2018). Living in a residential flat throughout winter with no heating can compel creative ways to pass the time.

Pop, clang, drain, slurp.

*Student life at the University of Otago is materialised against a series of processual constraints that inevitably overflow ostensibly settled and dry infrastructure*

A subculture of excess can be recycled for further retail. Scarfie culture renders the University an attractive sociospatial destination for prospective students. The expectation of student 'mischief' is materialised in the 'Proctoral Justice' stocks placed opposite the Proctor's office, situated roughly in the middle of campus, which 'humorously' denote the punishment meted out to student infractions. The local popularity of this device is illustrated in the photos taken of subjects in mock bondage (Otago Alumni News 2015). You too can play at being subjugated in a nod to the reliance on slave labour used to build parts of Dunedin (see Davidson 2018). Unlike these prisoners, students are transitory residents of Dunedin. Their capacity to generate flows elicits overlapping institutional responses because of the multiple subjectivities that students embody. Because students are private renters they are managed by landlords and the New Zealand Tenancy Tribunal. Because students are residents as well as members of the University community, their off-campus behaviour falls under the purview of the Proctor's office and Campus Watch. Because they are city residents, students are also subject to the local ordinances of the Dunedin City Council as well as the authority of the police. Institutions exist to contain. Scarfie culture to profane. Excess is therefore maintained.

Despite the fluvial nature of student sociospatial practices, 'the framework in which the students interact with the city is relatively stable, and so are the sociospatial relationships that they create' (Avni and Alfasi 2018: 1250). There is friction between the flows of students who change each year and the dry infrastructural, governing, economic, and civic relations with the city that remain the same. Dehydrating the liquid-scapes of scarfie culture through disciplinary actions reinforces the subcultural capital derived from being seen to resist civic and social norms of decorum. Even though students may perceive this subcultural capital as a benefit to them, this capital largely accrues to the University in branding its residential student areas as enticing and cool for newer students, while also subjecting successive student populations to increased surveillance based on the actions of the previous matriculating cohort (see Uni News 2017).

The frigid flows of Dunedin's education climate creates sociospatial practices that facilitate transitory student connections to the city. Per Avni and Alfasi (2018), exploiting this transition as the basis for transforming these connections would help to dissipate the current sedimented approaches to scarfie culture. A complementary fluvial governing response to student migrations could include connecting study more directly to projects and communities in the city in order to brand this as a distinctive University of Otago graduate competency as well as locating campuses and study centres in other parts of the city. Flows generate other flows. Their ontology is relational. The University could recognise that investing in wider city and educational policies that effect mobilities such as free education, better





public transport, housing conditions, as well as night-life economies, diversifies the city experience for all residents (however transitory). Economic pressures drive the commodity and educational flows that deliver students to Dunedin. In channelling these flows for futures beyond Dunedin, students deserve better than a liquorland of excess.

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