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Di Felicianantonio, Cesare  and De Craene, Valerie  (2024) Almost 30 years later, silence is still here with us: introduction of the themed issue. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 31 (4). pp. 413-423. ISSN 0966-369X

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369x.2023.2298798>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

Version: Accepted Version

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Almost 30 years later, silence is still here with us

**Introduction of the special issue “Remapping desire: bringing
back sex within geographies of sexualities”**

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Abstract

Since the milestone publication of *Mapping Desire* in 1995, geographies of sexualities have found increasing legitimacy and visibility through, among others, publications, conferences and the successful careers of some scholars in the field. However, the materiality of sex and bodies remains overlooked, this making Jon Binnie’s critique (e.g. 1997) of the squeamishness of academic knowledge still timely and relevant. By reflecting on the limitations of current geographies of sexualities scholarship, in this introduction we present the aims, contents and contributions of the special issue as a whole and the different papers composing it. We conclude by acknowledging that the ‘dirty work’ of sex research cannot be left to individuals (often occupying marginalized positions) but requires a collective effort from the entire human geography academic community.

Keywords:

Squeamishness- geographies of sexualities- sex- materiality- human geography- disembodiment- SDG5: gender equality

Introduction

Brussels, September 2011. Two PhD students (one soon-to-be, one in the first year) in Human Geography, who completed their Masters in universities and countries where geographies of sexualities have yet to appear in student curricula, attend the I European Geographies of Sexualities Conference, promoted by the Space, Sexualities and Queer Research Group (SSQRG) of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS). It seems like the dawn of a new world for them: senior, established academics mingling with postgraduates; a friendly and relaxed environment; keynote presentations on relevant, expected themes for human geographers (e.g. queer urbanism) but also emerging, profoundly (geo-)political, issues that would go to reshape the epistemology of the recently-born field of studies for the next decade and beyond (e.g. geographies of sexualities in Brazil, challenging spatial epistemological orders on the production and circulation of academic knowledge); presentations on topics (e.g., polyamory in public space) they would have never imagined to be found at a geographical conference. During the three days of the conference, they realize that there is already a wealthy body of scholarship in the field, starting with *Mapping Desire*, the volume edited by David Bell and Gill Valentine in 1995 usually considered as the first (successful) attempt to bring together the plurality of topics around gender, sexualities and space that had emerged in Anglo-American academic geography since the 1980s (e.g., Adler and Brenner 1992; Bell et al. 1994; Bondi and Domosh 1994; Knopp 1987; Lauria and Knopp 1985; Peake 1993). According to Linda Peake (2016: 575), the book “did take geography boldly into places it had not yet gone, making it possible to utter words not found before in the geographical lexicon – buggery, cottaging, cruising, masturbation, sadomasochism, and sexual attraction, as well as friendships, intimacy, love, and romance. Paedophilia was also introduced.” Following the conference, the future looks rosy for the research aspirations of the two PhD students who are eager to catch up with the multiplicity of debates that have come to define geographies of sexualities, questioning the foundations of geography as a discipline (e.g., Bell 1995; Binnie 1997).

