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QUEERCITIES, QUEERCULTURES

Europe **since 1945**

B L O O M S B U R Y

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Seeing like a queer city

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Introduction

It would be impossible to summarize the 12 core chapters making up this volume; along with the introduction and first postscript, they address a staggering array of topics regarding queer cities. I instead extend some key themes, building on three aspects of my own history. First, I have been involved in queer urban activism at various points in my life. This includes involvement in the events during the 1991 coup attempt in Moscow described by Dan Healey in Chapter 5 – some of which took place in my apartment at the time.¹ Second, I have conducted research on *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians, focusing on cities in that archipelago.² Third, I have conducted research on internet sociality.³

Reflecting on the varied insights provided by the contributors to this volume in light of these intellectual and activist experiences, I see five key themes of value for future work. First, the contributions to this volume demonstrate the limits of 'neoliberalism' as a conceptual framework. Second, they suggest how work in urban theory that highlights the partial, emergent and contradictory aspects of city governance has much to offer a queer perspective. I will weave the work of Mariana Valverde into the discussion to illustrate this point. Third, while the contributions to this volume take European cities as their foci, they suggest comparative lines of inquiry beyond what I might term a queer Hanseatic League. Fourth, the chapters in diverse ways all insist on attention to the historicity of sexuality and the urban. Finally, the authors of these chapters point towards the growing relevance of digital sociality in queer urbanity.

All told, then, in what follows I reflect on themes of law and governance, norms and practices, history and change. It is through such a contextual

and processual approach to queer urbanity that we can best appreciate the contributions to this volume and their import for future research.

Beyond 'Neoliberalism' and normativity

We have reached a point where 'neoliberalism' has lost analytical purchase save when carefully deployed in reference to the use of market models in governance.⁴ In many debates within queer studies, the term is used in a much more diffused manner, even acting as a synonym for 'capitalism'. The danger here is a functionalist analytic treatment of an anthropomorphized 'neoliberalism' as knowing what it wants – as possessing a unified set of interests that 'it' pursues through the coherent and consistent exploitation, abjection and exclusion of those who are not white, male, heterosexual, citizens, middle class, abled and so on. The 'good guys' and 'bad guys' are clear – the politics comfortable and known at the outset. That these exclusions and exploitations are very real should not blind us to the limitations of this 'neoliberal' analysis. This recalls Stuart Hall's classic critique of the idea that 'Of course, the right represents the ruling class in power. It represents the occupancy, by capital, of the state which is nothing but its instrument. . . . This is Marxism as a theory of the obvious. The question delivers no new knowledge, only the answer we already knew'.⁵

Construals of state power being self-aware and seamless can backfire in that they ascribe great efficacy to such power, making it hard to see how social change could occur. As Gibson-Graham and many others have long noted, this elides the diverse and often contradictory forms of capitalist and non-capitalist economic practice occurring on an everyday basis.⁶ It dehistoricizes capitalism, making it hard to see how this particular hegemony, despite its often violent power, is nonetheless a project that must be constantly renewed and is thus constantly vulnerable to reconfiguration.

This brings us to the question of normativity. In many ways, the critique of heteronormativity has linked a broad range of work falling in some fashion under the rubric of queer studies.⁷ Challenging heteronormativity, the view that heterosexual relationships and practices are more natural, holy or proper, is valuable not least because it allows us to differentiate and relate questions of law and social belonging to questions of emotion and affect. This, for instance, provides conceptual tools for distinguishing heterosexism from homophobia, which is vital for understanding and countering differential forms of oppression.⁸

Queer studies scholars have for some time now developed critiques of homonormativity, which occurs when certain forms of homosexuality get ranked over others and marked for preferential inclusion by the state (in particular, the legally sanctioned couple, the white gay man, the middle class lesbian, etc.).⁹ What remains deemphasized in this body of analysis is a discussion of queernormativity: often its very existence is ignored or denied.

Yet any discursive formation, any cultural logic, can have normalizing effects linked to political economic dynamics, and the figure of the 'queer' is not exempt. This insight was at the heart of Foucault's preference for a notion of 'reverse discourse' that allowed us to better understand how 'homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or "naturalness" be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified'.¹⁰

The point Foucault makes here – a top candidate for the foundational conceptual intervention of queer theory itself – is that we are shaped by the historical dynamics of power that constitute the cultural lifeworlds we in turn change. Foucault's dissatisfaction with the notion of 'liberation' was shaped by its implication that one could begin from a *tabula rasa*, stepping outside society and context, particularly the idea that such an impossible standpoint of absolute purity was necessary for political efficacy and cultural authenticity. This notion of being within the that which one critiques is at the heart of the notion of 'queer': transforming that which dominates. This implies complicities, contaminations, intimacies. It is a set of insights shared with many allied fields of inquiry like post-colonial theory, and it means recognizing that discursive fields represented as oppositional are not immune to the possibility of producing normativities of their own.

