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Introduction to special issue “Geographies of Sexualities”

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Abstract

In this foreword to the special issue “Geographies of Sexualities,” I provide a review of the scholarly discussions about place and sexuality that have occurred in the past 20 years. I highlight five major themes in my synthesis of this scholarship: (1) how narratives about geography and sexuality are co-constitutive; (2) a critical interrogation of these narratives to demonstrate how more nuances exist than these narratives suggest; (3) assessments of the spatial distribution of women in same-sex relationships, comparisons to the spatial distribution of men in same-sex relationships, and analyses of the experiences of women in areas with high concentrations of women in same-sex relationships and urban lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) neighborhoods; (4) comparisons across spaces to address the effect of place on outcomes such as well-being and how mobilities and movements across geographies matter; and (5) discussions as to whether, how, and why the geographies and spaces of lesbian, bisexual, and queer-identified women are shifting. My goal is to highlight these themes in order to contextualize how the articles in this special issue continue discussions and introduce new questions for the field.

Keywords: Geography, LGBTQ neighborhoods, lesbian spaces, urban/rural, mobilities, global LGBTQ identities, LGBTQ migrations

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In my introduction to this special issue, I synthesize scholarship published in the past 20 years that focuses on geography and sexuality. I discuss five key themes that emerge from this scholarship. My synthesis is crafted with the intent to contextualize the special issue articles within the broader interdisciplinary dialogues out of which and to which they contribute. In my introduction, I use the terminology lesbian, bisexual, and queer women, same-sex sexualities, and LGBTQ in reference to identities and lives, communities, and spaces. My use of these terms reflects how they are used in the literature, with the recognition of the imprecise and imperfect nature of any terminology to fully capture the range and variety of how individual women and communities may articulate non-heterosexual sexualities.

First, scholars have produced knowledge concerning how narratives about geography and sexuality are co-constitutive. Scholarship underscores how place is encoded with meanings about sexuality insofar as certain spaces are seen as LGBTQ-friendly and conducive to the creation of LGBTQ lives only through their juxtaposition to spaces that are seen as hostile and unfavorable to LGBTQ lives. The process of creating placebased distinctions that are intertwined with meanings about sexuality occur at a global level insofar as the West and the Global North are seen as more progressive and more conducive for the expression of same-sex sexualities and LGBTQ lives compared to the East and the Global South (Brown, Browne, Elmhirst, & Hutta, 2010; Puar, Rushbrook, & Schein, 2003; Puri, 2016; Swarr & Nagar, 2004; Wilson, 2006). Even within regions generally understood as less embracing of same-sex sexualities, distinctions are made such that certain cities or countries are understood in comparison to others as better spaces for LGBTQ people; for instance, Prague in the Czech Republic within Central and Eastern Europe (Nedbálková, 2016), Taipei in Taiwan within Asia (Brainer, 2019), Cape Town in South Africa (Oswin, 2005), and Beirut in Lebanon within the Middle East (Mousawi, 2018). Likewise, the distinctions made between urban and rural spaces continue to matter to narratives about sexuality insofar as rural areas are seen as inhospitable to LGBTQ lives in contrast to cities (Abraham, 2009; Halberstam, 2005; Myrdahel, 2016; Waitt & Gorman-Murray, 2011; Weston, 1995). Certain cities in the Global North in particular are seen as LGBTQ meccas, such as San Francisco, New York, Tel Aviv, Sydney, and Toronto (Fenster & Misgav, 2019;

Gorman-Murray & Baganz, 2019; Stone, 2018). Importantly, these co-constituted narratives of place and sexuality manifest in multiple ways and are espoused not only by some LGBTQ people and those seeking to make spaces more supportive of LGBTQ lives, but also by anti-LGBTQ activists who seek to make claims about same-sex sexualities as being antithetical to certain spaces (Johnson, 2009; Valentine, 2001).

Further, scholars not only note, but also critically interrogate, the ways in which meanings about space and sexuality are intertwined. Two different avenues of inquiry reflect this critical interrogation and I address both avenues in the following: work that focuses on spaces assumed to be inhospitable to same-sex sexualities and LGBTQ lives (spaces that have historically received less attention within the literature, such as the Global South or rural areas) and work that focuses on LGBTQ urban meccas (spaces that historically have received more attention within the literature). Although different foci in terms of spaces, taken together this work ultimately challenges and provides more nuance to dominant narratives about geography and sexuality.