More than a decade has passed since our first meeting (with each other and the sub-discipline) in Brussels, and both of us have had the opportunity to deepen their knowledge of this “messy field” (G. Brown 2008; Knopp 2007; Lim 2007) and experience the multiple challenges posed by doing research on desire and sexual practices (Bono et. al. 2019; De Craene 2017a, 2020, 2022; De Graeve & De Craene 2019; Di Feliciantonio 2021; 2023; Di Feliciantonio and Gadelha 2017; Di Feliciantonio, DasGupta and Gadelha 2017). However, what originally looked like dawn turned out to be the bright light of courageous, generous individuals whose value went recognized (sometimes even rewarded) by the institutions of geographical knowledge (often under the banner of diversity and inclusion) which, nevertheless, have remained unwilling to question the foundations of their mechanisms of knowledge production and validation. Despite *Mapping Desire* being almost 30 years old, we are still routinely asked to articulate how our research ‘is geography’, why it is relevant for academic geographers; we have been told, among others, that ‘there is too much sex and little geography’ in our work; we are being asked to cut parts of texts deemed too explicit in order to avoid the increasingly frequent backlash from right-wing groups and sensationalistic media news questioning equalities and the legitimacy of specific academic fields, especially gender and sexualities studies (e.g., Darakchi 2019; Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Nash and Browne 2020; Rasmussen 2023); we have seen ‘geographies of sexualities’ becoming increasingly mainstreamed and recognized by academic institutions, especially in the Anglo-American world (Binnie 2007; Bonner-Thompson et al. 2020; Brown, Browne and Lim 2007; Browne and Brown 2016), while few people working on sex and sexualities are offered permanent positions, this leading to some very big geography departments not having any member of staff doing research on sex and sexualities. More than a decade after entering this field, we have front row seats to witness the different mechanisms leading to the (always changing) processes of exclusion throughout publication, review and hiring processes, and the conditional acceptance -or better, tolerance- of the legitimacy of our work in the everyday academic practices, including in those institutions (departments, journals, etc.) who seem or claim to be supportive of our work. Sadly, Jon Binnie’s comment on how “[S]uspicion of and squeamishness around sex and sexuality are common threads through academic production” (1997: 225) resonates with us for its actual applicability. How else to explain the persisting silence around the materiality of sex and sexual practices (with notable exceptions such as Bain and Nash 2006; Bonner-Thompson 2017; 2021; G. Brown 2008; De Craene 2017a, 2017b; Di Feliciantonio 2019; 2020; 2022; 2023; Di Feliciantonio and Brown 2023; Gurney 2000; Langarita 2019; Misgav and Johnston 2014; Sanders-McDonagh 2017) in a sub-discipline that now counts several handbooks, monographs and myriads of articles? For geographies of sexualities to become mainstream, the focus has had to be on identities (Binnie and Valentine 1999; Bonner-Thompson et al. 2020; M. Brown 2012; 2014; Johnston 2016), rather than practices, as they better suit the neoliberal agenda of diversity and inclusion (e.g., Ferree and Zippel 2015; Morris et al. 2022). We are not trying to throw the baby out with the bathwater: the incorporation of geographies of sexualities scholarship into undergraduate and postgraduate syllabi; the career progression and the public recognition of scholars in the field; the proliferation of books and articles; the visibility within geographical associations and at conferences; the growing influence over broader disciplinary debates (e.g., citizenship, activism, home, precarity and work, just to name a few); these are all extremely important achievements that allow to include broader groups of people within geographical investigation, affirming the co-constitutive character of social inequalities across different axes of differentiation, while also making academic geography less exclusionary, open to acknowledging its masculinist, White, colonial and heteronormative history (Kinkaid 2023; Oswin 2020). Nevertheless, such advancements should not stop critical scholars from questioning the squeamishness of (geographical) academic knowledge to reaffirm the spatial

character of sexual practices and the sexed and normative construction of space (Bell and Binnie 2004; Bettani 2015; Hubbard 2012; Nast 1998; Oswin 2008; Valentine 1993). Building on Binnie's considerations (1997; 1998) about geographers pushing the boundaries of what constitutes 'acceptable' knowledge and scholarship against the increasing disembodiment of queer and feminist epistemologies, this themed issue aims to bring back sex within geographies of sexualities by engaging with the materiality of bodies, senses, and fluids in their contextual emergence as part of broader "spatio-temporal assemblages" (Brown and Di Feliciano 2022; Nash and Gorman-Murray 2017). Including geographical contexts under-represented in the field -such as Estonia, Finland, and Poland- the papers composing the themed issue extend considerations of sexual landscapes beyond hegemonic locations, concepts and binarisms (e.g., the 'homonormative', male-dominated big city; physical vs digital spaces; the removal of whiteness as a racialized category within sexual spaces; the neglecting of intimacy as a research method), creating diverse, diffuse and inclusive geographies of sex. In doing so, they offer new insights and theorizations that are of pressing importance to re-assert the centrality of critical geographical knowledge to understand the materiality of sex.

