



Critical commentary: Sexualities landscapes beyond homonormativity



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ABSTRACT

In this commentary, I reflect on the contribution of this special issue of *Geoforum* to the sexuality and space literature. I begin by situating it at the interface between critical queer geographies and geographies of sexualities. I then highlight three important themes that (re)emerge from these contributions that point to both continuities with past research and new directions for the study of geographies of sexualities.

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1. Introduction

As I begin this commentary, I am thinking about how queer life and its spatialities have changed where I live, in Montréal, Québec, Canada. Sexual minorities in Québec have had basic human rights protections since they were enshrined in the provincial charter in 1977. In 2005, a new era of 'equality' was ushered in with the extension of full marriage rights to same-sex couples throughout Canada. However, in this new era, conflicts over gender and sexual identity continued to be played out in Montréal's spaces. The physical assault of two lesbians who were kissing on the corner of a major intersection in the queer-friendly Plateau Mont Royal neighborhood in 2005 was a reminder of the persistence of societal homophobia. A complaint filed with the Québec Human Rights Commission by a heterosexual woman who was refused service in a men-only bar in the city's gay village in 2007 was a reminder that creating a place for our queer selves can involve gender discrimination. A report on the conditions of queer youth submitted to the Québec government 2008 was a reminder that many queers continue to face significant social exclusions. Finally, a petition that called upon the police to crack down on loitering, submitted to the City by the gay village business improvement association in 2011, was a reminder that building a 'successful' gay village might also involve the criminalization of poverty.

I use these spatial conflicts to speak to what I see as a major theme of this special issue: while legislation against homophobia, the adoption of non-discrimination clauses, and the extension of marriage rights have produced official 'equalities' landscapes for sexual minorities in many core nations, these forms of sexual legitimation have been socially and spatially uneven. This climate of equality and its attendant processes of assimilation, ambivalence and exclusion, are currently reworking relations of sexuality,

gender and space in ways that require continued investigation by geographers. In this review, I highlight the ways in which this collection advances this project, and therefore, extends the project of geographies of sexualities. I begin by situating the collection within literature, specifically focusing on how it emerges from the tensions between critical queer work and a sustained focus on geographies of LGBT sexualities. Next, I point to significant advances in the study of sexuality and space presented by these works. They include conceptual moves beyond the homonormative, a return to the study of municipal governance, and finally, the re-evaluation of 'the gay village' in the study of geographies of sexualities.

2. Queering geography and geographies of sexualities

Sexuality and space studies within the Anglo-American geography have experienced some important epistemological shifts. In the late 1990s, there was a notable shift away from an initial focus on 'uncovering' the spatialities of gay and lesbian populations in the 1980s (Brown and Knopp, 2003; Browne, 2007; Elder et al., 2003; Valentine, 2000) and towards the more critical investigation of how 'heterosexism' served to spatially marginalize non-heterosexuals, the critique offered initially by queer politics that later developed within the academy as queer theory (Binnie, 1997; Binnie and Valentine, 1999). UK geographers in particular used queer theory to push this field beyond the analysis of a simple heterosexual/homosexual binary and towards a critique of the production of geographical knowledge (Bell, 2007; Bell and Valentine, 1995; Binnie, 1997; Binnie and Valentine, 1999; Brown et al., 2007; Brown and Knopp, 2003; Oswin, 2013). Over the past 10 years, queer geographies have continued in this vein and geographies of sexualities have multiplied with many working to apply queer theory to material studies of space (Brown et al., 2007). As Oswin (2013) has recently argued, the result is that geographies of sexualities have become more 'nuanced' (i.e. less rooted in essentialist

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and universalist notions of identity and space) and queer geographers, working within a discipline that remains quite committed to the material, have contributed a unique perspective to queer theory beyond geography (Brown et al., 2007). It is this perspective that queer geographers continue to advance within critical geography, as they engage with relations of power that intersect with heteropatriarchy, including colonialism, nationalism and neo-liberalism (Oswin, 2008).

Such shifts have meant that there has been a notable tension between projects of queering geography and that of producing geographies of sexualities (Brown et al., 2007; Brown and Knopp, 2003; Knopp, 2007; Oswin, 2008, 2013). Never completely discrete, many have argued that it is this tension that makes the field so dynamic (Brown and Knopp, 2003; Browne, 2006; Oswin, 2013; Wright, 2010). For example, Brown and Knopp (2003) have argued that sexuality and space studies benefit from a 'built-in contradiction' between building consensus around concepts of sexual identity, power and space, and a constant process of conceptual destabilization brought by the deconstruction of these same metanarratives. Browne (2006, p. 891) has likewise argued that the interplay between the two has been critical to the project:

As I see queer geographies as separate from, albeit related to, geographies of sexualities, I think that they should not displace or overtake each other. If queer geographies are not merely the contemporary versions of geographies of sexualities, but in fact occupy a marginal and potentially critical position in relation to geographies of sexualities, then both of these geographies have a productive part to play.

