



“Scary” heterosexualities in a rural Australian mining town



Barbara Pini^{a,*}, Robyn Mayes^{b,1}, Kate Boyer^{c,2}

^aSchool of Humanities, Nathan Campus, Griffith University, 170 Kessels Road, Nathan, QLD 4111, Australia

^bJohn Curtin Institute of Public Policy, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth, WA 6845, Australia

^cUniversity of Southampton, University Road, Southampton SO17 1BJ, UK

A B S T R A C T

Keywords:

Rural
Heterosexuality
Australia
Sex-workers
Mining

This paper draws upon Hubbard's (1999, p. 57) term 'scary heterosexualities,' that is non-normative heterosexuality, in the context of the rural drawing on data from fieldwork in the remote Western Australian mining town of Kalgoorlie. Our focus is 'the skimpie' – a female barmaid who serves in her underwear and who, in both historical and contemporary times, is strongly associated with rural mining communities. Interviews with skimpies and local residents as well as participant observation reveal how potential fears and anxieties about skimpies are managed. We identify the discursive and spatial processes by which skimpie work is contained in Kalgoorlie so that the potential scariness 'the skimpie' represents to the rural is muted and buttressed in terms of a more conventional and less threatening rural heterosexuality.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

This paper takes up Hubbard's (1999, 2000) notion of 'scary heterosexualities' through the figure of 'the skimpie,' a female barmaid who serves in her underwear, or in some cases works topless, and can be found in most rural mining towns in Australia, including our case study town of Kalgoorlie. Hubbard (1999, 2000) defines 'scary heterosexualities' as the multiple manifestations of non-conventional heterosexuality which therefore includes morally sanctioned practices such as fetishism, prostitution, pornography, masturbation, voyeurism, and sado-masochism, along with morally sanctioned identities such as 'the lone mother', 'the prostitute' or 'the single woman'. He contends that focussing on 'scary heterosexualities' is important politically if we are to further denaturalise heterosexuality, and open up to scrutiny the material exclusions connected to morally infused discourses of heterosexuality. As such, Hubbard's (1999, 2000) intention in invoking the term is to (further) de-stabilise straight/queer binaries by highlighting the differentiated nature of heterosexual practice and the fact that not all expressions of heterosexuality are considered equally acceptable. In this paper we argue that women tending bars in their lingerie or topless represent a form of 'scary' heterosexuality in that they are

disconnected from notions of the nuclear family, as well as challenge the normative idea that such forms of corporeal display belong in private, rather than public, highly visible (work)spaces. At the same time we do not intend to advance an uncritical distinction between 'scary' and 'non-scary' sexualities. Rather, we use the term as a means to analyse the ways this particular, transgressive, form of embodied workplace practice is understood, managed, and situated vis a vis prevailing normative sexual expectations by skimpies themselves, bar-patrons, and members of the broader community.

In order to explore the extent to which the skimpie is representative of 'scary heterosexualities' in the rural we begin the paper with an overview of research on ruralities and heterosexualities. Following this, we provide further contextual information about Kalgoorlie and introduce our methodology, explaining our commitment to feminist research practice, and the challenges of such practice in undertaking a study of rural sex workers. Our use of participant observation, including in hotel bars, interviews and document analysis are all outlined. We commence the presentation of data by highlighting residents' commonly reiterated characterisation of Kalgoorlie as a traditional, friendly, inclusive and, above all, family-oriented country town. Against this we juxtapose resident responses of indifference, open-mindedness and/or tolerance to skimpies. We then focus on understanding the apparent dissonance between characterisations of Kalgoorlie as a town strongly anchored to normative heterosexuality and the endorsement of 'scary heterosexualities'. In highlighting the discursive and, moreover, the spatial containment imposed upon the skimpies we demonstrate the way boundaries are drawn around skimpies so

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 (0) 7 373 57434; fax: +61 (0) 7 373 57730.
E-mail addresses: b.pini@griffith.edu.au (B. Pini), r.mayes@curtin.edu.au (R. Mayes), L.K.Boyer@soton.ac.uk (K. Boyer).

¹ Tel.: +61 (0) 8 9266 1707; fax: +61 (0) 8 9266 3658.

² Tel.: +61 (0) 23 8059 3261.

that they do not contaminate morally-endorsed, conventional rural heterosexuality. Ultimately, what is 'scary' (Hubbard, 1999, 2000), that is, any disruption to normative heterosexuality in the rural disconnected from the nuclear family is muted.

2. Geographies of heterosexualities

While early studies of ruralities and sexualities focused on the lives of gays and lesbians they nevertheless provide foundational ground for this paper as this population's experiences of marginalisation and exclusion demonstrate the hegemony of heterosexuality in the rural (e.g. Kramer, 1995; Fellows, 1996). It is a theme that continues to echo in the literature on rural gays and lesbians, such as in more recent work by Gorman-Murray et al. (2008, p. 182), which, despite demonstrating positive change in terms of acceptance and belonging, also reports that 'everyday homophobia still exists' in non-metropolitan spaces. Such a conclusion is reached following an analysis of letters to an Australian country newspaper about the flying of the gay-identified rainbow flag on the Town Hall during a festival. The authors argue that the circulation of homophobia is embedded in multi-scalar and intersecting notions of rurality and heterosexuality tied to 'family' and 'nation'. Thus, while Gorman-Murray et al. (2008) continue the important work of documenting the ongoing heteronormativity of the rural, and its inherent exclusions, they simultaneously contribute to the task of uncovering the discourses, practices and beliefs by which heteronormativity in the rural is produced and reproduced. As feminist geographers such as Little (2003, 2007), Little and Panelli (2007), Johnston and Longhurst (2010), Bryant and Pini (2011) and Bryant (2012) have demonstrated, at least three key dimensions need to be considered as instrumental to this process – that is, family and community, gender, and nature. Collectively, meanings and values about these notions infuse what Little (2003, p. 406) has labelled the 'ubiquitous uncontested nature of heterosexuality' within rural communities.

