

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Gavin Brown and Kath Browne (eds)**, *The Routledge Research Companion to Geographies of Sex and Sexualities*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016. ISBN: 9781472455482 (cloth); ISBN: 9781315613000 (ebook)

What is the relationship between cities and sexualities? Is the Pride parade dead as a form of political expression? How does urban governance influence sex work? These are the kinds of questions raised at the intersection of geography and sexuality, and they bring with them debates from queer theory, sociology, and science and technology studies.

*The Routledge Research Companion to Geographies of Sex and Sexualities* functions as something of a coming-of-age text for the geographical study of sex and sexualities. Two decades on from David Bell and Gill Valentine's (1995) groundbreaking *Mapping Desire*, this large edited collection proves that the study of sex and sexualities continues to be of interest to a growing audience, not just in the field of human geography but across history, politics, economics, media and cultural studies too. What gives the book its distinctive edge in the study of "queer" bodies and lives—in both the non-normative and non-heterosexual sense of the word—is its stated aim to "disrupt the Anglo-American hegemony in studies of sexualities, sexes and geographies" (p.i). This is its most impressive outcome, as evidenced by the diverse contributions from contemporary writers across five continents.

The *Companion* takes as its starting point the historical lethargy in geography regarding the study of sex and sexuality beyond a heteronormative focus on couplehood and the family. This has shifted over time to incorporate approaches that attend to the influence of place, space and mobilities in shaping sexual desire, and how sexual identities including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender are represented across the world. The perceived "naturalness" of heterosexuality means that it has long been accepted as the default expression of sexuality in public space, so non-heterosexual or queer identities and practices in public space are easily marked as

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other (and sometimes punished). Following an initial focus in the 1980s and 1990s on gay male spaces, scholarship grew to consider lesbian experiences, and, more recently, bisexual and trans people. Today, the field is healthy and expanding, exploring not just sexual identity but also biopolitics and sexual health, migration, surveillance, technology, the value of home, the visibilities and exclusions that mark public and private space, and the life (and possible death) of the “gayborhood” (Ghaziani 2014; Nash and Gorman-Murray 2014). Noting the usefulness of the term “queer”, both as a sexual marker and a disruptive theoretical orientation, the editors nevertheless recognise the Anglo-American orientation of much queer thinking and the issues that can arise in its uncritical transference to other global contexts (see also, for example, Oswin 2008, 2015). Instead, particular attention is paid to the global South, disadvantaged bodies and “ordinary” cities. By consciously shifting “queer” concerns to coverage of the wider gamut of sex and sexualities, the book is able to explore not just sexual practices and identities but also new approaches to bodies and spaces.

The best word for Gavin Brown and Kath Browne’s endeavour here is *thorough*. All 44 chapters<sup>1</sup> are detailed and densely referenced, and key concepts are incorporated throughout each section to ensure that readers unfamiliar with any given area of research are smoothly brought up to speed. The volume’s introduction sketches out areas of interest in the field as a series of binaries, from public/private to global North/global South. Whilst they explore these tensions in the introduction, the structure is not replicated in topic themes, despite their natural fit as concepts that would help corral the scholarly contributions offered. Instead, chapters are absorbed into seven themes, but this more detailed structure provides a welcome categorisation for what is by any measure a strikingly diverse set of contributions.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.routledge.com/The-Routledge-Research-Companion-to-Geographies-of-Sex-and-Sexualities/Brown-Browne/p/book/9781472455482>

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The first section, “Urban Sexualities”, establishes the importance of the city in the study of sex and sexualities. Despite a historical entanglement of the study of urban spaces with gay male lives in particular, there has been rather less scrutiny of the ways in which other people’s sexualities shape and are shaped by experiences of urban life. Resisting the tendency for coverage of “homonormative” gay male identities in cities of the global North (Julie Podmore, p.21; see also Duggan 2002), the collection provides interesting discoveries to share via other sexualities—for example, Jen Jack Giesecking’s qualitative work on New York’s lesbian-queer bars (p.29). Other types of cities, including small cities (Lynda Johnston and Robyn Longhurst, p.45) and cities of the global South (Gustav Visser p.55), are also featured. This resituating of queer urban space gives voice not just to the metropolitan city but other forms of urbanism to prove that “cities of all kinds shape sexualities” (Gavin Brown, Tiffany Muller Myrdahl and Paulo Jorge Vieira, p.18).

