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# Geography and sexuality II: Homonormativity and heteroactivism

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## Abstract

Sexually inflected and queer geographies have variously responded to the changing legal, social and cultural landscapes of the 21st century. This report explores the spatial normalisations that these changes have created, through the concept of homonormativity, and the locatedness of these homonormative critiques. It then examines how these changes have been challenged in an effort to restore forms of heteronormativity through heteroactivism. The report shows the multiplicities and inherent spatialities of the significant changes to sexual and gendered equalities in the 21st century.

## Keywords

anti-gay, anti-gender, equality, homonormativity, marginalisation, resistance

## Introduction

The field of ‘queer geographies’ emerged by focusing on spatialities that normalised, and contested, heterosexuality within male/female binaries (Binnie and Valentine, 1999). This progress report describes scholarship that engages critically with the emerging spatialities of sexual and gender equalities in the early decades of the 21st century.<sup>1</sup> The substantial (and predominantly Global North) geographical scholarship has critically attended to the implications and evolving consequences and transformations of these sexual and gender politics, rights and equalities. Conversely, scholarship

on the contestations of these new sexual and gendered inclusions have pinpointed and illustrated the spatialities of continuing resistances to progressive changes.<sup>2</sup>

We begin by outlining the context for significant legislative and cultural changes to sexualities and genders and then the scholarship that engages critically with these ‘new normalisations’. Specifically, we examine how new

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normalisations reiterate neoliberal, social exclusionary orders, while at the same time, including some gay men and lesbian (Duggan, 2002). We then describe the recent scholarship on heteroactivism that names the growing resistances to sexual and gendered rights and equalities, including Lesbian, Gay, Bi and Trans (LGBT). In contrast to attacks on individuals and a focus on ‘deviant’ sexualities, heteroactivism names the activism that seeks to reiterate the ‘right’ place of the heterosexual normatively gendered family as ‘best for children, best for society’ (Browne and Nash, 2014; Nash and Browne, 2015).

### **Shifting Sexual and Gender Rights: Querying the ‘Progress’ of Two Decades of Change**

The first two decades of the 21st century were marked by significant liberalisation of sexual and gender behaviours, practices and social norms, particularly (but not exclusively) in certain countries in the Global North. These included the passing of same-sex marriage in 29 countries; the appointment of an Independent Expert on sexual orientation and gender identity in the United Nations; and various legislative shifts in terms of employment, hate crime and access to goods and services (Browne and Bakshi, 2011, 2013; Brown and Browne, 2016). These forms of (supra-) state-based legislative inclusions have been coupled with cultural changes, including widespread cultural shifts in the representations of sexuality and gender in popular culture (Richardson, 2017; Weeks, 2007). Geographical variation is critical to understanding both legislated and lived experiences. A nuanced spatial lens offers a critique of the assumption that the Global North is ‘progressive’ and ‘forward thinking’ in terms of sexual and gender liberations and that the Global South is ‘backwards’ (Bakshi et al., 2016; Kulpa and Mizielinska, 2011; Oswin, 2008).

Progressive legislative and cultural changes have come under substantial scrutiny within and beyond geography with a focus on those who continue to be outside new sexual and gender landscapes (Browne and Bakshi, 2013; Herek, 2009; Richardson and Monro, 2012; Taylor et al., 2010). Queer critiques of sexual and gender rights and equalities argue that some queers are ‘left in the cold’ (Sears, 2005: 93) because of legislative inclusions, such as same-sex marriage, which replicate existing capitalist, monogamous, racial and classed privileges (e.g., Warner, 1999a, 1999b; Richardson, 2017). One influential term developed in recent years to describe this outcome, is that of ‘homonormativity’, coined by Lisa Duggan (2002: 179) to describe:

A politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.

Homonormative politics and forms of social acceptance create new ‘others’ who are stigmatised because they do not fit into new gay normalisations. Geographers show, for example, how trans and bi people may be denied access to LGBT spaces/communities (Browne and Bakshi, 2013; Formby, 2017; Johnston, 2018; Maliepaard, 2018). They also demonstrate the importance of spatialities in both the production of homonormativity and the varied ways in which it is contested.

Taking a lead from Duggan’s (2002) original use of the term focusing on the privatisation and domestication of lesbian and gay life, geographical work has considered how homonormativity is produced and contested in the home (Gorman-Murray, 2017). Duggan’s articulation of homonormativity also addresses the societal privileging of self-reliant same-sex couples, which is subsequently discussed by geographers in relation to the political economy of austerity

and the rollback of state welfare provision (Brown, 2015; Di Feliciano, 2015). More broadly, the concept is used to examine how the increasing recognition and privileging of particular expressions of homosexuality has had implications for Pride events (Kenttamaa-Squires, 2017), processes of urban change (Doan, 2007; Gorman-Murray and Nash, 2014; Kanai and Kenttamaa-Squires, 2015; Kenttamaa-Squires, 2017) as well as state asylum policies (Giametta, 2017; Held, 2015).

