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## Confinement and Exclusion

# Re-Analysing the Geographical Metaphor of the Closet through Trans Experiences of Public Space

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# Confinement and Exclusion: Re-Analysing the Geographical Metaphor of the Closet through Trans Experiences of Public Space

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## Abstract

This article proposes to employ the well-known metaphor of the closet, prevalent in both lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) popular cultures and in the geography of sexualities, as a prism through which to interpret the experiences of transgender individuals in everyday public spaces. By juxtaposing quantitative findings from two questionnaire-based surveys conducted in France and the United Kingdom with results from an ethnographic investigation into the daily practices of transgender people in public spaces across Paris, Rennes (France), and London (UK), the article argues for the closet to be viewed as both a methodological and a conceptual tool. Despite the challenges posed by the closet metaphor's spatially contradictory range of implications, which defy simple cartographic representation, the closet metaphor facilitates the conceptualisation of the spatial dimensions of transphobia when applied to transgender lived experiences. Using geovisualisations based on the participants' life stories, the article highlights the coexistence within the trans closet of forms of rejection or avoidance, which can jointly exclude or confine, sometimes in the same place. The movements of exclusion and confinement inherent in the trans closet emerge as potent forces that limit access to space, impacts amplified by the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination.

## Keywords

gender, sexualities, trans geographies, closet, public space, mixed methods

## Introduction

“Being in the closet” and “coming out of the closet” are two widely used metaphors within LGBTI cultures. These metaphors illustrate the act of concealing or revealing one’s gender, sexual identity, or behaviour. These metaphors evoke feelings of safety or insecurity and underscore common dichotomies – private versus public, acceptance versus rejection. Geographies of sexualities have adeptly appropriated the closet metaphor to explore the spatialisation of homophobia. Indeed, as the closet implies both an interior and an exterior, it understandably prompts consideration of where homophobia manifests at the individual level. By encouraging us to contemplate space through the binary lens of acceptance or rejection of homosexuality, the closet becomes a powerful conceptual geographical tool.

Trans experiences of the closet help us take a step farther in the understanding of this conceptual tool. Indeed, transphobia exhibits multiple and intricate spatial dimensions, stemming from the biographical shifts accompanying gender transitions. For a single individual, being “in the closet” can encompass multiple possibilities: concealing the desire to transition, hiding the fact of having transitioned (which carries distinct implications depending on whether the person was known pre-transition), or masking gender nonconformity. Navigating the trans closet requires adept and nuanced manoeuvring within everyday public spaces. This paper argues that the closet is a potent conceptual tool in understanding the spatial dimensions of transphobia in all their complexity. Indeed, exploring the metaphor of the closet is a rhetorical exercise that leads one to question the spatial dimensions of homophobia and transphobia in a relational way, at many scales and in many interactions between space and time, individuals and society. It is a tool for understanding how power relations are interwoven into individuals’ uses and practices of space in their everyday lives.

This article critically examines the metaphor of the closet through the lens of transgender individuals’ experiences in public spaces. Drawing on statistical data about violence endured by trans people in public areas across France and the UK, it first examines *where* the closet operates, then why it takes different forms depending on the places the participants frequent. The argument then goes on to focus on everyday experiences of the closet, informed by ethnographic material, and categorises its impact in terms of its spatial dimensions thanks to innovative geovisualisations. An intersectional analysis, employing a geographical lens that emphasises the role of space in shaping intersectional relations (Rodó-de-Zárate and Baylina 2018), subsequently invites us to consider the closet as a product of sharp social power struggles, embodied in individuals’ spatial experiences. Overall, the metaphor of the closet and its spatial dimensions are employed as a heuristic tool to explore trans experiences of public spaces. Reconsidering the spatial dimensions of the closet metaphor through the lens of trans experiences allows for a more nuanced understanding of the complex spatial manifestations of homophobia and transphobia.

### The closet metaphor: a tool for conceptualising the spatial dimensions of heterosexism?

The metaphor of the closet has been used in the geographies of sexualities – and to some extent, more broadly, in gender and sexuality studies – to conceptualise the spatiality of heterosexism and its impact on LGBTI lives. Conceptualising LGBTI lives through the “epistemology of the closet” (Sedgwick 2008[1990]) is a way to highlight the “representational contract between one’s body and one’s world” (Sedgwick 1993, 230 cited by Murray 2005)

and the power relations woven into its fabric. By acknowledging that individuals remain in the closet or come out of it depending on the places and people they encounter, this epistemology interprets homosexuality as governed by a “regime of the open secret” (Sedgwick 2008[1990]), which is *known through not knowing* and constantly flirts with the boundaries of private/public or in/out dichotomies (Brown et al. 2011). Michael Brown describes the closet as “a term used to describe the denial, concealment, erasure, or ignorance of lesbians and gay men. It describes their absence – and alludes to their ironic presence nonetheless – in a society that, in countless interlocking ways, subtly and blatantly dictates that heterosexuality is the only way to be” (Brown 2000, 16). In that respect, using the closet metaphor to describe LGBTI lives is a way of highlighting the spatial dimensions of homophobia: even if the closet allows that homosexuality exists somewhere, it relegates it to social and spatial marginality (Brown 2000, 48). Thus, the closet metaphor conceptualises heterosexism as a spatial dichotomy between somewhere inside, confined but safe, where nonconformity to gender norms can be expressed, and somewhere outside, where people are free but potentially unsafe.

At the same time, the closet metaphor has been criticised for reinforcing artificial binarities. Class, gender, and race shape the (ir)relevance of the closet metaphor in describing practices of visibility and dissimulation. Brown (2000, 23) fears that writing about the closet might contribute to solidifying the ‘gay/straight’ or ‘inside/outside’ binaries, although they have been deconstructed by critical and poststructural theories. Numerous authors (e.g. Brown 2000, 23 or Schweighofer 2016, 228) refer to the same line from Fuss (2016[1991]), who points out that “the problem of course with the inside/outside rhetoric... is that such polemics disguise the fact that most of us are both inside and outside at the same time” (Fuss 2016[1991], 5). Postcolonial queer scholarship shows that the closet and coming-out narratives are not always suitable ways to describe the relation of non-white people to homophobia and transphobia. For instance, the proliferation of specific rules and spaces where multiple forms of homophobia take place, from the unspoken message to community exclusion (Ibrahim 2020), can make the closet irrelevant to understanding the lives of people of colour (POC) and potentially even supportive of white hegemony (Huang 2021; Boussalem 2021). This is what leads Snorton (2014) to re-examine Sedgwick’s concept of the ‘glass closet’, with the aim of exploring the dominant narratives surrounding how black men negotiate their sexualities characterised by both hypervisibility and confinement. While “blackness becomes the object of (white) ways of knowing” (Snorton 2009, referring to Fanon 2021[1952]), the ‘glass closet’ provides a framework for understanding the paradoxical ways in which black men manoeuvre through secrecy and dissimulation within a context of heightened visibility. In this regard, it has also been shown that the closet metaphor is not always appropriate in describing LGBTI lives in rural areas, where certain forms of visibility – such as the cohabitation of same-sex couples – are possible, but others – for example public kissing – are not (Schweighofer 2016). The persistence of the closet-ghetto polarity has been denounced as an obstacle to “queering our spatialised notions of homophobia and heterosexism”, and even as “one of the most insidious manifestations of both homophobia and heterosexism” in works studying lesbian, gay and queer spatialities (Knopp 2007, 27). While the metaphor can make spatial aspects of LGBTI lives easier to understand, this mode of analysis is not necessarily suited to a variety of material spaces or scales (Brown 2000) and reaches its limits in situations where the homo/hetero or safe/unsafe binaries are not the best way to understand sexuality (Tucker 2009). Hence, as a conceptual tool that helps to

conceptualise homophobia and transphobia in their spatial dimensions, the closet has plenty of limitations.

