Geographies of sexuality – a review of progress

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Abstract: This article examines the recent rapid growth of work on the geographies of sexuality. The authors argue that while sexuality has become an area of considerable interest within social and cultural geography, much remains to be done to tackle homophobia within the discipline as a whole. The article critiques the ease with which sexuality as an object of study has become assimilated into the discipline while homophobia remains deep seated. The authors discuss how feminist geography has been both supportive and restrictive in this respect. Reviewing the development of work on geographies of sexuality, the article argues we need to move away from a simple mapping of lesbian and gay spaces towards a more critical treatment of the differences between sexual dissidents. Finally, the authors argue for a greater forging of links with writers outside the discipline to consolidate work in this emerging area.

Key words: feminist geography, homophobia, lesbian geographies, queer politics, sexuality and space.

I Introduction

This article evaluates the growth of work on lesbian, gay and bisexual sexualities within geography. It is a rapidly expanding area of publication. As more and more writers on sexuality from outside the discipline of geography, such as Kath Weston (1995) and Elspeth Probyn (1995; 1996), are now writing about space and place, we wish to examine what is distinctive about geography’s contribution to the study of lesbian, gay and bisexual sexualities. We do not claim to be authoritative arbiters of the field, but instead feel that a review of the literature may be helpful to those approaching the subject for the first time. In doing so we wish to articulate the omissions, exclusions and failures of this emerging body of literature. In addition we wish to assess the contribu-
tion that geographies of sexuality have made in developing our understanding of how sexuality underpins social, cultural, economic and political transformations.

We have chosen to focus our review on three key areas where the greatest volume of work has been conducted: urban geography; and geographies of the urban/rural opposition; and geographies of citizenship. The prevalence of material in these areas reflects the fact that they have been among those that have been most receptive to feminist and postmodern critiques, and therefore been among the most open towards work on sexuality.

II Urban geography

The earliest work on sexuality and space sought to map the most visible lesbian and gay spaces within the North American city. While Loyd and Rowntree (1978) and Weightman (1981) were the first to publish geographies of the ‘gay landscape’ [sic], it is Manuel Castells (an urban sociologist) whose work is most widely cited. In *The city and the grassroots*, Castells (1983) presented material from his study of lesbian and gay spaces in San Francisco. This work was most easily and unproblematically ‘spatial’. The boundaries of specific gay male neighbourhoods and commercial districts were marked and defined by dots on maps – the dots being lesbian and gay facilities such as bars and other businesses gleaned through gay guides and business directories. Castells argued that the geography of gay men and the geography of lesbians reflected their respective gender roles and gendered behaviour. Gay men acted primarily as men and were therefore more territorial, had more disposable income and desired the visible spatially defined commercial scene. Lesbians acted primarily as women, were not territorial, were reliant on informal networks rather than commercial facilities, were more politicized than gay men and created lesbian space within feminist networks. The corollary of Castells’ assumptions about what both lesbians and gay men ‘looked like’ was that lesbians and gay men led lives distinct from each other and from straight society. These simplistic assumptions would be considered highly problematic and less tenable today.

Castells’ work on San Francisco did at least draw urban sociologists’ and geographers’ attention to the fact that there was a spatial basis to gay identity; and that gay men in particular were playing an important role in the gentrification of the city, and more generally in the so-called ‘urban renaissance’ in North American cities. Since Castells’ work on San Francisco, there have been surprisingly few writers within urban sociology and urban geography who have examined the role of gay men in urban regeneration. Larry Knopp has been the most diligent in this area, conducting studies in New Orleans and Minneapolis, and has published a string of articles on the involvement of gay men in the urban political economy (Knopp, 1987; 1990a; 1990b). More recently, Benjamin Forest (1995) has focused on the complex relationship between gay identity, space and place in West Hollywood.

