

TOWARD A HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF SEXUALITY

- DAVID HIGGS, ed., *Queer Sites: Gay Urban Histories Since 1600*. London: Routledge, 1999, 214 pp., illustrations, bibliography, index, £14.99 paper.
- PHILIP HUBBARD, *Sex and the City: Geographies of Prostitution in the Urban West*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999, 264 pp., bibliography, index, £40.00 cloth.
- FRANK MORT and LYNDA NEAD, eds., *Sexual Geographies, New Formations* Number 37. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1999, 144 pp., illustrations, £14.99 paper.

The manner in which sexual experiences and identities are inflected by contemporary urban life is something of a hot cultural issue at present. The depiction of Manchester's Canal Street in the British television series *Queer as Folk*, for example, constantly stressed the myriad and implicit ways in which a particular urban location sustained a queer experience organized around class, gender, age, and—above all—place-specific consumer practices. This equation of metropolitan life with specific sexual subjectivities is mirrored in another television series, *Sex and the City*. Here too, experiences of place—Manhattan—by a female, professional class friendship network are associated with distinct sexual practices, problems, and personalities exemplified by the thirty-something single woman.

As the three volumes under review demonstrate, this space-sex couplet is also a current historiographical issue. In a sense, this is not surprising. The work of geographers such as David Harvey and Henri Lefebvre has foregrounded the ways in which spatiality, sociality, and historicity are implicated together in the emergence of contemporary patterns of urban life, in what Edward Soja calls the "trialectics of being."¹ As Mort and Nead point out in their introduction to *Sexual Geographies*, space—the city—is not just "a relatively passive backdrop" against which social and cultural processes are enacted but is "a constitutive part of the cultural and social formation of metropolitan

modernity” (p. 6). Such ideas have heavily influenced current analyses of sexuality within human geography. Gill Valentine and David Bell, for example, relate the everyday experiences of lesbians and gay men to the regulative production of the city as a “heterosexist” space and the shifting contours of urban life. Political debates over queer rights become conflicts over the sexual meaning and use of space.²

In these kinds of analyses lie the foundations of a historical geography of sexuality, an investigation into the ways in which space constitutes—and is constituted by—sexual practices and categories. It is to this project that all three texts address themselves. The essays edited by Frank Mort and Lynda Nead in *New Formations* represent the most explicit and wide-ranging engagement with such concerns. *Sexual Geographies* “explores the relationship between sexual regimes and identities and the spatial mapping of London at a number of key moments since the 18th century” (p. 5). Yet, their identification of a historical-geographical approach to the history of sexuality is to beg the question, What do such paradigms have to offer? What might a historical geography of sexuality look like?

Miles Ogborn suggests two approaches to understanding and integrating sexual geographies into existing histories: first, through relating sites of sexual encounter and identity to geographies of leisure, sociability, work, and state regulation, thereby “weav[ing] sexuality into the complex social relations of the cityscape”; second, by analysis of the production and regulation of sexualities through established relations of power. For Ogborn, policing projects and law courts “work . . . through the production and manipulation of spaces which enabled and constrained different constellations of power and knowledge” to constitute specific notions of the sexual meaning of the city (p. 12). His own essay on Lord Hardwicke’s 1753 Marriage Act moves freely between these two tropes. The efforts of state and religious authorities to define a new moral geography of legitimate and illegitimate relationships within the city of London are related to contemporary understandings of the “local evil” of Fleet marriages and the sexual and cultural practices that sustained the clandestine marriage market.

The other contributions to *Sexual Geographies* are organized around this opposition between geographies of sexual regulation and sexual experience. Nead’s analysis of the production, consumption, and regulation of obscenity in the mid-nineteenth century is emphatically a geography of power. For her, official concerns over the sexual nature of the city generated a “highly focused public contest over contemporary concepts of space, culture and social identity” between the House of Lords, the Central Criminal Court, and the pornographers of Holywell Street (pp. 33-5). “Obscenity drew these three elements into a struggle over the legitimate and illegitimate functions of urban space” in which official attempts to remove the “polluting” influence of Holywell Street were bound up with dominant assumptions around the sexual morality of the public city (p. 35). Similarly, Marcia Pointon’s reading of the

funeral of the Princess of Wales is an involved textual analysis of the “imaginary topographies” generated by media accounts of her death and subsequent commemoration. In contrast, Christopher Breward analyzes the role played by clothing in the construction of place-specific urban identities, mapping “the ways in which the retailing spaces of metropolitan London shaped fashionable identities for young men in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (p. 47). In analyzing different patterns of consumption in Hackney, the city, and the West End, Breward relates this process of constructing masculinity to geographies of class and location. The discourses of manliness available in fitting rooms were “heavily reliant on a sense of place” (p. 48).

