FROM ORDER TO CHAOS
Geographies of sexualities

Carl Bonner-Thompson, Graeme William Mearns, Alessandro Boussalem and Ged Ridley

Section 1: mapping geographies of sexualities

Several years ago, one of us had our attention directed to a new digital mapping service, ‘I Just Made Love’ (Gray, 2011). Now reworked into a dating service that resembles countless others that are often now also normalised into daily routines, the ‘unique’ feature of this service remains a function that allows the inscription of the places where users have sex onto the Mercator projection. People use ‘pins’ to indicate the gender(s) of the person(s) they have sex with, accompanied by descriptions of the encounter. In thinking about geographies of sexualities in 2018, such a service still spurs manifold questions for the field. What motivates people to indicate the location of sex on a map using a smartphone? What visceral and/or bodily pleasures are gained from mapping sex in this manner? What spatial patterns are observable? How does the prevalence of same-sex sexual activity influence dominant thinking about sexual identities, practices and politics in this semi-public community? Do people consider safety, especially in countries where same-sex sexual activity and/or non-marital heterosexual sex remains criminalized? In short, ‘I Just Made Love’ indicates just how much intimate worlds have transformed since the 1990s, when the field was cemented. This chapter covers key transformations, while delimiting some possible future directions.

Burgess (1929) is often cited as the ethnographer who first linked sexuality to urban processes in a study of ‘vice’ in the 1920s Chicago School. Later, Loyd and Rowntree (1978), Levine (1979) and Weightman (1981) mapped spatial aggregations of gay men (and some lesbians) in a handful of US neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, Castells’ (1983) City and the Grassroots garners the most attention in terms of the field’s origins, perhaps as this was less positivist in efforts to explain the lesbian and gay clusters identified in San Francisco to the othering of homosexuality and overt discrimination (Adler and Brenner 1992).

By the mid-1990s, ‘sexuality and space’ was an important subfield of feminist geographies. David Bell and Gill Valentine published Mapping Desire in 1995, an edited volume credited as a milestone in its utility of queer theory to move beyond lesbian and gay geographies of the city towards a radical project of destabilizing sexual and spatial norms (Peake 2016). Motivated by post-structuralism, its contributors foreground a range of non-heterosexualities, utilizing
Carl Bonner-Thompson et al.

Butler’s (1990) concept of performativity to disrupt the assumed ‘naturalness’ of male/female, gay/straight and mind/body dichotomies (Johnston 2015). Debates around performativity featured heavily in early geographies of sexualities commentary (Bell et al. 1994). Exclusions prevalent in consumer spaces, such as on the bar and club scene (Skeggs et al. 2004) and Pride (Browne 2007), began to be unpacked. Backed by critiques of the neoliberal processes prevalent in urban and economic geography, such work challenged the myth of lesbian and gay affluence while adopting what might now be deemed an ‘intersectional’ framework to highlight fluidity and diversity within queer lives according to gender, race, ethnicity, class and other differences (Duggan 2003).

Performativity also motivated debate about the risk of ‘disembodying’ desire, vis-à-vis the importance of representation and discourse in and to these processes (Johnston 2018a). Misgav and Johnston (2014) spoke of the dilemma of reproducing heteronormativity by subjugating bodies beneath identities, contending that the ways in which the participants in their research attempted to stabilize gender and sexuality by regulating bodily fluids, such as sweat, nuanced the readings of discursive identity as fluid. Brown’s (2008) study of gay men’s cruising culture does similar, engaging with non-representational and affective theories (an emphasis on ‘happenings’ or ‘practices’) to discuss overlooked potentials of desire; positing that smells, objects and flesh (as well as identity) highlight how desire can unfold in ways that undo assumed identity categories (see also Binnie 1997). Concurrently, Bell (2007) courageously stressed the importance of talking more about sexual acts within the discipline to counter from within the prevailing squeamishness. This, he argues, often works to underpin ‘heteronormativity’ (see Section 2, ‘Queer geographies’).