Until very recently, lesbian urban communities had been very much neglected in these studies of gay male space. However Sy Adler and Joanna Brenner’s study of an unspecified lesbian community in a city in the north west of the USA, challenged Castells’ simplistic assumptions about lesbian identity and behaviour (Adler and Brenner, 1992). In their article they argued that lesbians did concentrate in specific
neighbourhoods of the city in question but that these ‘communities’ were ‘quasi-underground’ and ephemeral. These characteristics were also observed in studies of lesbian residential areas in other North American, British and French cities (see, for example, Ettore, 1978; Davis and Kennedy, 1986; Winchester and White, 1988; Peake, 1993; Valentine, 1995). Indeed, both Ettore (1978) and Peake (1993) have demonstrated the political importance to lesbians of establishing local territorial bases. Peake (1993: 427), writing in relation to Grand Rapids, a lesbian neighbourhood in the USA, states that ‘the formation of a lesbian residential area represents a political act aimed at securing access to residential areas of the city which are not mediated through relations with men’.

Work by Tamar Rothenberg on the Park Slope lesbian community in Brooklyn, New York, represents the most sophisticated treatment of an actually existing lesbian community to date (Rothenberg, 1995). Central to her study was the whole intensely problematic notion of what constitutes a lesbian community. Rothenberg (1995) argues that while economic factors, in particular the availability of inexpensive rented housing, have shaped and influenced the development of a lesbian identified neighbourhood, lesbian imaginings of community and the ‘symbolic’ importance that has been attached to Park Slope have also facilitated the growth and development of this neighbourhood into an area with ‘perhaps the heaviest concentration of lesbians in the USA’ (1995: 169). Rothenberg’s (1995) study is a reflection of the fact that work on the urban has become more sophisticated in its treatment of lesbians and gay men. This work is now also examining wider relationships between political economy of space and the politics of sexuality. Knopp has since attempted to explore the links between sexuality and capitalism in a broader context (Knopp, 1992; 1995). In addition a number of writers have explored the links between sexualized cultures of consumption and the production of sexualized space (see Binnie, 1995a; 1995b; Mort, 1995; Munt, 1995).

Equally significant has been the blossoming of work examining sexualized urban space outside the major North American gay centres. In response to the dramatic growth and development of urban gay villages in the heart of British cities in the 1990s there has been an upsurge of work on London’s Soho (Binnie, 1995a), and a string of studies on Manchester’s ‘Gay Village’ (Corton, 1993; Hindle, 1994; Whittle, 1994; Quilley 1995). Beyond the UK and North America, there have been several studies on Amsterdam (Duyves, 1992a; Binnie, 1995a). For another northern European perspective there is the work of Henning Bech (1992; 1993). Matthias Duyves (1992a; 1992b; 1995) and Jon Binnie (1995a) have both examined the phenomenon of lesbian and gay tourism, the economic potential of which has been recognized in many quarters recently (Duyves, 1992a).

Later work has since extended the scope of lesbian and gay geographies beyond the more material manifestations on the urban landscape towards examining lesbian informal networks and institutions (Valentine, 1993a; 1993c), and the management of multiple identities in everyday life (Valentine, 1993b). In contrast to the early work which identified visible gay neighbourhoods and consumption spaces within cities, these studies have been significant for stressing the importance of studying the less visible aspects of lesbian and gay communities. Likewise the work of Canadian geographer, Celeste Wincapaw (forthcoming), is also broadening geographical understandings of lesbian and gay ‘communities’. Rather than focusing on ‘real time’ face-to-face lesbian communities her research is beginning to explore the negotiation of lesbian
and bisexual identities in the virtual space of ‘lesbian-focused’ electronic mailing lists on the Internet. Such work, which draws heavily on the burgeoning cultural studies literature on identity and performativity but which also attempts to theorize the notion of ‘lesbian’ space in complex ways, offers new possibilities for geographical work both to inform, and be informed by, the work of other social science disciplines. As geographers we have indeed progressed a long way from marking ‘dots on maps’ in our understanding of the multiple and fluid ways that sexual ‘communities’ are imagined, negotiated and contested as demonstrated by the essays in Duncan (1996) and Ingram et al. (1997).