There is a significant tension inherent to this project. The bifurcation of analysis identified by Ogborn is one that his fellow contributors fail to bridge. Mort and Nead’s introduction implicitly recognizes this, separating those essays analyzing the discursive production of urban sexuality (Mort, Pointon, Nead) from those focusing on what they call the “practices of everyday life” (Breward, Nava) (p. 7). Mort’s own essay on the 1950s Wolfenden Committee is instructive in this respect. For Mort, the committee constituted an exercise in the control of metropolitan homosexuality and prostitution. The mapping of London “in terms of irregular sexuality” thus drew those sexualities into greater administrative visibility as a strategy in their effective regulation (p. 95). Yet, while the evidence of police authorities and magistrates produced a highly specific moral geography—in particular, associating the homosexual with the West End urinals—Mort fails to locate this process of mapping within patterns of sexual behavior and policing. The equation of homosexuality with public sex was not an arbitrary representational strategy but the product of specific spatial, procedural, and cultural constraints on law enforcement that placed private homosexual acts beyond the habitual operations of the metropolitan policemen. Furthermore, public sexual encounters must be located within class, age, and gender-specific urban experiences—which are ignored in this mapping of sexual London.

The collection edited by David Higgs sits uneasily within the boundaries of the historical geographical approach delineated by Ogborn. *Queer Sites* draws together essays on seven Western cities “in order to trace the development of dissident sexualities in them over the last four centuries” (p. 1). Michael Sibalis and Gert Hekma, for example, analyze the historical emergence of queer social networks organized around public (urinals, parks, and streets) and semiprivate commercial (bars and clubs) spaces in Paris and Amsterdam, respectively. Both emphasize the ways in which men seeking men have exploited the cultural and physical forms generated by metropolitan life to construct meeting places and spheres of relative cultural autonomy. As Sibalis suggests, “Urbanisation is a precondition to emergence of a significant gay subculture” (p. 11). Yet, although the conception of a comparative urban analysis of queer experience is a strong one and this book draws on the language of

“sites” and “urban histories” associated with current research on sexual geographies, ultimately, it fails to offer anything to such debates.

The critical absence—as Higgs acknowledges—is of any attempt “to provide a sustained methodological discussion of past urban gay geographies” (p. 4). While this charitably may be attributed to pressures of space and the wish to attract a generalist audience, it leaves a number of the essays floundering in a theoretical vacuum. In particular, Les Wright on San Francisco and Higgs on Rio de Janeiro and Lisbon fail completely to relate geographies of sexual encounter and identity to the wider social and spatial relations of the cityscape. The results are poorly written and organized accounts in which sexuality is curiously dislocated from the urban form. Randolph Trumbach similarly fails to relate his analyses of shifting understandings of same-sex desire to London’s changing social, economic, and cultural geographies. Contrary to the ideas of Soja and Lefebvre, space *is* treated as a relatively passive backdrop to “real” social and cultural processes.

An associated problem is the evidence used. The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century archives of the Portuguese Inquisition dominate Higgs’s analysis of Lisbon. And while Trumbach is understandably detailed on the eighteenth century, his account of London’s twentieth-century queer subcultures draws only on one published collection of life stories and his own memories. This is not a satisfactory comparative history. Only Dan Healey, in a lucid and entertaining essay on Moscow, fully meets Ogborn’s invitation to a historical geography of sexuality, relating patterns and understandings of same-sex relations to class and place specific experiences. Healey is at his most convincing—and intriguing—in his analysis of the ways in which geographies of sexual encounter were structured by wider sociospatial conflicts and processes. In particular, in situating Muscovites’ overwhelming reliance on public space in the virtual removal of private domestic and commercial space for urban sociability of the Soviet era, he makes a point instructive to all working on the queer histories of western cities. This aside, *Queer Sites* is a poorly organized and executed history of sexuality, not a systematic historical geography.

While the essays contained in *Sexual Geographies*—and to a lesser extent *Queer Sites*—profess to extend our understanding of historical sexualities, there is a sense in which they fail to carry through this potential. On one hand, the equation between particular sexual cultures and practices and experiences of place is implicit in many existing histories. Steve Humphries’s and Andrew Davies’s analyses of masculinity and sexuality among working-class youths, for example, clearly situate such identities within the experiences of the street corner gang and a public subcultural life.³ Furthermore, while the introduction to *Sexual Geographies* makes much of the ways in which “recent histories of sex have richly demonstrated the complexity of sexual languages [yet] have continued to underestimate the spatial dimensions of these representational codes,” this is a rhetorical overstatement (p. 6). Jeffrey Weeks’s early work on the Wolfenden Committee, for example, was highly attuned to the ways in

which their proceedings were inflected by distinctions between public and private.⁴ And while Mort et al. draw attention to the spatial dimensions of such languages, they fail to make the ultimate connections to geographies of urban sexual practice and behavior that would make this argument truly significant. As it stands, they are delivering readings of sexual discourses mediated through an understanding of the representation of space.