“Sexual Politics”, the second theme, locates sex and sexualities research within a long and contentious political history that has seen sexual minorities variously oppressed, repressed, or inflexibly assimilated. The editors pre-empt concerns that a section devoted to politics conceptually limits political power to only a portion of the volume by arguing that writing about sex and sexualities is itself a political act underpinning every chapter in the wider volume, which seems a reasonable way to tackle the issue. In fact, devoting a section to often radically embodied sexual politics testifies to the value of queer campaign, and Chen Misgav (p.105) and Natalie Oswin (p.129) demonstrate the ongoing potential of political action on a global stage that needs outspoken intervention now more than ever. Natasha Vine and Julie Cupples’ work (p.117) on intersectional geopolitics in a trans context is particularly interesting as a contemporary snapshot of trans identities in contemporary media. Their scrutiny of the ways talk-show hosts interrogate trans actors from *Orange is the New Black* to *RuPaul’s Drag Race* for their changing bodies rather than their work or activism shows how much there is still to do in

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destabilizing established hegemony in mainstream media culture. These chapters testify to the renewed energy of queer campaign to great effect.

This global theme is expanded through a postcolonial lens in section three, “Decolonizing Sexualities”. The impressive range of experiences in this section speaks to the commitment made by the *Companion* to articulate voices that have traditionally been less heard, and in this aim it succeeds, contesting dominant Euro- and US-centric approaches to the study of sexualities. Niharika Banerjea, Kath Browne, Leela Bakshi and Subhagata Ghosh demonstrate how queering participatory research can make it an effective tool for transnational collaboration, whilst highlighting the traditional conventions that continue to unhelpfully delimit academic and activist writing (p.184). Joseli Maria Silva and Marcio Jose Ornat unpack the impact of Anglo-American hegemony on the study of sexualities in Brazil by utilising an expression widely used in Brazilian LGBT groups: “Wake up, Alice!” (p.192). The implication is that for those outside of the academic discourses of the global North, the circulation of knowledge is far from a Wonderland. They highlight how the geopolitics of knowledge affects the everyday experiences of Brazilian *travestis* and their silencing at the hands of Anglophone academia. The theme here is of voicing research narratives that have not, perhaps, been given the attention they deserve in Anglophone academia.

Section four, “Mobile Sexualities”, and section five, “Sexual Health”, share some common ground in showing how important movement, migration and mobilities are not just for queer lives but sexual health too. Whilst there might also conceivably be overlap with earlier discussions of urban space in thinking about mobilities, here writers trouble traditional narratives of the queer “escape to the big city” (Weston 1995; Escoffier 1998) by showing how non-heterosexual migration patterns do not uniformly follow a rural-to-urban pattern (Marianne Blidon, p.201); nor are they characterised by straightforward progression to welcome liberation, as demonstrated in an analysis of trans mobilities (Petra Doan, p.237). Less studied is heterosexual

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mobility, but as the section editors Catherine Nash and Andrew Gorman-Murray point out, their invitation for contributions in the area went unmet (p.196). It says a lot about the potential of interesting work still to develop in the field of heterosexuality and mobility, although heterosexuality is to an extent addressed elsewhere in the volume, namely, in section six, “Commercial Sexualities”.