III Geographies of the rural/urban opposition

In the mid-1990s, there was an upsurge of interest in the rural as a specific focus for work on sexual geographies. The pioneering work of Jerry Lee Kramer on lesbian and gay communities in North Dakota (Kramer, 1995) and work by David Bell and Gill Valentine on rural Britain (Bell and Valentine, 1995a) mark both a significant development in the geography of work on sexuality, and clearly reinforce the need for lesbian and gay studies to consider issues of space and place. Bell and Valentine (1995a) argue that studies of the rural have thus far failed to examine the experiences of lesbian and gay men. These few studies of rural sexual geographies demonstrate how much we take for granted that lesbian and gay lives are lived in the urban environment. The urbaneity of lesbian and gay existence only really becomes visible when contrasted with the rural. In ‘Queer country’ Bell and Valentine (1995a) trace a cartography of lesbian and gay rural existence and experience. They stress the ambivalence of the rural in the sexual imaginary as simultaneously utopian and dystopian – a place of escape or becoming, as well as a place to escape from. In doing so they draw a distinction between those lesbians and gay men who have been brought up in a rural environment who migrate to the city to escape the oppressive moral landscape of the rural; and those lesbian and gay city dwellers who migrate to the countryside actively seeking a rural lifestyle in preference to the city. For those raised in rural communities, the city is most likely to be seen as a place to escape to in order to define oneself as lesbian or gay. For those who actively chose a rural life the attractions are manifold, though the reasons for migration are less clear.

In the 1970s lesbian separatist communities were established in rural parts of the USA (Valentine, 1997). These communities adhere to a folkish rural utopianism. For many women membership of these communities may embody a rejection of the man-made city, together with the perceived masculinity of the urban built environment. Here, place-bound identity is all important. For as Bell and Valentine (1995a) argue those engaged in same-sex activity in rural areas may not define themselves as lesbian or gay due to the lack of a developed social and political gay and lesbian community infrastructure. Informal networks, telephone dating and cottaging and cruising may constitute the rural spaces of these communities. Rural dwellers enjoying same-sex activity may not share the identity of the urban lesbian or gay man. This point is reinforced by the few case studies on the rural lives of lesbians and gay men.

A fascinating case study of one rural sexual geography is provided by Jerry Lee Kramer’s study of a rural lesbian and gay community in North Dakota. Kramer (1995:
reinforces the need for lesbian and gay studies to examine sexualities of the rural: ‘in gay and lesbian studies, empirical research into the strategies, behaviours and motivations of non-metropolitan gays and lesbians can provide further insights into the wide diversity of the homosexual experience.’ It is significant and fascinating that Kramer conducted his interviews with ‘exiled’ North Dakotans in the conurbation of Minneapolis–St Paul. Though his study is mostly concerned with gay men, he does acknowledge that North Dakotan lesbians are generally likely to be more isolated than gay men who at least have public spaces such as restrooms where they can meet other men for sex. Kramer (1995) argues that for lesbians the only escape was visits to Minneapolis and other big cities.

In ‘Get thee to a big city’ Kath Weston (1995) argues that the urban/rural dichotomy is crucial to how many make sense of their lesbian and gay identity. She stresses (1995: 255) that: ‘This symbolic contrast was central to the organization of many coming out stories.’ Weston adds that it is possible and useful to make sense of the rural through the study of the urban. The rural and the urban cannot be studied in isolation. Weston’s work brings into focus the tension between the rural and urban in the production of a ‘gay imaginary’. Unlike other studies, however, Weston’s research depicts a more pessimistic view of rural life for lesbians and gay men.

As both Kramer’s (1995) and Weston’s (1995) work suggests, the significance of migration in lesbian and gay lives and identities needs to receive greater attention. As Bob Cant says in the introduction to Invented identities ‘lesbians and gay men differ from other groups of migrants in that there is no homeland that can validate our group identity’ (Cant, 1997: 1). While lesbians and gay migrants share the common experience of migrating to escape prejudice and forge an identity, Cant (1997) through his editing of the life stories of 18 lesbians and gay men is keen to demonstrate the diversity of this experience, and specifically the significance of economic constraints on migration. A fascinating survey on London gay men’s mobility How far will you go (Kelley et al., 1996), published by the London-based Gay Men Fighting AIDS (GMFA), points to a complex pattern of gay men’s movement to and within London – the city that dominates the British gay culture. The results of the GMFA survey demonstrate that only 23% of the gay men they interviewed were originally from London, and that gay residents tend to cluster in the inner London boroughs such as Islington, Hackney and Wandsworth. Of course, it is not only rural–urban differences or regional differences that encourage lesbian, gay men and bisexuals to migrate. In the next section we consider the relationship between international migration and sexual citizenship.

