



## Geography

by Michael Brown

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Most people would expect that the discipline of geography has little or nothing to say about glbtq topics. They think of this academic discipline as a dry almanac of remedial factoids about state capitals and the Corn Belt; or worse, they reduce it to only the physical branch of the discipline (the study of landforms and earth processes). Yet *Human Geography*, the social scientific and humanistic side of the discipline, actually has had quite a bit to say about glbtq issues.

For much of its history Geography has been misunderstood and underappreciated, especially in the United States, where it has been swallowed up by the historian-dominated social studies curriculum for schools. There are only 60 doctoral-granting departments in United States universities.

Ironically, this marginalization stems in part from a legacy of homophobia. In the 1940s, a simmering conflict over a gay relationship between geographers in Harvard University's Geography Department catalyzed the push to close the department. Once Harvard closed its geography department, other major schools followed, leaving the discipline on a precarious footing in the academy. Conversely, geography is much stronger in British and Commonwealth universities, due in no small part to the discipline's historical service to empire and imperialism. These ties, too, had their own queer lineaments.

Nevertheless, over the past 25 years geography has been especially attuned to glbtq people and places and natures. Like other social sciences, early efforts of glbtq scholars were directed at drawing the discipline's attention to its own neglect of glbtq people and places primarily by locating them in space and discussing the resulting patterns' significance. Other efforts attacked the discipline's own homophobia and heterosexism, sometimes quite dramatically, as when one of the field's queer "pioneers" presented a paper at an academic conference in drag. These efforts were abetted by the emerging power of feminists and other critical scholars at the intellectual vanguard of the discipline.

They also corresponded to the rise of so-called "postmodern" and "poststructural" cultural theory and epistemologies across the social sciences and humanities, where an appreciation of grounded, contextual, and local knowledge opened up space for geographers' insights to begin to be heard and appreciated. The result was increased--though still limited--intellectual traffic between queer geography and allied disciplines such as architecture, history, and anthropology.

### **Sexuality and Space**

Geography's main contribution to sexuality studies may be summarized in its emphasis on *spatiality*. Geography insists that all social relations are spatial, and that this matters profoundly. In other words, they do not exist--nor are they best understood--in some abstract purity. Instead, they must be understood relationally and situationally in both space and time, and at a variety of spatial scales from the globe to the body itself. Hence it matters *where* things take place in order to understand what they are. For example, the uneven distribution of glbtq people and identities across space is fundamental to understanding who we are and what being "queer" means.

Such a perspective stands in sharp contrast to conventional social-science approaches where key theoretical concepts or themes retain an essentialized, platonic form, or where their variability over time is highlighted to the exclusion of their variability across space. Geography's "anti-essentialist" perspective means that it is best understood not as a topically-focused inquiry in the academic division of labor, but rather as a mode of seeing and thinking. That standpoint is often called "the geographical imagination."

While work on sexuality and space grew through the 1980s, it was not until the mid 1990s, with the publication of Bell and Valentine's *Mapping Desire* (1995) that the subdiscipline took hold. Sexuality and space is now a strong and vibrant part of urban, cultural, political, and feminist geographies.

To find cutting-edge work on sexuality and space, readers should consult the international journals *Antipode*; *Gender, Place, and Culture*; *Social and Cultural Geography*; and *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. Furthermore, the Association of American Geographers has a specialty group dedicated to the topic. And while there is a decided focus on gay men and lesbians per se, there have also been consistent attempts to study other sexual minorities, including bisexuals, transgendered people, sex workers, and queers more generally, as well as heterosexual cultures and spaces.

Five themes (location, place, nature-society, movement, and regions) exemplify the geographical imagination, and illustrate how geographers have researched sexuality.

### **Location**

Geographers have shown a broad interest in specifying the absolute and relative location of gay and lesbian neighborhoods at a variety of spatial scales. The most obvious treatment of location in queer geography is Gates and Ost's 2004 atlas of same-sex couples in the United States. *The Gay and Lesbian Atlas* shows the concentration of same-sex households in typical areas such as San Francisco, New York City, and Provincetown, Massachusetts, but it also reveals the ubiquity of such family formations across the entire country. Before the 2000 American Census, such mapping was difficult because there was no way to detect same-sex households. Ironically, now that such data are available and being used, some geographers are criticizing the perpetuation of uncoupled glbtq people's invisibility, as well as that of those who are not heads of households, in such research.

The locational analysis of social networks has been another theme, though one largely worked on in lesbian communities. All have noted how tenuous and fluid these networks can be, especially given the ubiquity of the threat of male violence against women in general and lesbians in particular.

Geography's historical attachment to fieldwork and the field has also prompted extended considerations of the locations of researchers and students, including the classroom itself. Much of this research focuses on the ways in which heterosexism works through the spaces of classroom and field to discipline researchers' and students' behavior.

There is also a small American literature on quantitative analyses of voting patterns in gay-rights referenda and elections, most of which argues that both the diffusion of political ideas related to "gay rights" and the so-called "culture wars" can better be understood by looking at voting patterns and their socio-demographic correlates.