However, I argue that using the closet as an imperfect conceptual tool can still lead to a better understanding of queer spatialities. First, employing the metaphor of the closet to consider LGBTI geography is a way to reposition power struggles back to the heart of the analysis. This is one of the main arguments advanced by Brown in his book *Closet Space* (2000), which advocates for the strength of closet metaphor in illuminating the spatial dimensions of homophobia, referring in particular to its “power/knowledge” dynamics. Brown argues that “even if there are more complex, less straightforward workings of the spatial”, “exploring the closet as a spatial manifestation of homophobia and heteronormativity” makes it visible when space “does simply confine, conceal, trap and disempower” (2000, 19). Indeed, the metaphor of the closet clarifies the spatial dimensions of the power struggles of homophobia and heteronormativity. It divides space between an “inside”, where homosexuality is confined but can be expressed, and an “outside”, where it has to some extent to be concealed (Blidon 2008), as people “know through not knowing” (Brown et al. 2011, 24). The closet thus reveals one of the main spatial dimensions of homophobia: even if it allows homosexuality to take place somewhere, it confines it to spatial and social marginality (Brown 2000, 48). In this way, the closet metaphor illustrates how the confrontation of an individual with normative society takes place in everyday life and space (Murray 2005).

Secondly, the coming-out narrative that characterises the closet – one is *in* the closet before one *comes out* of it – makes the biographical dimension of LGBTI people’s relation to space visible. It not only defines space as safe or unsafe, but also in terms of *who-knows-what*, and these definitions may vary over a person’s life course according to their shifting social and spatial contexts and articulations of subjectivity. Indeed, it was following their exploration of the mobilities of young LGBTI people who had moved back to their hometowns after studying in big cities that Waitt and Gorman-Murray (2011) commented on the biographical dimension of the closet, which evolves differently according to the mobilities associated with life trajectories. They show that “experiences of homophobia can be worked through, and place attachment remade”, highlighting the “temporal and spatial contingencies of sexual subjectivities” (Probyn 2003, 294, qtd. in Waitt and Gorman-Murray 2011, 1251). Thus, the closet changes with life and location.

Considering LGBTI lives through the metaphor of the closet can lead to a better understanding of the spatial dimensions of power relations between individuals and a cisheteronormative society in time and space. It is also a way to make life course changes visible in spatial ways, particularly in terms of knowledge dynamics. I therefore argue that, even as we consider its inadequacies for the description of queer and trans lives, the closet metaphor remains a heuristic, good-enough method of analysis when applied to trans experiences of everyday public spaces.

### What about a trans closet?

Yet the applicability of the closet metaphor to the description of trans lives should not be taken for granted. Indeed, whereas the closet’s main characteristic is the “spatial opposition” between “a secret, clandestine, private desire” and “a public, claimed and asserted sexuality” (Fassin 2000, 182), gender cannot always be divided between a private

and a public sphere. Indeed, gender is a social trait that is perceived as both unchanging (Löwy and Rouch 2003) and unambiguous (Kessler and McKenna 1985). Changing gender cannot go unnoticed. Moreover, while it is possible to hide being trans, no one can protect themselves from people's tendency to classify them automatically as male or female, which makes it difficult to play on gender ambiguity, especially for familiar individuals. In this respect, trans Bourdieusian and materialist scholars have considered the specific temporalities of the trans closet. Schilt (2010), for example, based her demonstration of gender inequalities at work on the existence of a "before" and an "after" gender transition, always considering the latter as relatively hidden, people being "stealth" at these two points. Beaubatie (2019) has shown that the trans closet is evolving by definition: a trans person "often passes as cis in their original gender category, then, at a more advanced stage of their transformation, begins to pass as cis in their destination gender category". Trans people would thus be in the closet at least twice, before and after their transition, although not all trans people follow such a linear path. Some choose to make their nonconformity to gender norms visible before, during or even after their transition: this can be compared to gay and lesbian people who choose to publicly claim their sexuality. Beaubatie shows, from this starting point, how the capacity of individuals to 'plan' and 'appropriate' the closet depends on their social category and their Bourdieusian social, cultural and financial capital. But this appropriation notably depends on their capacity to negotiate an *obvious* change. These temporalities make the trans closet quite specific: one can be a fellow member of Stones' "class of invisible ones" (2006[1987]), hiding from everyone one is trans and living entirely normatively in one's transition target gender: one has still changed gender. I argue that this major break in the life trajectory of trans people makes a fresh examination of the closet as a geographical concept extremely relevant to trans geographies and lives.

### Annotated logbooks documenting everyday life spaces

The aim of this research, which originated in my PhD thesis (Bonté 2022), was to chronicle the quotidian geographies of transgender individuals, their regular mobilities and interactions with local communities and places. The methodology and materials used in this article integrate qualitative and quantitative methods.

The primary data for this study comes from interviews and logbooks, that were completed in Paris (France), Rennes (Ille-et-Vilaine, France) and London (UK). The logbooks were maintained by 25 transgender individuals over a span of three randomly selected days between January to December 2019 in the three cities. Participants, whose anonymity is ensured by pseudonyms, were instructed to record everything happening outside of their homes, their feelings, and thoughts about the events. The process of logbook creation was preceded by a biographical interview, which aimed to understand the key phases of the individual's life, their experiences with transphobia, and their residential, social, and professional trajectories. This interview also served to gather the participants' primary perceptions about their places of origin, current and past residences, and frequently visited locations. Subsequently, a second interview was conducted to review the logbook entries with the participant and discuss the events of the three-day period. The logbook proved useful as a counterpoint to the first interview, helping to maintain a focus on everyday locations and occurrences rather than abstract representations. It also facilitated the compilation of a list of locations that participants regularly frequented, providing a robust basis for discussing

feelings and impressions relating to everyday locations and movements during the second interview.

The comparison between Paris and London underscores the impact of the two political systems on the daily lives of transgender individuals, particularly with respect to fears in public spaces, healthcare, and the struggle against discrimination. In this paper, this aspect of the comparison is not highlighted, although it has been important for the overall research and contributes to reinforcing the results. The case of Rennes, a medium-sized university town in French Brittany, provides a contrasting perspective to this comparison, not only in terms of city size but also in terms of LGBTI activity and presence. Although the presence of several trans organisations has facilitated the implementation of field research in Rennes, the trans landscape in Rennes does not match that of Paris or London, whether in terms of community size or the diversity of activist efforts. Moreover, documenting trans lives outside of global cities is a way of answering calls from Halberstam (2005), and Stone and Compton's (2024), and many others to "de-centre sexuality research and disrupt metropolitan-centred narratives", as Waitt and Gorman-Murray put it (2011, 1240). Such a move enables a deeper understanding of the complexity inherent in the spatial dimensions of the closet, particularly when these dimensions fluctuate significantly depending on the nature of the social interactions associated with the spaces in question – interactions that are far more varied and contrasted once one moves beyond the anonymous urban centres of global cities.