Scholarship focused on places assumed to be inhospitable to same-sex sexualities and LGBTQ lives challenges that assumption by documenting the varied ways that expressions of same-sex sexualities manifest in these spaces. Such work calls attention to how those expressions and identities may differ from ones in the Global North or LGBTQ urban meccas, but need not be read as less valid. For instance, in their analysis of poor women in same-sex relationships in South Africa and India, Amanda Lock Swarr and Richa Nagar (2004) illustrate how the women are able to assert same-sex intimacies in the context of experiencing extreme poverty and sociopolitical marginalization. Swarr and Nagar undermine the assumption that the women's location would make creating same-sex sexualities out of reach; rather, they argue that the women's assertion of same-sex sexualities is intertwined with their negotiations for daily survival. They note that the women's articulations and experiences of same-sex sexualities differ from Western ones (in terms of identity labels used or the absence of visible organized lesbian communities). As scholars work to create knowledge about same-sex sexualities in areas of the globe where there has been little attention thus far, scholars also acknowledge the barriers and challenges to doing such work (Blidon & Zaragocin, 2019; Pitoňák & Klingorová, 2019; Silva & Ornat, 2016). Further, scholarship focused

on small towns and rural areas in the United States provides another challenge to dominant narratives that posit these spaces as wholly unfavorable for lesbian, bisexual, and queer-identified women's lives (Barton, 2012; Eaves, 2016; Forstie, 2018; Gray, 2009; Oswald & Cul-ton, 2003; Oswald & Lazarevic, 2011; Woodell, Kazyak, & Compton, 2015). Such work highlights how some lesbian, bisexual, and queer-identified women experience small towns as spaces where they can be out, accepted, and visible, and that their interpretations rely on making distinctions between urban and rural LGBTQ identities (Kazyak, 2011, 2012; Thomsen, 2016). In a related vein, work in this area also calls attention to how manifestations of homophobia and anti-LGBTQ sentiments may differ across geographies (Abdi, 2014; Barton, 2012; Brainer, 2019). Thus, while work challenges the assumption that certain spaces are wholly unfavorable for LGBTQ lives, scholars also work to simultaneously call attention to how homophobia may still manifest in those spaces in ways that differ from manifestations in the Global North or LGBTQ urban meccas.

Another challenge to dominant narratives about geography and sexuality emerges from scholarship that critically analyzes LGBTQ urban meccas and the notion of a global queer identity, often via attending to processes of globalization and gentrification and histories of colonialization. For instance, work focused on tourism campaigns that market global LGBTQ urban meccas asserts that such efforts turn those spaces into commodities to be consumed; these scholars then question how global patterns of inequality shape who has the ability to consume the commodities (Markwell, 2002; Puar, 2002; Rushbrook, 2002). Similarly, other work argues that the interpretation of certain cities as global LGBTQ meccas can obscure the struggles that LGBTQ people may experience within those cities (Markwell, 2002; Moussawi, 2018). Scholars have also addressed how attempts to create a shared global queer identity obscure the differences that exist across regions and between countries with regard to expressions, experiences, and articulations of same-sex sexualities (Hoad, 2007; Swarr, 2012). Further, scholarship also critically assesses LGBTQ urban meccas via analyzing how exclusions in these spaces occur based on factors like class, gender identity, and race. The topic of the effects of gentrification on urban LGBTQ neighborhoods has generated discussions about class and racial divisions with regard to which LGBTQ

people are able to afford to be seen as legitimate in these spaces (Doan & Higgins, 2011; Hanhardt, 2013). Likewise, scholars draw attention to practices that marginalize and exclude transgender women within lesbian spaces (Browne, 2011). Finally, scholars have demonstrated how people of color experience marginalization and exclusion in LGBTQ communities and LGBTQ neighborhood in cities (Logie & Rwigema, 2014; Moore, 2010; Orne, 2017). These works underscore how the broader patterns of racial inequity and segregation that exist manifest in LGBTQ spaces.

In sum, all of this scholarship calls attention to how certain models of sexuality do not always translate across spaces (for instance, from Global North–Global South or from urban–rural), but that differences in expressions of same-sex sexualities or LGBTQ identities need not always be interpreted as a reflection of oppression. As a whole, this scholarship argues that holding up one space as a LGBTQ global mecca obscures the lived realities that LGBTQ people living in those cities may experience (which are not always as positive as assumed) and holding up one space as antithetical to LGBTQ life obscures the lived realities that LGBTQ people living in those areas may experience (which are not always as negative as assumed).