Some of the most interesting debates within queer geography have focused on the ways in which different social locations, such as class and ethnic identities, affect and are affected by queer identity. Studies show how different locations exhibit particular relations between people's class, ethnic, gender, and ableist identities that may either challenge or perpetuate homophobia and heteronormativity.

One rather heated exchange was instigated by geographer Heidi Nast, who raised questions about "queer

patriarchy" among class-privileged gay white men in a commentary published in *Antipode*, a self-styled "radical journal of geography." Her piece elicited strong responses from such queer male scholars as Glen Elder and Matthew Sothorn.

## **Place**

Place refers to the unique and meaningful confluence of social relations in time and space. It is a term typically used to capture the cultural dimensions of location.

Here, three themes emerge. First are attempts to understand the closet as material space rather than just a linguistic metaphor. Some of the earliest works in the discipline were given to arguments insisting on the need to explore these hidden, concealed, and erased spaces that were often right under geographers' noses. Gay bars are the most obvious example.

It is fair to say, however, that most work has focused on a second theme, which is the investigation of gay or lesbian neighborhoods and/or the navigation of queer folks through urban space. This scholarship has investigated a wide array of areas in cities and other places around the world, for example: Adelaide, Auckland, Belfast, Cape Town, Christchurch, Delhi, Duluth, New York City, Washington, D. C., Los Angeles, Montreal, New Orleans, rural North Dakota, Toronto, Vancouver.

A third but growing theme, as indicated above, pursues the rural placement of queer life. The collection by Phillips and others, *De-Centering Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis* (2000), pushes against the urban-metropolitan bias in queer geography, demanding that rural spaces also be explored, and showing that these are numerous, complex, and often very influential. His challenge has produced some interesting extensions confirming this basic insight.

## **Nature-society**

A so-called "nature-society" theme (the study of the reciprocal relationship between human beings and their natural or biological environments) is a mainstay of geography, but has affected queer geography only minimally. The theme has been most significant in the geography of AIDS and HIV.

Medical geographers, epidemiologists, and others have mapped and modeled the spread of AIDS and HIV globally and nationally, with little concern for the social and cultural dimensions of the virus or its pandemic. Most ignorantly, they refused to consider the ways gay men, lesbians, and others fought to block the diffusion of the virus, as well as the cultural dimensions of sexuality that affect prevention and infection.

But other geographers have since tried to address these omissions. A "critical health geography" has emerged around this nature-society topic that today is vibrant and growing. It shows, among other things, how important to making sense of HIV/AIDS the spaces of the disease and its treatment, as well as of related subcultures, institutions, and political activism, can be.

## **Movement**

The study of physical movement, including migration, commuting, and daily lifepaths, takes multiple forms in queer geography. Migration of glbtq people from rural areas, suburbs, and conservative parts of cities to other neighborhoods, for example, has been shown to be important in the gentrification process, as well as in the diffusion of queer political strategies and social values. Coming out of the closet, geographers argue, often is spatialized in the form of a migration from one place to another. HIV-positive gay men, for example, link their migration to issues of health-care accessibility, as well as homophobia and AIDS-panic.

Other forms of movement, such as daily commuting and leisure travel, have also been explored. The former

has focused particularly on the constraints confronting lesbians in constructing safe daily lifepaths, while analysis of queer tourism (including so-called "sex tourism") and travel is a particularly burgeoning topic.

Given the discipline's historical links with imperialism and colonialism, it is not surprising that these historical linkages are also being explored. Most recently, there has been a growing interest in the relations between globalization, diaspora, and glbtq identities, much of which has argued that "Western" notions of "gay" and "queer" are themselves potentially "neocolonial" and "neoimperialist."

Such work tends to argue for culturally sensitive and indigenously-derived notions of sexual minority status, as well as for an awareness of how non-Western cultural experiences with sexuality have shaped Western imaginations on the subject

## **Region**

Geographers have long been interested in defining the regional structure of the globe. That is, they seek to make sense of the world by understanding its component parts geographically. From the standpoint of glbtq people and issues, this has tended to mean looking at how different sexualities are constructed and understood in different parts of the world, as well as the role that these constructions play in defining different regions.

Ironically, queer geography, including that about the so-called "non-Western world," remains primarily concentrated in English-speaking and "Western" countries. Nevertheless there has been queer research done by scholars elsewhere. This include scholars in Africa, Asia, Australasia, Europe, the Caribbean, and South Asia.

Most recently, this work has turned its attention away from trying to describe and understand regions per se, and towards understanding "transnationalism," "hybridity," and "multiculturalism" in a globalizing culture and economy. As with much of the new work done under the rubric of movement, much of this scholarship stresses two-way relationships between the "West" and non-"Western" places, as well as new "spatial forms" such as transnational queer identities, political movements, and authority structures.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, geography is a marginalized, misunderstood, and often ignored approach to glbtq topics, yet it has much to offer because it approaches the topic from a spatial perspective rather than an abstract or exclusively historical one.

The homophobia within the discipline is being challenged by an expanding international group of glbtq scholars whose work exemplifies the geographic imagination across the themes of location, place, movement, nature-society, and region. Future work certainly will continue on these lines, especially with respect to globalization. What is less predictable is whether the rest of the social sciences and humanities will appreciate this geographical imagination.

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