Such an approach further perpetuates a distinction between representation and experience. This is historical practice with a political danger. While analysis of the regulation of sexuality sheds light on the spatial constitution of dominant sexual codes, it also risks replicating those very categories. Official representations of same-sex relations, clandestine marriages, or interracial relationships in the past construct a range of sexual practices as deviant, as other, immoral, and marginal. Historians unconsciously mirror these moral maps. Thus, Mort and Nead speak of the “social geography of marginality” and David Higgs describes queer historical experiences as “furtive” and “anonymous.” The collection of essays edited by Stephen Whittle on gay men’s urban lives goes under the title *The Margins of the City*.⁵

Yet, Ogborn’s work on the Fleet marriages suggests the existence of alternative moralities in which the clandestine marriage market was located, moralities beyond the bourgeois understandings of church and state. Recent scholarship on historical queer subcultures—particularly George Chauncey’s work on New York—has similarly demonstrated the ways in which gay men did not perceive themselves as anonymous, marginal, or immoral but as a recognizable, central, and positive presence in urban life.⁶ As Alan Mayne has argued in a recent issue of this journal, “The task for social historians . . . is to identify places and activities that have been abstracted by others as dark and marginal and to puzzle through to the experiences of insiders.”⁷ Mayne’s distinction between the social geography of urban inequality and the history of slum myths is appropriate. A historical geography of sexuality must address the geography of urban sexual experiences and understandings as well as the historical production of categories of sexual deviance. This would relocate the production and distribution of pornography in nineteenth-century London within wider analyses of the economic organization of Jewish retailers, the West End property market and the development of an urban consumer of obscenity.

The challenge for a historical geography of sexuality is thus twofold. First, it must situate geographies of sexual encounter, identity, and experience within wider urban social relations. Second, it must bridge the division between discourse and practice by relating the experiences of sexual subjects to their representation as marginal—and vice versa. The work of Stephen Maynard is instructive on the kind of terrain on which this project can develop. Contrasting Foucauldian analyses of sexuality as discursive formation with Chauncey’s “privileging of the sexual underground” as the site at which sexualities are constructed, Maynard seeks to resolve this tension, locating sexual experiences

and identities within both discursive and material (spatial) processes and structures. For Maynard, this can be achieved by focusing on the sites at which discourse and experience meet, what he terms *anchor points* or *local centers of power-knowledge*. As he argues, "We need to view subcultural and discursive formations as existing in a reciprocal relationship, both shaped by a process we might call the dialectics of discovery."⁸ A historical geography of sexuality should be well positioned to meet this challenge.

Philip Hubbard's *Sex and the City* is a model of how such a geography might look. *Sex and the City* is a wide-ranging "attempt to develop a distinctive geography of heterosexuality" (p. 5). Focusing on western, urban prostitution, Hubbard analyzes the ways in which "forms of human sexuality and sexual practice are shaped by the structuring of space" (p. 1). The result is a subtle and persuasive reading of current writing on prostitution, sexuality, and geography that weaves together theoretical exposition and detailed empirical analysis.

Hubbard's starting point is the historical and contemporary production of sex work within dominant, pejorative categories of sexual deviance. This "whore stigma" he argues, sustains the shifting regulation of female prostitution from medieval town statutes to modern regulative bureaucracies and community initiatives. Drawing on Sibley's work on geographies of exclusion,⁹ he characterizes these strategies as attempts to repudiate and remove a disorderly sexual presence from the urban environment, defining the limits of acceptable sexuality through the symbolic ordering of space. In particular, he locates these processes within capitalist impulses to normalize the bourgeois nuclear family as the hegemonic sexual norm. Vice laws thus made "dominant moral codes clear tangible and entrenched, providing a fixed point in the attempt to construct boundaries between good and bad subjects" (p. 103). For Hubbard, the threat posed to heterosexist, patriarchal power by the uncontrolled female sexuality of the prostitute meant she had to be excluded from the modern city.