IV Geographies of sexual citizenship

Geographers have begun to theorize the relationship between sexuality and the state – how sexualities and the state are mutually constituted at different spatial scales. The focus on spatial scales and how sexual citizenship is constructed at different scales is a major strength of Michael Brown’s study of AIDS activism in Vancouver (Brown, 1994; 1995a; 1995b). David Bell has examined the ways in which an intimate citizenship is constructed and contested through the politics of public sex and the Operation Spanner trial in the UK (Bell, 1995a; 1995b). These studies constitute a challenge to an urban, political geography hitherto ignorant of sexuality. They also reflect a growth of interest
on sexuality and the state more generally in social and legal theory (Cooper, 1994; 1995; Stychin, 1995; Wilson, 1995). While many of these studies ignore the spatial, for others issues of public and private space and the deployment of spatial concepts are central to their arguments. For example in her study of symbolic centrality of race and sexuality in new-right discourse in contemporary Britain, Anna Marie Smith (1994) deploys Derridean perspectives on space, identity and difference. She argues that the postwar production of British national identity was predicated on the exclusion of otherness, specifically the figure of the black immigrant in Powellism, and the queer in Thatcherism. Shane Phelan (1995) also discusses space in her deconstructive reading of queer politics, while Leslie Moran (1996) examines the contested and performative uses of space in his elegant study of the place of sexuality within English law. In *The homosexual(ity) of law*, Moran is concerned with how English law creates a distinction between public and private space, one which is reinforced by the policing of public sex between men. Focusing on the space of the public convenience as a discursive and real space (also discussed in Woodhead, 1995), Moran (1996: 141–42) argues that

the public, non-sexualized, convenience is always already imagined as a sexualized space of private encounters; its very existence speaks not only of a taboo around urination/defecation and the fact that it now has to be undertaken in private but that the removal of these functions into a private space generates other private dangers. The private and the sexualized nature of that space is written in the division between male and female space; in the use of frosted glass that might provide natural light but prevent a public display; in the design of the stalls; in the erection of barriers between the stalls to secure individuality during the private act of urination; in the separation of space into individual private cubicles; in the provision of lockable doors to secure that individual space etc.

While lawyers such as Moran have explored the links between sexuality, public order and space, an evolving literature on architecture and sexuality (Colomina, 1992; Sanders, 1996; Urbach, 1996) has examined how buildings embody concerns about the proper social order. Other writers have examined the policing of public sex (Califia, 1994; Dangerous Bedfellows, 1996).

From the discussion of the literature on lesbian and gay geographies thus far it is clear that movement and migration loom large in the lives of lesbians and gay men. However there have been few studies of sexual citizenship and the politics of international migration (though see Jessurun D’Oliveira, 1993; Chauvel, 1994). For lesbians and gay men, migration across national boundaries can be immensely problematic, especially when it comes to obtaining full rights of citizenship based on same-sex relationships. There has been little discussion of the transnational dimension in sexual cultures. Binnie’s work on international migration and tourism hints at a connection between consumption and sexual citizenship (Binnie, 1995a; 1997a). While it may be hard for some to resist the temptation to stereotype gay men as uniformly affluent and mobile, it is clear that the persistence of laws that fail to recognize same-sex partners for the purpose of rights of residence and affording of citizenship status represents a barrier to movement of lesbians and gay men across national boundaries (Valentine, 1996).

Work on international lesbian and gay tourism needs to challenge the homophobia often implicit within some disembodied accounts of western tourists engaged in sex tourism. Lynda Johnston (1996) has challenged tourism as an area of study within disciplines such as geography, arguing that it produces hegemonic, disembodied and masculinist knowledge. Her work on the HERO parade, New Zealand’s largest gay
proud parade, and the Sydney Mardi Gras in Australia, offers a new perspective on tourism and the complex power relations it involves. By taking an embodied approach to the study of these festivals, Johnston’s (1996) research not only subverts the masculinism of tourism discourse but also, like the work of Binnie and Bell, represents a significant attempt to liberate sexuality from the ghetto of community studies within the discipline, marking another step on the path towards making it a fundamental issue to be considered in all aspects of human geography inquiry.