Here a potential contradiction arises in geographical work, as homonormativity tends to be used to explain both domesticated same-sex coupledness (associated with the decline of LGBT public cultures) *and* the dominant expressions of lesbian and gay public life centred on the commercial LGBT leisure scene. Indeed, Di Feliciano (2019) has addressed this contradiction and explored how the pull of individualism, domestication and coupledness might not preclude participation in highly sexualised gay public cultures and may also shape the lives of HIV+ gay migrants.

Geographers have criticised the concept of homonormativity extensively. For instance, nearly a decade ago Brown (2012: 1066) contended that 'homonormativity (and, even worse, *the* homonormative)' has gained popularity among sexualities scholars and is represented 'as a homogeneous, global external entity that exists outside all of us'. He argued that homonormativity has been theorised on the basis of life 'in the same limited range of global cities that it studies' (e.g. San Francisco, London, New York). Understanding theorists as located somewhere (e.g. many queer theorists developing this thinking are located in large cities), their work can be seen as a 'product of exactly the same spaces and social networks that it critiques' (Brown, 2012: 1067). Thus, geographers have shown that where queer theory is created matters to its making and can reproduce hegemonies around the US that can be presumed to be/written as universal. Mikdashi and Puar

(2016) argue further that the US focus of queer thinking is evermore entrenched and pervasive, increasingly unmarked by its location, in contrast to 'localised' case studies elsewhere (see also Kulpa, 2014). However, it is notable that Mikdashi and Puar, and others in broader queer and sexualities studies, do not cite geographers even where they have been undertaking a very similar spatialised critique of queer theories' positionalities (such as Brown, 2012; Kulpa, 2014). This reflects more broadly how queer geographies and sexualities geographies remain under-recognised in broader work in this area.

Perhaps one of the most influential spatialised critiques that builds on homonormativity is 'homonationalism'. Jasbir Puar (2007) coined the term to understand the post-9/11 use of 'gay rights' in the US to create and perpetuate violent nationalist policies/practices that target Brown and Black bodies as terrorists in both domestic and foreign policy (see also Ammaturo, 2015; El-Tayeb, 2011; Kahlina, 2015; Mepschen et al., 2010). Puar (2007) primarily analysed contemporary global sexual politics as a biopolitical regime for the governance of bodies and populations. In contrast, geographers usefully consider how LGBT rights have been mobilised in geopolitical disputes between Russia and the EU (Foxall, 2017); controversies over aid conditionality when Uganda enacted anti-gay legislation (Rao, 2015, 2020; Tucker, 2019); or the ways women find extra-territorial solutions to national legislation when seeking access to safe abortions (Brickell and Cuomo, 2019; Calkin and Freeman, 2019; Freeman, 2017). These matters are not just biopolitical questions about the regulation of populations, they directly relate to international relations, constructions of national identity and the ways in which territorial sovereignty impacts on marginalised citizens. Thus, as matters of sexuality and gender increasingly become diplomatic concerns, there is a need to think geopolitically and globally about these questions. For example, Laurie and Richardson's investigations of geographies of

stigma highlight the importance of borders and their geographical imaginaries in the reconstitution of everyday lives and the sexual politics of post-trafficked women (Laurie et al., 2015; Richardson and Laurie, 2019). Despite over two decades of explicitly feminist interventions in theorising geopolitical relations (Dixon, 2016; Dowler and Sharp, 2001), more geopolitical engagements with sexualities are needed (Arondekar, 2004; Daigle, 2019). Developing from critical and feminist geopolitics to thinking about global sexual politics, geographers of sexualities can add a distinctly geographical imagination to interdisciplinary debates about contemporary sexualities.

### **New Resistances: Challenging LGBT Equalities**

Alongside critical engagements with the limitations of legislative and cultural equalities, scholars have begun examining heteronormative resistances to the sexual and gender changes of the 21st century. As we discuss below, these resistances can be portrayed as contemporaneously located in the Global South, creating a form of Western exceptionalism (Boulilia, 2019; Haritaworn, 2015; Tucker, 2019). Sexual and gender equalities implemented in supposedly ‘accepting nations’ of the Global North can cast Brown and/or Muslim bodies as the ‘homophobic other’. These bodies become those who are ‘not us’ (Haritaworn, 2015; Rahman, 2014). This perspective often overlooks white Christian contestations of sexual and gender equalities (Nash and Browne, 2020).

Often these accounts fail to consider how these debates are mobilised by political actors in the post-colonial contexts where they occur (Rao, 2020). Oswin (2019), for example, demonstrates that postcolonial elites in Singapore actively retained colonial anti-sodomy laws in order to discipline and harness the heteronormative family in support of the developmental nation-building project after

independence. In other contexts, queer rights and Muslim homophobia are positioned in opposition to a Western exceptionalism that renders certain populations ‘inferior’ (Boulilia, 2019; Rahman, 2014). Beyond this homophobic other, Christian resistances to LGBT rights are read as creating contradictions and divisions within Christianity (Vanderbeck and Johnson, 2015), a complexity not afforded to Brown, Muslim ‘homophobes’ (Haritaworn, 2015). In a study of queer strategies for survival in Beirut, Moussawi (2020) demonstrates that distinctions between traditional/modern and backward/progressive are often deployed fractally at multiple different scales to negotiate difference. Moussawi (2020) also cautions against assuming that the normativities so critiqued by Anglo-American queer theorists actually make sense in situations disrupted by sustained economic and geopolitical precarity.