Second, as complementary material, I used data from two national surveys:

- The National LGBT Survey, initiated in 2017 by the UK government and available as aggregated data. This survey, which documents many aspects of the lives of LGBTI individuals, is based on information from around 14,000 transgender and non-binary respondents.
- The "*Trans et transports*" ("trans and transport") survey, launched in 2017 by the French feminist organisation "*FéminiCités*", which granted me access to their individual database. This survey documents instances of transphobia, primarily on public transport, and sheds light on the causes and consequences of transphobia in the everyday lives of transgender individuals. There were 253 respondents self-identifying as transgender or non-binary.

These two surveys, although exceptional in terms of the number of respondents compared with the data usually collected on trans people, cannot be considered representative of the population. They were distributed via LGBTI organisations and social networks, and there is insufficient baseline statistical information on trans people that would allow the results to be weighted against the social structure of the trans population. No significance test has been carried out on these results: this would run the risk of passing off as significant a statistical relationship which, in any case, only illustrates the characteristics of the sample (Gros 2017). However, these figures, which illustrate the experiences of the many trans people who responded to these surveys, remain a valuable aid in guiding the argument (Bonté 2022, 29).

Together, these complementary materials facilitated the collection of diverse data about trans people's everyday lives, and their relation to space and mobilities. Spatial perceptions of individuals, gathered through biographical interviews, were juxtaposed with collective data on living conditions as revealed by the surveys. This was further supplemented

by the insights into individuals' daily lives, emotions and well-being contained in the logbooks.

### Trans closet: what shall be hidden? From gender nonconformity to gender transition

At the outset of the study, a paradox emerged, underscoring the need to consider transphobia as a complex spatial phenomenon that varies across places and scales. While big cities were portrayed as havens of well-being in the interviews, offering reassurance and generally greater safety than the participants' hometowns, the surveys indicated that transgender individuals are more exposed to physical and sexual violence in big cities than elsewhere. Among the transgender respondents in the National LGBT Survey (2018) (FTM, MTF and non-binary individuals), 57.5% of those living in Greater London reported exposure to physical violence in public spaces in the past six months, compared to only 53.8% in the other UK regions. A similar pattern was observed in the *"Trans et transports"* survey, where the proportion of respondents reporting exposure to physical or sexual aggression in public transport in the past year appeared to correlate with city size (Table 1), further contradicting the idea that cities would be inherently safer. This finding also contradicts the narrative of well-being and security conveyed in the interviews, that show that trans people feel safer in big cities despite what the figures suggest.

	Reporting of an assault in a public transport system in the last 12 months		
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Sample size
Paris metropolitan region	43.0 <sup>(1)</sup>	57.0	86
Big regional cities	26.2	73.8	103
Small towns and rural areas	5.6	94.4	18

Sample: Respondents using public transportation at least once per week.

(1) Among the 86 residents of the Paris metropolitan region who responded to the question, 43% reported an assault in a public transportation system in the last 12 months.

**Table 1.** Sexual or physical assaults reported by regular public transport users. Source: *"Trans et transports"* survey, FéminiCités, 2017.

A more in-depth examination of the surveys provides some insights to resolve this paradox. While verbal and sexual harassment, as well as physical violence against transgender individuals, are more prevalent in Greater London than in other UK regions, other forms of violence are disproportionately represented outside that global city. This is particularly true for "outing", or as the survey terms it, "disclosure of LGBT status" (Table 2).



## Types of violence reported in the last 12 months

	Verbal harassment (%)	Physical harassment or violence (%)	Sexual harassment or violence (%)	Threat of violence (%)	Disclosure of LGBT status (%)	Other (%)	Sample size
Greater London	41.0 <sup>(1)</sup>	7.1	7.0	14.4	20.5	28.3	1880
Other regions	35.3	4.8	4.4	10.6	22.0	24.9	12200

NB: Each person could report several types of violence

Sample: transgender respondents (FTM, MTF, NB)

(1) Among the 1880 residents of the Greater London who responded to the question, 41% reported having been verbally harassed in the last 12 months.

**Table 2.** Types of violence reported by trans respondents. Source: National LGBT Survey, UK gov., 2018.

Forcing trans people out of the closet is the only type of violence that is slightly overrepresented in less densely populated places. However, it can be supposed that physical or verbal violence “due to LGBT status” (National LGBT survey 2018) are also the result of outing, albeit not perpetrated directly but arising from a deduction or perception by the aggressor. Hiding gender non-conformity or marks of transition from strangers is a form of the trans closet. This hypothesis seems to be reinforced by the survey: as Table 3 shows, the perpetrators of transphobic violence are more often people known to the victims in UK regions other than Greater London. This leads me to suggest that being forced out of the closet due to being already known in a given place constitutes a form of violence against trans individuals. Many participants in the qualitative interviews who still live in the area where they grew up report avoiding certain places to prevent running into former classmates, fearing the possibility of enduring the harassment they experienced at school. For example, Paul (a 21-year-old student living in a northern Parisian suburb) mentions that he never takes the bus from his town to the suburban train station in order to avoid meeting former classmates: he does not want to be seen now that he is transitioning. Furthermore, the types of violence stemming from being outed or being out seem to be more prevalent in less densely populated areas. I hypothesise that the level of mutual acquaintance between individuals using public spaces in these areas is higher than in more densely populated urban centres, which leads to different manifestations of transphobia depending on the space.

Consequently, the concept of the ‘trans closet’ appears to be at least dual in nature: on the one hand, particularly in big cities, being ‘in the closet’ tends to signify concealing one’s transgender or gender nonconforming identity from strangers. On the other hand, it also entails the transgender person hiding the fact of their gender transition from people who were acquainted with them prior to transition. I hypothesise that the metronormativity (Halberstam 2005) characterising much research on the geography of sexualities partly explains why the question of the variability of the closet, depending on the forms of sociability

specific to the spaces regularly frequented, has not been extensively explored. Metronormativity undoubtedly contributes to the inadequacy of the closet concept in capturing the diverse experiences within LGBTI communities, including those of POC, working-class individuals, trans people, and rural dwellers. Nonetheless, the closet remains a heuristic tool, imperfect but enabling novel insights into transphobia's contradictory spatial dimensions.

#### Perpetrator of the most serious assault in the last 6 months

	Stran- ger(s) (%)	Friend(s) (%)	Neigh- bour(s) (%)	Family member(s) I haven't lived with (%)	Another person I know (%)	Other	Sample size
Greater London	66.8 <sup>(1)</sup>	16.5	8.2	14.4	17.1	6.9	1020
Other regions	58.2	16.8	6.6	16.1	20.7	2.9	6190

Sample: trans (FTM, MTF, NB) respondents who reported being victim of a physical or verbal assault in the last 6 months.