Queer perspectives now traverse multiple paths, but typically share a concern with undoing binaries of gender and sexuality rather than ‘just’ representing ‘abject’ and ‘abnormal’ lives (Browne 2006). More scholars are doing this with a focus on heterosexuality, especially in terms of marriage, sex work and normative readings of family. The last has involved queering spaces of domesticity largely assumed to be private, like the home (Beasley et al. 2015; Pilkey 2014). Binnie and Valentine’s (1999) review of the field through to the late-1990s remains vital reading, especially in introducing sexual citizenship. Johnston (2015, 2017, 2018a) provides a contemporary take on the field’s standing now.

For over three decades, geographers have investigated how certain sexualities (re)produce social and spatial orders, imbued with uneven power relations. During what is now a lively period of debate, far removed from simple correlations of sexuality-space, the visualizations of ‘chaos’ and ‘complexity’ apparent across ‘I Just Made Love’ could arguably not have been foreseen by those working in the face of considerable stigma to push at scholarly boundaries by mapping sexuality in early research. This once-academic quest to deduce spatial order from what we now realize as multifaceted assemblages of bodies imbued with discursive codings of genders and sexualities has largely been democratized through digital technologies – wherein services such as OKCupid, Tinder or Grindr overlay space with a digital grid, rupturing how sexualized spaces are experienced and theorized.

While significant legal challenges have been ‘won’, the geographies of sexualities remain uneven and discrimination continues against lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and other queer (LGBTQ) lives in all places, but to a varying intensity, ranging from death and violence through to subtler prejudices. The changing face of marriage, family and relationships, growth in trans activism, the normalization of online sexual networks, queer lives in the countryside and LGBTQ religiosity are a tiny selection of the topics now studied (Binnie 2016; Gray et al. 2016; Smart and Whittemore 2016; Taylor and Snowdon 2014; Valentine et al. 2016). We can provide only a snapshot, but the remainder of this chapter highlights a raft of things still waiting to be understood.
From order to chaos: geographies of sexualities

by those within the field. Mindful of initial efforts to correlate sexuality and space, the thrust of this chapter is not to offer a corrective to the chaos we now see as unfolding but to assist those wishing to navigate and contribute to this diverse field of scholarship for the first time.

We start by highlighting some of the limits to performativity, with the aim of bringing readers up to date with complementary approaches that may take the geographies of sexualities forward, alongside queer theory. We then explore the rise of trans geographies before mapping some futures we see for the field. The emergence of queer theorizations and their incorporation into geographical analyses represents an important turn. Over the last couple of decades, studies of spaces and sexualities that adopt queer perspectives and concepts have multiplied. In the next section, we present the ‘sparks’ of queer inquiry.

Section 2: queer geographies

The concept of heteronormativity has been central to the subfield of queer geographies, and can be summarized as ‘the set of norms that make heterosexuality seem natural or right and organize homosexuality as its binary opposite’ (Corber and Valocchi 2003, 4). Butler’s (1993) formulation of queer theory seeks to disrupt binary configurations of sex, gender and sexualities, showing their social construction through regulatory heteronormative laws, institutions and systems. Considering this deconstructive theory exposes ‘the limits and instabilities of a binary identity figure’, but Seidman (1995, 131) also suggests that queer theory risks failing to observe specific axes of domination that differentially influence the lives of individuals and groups. Consequently, a total dismissal of identity categories and their associated politics can be counterproductive in cases where one wishes to attend to how the lives of oppressed people (and their praxes towards justice) are to be understood by social actors themselves (Collins and Bilge 2016).