However, Browne raises the concern that queer theorizing, as a critical geographical practice, might be overvalued in relation to the more material project of geographies of sexualities. Brown et al. (2007) have also cautioned that an emerging "theoretical orthodoxy" should not overtake earlier approaches. While they acknowledge that geographies of sexualities have benefitted from the attention to discourse and relations of power addressed by queer theory, they assert the continued relevance of social science concerns with embedding such power relations in research on "... institutions, practices and material relations" (Brown et al., 2007, p. 13–14).

It is here, where geographies of sexualities meet queer critique, that I would situate this collection. Written after 10 years of critical engagement with the forces of assimilation that produce 'homonormativities', this collection seeks a different path: its focus is on how a climate of 'equalities' is altering (or not) the spatialities of LGBT sexualities. However, while the focus is on the spatial relations developing in a climate of assimilation, the authors demonstrate the complexity and multiplicity created by these conditions, moving beyond the binary of inclusion/exclusion that came with an analytical focus on homonormativity. Landscape is used as the spatial metaphor for the move beyond this dualism. Fully aware that there may be no place that lies outside such arrangements, I use the title *sexualities landscapes beyond homonormativity* to signal this analytical move away from a focus on internal marginalization and towards enriching the field of study by moving beyond this dichotomy.

3. Sexualities landscapes beyond homonormativity

Since the late 1990s, the popular and academic press has been rife with speculation about the erasure of LGBT identities that would come with increased social acceptance and assimilation. While a few triumphalists have ardently predicted an eventual "end of gay" created by a complete collapse of the homosexual/heterosexual binary (Archer, 1999; Sullivan, 2005), most scholar-

ship on gay, lesbian and queer futures has been much more critical and tentative (Seidman, 2005; Sinfield, 1998; Warner, 1999; Weeks, 2007). For example, Weeks (2007: 4) has cautioned against viewing 'sexual liberation' as a linear "... journey from the darkness of sexual repression into sexual freedom". Early in the struggle for marriage rights, Warner (1999) cautioned against the deceptive promise of assimilation and Vaid (1996) highlighted the potential gap between gaining legal rights and the extension of broad-based social rights for all sexual subjects. The emerging queer analysis of 'homonormativity' in the early 2000s pointed in another direction, suggesting not the end of gay, but rather the emergence of a central power dynamic among 'queers' whereby neo-liberal capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism and racism worked to empower some queer subjects and further marginalize others in the assimilation process (Duggan, 2002; Nast, 2002; Puar, 2006).

In geography, the politics of normalization was initiated within the *Antipode* debate (Elder, 2002; Nast, 2002; Sothorn, 2004) to which Oswin (2005) has usefully responded with a caution against creating a dichotomy between 'normalized' and 'radical' queer subjects and spaces. This argument is rearticulated in her review of 'queer space' (Oswin, 2008) where she argues that oppositions between "... maleness/femaleness, whiteness/non-whiteness, and privileged/non-privileged remain rather too neat. The result is a depiction of dominant gay white males while faith is placed in women and queers of color as still radical subjects" (Oswin, 2008, p. 96). Other geographers have also cautioned against reifying the normative at the expense of difference and its multiple spatialities (G. Brown, 2009, 2012; Browne, 2006; Visser, 2008). For example, G. Brown (2009, 2012) has argued that an analytical focus on homonormativity not only recentralizes the populations and spaces that are most empowered in our analysis, but it also strips critical research of the geographical specificity embedded in these relations. In the end, he argues that there "... are two different ways of reading the landscape of contemporary 'gay life': one reads for hegemony; the other reads for difference, unevenness, and geographical specificity. These two readings have different performative effects. I have made an ethical choice to read for difference" (Brown, 2009, p. 1498).

While I share this ethical commitment, I would argue that the analytical binary that it creates – between reading for hegemony and reading for difference – is also "too neat". As the papers in this collection demonstrate, disrupting this particular binary means decentring homonormativity as a framework for analysis, dissecting its components, and attending to important and neglected intersectionalities (Oswin, 2008; M. Brown, 2012). Most of the authors make these moves either empirically or conceptually, but two are exemplary in this respect. Wilkinson (2013) shifts away from the homonormative/heteronormative debate regarding the impacts of 'rights' legislation by demonstrating how 'inclusive' UK family policy, intended to denaturalize heterosexuality, has worked to reinscribe 'mononormativity', a form of sexual citizenship based on 'compulsory coupledness'. If breaking down these hegemonies into more specific norms and relations of power is central to this project, so too is a move towards the intersections through which these relations of power are constituted. In order to highlight one of the most powerful gendered components of heterosexism, Gorman-Murray (2013) examines how friendships between heterosexual and gay men lead to the reworking of hegemonic relations of masculinity at a variety of scales within Australia (see also Gorman-Murray and Waitt, 2009).

4. 'Within' the nation state: multi-scalar politics and municipal governance

The dynamic between national policies that act as a major force in the normalization of LGBT sexualities and other scales of sexual

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