(1) Among the 1020 residents of the Greater London who responded to the question, 66.8% reported that the most serious assault they had experienced in the last 6 months had been perpetrated by one or more strangers.

**Table 3.** Perpetrator of the most serious assault divided by regions. Source: National LGBT Survey, UK gov., 2018.

### Dual spatial manifestations of the trans closet: enclosure and exclusion

The data collected through interviews and logbooks underscored how these two forms of trans closet (concealment from strangers and concealment from acquaintances) manifest in the everyday spatial practices of transgender individuals.

#### *The trans closet: a Goffmanian facework*

First, hiding being trans or gender nonconforming from strangers, particularly in public spaces, generally results in a form of *enclosure*. The closet compels transgender individuals to try to normalise their appearance in everyday spaces. Whether going to college, the supermarket, or to meet friends, the participants employ specific vocabulary to describe this effort: Johanna (42, Clamart – suburb of Paris), Ella (28, Paris) and Cathy (62, Cergy – distant suburb of Paris) “*se sapent*” ( “get dressed up”), Ruth (21, Tottenham, London) describes the act of “getting up, makeup, putting on clothes” as a “process” which can sometimes be exhausting, and Marius (21, Paris) as well as Noah (34, Hackney, London) explain that they sometimes spend hours in front of the mirror and ultimately abandon the idea of going out for the day, uncertain if they will “pass” – as unlikely as it may seem, since they have both been fully recognised as males for many years. This effort is reported to be very draining: most of

the participants who undertake it say they need to take entire days off to rest and be alone. Daren, a 26-year-old trans woman working as a research technician in a laboratory in central London and living in Greenwich, puts it this way:

Friday 6 December. I was completely exhausted so stayed at home all day. [...] Home is a place in which I disengage with cis people's perceptions of my existence.

(Daren, 26, research technician, Greenwich, London)

The fatigue, widely shared among the participants, appears to stem specifically from 'unfocused interactions' as Goffman terms them, designating the first step of "communicating behaviour of those immediately present to one another" (Goffman 1966, 24). As opposed to 'focused interactions', which typically involve an exchange or dialogue, 'unfocused interactions' are "the kind of communication that occurs when one gleans information about another person present by glancing at him [sic], if only momentarily, as he passes into and then out of one's view" (Goffman 1966, 24). Indeed, when I ask Corentin about the high level of anxiety he expresses in his logbook, he gives a precise description of what is stressful, and hence tiring, in everyday basic interactions with strangers in open public spaces:

There's no choice when you're face to face with someone, you look at them, without necessarily judging them [...], but in your head you're automatically going to classify the person, you don't say to yourself 'there's someone' you necessarily say to yourself 'there's a guy, with a jumper, very tall' or 'there's a girl walking her dog', [...] it's a little judgement to understand what's going on. But as a trans person, [...] whenever someone looks at me... [...] I know they're classifying me and I always get a bit nervous because I think: 'Where are they going to classify me? Are they making fun of me?'

(Corentin, 23, student in apprenticeship, Rennes)

What Corentin describes captures well what is at stake in Goffman's "face engagement" during "unfocused interactions". Indeed, each interaction requires engaging one's face, which is more than just clothes or an attitude, but rather "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman 2017[1967], 154): engaging the face means exposing oneself to collective representations, through which others interpret what they perceive of them. When the face – which also represents a person's social value – is not acknowledged by others, this is experienced as a violent event: it is indeed a way trans people are "confronted with the realities of being trans" (Daren) through remarks, looks and mockery, which makes them feel excluded from society. Therefore, for Corentin and the other participants, the risk associated with face engagement is high, as the slightest verbal aggressions contribute to a sense of social exclusion.

The consequences of face engagement in unfocused interactions for trans spatial practices are significant. First, it leads to general fatigue, which prevents them from using public spaces in an ordinary way. Secondly, this fatigue leads them to stay in places where there are as few strangers as possible. For the majority of the research participants, this meant that they stay mostly in their room, which gradually becomes the only "safe place" where they

could relax. Daren explains in her logbook the consequences of the presence of a stranger in her home who came to visit her roommate:

When this situation occurs, often outside of my control, I am reminded that there is no space where I will not be confronted with the realities of being trans, [...] [as] in my home, I have no space to leave. As the person arrived, I greeted them, but felt compelled to go to my room. I notice that this small space acts as a barrier to the outside, making me feel secure and safe to relax.

(Daren, 26, research technician, Greenwich, London)

The specificities of facework for trans people in public spaces contribute to a general fatigue which makes them feel safer in places that are controlled, private and where they are alone or with people close to them. We can assume, as trans Marxists have shown (Raha 2021), that the importance of this emotional work is amplified in the experience of trans women and 'femme' queer and trans people of colour. For the majority of the participants, the difficulties of facework lead them to stay in their homes or even in their private rooms. I maintain that this movement of *enclosure* is one of the spatial manifestations of the trans closet.

### *The trans closet: hiding the biographical shift*

However, I argue that sticking to a definition of the trans closet focused solely on facework in anonymous public spaces is "metronormative" (Halberstam 2005). Indeed, unfocused interactions are typical of public spaces frequented by a diverse array of users who are unlikely to recognise each other, such as the centres of big cities. This overlooks the interactions specific to less anonymous places, where neighbours interact with each other and are no longer "strangers", belonging to what geographers variously term "the parochial realm" (Lofland 1989), "shared spaces" (Valentine 2008), "semi-public spaces" or "everyday spaces of encounter" (Peterson 2017). In fact, this definition neglects the role of local communities in both deprived and peripheral neighbourhoods, as well as in more rural spaces, which are characterised by greater embeddedness (Fol 2010) and more localised resources (Renahy 2010). Indeed, while being a closeted trans person necessitates concealing one's gender transition, the interviews revealed that concealment from individuals known prior to transitioning, such as former classmates, family members, family friends, etc. was nearly impossible. Marius, a young trans man who has grown up in a deprived neighbourhood in the south of Paris where "everyone knows each other", describes this struggle in his interview:

It was a huge fear for me, becoming marginal. [...] When I was a child [...] I used to pray every night that the next day I'd wake up and have a penis. I was well aware that gender was linked to this in our societies, but above all, I always said, 'that no one would get upset, that no one would be annoyed, that everyone would be OK'. I think I was already very aware of abnormality, in the sense of breaking the norm.

(Marius, 21, student in a prestigious college, Paris)

From childhood, Marius knew he wanted to transition. His primary concern was that people would be upset by the change. Indeed, this is the case for some of the participants who did not relocate during or immediately after their transition, and are known in their neighborhood for having transitioned. Johanna, a 42-year-old trans woman, has worked and lived in the

same neighbourhood for over twenty years: as a local civil servant, she was already well-known in her neighbourhood before transitioning. She now experiences a significant level of transphobic verbal harassment in neighbourhood public spaces, where she is known, whereas she is left alone in places where she is anonymous. She says she is “known as the white wolf” – a French phrase indicating recognition, not always in a positive sense.