One major feature of the work discussed so far however is the predominance of writers from the English-speaking world, especially North America and the UK – with perhaps some of the most innovative work on feminist geography and sexuality and space now coming out of geographers at the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand (Longhurst, 1995; Peace, forthcoming). Criticizing the ethnocentricity of lesbian and gay geographers and their preoccupation with the developed world Glen Elder (1995: 57) asks: ‘How are sexualities constructed and negotiated in peripheral economies, and how do these spatial processes feed into the emergence of amongst other things, “gay and lesbian culture” in “First World” settings?’. Unfortunately, there are still few answers to these questions (though see Robson, 1991; Bravmann, 1994; Murray, 1995; Skelton, 1995; Drucker, 1996).

Each of these subsections has considered progress in specific fields of geographical study where the interplay between sexualities, acts and identities, and space and place has been paramount. The discussion about race and nationhood – as studies of community have also shown – implies that the whole notion of a uniform universal lesbian and gay identity and community has become untenable in both politics and theory. We will now go on to discuss work done by geographers which has sought to evaluate critically the politics of lesbian and gay identity, in the light of the challenges posed by queer politics and theory.

V Queer geographies: the trouble with identity politics

Geographers have most recently explored a range of perspectives based on queer theory and sexual practice. This is a reaction against earlier work on lesbian and gay geographies outlined above, which perhaps had an uncritical all-embracing concept of lesbian and gay identity. Queer geographies have therefore attempted to scrutinize the desirability of identity politics. Work by writers such as Bell et al. (1994), Julia Cream (1992; 1995) and Alison Murray (1995) has challenged established notions of fixed identities. David Bell’s mapping of a bisexual geography is significant here in subverting the hegemony of lesbian and gay geography, which had hitherto ignored bisexuality (Bell, 1994). For Bell, bisexuality is very much ‘a place on the margins’. In challenging the placelessness and homelessness of bisexuality in queer politics, and lesbian and gay geographies, Bell offers a powerful critique of biphobic notions that bi’s are tourists in lesbian and gay spaces (Bell, 1994). However, while remaining ever sympathetic towards queer’s transgressive project to subvert identity, he also remains highly cynical of queer’s utopianism, and in particular the way queer politics has almost become a parody of itself, reinforcing the marginalization of discussions of ‘race’ and bisexuality, among other thorny issues (Bell, 1994).

There have been few studies explicitly concerned with sexuality and the geographies
of ‘race’ and racism (though see Peake, 1993; Davis, 1995; Skelton, 1995). Moreover geographers studying ‘race’ and racism have also been culpable of neglecting sexuality in their discussions, despite the growth of material on the intersections of race and sexuality elsewhere (for instance, see Gilman, 1985; Mercer, 1993; Smith, 1994; Smyth, 1995). Disability is another neglected area of geographical research on sexuality and space (though see Butler, forthcoming). Work outside geography has addressed the links between homophobia and ableism. In Untold desires: the sexual politics of disability, Tom Shakespeare, Kath Gillespie-Sells and Dominic Davies (1996) provide a starting point for an examination of both the homophobia within the disability movement and ableism within the lesbian and gay scene. They argue that while there are studies of sexuality and disability they fail to acknowledge the experiences of disabled people themselves (1996: 3):

There is quite an industry producing work around the issue of sexuality and disability, but it is an industry controlled by professionals from medical and psychological and sexological backgrounds, the voice and experience of disabled people is absent in almost every case. As in other areas, disabled people are displaced as subjects, and fetishized as objects.