Legal nonconforming and nuisances of queer urbanity

Moving beyond the languages of neoliberalism and normativity as self-evident constructs permits us to advance a more nuanced analysis of queer urbanity. To demonstrate this in the most succinct manner possible, I will turn to the work of Mariana Valverde. The title of this chapter pays homage to her article 'Seeing Like a City: The Dialectic of Modern and Premodern Ways of Seeing in Urban Governance'.¹¹ Valverde advances the claim that the 'seeing like a state' rubric associated with James Scott, while of value in many contexts, cannot be simply extrapolated to questions of the urban.¹² Forms of urban power are notable for their conjunctural character – city council districts, fire districts and police districts may not overlap, indeed may use different data sets and modes of governance, and thus have difficulty communicating with each other. Valverde challenges the 'methodological tendency to regard legal and governance inventions . . . as tools chosen to implement a fixed political project'.¹³ This is quite a queer point. Given the emphasis on history that we find in most chapters in this volume, it is relevant that Valverde underscores how 'the relationship between modern and premodern modes of urban power/knowledge . . . is not captured by narratives in which one mode of power/knowledge replaces the other in Weberian fashion. Neither is the relationship reducible to the hegemony-versus-resistance paradigm'.¹⁴

In regard to intersections of the queer and urban, two aspects of Valverde's analysis are of particular interest. The first is Valverde's concept of 'structural contingency', which provides one way to avoid totalizing narratives of neoliberalism.¹⁵ Valverde charts the history of the fascinating concept of the 'legal nonconforming' building or social formation in urban law, through what I might term the routinization of exception:

The fundamental role played by the exception-granting mechanism in contemporary planning is well known to practitioners, but it is not reflected in planning textbooks or in official law. The fact is that in many cities today, legal nonconforming uses are everywhere. There are condominium buildings that are twice as tall as the zoning regulations theoretically allow, many low-income people continue to live above workshops and stores despite the zoning rules, and there are numerous businesses that are not supposed to be located where they actually are.¹⁶

What is striking here is that 'legal nonconforming use' is 'the category that installs exceptionality, indeed illegality, at the very heart of modernist planning law'.¹⁷ Note this is very different from the 'state of exception' discussed in the work of Agamben and linked to the figure of the concentration camp.¹⁸ The notion of 'legal nonconforming use' queers the city by instilling exceptionality within its heart, not at its margins. It both geographically and legally incorporates the Other in the tension of the nonconforming. Surely there is great potential for a queer reading of Valverde's analysis that would permit advancing a notion of 'queer nonconforming' that is included through exception. Such an analytical approach would generate research questions and theoretical insights that could significantly advance the narratives of queer communities in European cities presented in the volume.

A second issue raised by Valverde with relevance to the analysis of queer urbanity is 'the category of nuisance'.¹⁹ Emphasizing that 'the capacious and rather fuzzy category of nuisance enables a significant amount of legal governance', Valverde shows how this category is linked to a category of 'enjoyment' – if you prevent someone from enjoying their urban environment, you are making a nuisance.²⁰ Thus 'nuisance is an inherently relational and thus embodied category'.²¹ As a result, 'since microcommunities, in the context of urban governance, are always assumed to share certain local norms and tastes . . . nuisance and related legal disputes play a constitutive role in the construction of culturally specific collective subjectivities'.²²

As with the notion of 'legal nonconforming' discussed earlier, the category of nuisance has rich potential for advancing queer urban analysis. Historically, queer persons have often been targeted for 'nuisance abatement' – seen not so much as an existential threat to the city, but endangering others' 'enjoyment' of the urban context. Furthermore, as Valverde notes, the notion of nuisance is powerfully intersubjective and embodied.

Tracking, for instance, how a gay pride march is sometimes construed as a nuisance and in other cases as an asset might thus have much to offer future investigations into queer urbanity.

Beyond the queer Hanseatic League

Valverde developed her analysis regarding the specificities of urban governance, of 'seeing like a city', with regard to North America and particularly Canada. Yet I do not think this makes her insights any less valuable for the contexts discussed in this volume. This is not only because city governments worldwide often share ideas and copy policies first implemented elsewhere. In addition, the insights discussed above are valuable because they help push us into a more comparative and less Eurocentric frame.

To be clear: my point is not to find fault with the fact that the chapters in this volume discuss Europe. No one book can do everything; focus is important, and in any case the range of cities and issues discussed is impressive indeed. My point is rather that the studies in this volume can now be situated in a more global perspective. For instance, in my own work in Indonesia I have seen *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians engage in what de Certeau referred to as 'tactics' of place-making in urban environments, from parks to apartments and salons.²³ Given that Indonesia is the fourth-most populous nation (after China, India and the United States) and home to more Muslims than any other country, the questions of Islam and belonging that haunt discussions of contemporary European cities can be usefully placed in dialogue with urban contexts where Islam is the majority religion.²⁴ Similarly, forms of queer urbanity elsewhere in Asia, in Latin America, in Africa and beyond can provide fascinating comparative material to extend the insights of these chapters.