Additionally, another theme prominent in scholarship in the last two decades is a focus on assessing the spatial distribution of women in same-sex relationships, comparing it to the spatial distribution of men in same-sex relationships, and analyzing the experiences of women in areas with high concentrations of women in same-sex relationships and urban LGBTQ neighborhoods. Scholars have used census data (which allows for an assessment of same-sex couples) to document broad demographic patterns related to geography and sexuality in the United States and Australia (Baumle, Compton, & Poston, 2009; Gorman-Murray, Brennan-Horley, Kirsten Mclean, Waitt, & Gibson, 2010). Often, discussion of demographic trends centers on the fact that the areas with the highest concentration of female same-sex couples do not overlap with the areas with the concentrations of male same-sex couples (Brown-Saracino, 2018; Ghaziani, 2015). In particular, scholars note that female same-sex couples are less urban compared to male same-sex couples, a trend that occurs in both the United States and Australia (Gates & Ost, 2004; Gorman-Murray et al., 2010). Further, in addition to tracking these more general differences

in geographies between female same-sex couples and male same-sex couples, scholars have focused specifically on urban LGBTQ neighborhoods. Such work highlights that the areas with high concentrations of women in same-sex couples are distinct from those with high concentrations of men in same-sex couples. For instance, in Chicago, Boystown is the visible area marked as that city's LGBTQ neighborhood, and yet the highest concentration of women in same-sex couples is in a different neighborhood, Andersonville (Ghaziani, 2014). Scholars focused on non-U.S. contexts, including Sydney, Toronto, and Montreal, have likewise documented the phenomenon that urban areas with high concentrations of lesbian, bisexual, and queeridentified women tend to be distinct from those areas with high concentrations of gay, bisexual, and queer-identified men (which are recognized more broadly as the LGBTQ district of that city) (Nash & Bain, 2007; Nash & Gorman-Murray, 2015; Podmore, 2006).

Along with documenting these demographic trends, scholars have also focused on analyzing the experiences of lesbian, bisexual, and queeridentified women who live in areas with high concentrations of women in same-sex relationships and lesbian, bisexual, and queeridentified women. This work includes attention to those living in intentional, often rural, lesbian communities to discuss how these communities function and why women seek to carve out spaces separate from mainstream society (Browne, 2009; Herring, 2007; Rabin & Slater, 2005; Stein, 2001). For instance, in their analysis of three lesbian land communities in Oregon, Arizona, and Arkansas, Rabin and Slater (2005) provide insight into the varied reasons women seek out intentional lesbian lands as part of their lesbian feminist perspective and how most communities self-govern through consensus. Analyses have also focused on the county town of Daylesford in Australia, which has a high number of LGBTQ people living there and a reputation for being LGBTQ friendly (Gorman-Murray, Waitt, & Gibson, 2008). Additionally, Japonica Brown-Saracino (2018) analyzes the identities and lives of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women in four small cities in the United States that have a high number of women in same-sex couples and are imagined as sites of acceptance for LGBTQ people: Ithaca, New York; San Luis Obispo, California; Portland, Maine; and Greenfield, Massachusetts. Her analysis illustrates how place shapes sexual identity insofar as the women in each city articulated very different

narratives about sexuality; she argues that those sexuality narratives are in part influenced by the more general narratives about place and the city. For instance, she finds that in Portland, Maine, LBQ women stress that sexuality can change and adopt “hybrid” sexual identities and argues that, in part because Portland prides itself as an innovative and up-and-coming city, LBQ women likewise articulate their sexuality as something they can create and shape.

Additionally, along with analyzing the experiences of lesbian, bisexual, and queer-identified women in certain spaces, scholars have compared across spaces to study the effect of place on outcomes such as well-being and safety as well as to interrogate the importance of mobilities and movements across geographies. Work that addresses the effect of place tends to limit analytic comparisons either to urban vs. rural spaces or to regions with more supportive vs. less supportive laws related to LGBTQ rights. Research on whether differences in mental health exist between LGBTQ people living in rural areas vs. urban areas in the United States is mixed, with some work showing worse mental health outcomes for those living in rural areas, some work showing worse mental health outcomes for those living in urban areas, and some work showing no differences in mental health outcomes (Fisher, Irwin, & Coleman, 2014; Wienke & Hill, 2013; Woodell, 2018). Also, work has sought to assess differences in levels of victimization across urban and rural areas in the United States. Some research shows that LGBTQ people are less safe and experience more discrimination in rural areas compared to urban areas (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009; Swank, Fahs, & Frost, 2013; Swank, Frost, & Fahs, 2012). Other work suggests that cities with high concentrations of LGBTQ people can be correlated with higher levels of victimization (Green, Strolovitch, Wong, & Bailey, 2001; Spring, 2013, p. 692).