With focus on how different modes of power – ableism, classism, homophobia, racism and sexism – interlock to produce a specific kind of oppression for those who occupy one or more difference(s), intersectionality has been noted as being a potentially useful approach that might help to overcome some of the limits of queer theory. Intersectionality helps geographers in exploring the variety of ways in which processes of marginalization are lived out and felt according to particular subjective positions – say, those pertaining to being a British lesbian but also being Black in predominantly White spaces, while also maintaining a complex affiliation to one’s working-class background; a subjective position that would likely reveal a layered oppression that differs from those faced by a White working-class lesbian. A number of geographers have outlined how intersectionality might be deployed to understand how such variances unfold and/or are reproduced spatially so that they can be tackled (Hopkins 2017; Valentine 2007). For Oswin (2008, 100), it remains necessary to move past framings of queer theory as focused solely on non-heterosexual lives to ‘examine sexuality’s deployment in concert with racialized, classed and gendered processes’. Topics that could benefit from an intersectional queer perspective include ‘transnational labour flows, diaspora, immigration, public health, globalization, domesticity, geopolitics and poverty’ (Oswin 2008, 100). These topics are still comparatively marginal to those illuminated in Section 1 of this chapter, which dominated the geographies of sexualities until the century’s turn. To challenge the normalization of queer identities and knowledge, some geographers turned to a politics of homonormativity.

Section 3: homonormativity and homonationalism

Duggan (2003, 179) defined homonormativity as a ‘politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them whilst promising
the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption’. Deployment of the concept promotes consideration of how some LGBTQ people are included as citizens who are active in upholding neoliberal modes of consumption, allowing the observation of queer complicities with patriarchal, classist and racial systems of oppression (Nast 2002; Oswin 2004). In her analysis of such complicities, Puar (2006) coins the term ‘homonationalism’ to stress how particular queer discourses in the West can produce and sustain nationalist ideology that works to oppress the racialized other. Deployed within an assemblage framework, homonationalism can aid critical geographical analyses of discourses and practices that are revealing of the prevailing – and often subtle – prejudices that mark diverse queer lives: for example, how well-intended ‘hate crime’ policies around sexual orientation and gender identity can work to oppress racialized communities (Haritaworn 2010); how political demonstrations and parades can use limited LGBTQ rights discourses that legitimize Islamophobic stances (Kehl 2018); and how ‘gay-friendly’ city-branding initiatives can bolster regulatory and normative discourses that are detrimental to others, particularly those of lower economic status who may have limited means to participate in the consumer practices that such initiatives tend to encompass (Hubbard and Wilkinson 2015). Homonationalism prompts manifold questions of sexual citizenship that need answering to diversify the multi-scalar processes that produce ‘acceptable’ citizens, identities and bodies.

Section 4: expanding queer – bodies, affect and emotion

During the past two decades, the scale of the body (including emotional responses) has gained prominence in feminist geographies in efforts to understand the complexity of the social world (Davidson and Milligan 2004). This focus has allowed geographers to emphasize aspects of human experience that are not (yet) cognitive. Affective theories are part of this shift. Lim (2007, 68) productively combines queer and affective theories, understanding affect as ‘the capability of a body to impact other bodies and to be affected by them’. In turn, he suggests that ‘body’ can refer to both human and nonhuman composites. The workings of emotions, embodiments and affects as critical aspects of human experience have enabled queer geographers to examine relationships between sexualities and space in new ways.

Gorman-Murray (2009) has applied an embodied framework to his study of queer migration, while Brown (2008) combines queer and affective theories to observe ‘cruising’ practices among men seeking sex. Both of these geographers also reveal possibilities to engage corporeal feminist perspectives with haptic geographies (those of ‘touch’), as Waitt and Stains (2015) have done in their study of sweat management among young people in Australia. Both Johnston (2012) and Morrison (2012) have brought the geographies of sexualities into conversation with haptic geographies to help to understand how touch contributes to the making and remaking of bodily boundaries, which impacts on sexual and gendered expressions. Greater attention to the body is arguably important in furthering development of the field, while also being central to the emergence of trans geographies, which are summarized in the subsequent section of the chapter.

Section 5: trans geographies

Trans geographies have emerged as an important and lively subfield as the geographies of sexualities have become more closely aligned with the concepts, theories and epistemological standpoints of gender studies, particularly research at the folds of queer theory and other post-structural standpoints (Stryker and Whittle 2006). The latter often used trans subjectivities to
illuminate gender as an unstable and fluid social construction, as explained in Section 2 of this chapter (West and Zimmerman 1987). Ideas of gender as a malleable construct underpin considerable scholarship, an idea dependent on a range of factors, presentations, embodiments and contexts rather than a fixed binary. Butler (1993) talks about trans bodies in aforementioned work on performativity, using trans women’s bodies to explain the constructed nature of gender. Arguably, such views are now seen as problematic as they can deny varied trans subjective, lived and felt experiences (Hines 2010).