In the first paper of this issue, Jenny Sunden, Susanna Paasonen, Katrin Tiidenberg, and Maria Vihlman show how social media platforms devoted to sexual expression in three Scandinavian countries (Denmark, Finland, and Sweden) shape how users imagine and engage with location by negotiating notions of proximity and distance (e.g., local scarcity or experiential distance), risk and safety, and in doing so make space for sexual sociability. Their study challenges binary understandings of both space and sex by showing how users of these platforms articulate a sense of comfort and investment in local spaces of sexual play, but also how platforms operate within regional and linguistic boundaries and how the platform affordances co-produce the sexualization of spaces, and the spatialization of sex at the regional scale. What this paper does is emphasizing the centrality of sexuality and the materialities of sex to understand physical spaces (whether this is a beach, trees, a sauna, or a nation state), eliciting once more how sexuality and space are intrinsically linked rather than complementary to each other.

Studying the sex life of non-heterosexual couples in Poland, Agata Stasińska and Joanna Mizielińska call for a nuanced and critical understanding of sexual practices attentive to socio-political contexts and goes beyond the Anglo-American dominance of current analyses of queer lives and relationships. In their paper, they show how research participants try to take control over their sexual stories by distancing them from the stereotypes and prejudices attached to their sexualities and gender. Their analysis contributes to a better understanding of how 'private' spheres relate, preproduce, and/or challenge 'public' norms, and allows us to better understand how the problematic socio-political situation of nonheterosexual communities in Poland and Polish traditionalism impacts how nonheterosexual people develop their sexual stories and perceive their sexual practices.

Gilly Hartal and Sari Geiger use looking for silences as a method to show how sexual subjectivities are framed in relation to urban places, rendering peripheral areas in Israel often the landscape of sexual oppression or violence. Rather than seeing these in opposition to each other, Hartal and Geiger move beyond the rural-urban dichotomy by showing how sexual subjectivity of LBT women itself is constructed through the intertwined movement between silence and discourse, and between rural and urban. Interestingly, it is the *lack* of the materiality of sex and sexual practices in this research on sexual subjectivity on LBT women in the Israeli periphery that lead the authors to question the how, why and where of the silences, for example showing how sex is (only) present in a domesticated form, yet even then, it is discursively absent. In doing so, they convincingly show how looking into silences -what is not said, but

also what is hinted to- serves as a fruitful vantage point to understand socio-geographical questions on sexuality.

A similar effort is brought by Kerry Drysdale, Sophie Robinson and Andrew Gorman-Murray, who have collectively reflected on where, in their own work, lesbian placemaking occurred through the materiality of sex. Interestingly, they also had to look back at their past research projects and trajectories, looking back at what had been said, but also what was not explicitly spoken about. Doing so was the only way to engage with the materiality of sex when researching domestic, social, and community placemaking practices in Australia. In contrast to the better researched lives of gay men in Australia, this collective effort -bringing together different disciplines and research projects- shows how lesbians and queer women have already and are still navigating precarious, ephemeral and mobile places in which sex and placemaking activism are intertwined and in which their sexual hedonism plays a far more crucial role than often anticipated, if only we are willing to see it. And, as the authors add, this requires practicing how to speak to each other and different audiences about the sexual desires and behaviours permeating archives and finding methodologies which allow us to better grasp the materiality of sex.