While studies have shown the nuances and complexities of engagements with religion and sexual and gender rights (Brown et al., 2010; Yip, 2018; Yip and Hunt, 2016), religion is often seen as having a key role in oppositions to sexual and gender rights in the UK and US, at a legislative level, as well as through national and local practices (Andersson et al., 2013; Johnson and Vanderbeck, 2014; Vanderbeck and Johnson, 2015). In this sense, religions are often (erroneously) perceived as monolithically ‘homophobic’, overlooking attempts to create spiritual practices that affirm sexual and gendered diversity (Seitz, 2017). Political science scholarship, based predominantly in the US, has offered an extensive and longstanding engagement with the ‘Christian Right’ and conservative oppositional activism in the US, and supra-national organisations such as the UN (see, e.g. Andersen and Fentner, 2008; Burack, 2014; Buss and Herman, 2003). Understanding gay/LGBT rights campaigns as mutually formed through their engagement with opposition, named as the Christian Right, has been a key contention of those engaging with social

movement theories (Altman and Symonds, 2016; Tremblay et al., 2011). This predominantly North American-focused literature relates specifically to 'anti-gay' rhetoric that vilifies homosexuality, trans people and others as 'deviants' and outside of the moral order, with some examination of the 'stranger next door' (Burack, 2014; Stein, 2001).

Moulding accounts of anti-gay movements and political ideologies and action on US historical experience frames resistances to sexual and gender equalities as an 'export from the United States, overlooking the home-grown roots of the phenomenon' (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017b: 254; Rao, 2015). In contrast, critiques of the globalisation of the Christian Right (Butler, 2006) consider nuanced geographies that pay attention to how local, regional, national and transnational resistances are creating complex interconnected politics (Browne and Nash, 2017; Nash et al., 2019). This increasingly important in social movement literature charts developing oppositions to sexual and gender equalities particularly across Europe under terms such as anti-gender/anti-genderism activism, decentring US Christian Right analyses (see, e.g. Kováts, 2017, 2018; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017a; Nicholas, 2019).

Geographical scholarship has conceptualised 'anti-gender'/'anti-genderism' politics through the broader lens of heteroactivism, offering a geographically nuanced means of exploring emerging resistances to sexual and gender rights (Browne and Nash, 2017; Nash and Browne, 2020). The term heteroactivism conceptualises how sexual and gender rights are resisted, through activism operating in locally specific but transnationally inter-connected ways. It seeks to elevate heterosexuality within man/woman binaries, and formalised within either state or religious marriage for procreation and child raising, as the normative social standard (Browne et al., 2018; Browne and Nash, 2014; Nash and Browne, 2015). This conceptualisation of heteroactivist resistance to sexual and

gender equalities has enabled explorations of the different manifestations that oppositions to LGBT equalities are taking (Nash et al., 2019). This includes how heteroactivists push back against accusations of homophobia, bigotry and hate speech, by creating new arguments that enable them to resist LGBT rights. For example, calls for freedom of speech to challenge trans rights, or same-sex marriage, and parental rights claims to exclude children from compulsory lessons that include LGBT people, lives and relationships, illustrate a tactical move away from individualised attacks on the depravity or dangers of LGBTQ people (Nash and Browne, 2020). These are geographically manifested in ways that connect to local, regional and national cultures, legislative regimes and court decisions. Yet they are also international in the ways that they learn from each other, work together and share successes and failures (Nash and Browne, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

How legislative changes promoting sexual and gender equalities are lived and resisted are key lenses through which we can develop an understanding of contemporary spatialities and places. Geographic scholars argue that progressive changes to sexual and gender equalities, and the resistances that occur cannot be understood outside the interconnections between places. Such a view is critical of the focus on theories that are created in, and based on, the US yet fail to acknowledge this in their creation of critiques and knowledges. It also contests the hierarchical divisions of progressive/backward places and argues how sexualised and gendered power relations are manifest is not easily delineated or compared. Despite the inherent spatialities of sexual and gender equalities and the centrality of sexual and gendered power relations to the constitution of human lives in and between places, these have yet to be fully recognised within and beyond geographies.




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## Notes

1. Sexuality equalities are used to indicate a broad range of sexualities that have been legislated for and have experienced (some) changes in terms of popular cultural acceptances. These include lesbian, gay, and bisexual equalities. Gender equalities indicates the ways in which legislative and cultural inclusions have sought to 'protect' mainly trans (variously defined legislatively) and shifts in cultural acceptances.
2. We acknowledge that there is an extensive literature that we cannot do justice to in this short report. We also recognise the limits of hegemonic citation practices that place the locus of geographies of sexualities/queer geographies in the Anglo-American-Antipodean regions. Nevertheless, we hope that the review will be a useful starting point for outlining key debates and offering insights into their efficacy in Geography. We look forward to developing these conversations through further dialogue and critique.

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