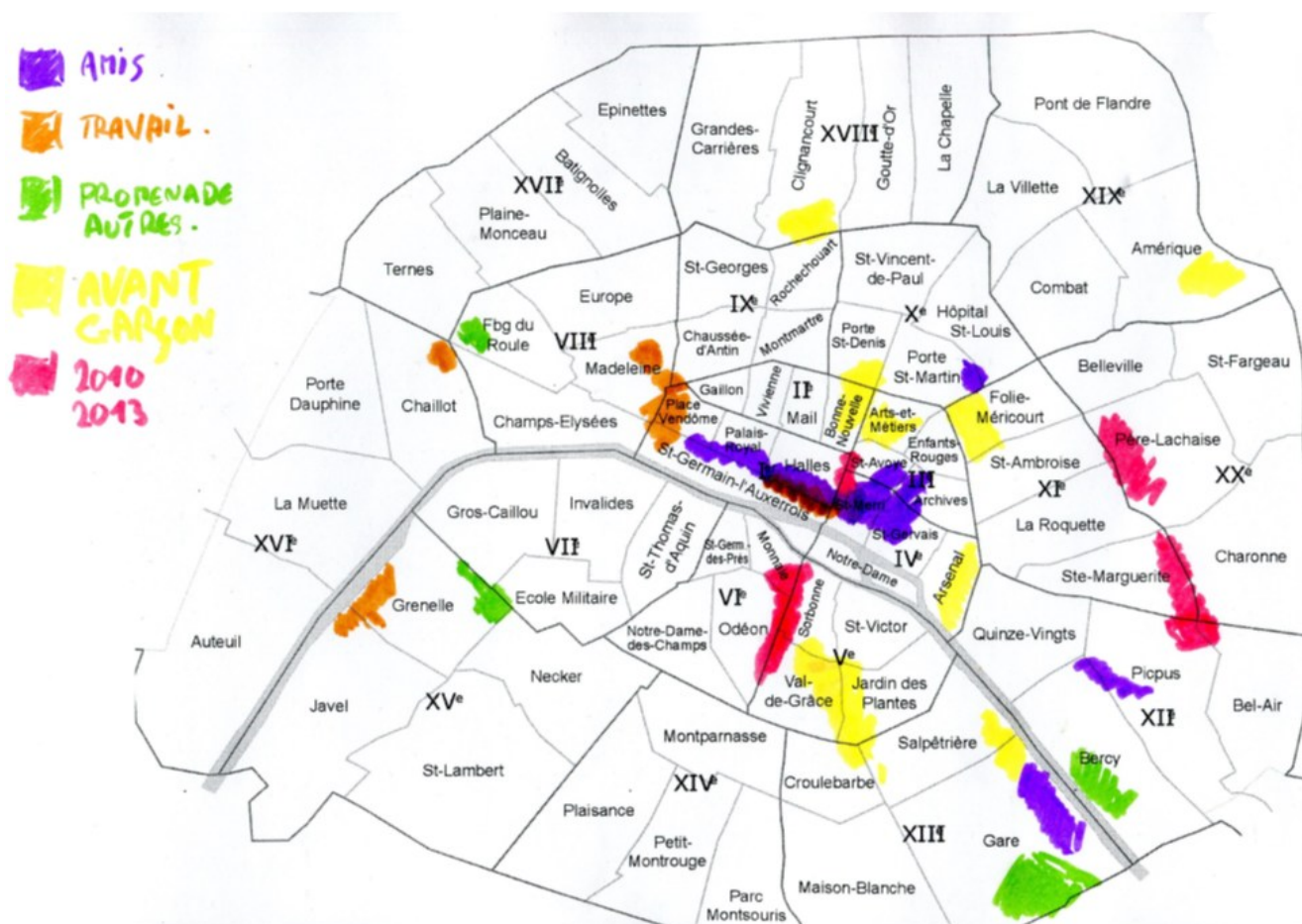
When you say you’re ‘known as the white wolf’, do you mean at the council offices, or also outside?

Johanna: Well, yeah, in [my] previous job I worked in all the leisure centres, and in the management of the municipal services too, [...] and then [I] went back to see them as a trade unionist, but in transition. And then once I wasn’t there, ‘piapiapiapia’, the news went around the town 50 times... [...] In short, the harassment... it’s because I’m known to young people in the entire town... I think my passing is fine.

(Johanna, 42, local civil servant, Clamart - suburb of Paris.)

The source of Johanna’s harassment appears to stem from people knowing her and being aware that she is trans: in fact, she does not experience harassment outside her town, where people do not know she is trans. Being known by her neighbours has spatial implications for Johanna’s mobilities, as she either stays at home or ventures beyond her neighbourhood. It also impacts the use of local public spaces by trans individuals who are not known in their neighbourhood: the risk of discovery is a manifestation of the trans closet that leads to heightened self-constraint and, ultimately, avoidance of a local community’s shared spaces. For instance, Samuel, a 24-year-old school supervisor in a deprived Paris suburb, avoids taking part in sports in his neighbourhood because of his fear of being recognised by his students without his binder (a compressive bra that conceals the breasts but is unsuitable for sports). The threat of being recognised as trans, or, as Daren phrases it, being “clocked,” compels him to exercise at home or, more frequently, outside his neighbourhood, for example in central areas in Paris.

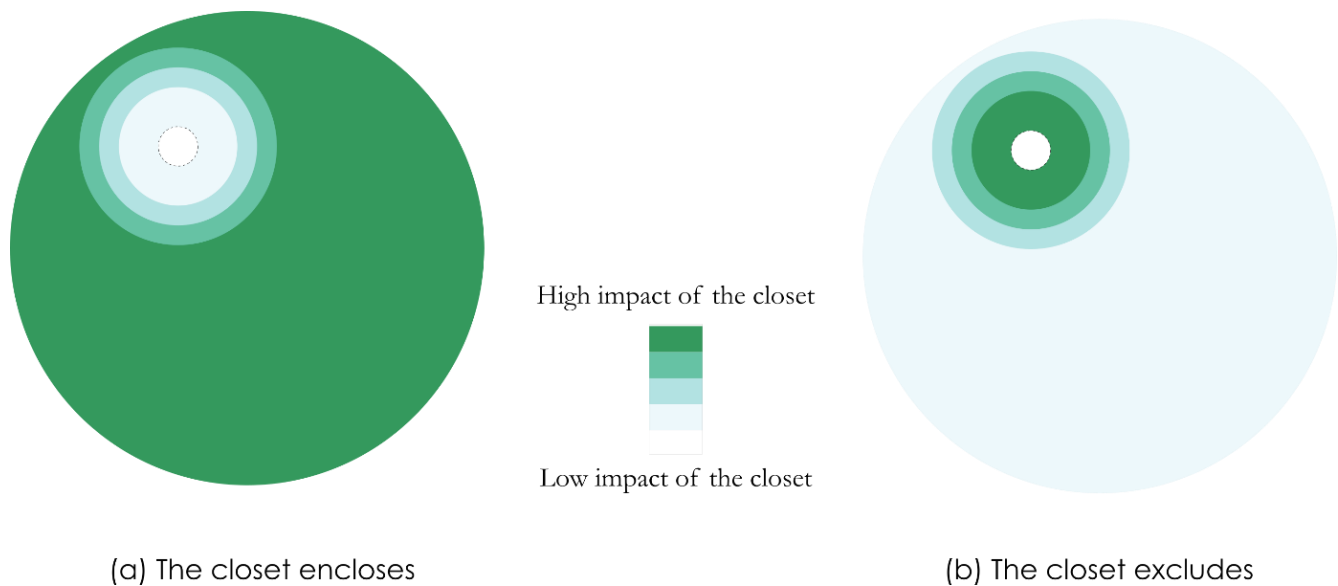
As a result of their adoption of this specific spatiality within the trans closet, some participants stopped going to local community places (cafés, libraries, public spaces in small towns, sports clubs, etc.) following the onset of transition, so they could “have a fresh start” elsewhere (Tobias, 21, art student, Whitechapel, London). This is the case for Hélène, a 43-year-old trans woman living in Noisy-le-Sec, a deprived neighbourhood in the eastern suburbs of Paris. On a map where she marked the places she often visits in central Paris (Figure 1), she created three categories for the places she currently visits (purple: friends, brown: work, green: walks), and two categories representing the past: “*avant garçon*” (“before, as a boy”) in yellow, denoting the spaces she frequented before her transition, and “2010-2013”, representing spaces she frequented during the first three years of her transition. The near absence of overlap highlights the significance of the spatial dimension of the trans closet.