Poststructuralist thought reintroduced the body as a focus of research in terms of (gender) transitional care, perceptions of trans bodies and the violence experienced by particular gendered embodiments (Namaste 2000). Current work tends to utilize trans bodies to demonstrate gender ‘fluidity’, but it is crucial to remember that this fluidity applies to all bodies and that trans identities can be just as fixed or fluid as those of cis-gender people (Cornwell 2014). Geographers must therefore work not just to examine what trans bodies can teach us about gender but also to acknowledge diversity within the community itself, rather than using trans merely as a point in teaching to a predominantly cis-gender audience (Johnston 2015). Furthermore, trans studies are, currently, US Anglocentric, although there is growing work on trans women of colour and a body of work engaging post-colonial approaches to understand gendered cultures and histories outside the Western conceptualizations that have dominated scholarship within and outside the geometries of sexualities (Ahmed 2000).

A tension remains between discursive and embodied theories of trans geographies. Trans people should not be reduced to bodily differences, despite these differences playing a significant role in trans lives. Within the field, there is considerable criticism of the reductive way that some research exclusively focuses on bodily difference rather than the effect(s) that these differences come to have on how bodies inhabit and move through spaces (Ellis et al. 2014). Accordingly, approaches that centre only on the body can be voyeuristic and risk othering the actualities of trans lives further (Stryker 1994). Trans geographies are beginning to encompass a mix of theoretical and methodological perspectives; from Doan’s (2010) feminist autoethnographic accounts through to Browne, Nash and Hine’s (2010) larger studies on the diverse views and identities of trans people in Brighton, UK. A commonality in the emerging scholarship appears to be the foregrounding of subjective experiences to understand how trans people live with and respond to gender binaries in the range of spaces through which everyday lives play out. For instance, Crawford (2014) addresses the multiple ways that trans people encounter the space of the bathroom, while Doan (2010) explores how her own transition impacted on the ways in which she moves through spaces, which have become more difficult to use following her transition, illuminating further the ways in which a two-pronged sex/gender logic structures the spaces that most (often, cis people) take for granted. Doan (2010) calls this ‘the tyranny of gender’. While Crawford’s (2014) framework is a more conceptual, Foucauldian spatial analysis, both she and Doan (2010) use the spatial exclusion of trans bodies to highlight the marginalization of certain identities and bodies through the reinforcement of rigid gender binaries (Hines 2018; Johnston 2018b).

As the subfield develops, further attention to who is writing about trans lives may be useful. Many have critiqued a view of ‘nothing about us without us’ in disabilities studies (Shakespeare 1993). Arguably, part of the reason why so little has been done by trans people is the hostile response that this type of research garners. Hines (2018) is among the feminist scholars who have been met with significant personal criticism for engaging with this work – focusing not just on the content of her research itself but the very existence of trans people as viable identities. Looking forward, this is a broader issue than just who is writing. Institutionally, more support is needed to allow these marginalized voices to emerge, the voices of those who
Carl Bonner-Thompson et al.

disproportionately face all kinds of educational and employment barriers, precarious living conditions, poverty, a lack of parental support and a lack of, or limited access to, healthcare and housing (Serano 2007).

Section 6: future geographies of sexualities

By means of a conclusion, we wish to highlight some of the ways in which the geographies of sexualities might continue to trouble heteronormative knowledge production. Longhurst and Johnston (2014) have argued that, in spite of a proliferation of scholarship on bodies, masculinist, heteronormative and sexist power structures remain intact. We agree with this sentiment and suggest that a starting point for those considering engagement with the field is the need for a careful appreciation of the messiness of sexual and gender identities and bodies vis-à-vis the relationships that these have with place. Binnie (in Skeggs et al. 2004) suggested that geographers work to challenge ‘squeamish’ queer and feminist epistemologies and continually push the boundaries of ‘acceptable’ knowledge. A way in which to do this might be to focus more on ‘touch’, as this is still largely absent from work within the field and ‘sex itself is a series of touches, feelings and embodied sensations’ (Morrison 2012, 11). Therefore, geographers working within the field could push to understand how places impact on how sex is understood, mediated and felt. The latter means understanding how people can break or reform spatial and bodily power relations to advance queer perspectives.