Contributions sexual health are impressively diverse—no mean feat bearing in mind that the primary link between health and geographies of sexualities remains HIV/AIDS (and to a lesser extent other sexually transmitted infection). The differential risk of bodies, as marked for example by race, gender and sexuality, has been historically overlooked (Binnie 1997; Wilton 1996), but this collection works hard to incorporate place and embodiment in medical and health geographies, with the associated consideration of what sexuality might mean in such a context. Thus chapters range from an analysis of migration and mobility in gay men’s sexual health in semi-rural Canada (Nathaniel Lewis, p.283) to the alarming relationship between homophobia, human rights and HIV/AIDS in Africa (Andrew Tucker, p.295), via the complex issues involved in MSM (men who have sex with men) participating in African biomedical research (Stephen Taylor p.275). Gerry Kearns’ historical overview of the epidemiological failures and pathologisation at play in diagnosing, tracking and disseminating the structures of HIV/AIDS in late 20<sup>th</sup>-century America makes for a truly fascinating piece of writing. For me, this arresting chapter was the highlight of the section, closely followed by an expert introductory overview of the field of sexualities and health geographies by Andrew Tucker (p.258). Tucker looks to the future of epidemiological work with regard to the global South, the subjectivities of sexualised spaces, and the health needs of young men who have sex with men (YMSM), all whilst sketching out the past and present state of sexualities and health geography.

The penultimate section on commercial sexualities occupies interesting shared territory with the queer mobilities explored earlier, because sex work is so entangled

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with issues of transportation, movement and travel. Scholarship on sex work is burgeoning, and in contexts far removed from historical understandings of prostitution. Urban gentrification, biopolitics and ever-changing legal frameworks all have a part to play in formulating new understandings of sex work, and all are represented here. Phil Hubbard (p.313) and Marlene Spanger (p.341) explore very recent developments in the field; the former in terms of urban governance, and the latter in terms of migrant identities in a Northern European sex work environment, with particular scrutiny of the well-meaning but restrictive machinations of the Danish state. As section editor Maarten Loopmans points out (p.307), there remain lacunae in the study of sex work, namely, embodied understandings of sex work, LGBT sex workers, and online sex work. The paucity of online sex work research seems particularly odd given its established global importance.

The volume marks a shift to the future in the final chapters on “Digital Sexualities”, with a focus on technologically-informed mapping and its effect on gay space in the urban sphere. Scholars looking to find out more about virtual bodies, robots or online commercial sex environments might however be disappointed. Chapters do explore, for example, sexual identity in online gaming (Cherie Todd, p.379) and the lives of non-heterosexual youth online (Gary Downing, p.369). Kath Albury’s chapter on “sexting”—the exchange of erotic text messages and personal photos via mobile phones—in schools raises the question not just of technologically-mediated sexualities but how technology figures more generally in the daily lives of young people, and how this technological affinity sometimes clashes with educators and parents in terms of split attention. The most provocative but also generative contribution to the section comes from Sharif Mowlabocus, who illustrates the twin pleasures and risks of geolocative technology by contrasting Grindr as a GPS-enabled cruising practice for gay and bisexual men with GPS-enabled sex offender apps that locate and track supposed criminals in a user’s local area (p.391). Mowlabocus’ work shows how technology regulates the spaces of everyday life in beneficial and

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challenging ways, and how that regulation impacts not just on social but also sexual practices.

I admit that as a researcher who specialises in digital technology and sexualities, I have my own affinity for this particular field, but nevertheless I was surprised not to see more in this final “Digital Sexualities” section. Few would disagree that the role of technology is crucially important in the ongoing development of sex and sexualities research in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nash and Gorman-Murray partially address the limited range of technological contributions in their refreshingly up-to-date concluding chapter, which tracks the influence of new technologies on the ongoing fragmentation of queer urban landscapes in the global North (p.399). At least a few sentences of exploratory thinking on new directions in technologically mediated sexuality—for example, the growing arena of virtual reality—might have been welcome.

On the whole, though, this book is an impressive marker in the field. Gavin Brown and Kath Browne are both respected scholars in geographies of sex and sexualities, and their influence in contemporary scholarship is clearly evident. At the same time, they bring in scholars whose scope reaches beyond more commonly explored queer lives in the urban global North. For those who still hold doubts about the status of geographies of sexualities, the volume clarifies the real importance of the subject in how it can help us think about identity, behaviour, place and space. The value of this collection lies in helping to further cement (or for some, legitimise) geographies of sex and sexualities as a growing field of research with valuable provocations for scholars in numerous related fields. Sex and sexualities research can now boast a book capturing the healthy state of the discipline in 2017, as well as a useful reference work for scholars, researchers and policy workers alike.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://sexualityandthecityblog.wordpress.com>