**Figure 1.** Mental map of the spaces often frequented by H  l  ne, 43, a contract administrative worker, Noisy-le-Grand (suburb of Paris).

Thus, the trans closet not only involves facework to conceal gender nonconformity, but also acts as a boundary, separating a *before* and an *after*. Some individuals, like H  l  ne, strictly separate the before and after places. Other participants, like Johanna, live with the door of the closet perpetually open: it exposes them to severe harassment in their local community spaces, in their neighbourhood, and generally in places surrounding their homes or hometowns. It prompts them to retreat to their homes or to escape to more anonymous spaces. When the door of the closet is closed, the risk of being discovered triggers the same process of exclusion.

I argue, therefore, that the trans closet represents both an effort of normalisation in everyday space, and patterns of marginalisation with respect to familiar spaces and people. This results in a complex spatial manifestation of the closet in the everyday lives of trans individuals: as summarised in Figure 2, the closet is both spatially enclosing *and* excluding. The subsequent results aim to demonstrate how these two opposing and contradictory manifestations of the closet play out in the everyday lives of trans people.



**Figure 2.** The opposing spatial manifestations of the trans closet.

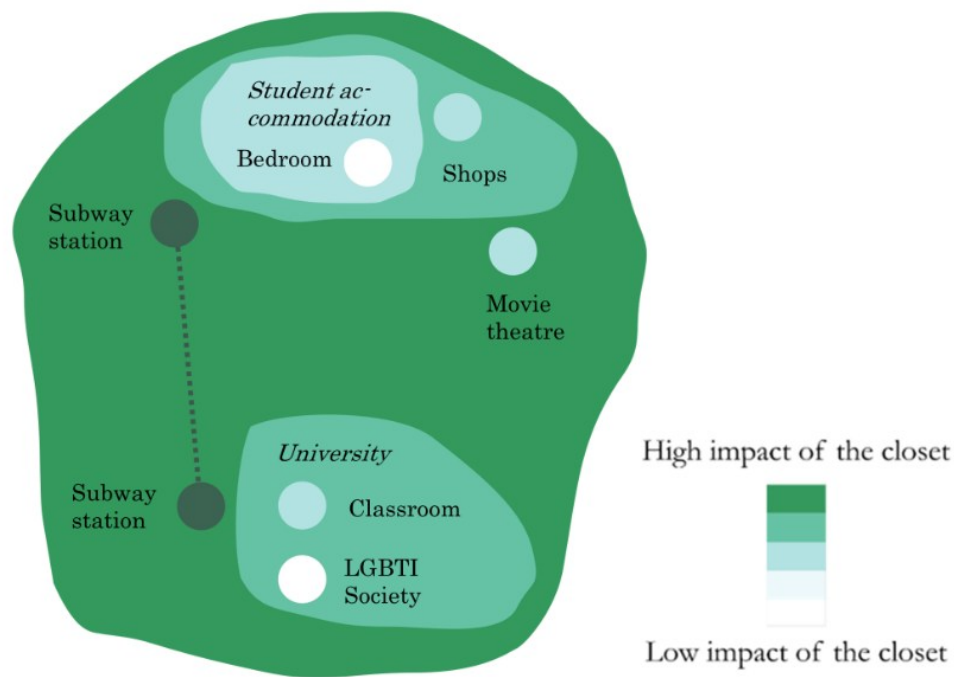
### The spatial manifestations of the closet in the everyday lives of trans people

The following series of geovisualisations (Figures 2 to 5) use varying shades of colour to illustrate the spatial consequences of the closet on the participants' living environments. A gradual rise in values, represented by a spectrum of green shades, denotes the energy and attention that the closet demands, whether it manifests as high levels of stress, concealment or avoidance strategies, explanations, or even falsehoods. By employing zonal symbols to depict the spaces where the participants feel the intensity of the closet, I can demonstrate the ubiquitous dimension of the closet and its spatial ramifications: its presence creates a vast dark green zone across the sketch, confining the participants to a few lighter green safe spaces, whereas its absence causes its enclosing dimension to vanish, rendering the sketch white once again. As with more traditional maps, the concentration and intensity of colour can be discerned at a glance: the larger and darker a green zone is, the more the individual is confined to the few safe spaces they possess, whereas a few dark green spots indicate places from which the person is repelled.

#### *Rebecca: when the closet leads to spatial enclosure*

The interview with Rebecca revealed that gendered fears pervade her everyday life, shadowing her wherever she goes, from her bedroom in her student accommodation in Southwark to her university, a few subway stations away. She only feels truly safe in two places: her bedroom and her university's LGBTI society. As can be seen in Figure 3, this leads to her gradual confinement to these two places, as the high volume of verbal harassment she is subjected to, and the sense of being "out of place" conveyed by the media coverage of trans people in the UK, contribute to eliciting and maintaining a high level of fear everywhere else. For Rebecca, the closet is almost exclusively a facework exercise: when I met her, she had just arrived in London and was unknown to anyone. However, she was in the initial stages of her transition, already dressing and generally presenting as a woman, but still on the lengthy NHS gender services waiting list, not yet authorised to start medical transition procedures. Therefore, Rebecca constantly makes considerable effort to pass as cis, which generates a

high degree of fear of being identified as trans or queer, and subsequently being harassed or even assaulted. Spatially, the closet functions day-to-day as a confining force.