While such critiques of the concept of a lesbian and gay identity represent one example of queer geographies, a second strand of work has sought to understand how the theoretical insights of queer theory’s critique of identity politics may be applied to discussions of space. In ‘All hyped up and no place to go’ Bell et al. (1994), inspired by the work of Judith Butler (1990), attempted to explore the importance of the spatial specificity of the performance of gender identities. Employing Butler’s notion that gender is not simply an aspect of what one is, but is something one does repetitively in interactions with others, Bell et al. try to assess whether similar arguments can be made for the production of spaces. While Butler (1990) suggests that gender as performance is no longer limited by sex, so Bell et al. (1994) suggest that public heterosexual space may not be restricted to heterosexuality. Using the examples of the lipstick lesbian and the gay skinhead, they asked questions about whether the performance of these identities can ever disrupt the heterosexuality of straight space, questioning whether in Butler’s (1990: 124) words ‘it is the site of parodic contest and display that robs compulsory heterosexuality of its claims to naturalness and originality’. Concluding their article Bell et al. remain ambivalent about the politics of proclaiming the queer transgression and subversion of identity, pointing out that the performances of these identities are read differently, by different people in different places. The article and the respective replies to it demonstrate the limits of thinking through the tensions between discursive bodies and material spaces.

VI Conclusion

Despite the critical tone of the latter stage of the article we hope we have demonstrated that geographies of sexualities have come a long way in the last decade. Progress in the study of the lives of dissident sexualities has been most striking, most notably in three key areas: urban geography; rural lesbian and gay geographies; and the geography of sexual citizenship. In each of these areas, there have been significant developments in both geographical understandings of lesbian, gay and bisexual lives and signs that
sexual dissidents are beginning to have an impact on the heteronormative nature of geographical knowledge (Binnie, 1997b).

Work on geographies of sexualities has to date been characterized by an emphasis on both the material and the everyday – how sexualities are lived out in particular places and spaces. This is the major contribution that geographers can therefore offer other disciplines concerned with sexuality. Geographical work provides a corrective towards the tendency within some poststructuralist writing on queer to divorce considerations of sexual politics from wider political economic debates. It is a strength of the more contextualized geographies of sexuality that sexual politics must not be treated in isolation and that wider political economic forces and considerations are at play in the production of sexualized spaces (Binnie, 1995a; Quilley, 1995). As Michael Warner (1993: x) argues in his introduction to Fear of a queer planet, ‘the energies of queer studies have come more from rethinking the subjective meaning of sexuality than from rethinking the social’. Geographers could occupy a central place in the rearticulation of queer theory to include a much needed social or material dimension (Warner, 1993). There is an urgent need, articulated by Richard Cornwell (1997) among others, to create a queer social theory and queer political economy which acknowledges both the importance of capital to the formation of sexual cultures and communities, and one which acknowledges the exclusion and marginalization from economic activity engendered by homophobia as well as recognizing the homophobia implicit within commonplace assumptions about gay men being uniformly white and affluent.

While there is now almost an abundance of published material on local lesbian and gay communities, less has been written linking lesbian and gay geographies to processes of globalization. Geographers could gain much from material produced elsewhere on the transnational basis of sexual identity (Manalansan IV, 1995), nationalism (Mosse, 1985; Parker et al., 1992) and imperialism and globalization (Hyam, 1990; Lane, 1995). Unfortunately we have yet to witness much work on the geography of sexuality in these areas, and the ethnocentricity of the literature on sexuality and space remains largely unchallenged.

Indeed, there are many areas within the discipline of geography where discussion of sexuality has been notable for its absence, for example, transport geography and population geography. The different philosophical approaches that dominate different subdisciplinary areas may explain the uneven impact of work on dissident sexualities within geography. Geography remains a highly contested enterprise. While social and cultural geography have been very receptive towards contemporary developments in social theory (particularly with respect to the postmodern emphasis on ‘difference’) and therefore towards dissident sexualities, many other fields of geographical inquiry remain wedded to their positivist tradition. However, this does not explain why the hegemonic sexual identity, heterosexuality, has thus far received so little attention from geographers (notable exceptions being Linda McDowell’s (1995) work on heterosexual masculinities in city work places, and Phil Crang’s (1995) work on the performance of masculinities and femininities in restaurants). Perhaps then what we need is not so much a queer reading of space, but rather a queer reading of the discipline of geography itself.
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