The sexual mapping of the city is thus related to dominant discourses encouraging people to adopt normative heterosexual identities. Yet, Hubbard is also able to make the crucial analytical bridge between this discursive exclusion and the lived experience of sex workers. Central is the assertion that the pragmatics of policing determines that such exclusion cannot be achieved totally. Statutory and cultural limitations on police operational procedures mean that their relationship with female sex workers is characterized by a complex and constantly shifting pattern of negotiation. Analyzing geographies of social control through medieval Southwark to present day Hull, he demonstrates how the regulation of prostitution focuses on those urban zones where it is perceived to be "out of place." Drawing on the discursive production of sex work as a threat to the nuclear family and their own cognitive maps of the cityscape, the police target soliciting only when it is situated in residential and "respectable" neighborhoods. Thus, "The historical evolution of red light districts . . . needs to be viewed as part of an ongoing process involving the exclusion of disorderly prostitution from imagined sites of orderly sexuality"

(p. 180). Prostitution is tacitly removed to—and tolerated in—industrial or inner-city zones where it is “in place.”

This focus on the site at which sexual discourse and sexual experience meet—the everyday negotiations between street policeman and sex worker—is Hubbard’s strength. *Sex and the City* thus connects pejorative sexual discourses and sociospatial practices to the lives of individual prostitutes. Potential legal hostility means these working lives are characterized by attempts—not to oppose law and order—but to “re-work and divert [urban] spaces to create an alternative meaning of space—a space that often has its own alternative morality, rhythms and rituals—often invisible to outsiders” (p. 183). The spatial marginalization of prostitutes—the obstacles to work from (traditionally safer) domestic locations in some cities, or their reliance on the cover of night—creates very real, everyday problems. On one hand, the adoption of specific beats and working practices such as “pairing” are tactics to “establish social spaces and socio spatial networks that are, at least in part, insulated from control and surveillance” and to offer protection from dangerous clients (p. 183). On the other, this moral remapping of the city sustains an identity apart from pejorative constructions of the sexual marginality and immorality of sex work. Thus, prostitutes may maintain a rigid division between domestic and working life and experience that life as a profession, imbued with concomitant pride and skills.

In a convincing twist, Hubbard closes the loop between discourse and experience. The discursive and pragmatic removal of solicitation to the (assumed) margins of the city, means that when the police, community groups, or media panics “discover” prostitution, dominant constructions of their status as marginal and deviant sexual subjects are sustained through their association with a particular location. “The place of prostitution in the urban landscape serves to construct and reconstruct popular understandings of the limits of sexual citizenship” (p. 15). In the public imagination, sex workers assume the characteristics of the place in which they are found, at the same time as their presence defines that location. For Hubbard, “the moral contours of society are mapped on to (and out of) specific urban spaces” in a process that ensures the place of the prostitute at the symbolic heart of definitions of legitimate heterosexuality (p. 16). It is this self-reinforcing loop that Maynard refers to as the “dialectics of discovery.” *Sex and the City* grounds sexual practices and categories firmly in spatial-material relationships and processes.

There are aspects of this book that historians will find frustrating. Hubbard is a geographer and most concerned with contemporary sexual regimes. There are times when his treatment of the historical production, regulation, and experience of sex work is somewhat thin. In particular, while he is strong on the shifting regulation of sexuality associated with the emergence of metropolitan modernity, he underplays the changing ways in which prostitution has been conceived as a form of sexual difference. His assumptions as to the prevalence and meanings of the “whore stigma” are in a sense ahistorical. But if *Sex and*

the City is not a perfect book, it remains a very good—and a very important—one. Through demonstrating the reciprocal structuring of geographies of sexual discourses and sexual practices and situating competing moral maps of prostitution in the complex and contested terrain of urban power relations, Hubbard demonstrates what a historical geography of sexuality can achieve. This is a model for all working in this field.

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NOTES

1. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, D. Nicholson-Smith, trans. (Oxford, 1991). David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, 1989). Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real and Imagined Places* (Oxford, 1996).

2. See for example David Bell and Gill Valentine, *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexuality* (London, 1995) and T. Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter, *Queers In Space: Communities/Public Places/Sites of Resistance* (Seattle, 1997).

3. Steve Humphries, *A Secret World of Sex: Forbidden Fruit: The British Experience 1900-1950* (London, 1988). Andrew Davies, "Youth Gangs, Masculinity and Violence in Late-Victorian Manchester and Salford," *Journal of Social History* 32, no. 2 (1998): 349-70.

4. Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800* (London, 1981), 239-43.

5. Stephen Whittle, ed., *The Margins of the City: Gay Men's Urban Lives* (Aldershot, 1994).

6. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: The Making of the Gay Male World: 1890-1940* (London, 1995).

7. Alan Mayne, "On the Edge of History," *Journal of Urban History* 26, no. 2 (2000): 249-58.

8. Steven Maynard, "Through a Hole in the Lavatory Wall: Homosexual Subcultures, Police Surveillance and the Dialectics of Discovery: Toronto, 1890-1930," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5, no. 2, (1994): 207-42, and Maynard, "'Respect your Elders: Know Your Past': History and the Queer Theorists," *Radical History Review* 75 (1999): 56-78.

9. David Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West* (London, 1995).