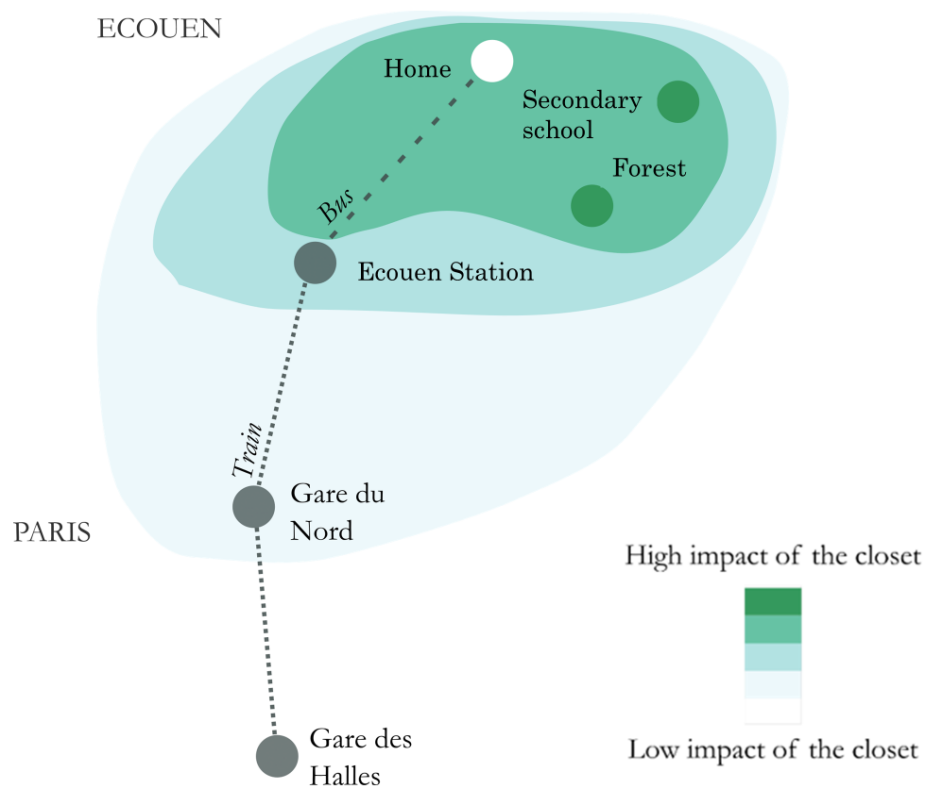


**Figure 3.** The closet in the day-to-day life of Rebecca, 18, student, Southwark, London.

### *Ludo: when the closet leads to spatial exclusion*

In contrast to Rebecca, Ludo is not subjected to harassment by strangers. The closet does not necessitate any specific facework in his day-to-day life: he passes as cis to strangers and his appearance has never been questioned. However, Ludo frequently endures verbal harassment in his neighbourhood from former classmates. He currently lives as a student-athlete in a specialised boarding high school outside the region, where he is openly accepted as a trans man. When he returns to Ecoen, his hometown, he fears recognition by a former classmate or a family friend. This occurs occasionally, especially on the bus that connects the city centre to the train station to Paris. Consequently, Ludo avoids the public spaces surrounding his home: he instead frequently travels to Paris to meet his LGBTI friends around the two main train stations of Gare du Nord and Châtelet-les-Halles, which are directly connected to most of the region's commuting network. In these central public spaces, he feels "anonymous" and "quiet". Spatially, Ludo's closet functions on a day-to-day basis as a repelling and excluding force.



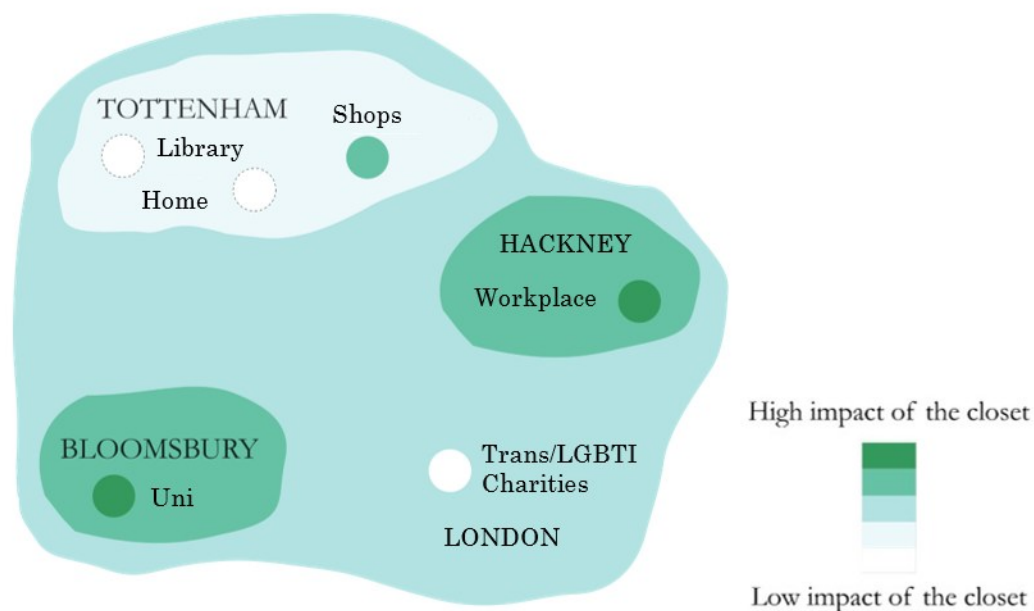


**Figure 4.** The closet in the everyday life of Ludo, 18, high school student, Ecouen (northern suburb of Paris)

### *Ruth: the closet as a blend of enclosure and exclusion*

Some participants, particularly those who have grown up in neighbourhoods they still visit regularly, are exposed to both enclosure and exclusion. Ruth lived in Hackney during her high school years. She now lives independently in Tottenham, but still visits Hackney several times a week to work as a waitress in a local restaurant. While she is exposed to a significant amount of transphobic harassment by strangers in places where she is anonymous, she still fears being recognised in Hackney, as occurred once when former classmates ate at the restaurant where she works. This also occasionally happens in her current neighbourhood, as she is known by the local shop owners and has already endured their mockery. She feels safe in a few spaces where she can escape the cisnormative gaze: her room, where she is alone, the local library, where she is left alone, and her university's LGBTI society. The harassment she experiences in anonymous public spaces compels her to seek refuge in these appropriated spaces, while the fear of being recognised by people she knows excludes her from the local resources of her former and current neighbourhoods. Spatially, the combination of the excluding and enclosing dimensions of the trans closet pushes powerfully towards isolation. The trans closet thus greatly complicates access to public spaces and individual mobility.

The complex spatial dimensions of the trans closet are rooted in the two spatial dynamics of enclosure and exclusion, which are frequently intertwined in the experiences of trans individuals. The capacity to plan one's own closet unveils the power dynamics inherent in the spatiality of social marginalisation.



**Figure 5.** The closet in the everyday life of Ruth, 21, student, waitress and sex worker, Tottenham (London).

### Planning the closet: an exercise of power

Building on Bourdieu's analytical framework and his notion of 'social space' ("*espace social*", Bourdieu 2017[1979]), Beaubatie demonstrates that there exists, as a mirror to the social space described by Bourdieu, a 'gendered social space' ("*espace social du genre*", Beaubatie 2019). Beaubatie's notion of 'gendered social space' relies on two key points. First, it is possible to evolve within gendered social space, which Beaubatie calls 'gendered mobility', mirroring the notion of 'social mobility' (Payne 1989) – biographical mobility between different social groups. Similar to class transgressors, trans individuals are gender transgressors who leave one gender group to join another. Second, gender expression and self-identification are intimately dependent on socio-economic characteristics; thus these 'gendered social mobilities' are constrained and linked to the social position of individuals. Beaubatie uses the term 'planning' ("*aménagement*", Beaubatie 2019) to refer to a form of closet management, suggesting that the relative ease of negotiating and managing one's closet depends on one's position in gendered social space and socio-economic characteristics. Therefore, I propose to adopt Beaubatie's sentence of 'planning the closet' to explore the full geographical dimension of this socially constrained management, adding an additional layer to the well-known polysemy of the notion of 'planning' in spatial studies.