Assemblage can also be deemed to be important to the future of the field. Nash and Gorman-Murray (2017, 6–7) recently called for closer attention to assemblage in terms of urban sexualities, contending that it:

Might help us to explain what places and why, what subjects and why, and to consider these assemblages as events, non-binding and ephemeral. Identity and subjectivity are not pre-given but are a ‘sexuality/gender’ coming into being through the viscosity of bodies, non-human actants, objects, ideas, capital and constituting, we can hope, a proliferation of sexualities and genders that are nevertheless unbounded, while tentatively (and recursively) formulated in and through place.

Assemblage is potentially useful in enabling understanding of the multiple bodies, objects and affects that make sexualities meaningful through everyday lived experiences of places. By understanding the viscosity of bodies, we can understand how subjectivities emerge through places, rather than being pre-given and bounded. In this sense, the fleshy physiology of people and bodies can be appreciated alongside their social and cultural meaning – they do not exist in opposition but work in combination to shape everyday lives. Bonner-Thompson (2017) is informed by assemblage to understand how masculinity and sexuality emerge for men who use Grindr, through their engagement with digital spaces. He explores how locations, skin, flesh and desire are assembled by gender and sexuality in Grindr profiles. Subjectivities are not formed through singular bodies but multiple ones. The presence of technologies in our lives is always increasing, becoming further entangled in our sexualities. Therefore, the importance of nonhuman ‘things’ in constituting sexual subjectivities requires further investigation. This also provides an interesting way to understand the rising interest in digital technologies. A Gender, Place and Culture special issue entitled ‘Queer Code/Space’ raises important questions in exploring sex, sexuality and desire through emerging technologies (Cockayne and Richardson 2017). Many of the topics covered in this chapter could be revisited through greater consideration of the role of technology in assemblages that are generative of genders and sexualities.
To further destabilize the field, we must consider the proliferation of trans, intersex, drag, cross-dressing and other subjectivities, which tells us more about how places are brought into being and the ways in which these can conform or resist gender binaries (Johnston 2015). Diversifying work in this manner will enable a wider populous of voices to challenge heteronormativity. However, these developments should be focused not only on categories and epistemologies of the West. Efforts to decolonize the geographies of sexualities are continuing, recognizing that the field has largely been a White and Anglophone project until recent years, as with other parts of the discipline. The word ‘queer’, for example, is itself understood in many places as a Western concept. Not acknowledging and unpacking how Western categories are used to understand sexualities in different times and places renders a risk of complicity in neo-colonialism (Puar 2007). Queer, by some, is understood as a colonial tool, reproducing the epistemologies of the Global North (Silva and Vieira 2014). Adopting a non-White and non-Western view may mean radically changing the ways in which those of us in the field see genders and sexualities; a difficult, yet necessary, process if geography is to be refined in its abilities to analyse the social world beyond the West. The geographies of sexualities are at an important moment. To continue disruptive agendas, multiple dimensions must be considered. The field must continually build on and push at the boundaries of feminist and queer epistemologies to combat normative processes and challenge intersecting power relations of ableism, classism, homophobia, racism and sexism, while not forgetting the neoliberal processes that such geographical knowledges are all too often entrapped within.

Key readings

References


Gray, E. 2011. “I Just Made Love’ App Lets Users Track Their Sexual Encounters.” *Huffpost* online. Available at: www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/i-just-made-love-app_n_1158266?guccounter=1&guce_referrer_us=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvLnVrLw&guce_referrer_cs=K-YuROa-qwP7IV2YEaCQ8Q.


From order to chaos: geographies of sexualities