Alessandro Boussalem and Cesare Di Feliciano also experiment with the analysis and writing up of their research projects when researching sexual racialization in the lives of gay and bisexual men in Belgium, Italy and the UK. In their paper, they discuss their 'dialogical' approach to the interpretation and analysis of qualitative data and collaborative writing, allowing them to reveal the ambivalences of power relations at work in the formation of sexual desires and encounters. They join the other contributors to this special issue who all highlight the central role of place, location and social context, and how dynamics of privilege and oppression vary for the same person across different locations and moments in time in ways that are not fixed. By making the dialogue, and the (self) reflexivity it requires, part of the research process itself, they highlight the fruitful encounter with each other's data, but also categories, reflections and positionalities, advancing an intersectional analysis beyond fixed categories that too often underlie, amongst others, the positionality-section of research papers.

The final contribution to this special issue takes the quest for new methodologies and research practices when researching the materiality of sex even further. In their research on trans sex practices, H Howitt employs intimacy as a method by using their body as both a fertile site of knowledge production and an instrument for intimate analysis. Opposing the emotional and bodily detachment that is foregrounded in the neoliberal and erotophobic university, Howitt uses intimacy throughout the entire project: not only as a site of inquiry, but also as a tool for data collection, analysis and intimate dissemination. This paper not only helps to push geographies of sexualities to reconsider the current methodologies being used and ethics to support these methodologies, but also sheds a much needed light on the often overlooked trans lives and intimacies. In many ways, this contribution confronts geographies of sexualities and current academia with the hierarchisation and (de)legitimation of certain forms of knowledge, even today, and even in research spaces (conferences, journals, special issues, ...) where the materiality of practices are presented as a central theme.

The many collaborative writings in this issue clearly show the willingness to experiment with and a need for more engaged research methodologies in the way we collect, analyze, interpret and write our research when trying to bring to the fore the materiality of sex and intimacies. As guest editors, we appreciate these efforts, especially in the enduring publish-or-perish rat

race that hinders rather than facilitates the time and energy that these practices of truly listening and engaging in complex dialogues require (Evans 2016; Mountz et al. 2015).

We see this special issue as a further call for geographers of sexualities not to shy away from the ‘dirty work’ (Irvine, 2014) of engaging with the materialities of bodies and sex through experimenting with different theories, methods, collaboration practices, and outputs. Hoping not to find ourselves writing the same message in ten years from now, we believe it’s important to acknowledge that such change can really manifest only through the support of the entire human geography academic community. Without a collective willingness to question and change the foundations of the structures that reproduce the everyday squeamishness of academic knowledge and practices (e.g., funding, hiring, publishing, citing, collaborating, teaching), we cannot expect individuals (often occupying marginalized social positions) to take the burden of unveiling the silences and assumptions that continue to shape human geography as a discipline and as a community of scholars. Therefore, those occupying key positions within our academic community- e.g., editors, senior professors who sit in hiring and/or funding panels- should take into account, within their role, the challenges faced by marginalized subjects and/or researchers working on topics that continue receiving mockery and ostracism. This should apply also to ethical committees that have been shown to be overzealous in their prescriptive role when dealing with research on bodies and sex (Di Feliciano 2021; Robinson and Davies 2014), while failing to care for the wellbeing of researchers who are often the receivers of intense public backlash and hate campaigns because of the focus of their research (Peto 2017; Rasmussen 2023). Peers not occupying senior roles who work on topics receiving less negative reception can also do their part by being more proactive and outspoken in building solidarity with those occupying marginalized positions, putting mechanisms in place to share and redistribute the mental load and the emotional toll of doing research that is routinely devalued and ridiculed (Puāwai Collective 2019; San Roman Pineda et al. 2023). These and other strategies are crucial to discontinue the silence that is still with us today.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Gender, Place & Culture for providing the space for this special issue. Thanks in particular to Dr. Margaret Walton-Roberts for the guidance throughout the making of this issue. We thank all authors of this issue for their inspirational insights and thought-provoking ideas to bring back sex into geographies of sexualities. The conversations during and after the issue are what keeps on inspiring and motivating in our work. To Kacy, our co-conspirator, who would have probably co-edited this with us.

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