The act of "planning" a trans person's closet is a highly socially situated behaviour (Beaubatie 2019a). However, this spatiality of the phenomenon remains underexplored. I argue that the accumulation of factors relating to social marginalisation significantly influences the spatial dynamics of the trans closet, making the planning process either more manageable or more challenging. The spatial configuration of a closet emerges as a product of delicate negotiations among disparate sources of power.

The capacity to strategise and organise one's closet hinges upon an individual's position within the intricate web of power relations that shape their life. Indeed, depending

on the unique social characteristics and life trajectories of individuals, some closets appear markedly more complex than others. Jamie is a 25 years-old student, whose parents live in Austria and come from Pakistan. Although Jamie has never personally lived in Pakistan, their<sup>1</sup> family keeps strong links with Pakistani communities in both Vienna and London. Jamie self-identifies as a Hijra, an identity specific to South Asian societies, denoting individuals who defy conventional male or female categorisations. Jamie's interview underscores the intricate interplay of racism and transphobia, resulting in an exceptionally complex closet experience. This complexity manifests in various forms across the diverse spaces they frequent: from LGBTQI-friendly environments at their arts university to the Pakistani shops and neighbourhoods of London, and even ordinary places like the London Underground.

When I'm wearing a bindi or any traditional outfit [...], I'm always hyper aware of others wherever I go. In my school there is an LGBT group but they will make comments on my outfit, [...] I never know if they are honest or just trying to make me special and different. [...] Then in the tube I hear remarks, like guys asking if I lost a bet. [...] I sometimes go to Pakistanian shops but I feel afraid of being discovered as a Hijra as we are pretty low on the social ladder. [...] Also I'm afraid that British Pakistanis reject non-occidental identities as a result of internalised racism.

(Jamie, 25, student, Bethnal Green, London)

Planning Jamie's closet presents a multifaceted nexus of intricately interwoven challenges at the intersection of racism and transphobia. This convergence not only strengthens the barriers but also narrows the confines. Jamie employs several coping strategies: frequenting South-Asian queer circles, particularly social gatherings, and meticulously adjusting their appearance and visibility according to the specific contexts they encounter each day. However the accumulation and intersection of the factors of discrimination make this a hard task. It leads Jamie to say that "wherever [they] go[es], there is something wrong about [them]", which illustrates the strong feeling of being constantly "out of place" (Cresswell 1996) that the interviews and logbook clearly reveal. This situation demonstrates the strong power relations that make up the phenomenon of spatial exclusion and confinement.

While exposure to multiple forms of discrimination makes it harder for trans individuals to plan their closets, some of the participants also use their social contacts, knowledge and skills to plan their own closet. This is, for instance, the case for Tess, an autistic trans woman: as taking the subway is a tiring experience for her, she negotiated with the French national job agency (Pôle Emploi) for the journey to a job to be counted as a potential criterion of rejection, allowing her to refuse job offers without jeopardising her unemployment benefit. She stipulated that she would only consider job opportunities within a 30-minute radius of her residence, with no line changes required. To do this, she took advantage of the job centre's regulations, which allow special arrangements for people with disabilities. While most of the participants of this research could certainly benefit from these specific regulations (more than half of the participants have been diagnosed with mental health disorders and four of them have physical disabilities), Tess is the only one who has managed to plan her access to public spaces, or even her closet space. She is also one of the few participants who

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<sup>1</sup> Jamie, as a non-binary person, uses the pronoun "they".

are white, financially comfortable, highly qualified, and part of a very supportive network. The intricate interplay of social, economic and cultural Bourdieusian capital empowered Tess to navigate institutional regulations, optimising her daily travelling comfort. As a trans individual, the possession of these resources facilitated her deliberate planning of her closet. In contrast with Jamie's complex closet, Tess's case underscores the centrality of power dynamics in shaping the spatial dimensions of the trans closet.

### A geographical exploration of the closet via trans perspectives

Examining the closet through trans experiences sheds light on the materiality of transphobia within the spatial dimension. More than a mere boundary between "inside" and "outside," the trans closet reveals intricate spatial dynamics of marginalisation. Parallel currents – enclosure and exclusion – coexist within the trans spatial realm, creating complex geographies of marginality.

The closet, seen through trans experiences of everyday spaces, emerges as a powerful heuristic tool for understanding the spatialisation of LGBTI-phobia and the ways in which individuals resist it. While the closet is traditionally conceptualised as a place where one's authentic self remains confined due to societal constraints, trans experiences introduce another dimension: openness. Being "out of the closet" need not entail overtly expressing one's LGBTI identity to strangers in the street; rather, it involves skilfully navigating invisibility among unfamiliar individuals while seeking acceptance within familiar circles. The closet is not an individual practice, but rather the product of an interaction between individuals and society.

The experiences of transphobia related in this paper show that marginalisation operates in a way that is complex to conceptualise, as it combines experiences of space that are difficult to represent on a 2D map with the common tools of cartographic semiology. An individual's relation to their ordinary environment is also greatly complicated by the accumulation of factors of marginalisation. Spatially, the processes of exclusion and confinement not only overlap but are mutually reinforcing and further complexify the marginalisation process. Some researchers have proposed tools that use superimposition as a graphic and conceptual way to visualise multiple processes of discrimination in space – for example the "relief maps" proposed by Maria Rodó-de-Zárate (2014). This research suggests other visualisation tools that would better show the intersectional dimension of spatial marginalisation, both its spatial complexity and the exponential major of the accumulation of causes of exclusion and confinement.

This paper aimed to apply the imperfect metaphor of the closet to explore its spatial dimensions through trans experiences. By using the closet as a heuristic tool, I was able to show that transphobia manifests spatially in ways that go beyond the classic dichotomies suggested by the closet metaphor. Geographers traditionally use a set of spatial metaphors, derived from common language, for the meanings carried by collective representations associated with the words used. The closet metaphor, also explored in its spatial semantics to suggest the confinement, concealment, and solitude experienced by victims of homophobia, has been useful in understanding the spatial dimensions of transphobia. However, the implicit spatial dimension it carries – a safe but isolated space separated from a homophobic and transphobic outside world by a closed door – does not correspond to the findings presented in this article. Rather than a closet suggesting the existence of transphobic and non-

transphobic spaces, or practices of concealment and visibility, the results presented in this paper reveal that the trans closet materialises in the form of spatial dynamics. To some extent, the trans closet confines and constrains. To another extent, it excludes, distances. These two spatially contradictory currents can brush against and overlap in the living space of a single person. From individuals stuck in a closet, trans people reveal themselves more as sailors navigating, autonomous but constrained, caught in tumultuous currents. It is in this sense that I suggest reinterpreting the spatial experiences of homophobia as described in geographical literature.

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