The above authors draw on disparate data sources such as the British reality television programme, 'A Farmer Wants a Wife', media reports about a New Zealand Rural Bachelor of the Year Competition, and interviews with young, married, farming couples in rural Australia, to argue that the sustainability of the farm, and more broadly, the rural community, occupy prominent positions in the constitution of rural sexualities. Little (2003), for example, notes that a magazine campaign, along with a country town ball, held to introduce bachelor farmers to single women, were judged successful according to whether they led to marriage and children. The constitution of dominant, rural heterosexualities around reproduction of farm/community is inextricably linked to a second defining feature of dominant definitions of rural sexuality, that is, traditional gender identities. Thus, 'heavy reliance on hegemonic masculinity,' Johnston and Longhurst (2010, p. 103) report, is as embedded in the New Zealand Rural Bachelor of the Year Award as it is in the narratives of young farming men interviewed by Bryant (2012) who imagine family futures naturally marked by gendered divisions of labour. The third and final dimension underpinning privileged rural sexualities is the importance of nature. This is clearly evidenced in Little's (2007) analysis, which explains that communicated across the campaigns for bachelor farmers are bifurcated constructions of the urban and the rural. The former is judged more positively as a natural place and therefore one in which romance, health and fertility can flourish.

Underpinning each of the dimensions of the specific type of rural sexuality described by feminist geographers is a moral geography, namely the constitution of the rural as a particular space in which certain sexual behaviours and activities are deemed moral and/or immoral (Cresswell, 1996). For example, the farming

bachelor men invoke claims of moral responsibility to marry and reproduce for family and community (Little, 2003, 2007). Similarly, the 'co-construction of gender', as Johnston and Longhurst (2010, p. 101) contend, is not only 'important to the success of the rural heterosexual relationship,' but imbued with morality. Bryant and Pini (2011) explain, for example, that the young, married farming men they interview justify and rationalise unequal divisions of household labour by appealing to claims of a 'good marriage', 'mutuality' and 'equality'. Further, Bryant (2012) demonstrates that any deviations from normative gender identities, such as farm women undertaking off-farm paid work and utilising child-care are policed and sanctioned. The moral superiority of nature as a further dimension of rural sexuality is also reinforced across the data sources engaged in the feminist geographical literature. Moral worth and value are attached to nature as representative of innocence, stability, strength as Bryant and Pini (2011) demonstrate in their critique of the award-winning Australian documentary 'With this Ring'. The documentary recounts the life of a young woman farmer, Gayle, and her husband, Mac, after an on-farm accident left Gayle disabled. Mac's decision to stay with and care for Gayle after the accident is unequivocally linked with his identity as 'rural man,' who is dependable and loyal, and the couple's life on a property in remote Australia, and its depiction as lush, nurturing and isolated.

The above studies are part of a larger body of geographical literature that has examined morality and immorality in terms of heterosexual performance as a means to illuminate social exclusions linked to sexual practices, to pluralise understandings of heterosexuality, and to highlight the ubiquity and normativity of heterosexuality (Hubbard, 2008). Representative is Walsh's (2007) study of gender, heterosexual intimacy and emotions amongst single British expatriates in Dubai. Participants are involved in frequent heterosexual encounters supported by a sense of transience and a rendering of Dubai as a holiday/party space. She cautions, however, against 'celebrations of liminality' in understanding this divergent performance of heterosex as she observes the unequal gendered power context in which such performances take place (Walsh, 2007, p. 524). This demonstrates that in particular spaces moral ascriptions of heterosex may be malleable, but will still be refracted through multiple relations of power. In other work Hubbard (2009) has considered adult entertainment as manifest in activities such as pole dancing, striptease, exotic dance and lap dance. He examines the discourses engaged by opponents of this transgressive heterosexuality (as untied to monogamy and procreation) in relation to licensing regulations, and reports that while 'objections made on moral or taste grounds' are purportedly inadmissible (Hubbard, 2009, p. 740), it is indeed morality which informs much of the protestation. Morality/immorality underline what are typically unsubstantiated opposition claims such as that adult entertainment sustains criminality, and that adult entertainment exploits vulnerable women, while generating morally-infused identities such as the 'normal woman' or 'the vulnerable child'.

That moral geographies are intertwined with geographies of non-normative heterosexuality is a theme which resonates with the larger trajectory of literature that has focused on non-conventional heterosexuality, that is, the literature on sex work. This work has documented attempts to contain sex workers in the public realm via the designation of red-light districts, along with sex workers' resistances and accommodations to this containment (Hubbard, 2001; Hubbard and Sanders, 2003; Howell et al., 2008). It has also tracked press reports about prostitution in which dichotomized representations of the 'ordinary housewife' sit against the sexualised and stigmatized feminine identity of 'sex worker,' who pollutes the familial and neighbourhood spaces of conventional heterosexuality (Tani, 2002). Further research has

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6545906>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6545906>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)