Further, scholars have analyzed the importance of mobility and movement across geographies. For instance, scholars attend to the ways in which migration is constitutive to LGBTQ identities insofar as part of what it means to be LGBTQ is to be displaced (Binnie, 2004; Fortier, 2001; Mai & King, 2009). The migration of people to regions and places like LGBTQ urban meccas speaks to the continued desire to find spaces to be able to freely express same-sex sexualities. For instance, Binnie and Klesse (2013), focus on some LGBTQ people’s

migration out of Poland and into other nations in the European Union reflects their perception and experience that Western Europe offers greater acceptance of LGBTQ identities compared to Central and Eastern Europe, particularly Poland. Likewise, scholarship highlights the continued appeal of LGBTQ urban meccas and the sentiment that these spaces offer a sense of safety and ability to explore sexual identities (Drabble, Veldhuis, Wootton, Riggle, & Hughes, 2019; Ghaziani, 2014; Gorman-Murray, 2009). Yet work also points to nuances. For instance, focusing on migration patterns of LGBTQ people in France, Blidon (2016) finds that those migrating to Paris were actually more likely to already be from metropolitan areas (as opposed to the countryside), which she argues challenges the idea that rural LGBTQ seek out urban LGBTQ meccas. Other scholars address the fact that some LGBTQ people enjoy certain aspects of living in small towns or regions assumed to be hostile and in fact migrate to those spaces from spaces assumed to be more accepting (Oswald & Lazarevic, 2011; Janovy, 2018; Kazyak, 2011; Waitt & Gorman-Murray, 2011). Scholars also argue for the importance of attending to how interpretations and experiences across geographies may differ by race, class, and gender identity (Abelson, 2014, 2018; Giesking, 2016; Hanhardt, 2013).

Finally, discussions as to whether, how, and why the geographies and spaces for lesbian, bisexual, and queer-identified women are shifting have occupied much of the literature in recent decades. Scholars have documented broad geographic demographic trends, and have provided more specific analyses of the changing nature of spaces in urban LGBTQ neighborhoods. This work attributes these changes to a variety of factors, but often highlights two factors in particular: an increased acceptance of LGBTQ people within the broader society and a shift in conceptualizations of sexuality that emphasize fluidity and queer identities. For instance, relying on demographic data, scholars note the fact that LGBTQ people in the United States live in more varied locales than reflected in academic literature, and document increasing numbers of female same-sex couples in rural areas and regions assumed to be inhospitable, such as the Midwest and South (Black, Gates, Sanders, & Taylor, 2000; Gates, 2006, 2007; Rosenfeld & Kim, 2005; Stone, 2018). Scholars point to these trends and speculate that they reflect an increasing acceptance within these areas. Work focused on non-U.S. contexts likewise situates analyses of geography

and sexuality vis-à-vis discussions of changes in the broader culture (Nedbálková, 2016; Wimark, 2016). In his analysis of gays and lesbians in Izmir, Turkey, Wimark (2016) argues that increasingly cultural visibility gay and lesbian identities are one factor that makes it possible for younger generations to stay in that city (as opposed to migrating to a city or region more visibly marked as LGBTQ-friendly). Further, scholarship has also addressed more specifically the changing nature of spaces for lesbian, bisexual, and queer-identified women in urban areas. Most of this work focuses on how the number of community institutions visibly marked as lesbian, like bars and bookstores, have declined if not completely disappeared, which some scholars discuss vis-a-vis changes in communities' and individual's understandings of sexual identity (Forstie, 2019; Giesecking, 2016). For instance, in her work focused on lesbian spaces in Montreal, Podmore (2006) argues that those spaces became more fragmented alongside a shift away from a static-based notion of lesbian identity toward a more fluid notion of sexual identity. Nash and Gorman-Murray (2015) echo this in their assessment of changing lesbian spaces in Toronto and Sydney and argue that younger generations seek out a broader range of spaces outside of lesbian-marked venues that are not seen as restricted and identity-based. Other work focuses on how lesbian, bisexual, and queer-identified women experience conflicting reactions to these changes (Brown-Saracino, 2011).

In sum, a rich body of interdisciplinary scholarship underscores the importance that scholars interested in sexualities interrogate questions of geography, space, and location. The articles in this special issue continue these discussions and introduce new findings and questions for the field.

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The author

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