History, event, movement

A common theme of the chapters in this volume, which largely take the form of linear chronological narratives, is an attention to history. The World Wars loom in the background as transformative disruptions in urban life and national identity, and attention is paid to activism and organizing. In terms of this overall interest in the historicity of queer urbanity and also the concerns with queernormativity discussed earlier, it is worth asking how European urban and national histories shape not just forms of exclusion, but forms of inclusion as well.

For instance, in his book *Symptoms of Modernity: Jews and Queers in Late-Twentieth-Century Vienna*, Matti Bunzl explores over a century of relationships between Jews, queers and national belonging in Austria.

He notes that 'through the modern twin discourses of anti-Semitism and homophobia, these groups were mobilized and fortified as the constitutive outsides of respectable Germanness, thereby allowing the retrospective fixing of the nation-state as a fantasized public space of ethnic and sexual purity'.²⁵ Of particular interest is his conclusion that:

[T]he emergence of Jews and queers into Vienna's public sphere should be read as a signpost of postmodernity. This is meant literally, in that the unprecedented prominence of these groups within the city's urban landscape signals a genuine departure from the modern logic of Jews' and homosexuals' foundational abjection. In a globalizing world, the principal Others of the modern nation-state no longer figure as constitutive outsides. On the contrary, they have been incorporated as fundamental elements of a diversified public sphere.²⁶

The significance of this insight cannot be underestimated. Recalling my earlier discussion of inclusion through 'legal nonconforming', Bunzl here gestures towards a contemporary dynamic of contested belonging in the European city worth additional investigation. The attention paid by queer scholars to inequality and exclusion is critical to that intellectual project, but as several contributors to this volume note, that project loses comprehensive force if we disavow or downplay the forms of social justice and inclusion that, however, incomplete and unequally distributed, must be brought into the analytical frame in a manner that resists both triumphalism and teleology.

An important emphasis in Bunzl's analysis, shared by nearly every chapter in this volume, is the role of events in urban queer subject and community formation – from Berlin to Ljubljana. Unlike a community or an enclave, 'events' in my formulation here are delimited geographically and temporally. When the geographical delimitation is highlighted, they are often termed 'memorials'; when the temporal delimitation is highlighted, they are often termed 'marches' or 'protests'. It is unusual for such events to take place in the countryside or even the suburb; rather, people typically hold them in a place seen as the city's heart.

Forms of movement are also a common theme in analyses of queer urbanity. While of course, many queer people are born in cities, cities are also the prototypical destination for queer persons in Europe and beyond (i.e. for instance, very much the case in Indonesia). The 'coming out' narrative, in whatever form it takes in varied cultural contexts, often includes not just a personal coming-to-consciousness, but a physical movement away from the family home to an urban context. In the United States, this narrative has been transformed by many persons, particularly but not exclusively queer persons of colour, for whom separation from the family is undesirable for affective, economic and social reasons. In Indonesia as well, persons often live in the parental home until married: many *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians use

the excuse of a job opportunity (almost always a major city) as a reason to move from the family home, but still keep in close contact.

As several contributions to this volume note, movement between cities is also a feature of many queer urban lives, ranging from brief visits for a pride parade or to visit friends, to longer-term migrations (for instance, from Helsinki to Sweden or Denmark). In Europe as in many other parts of the world, international forms of migration are often to cities, and these migrations continue to transform queer urban experiences.

Digital queer urbanity

As an anthropologist, I always hesitate to make universalizing claims, but it may not be hyperbole to assert that we have already reached a point in human history where there is no such thing as a queer selfhood that does not have a digital component. In particular, the rapid global spread of mobile devices, even to persons living in poverty, means that forms of 'digital divide' are in flux. However, while internet technologies are reshaping diverse domains of human existence, we must not let the technology sector's affinity for hype-filled narratives to occlude historical legacies and continuities.

The impact of online sociality on queer urbanity is so vast that I will here simply note three forms this impact can take that are worthy of empirical and theoretical attention. First are the globalizing aspects of digital technologies. Because historically queer life is rarely learnt from one's 'tradition' or family, queer persons have long engaged with translocal narratives in forging subjectivities and communities that are influenced by, but not reducible to, that translocality. In my own work, I have used the notion of 'dubbing culture' to discuss how queer persons reconfigure translocal narratives in the context of technology, in a manner analogous to a 'dubbed' film where the moving lips of the actors and the voice rendered in another language do not match up.²⁷ In contemporary urban contexts, internet technologies allow for important forms of communication and interaction between cities, between cities and their countrysides, and international organizations. Simply because someone who suspects they may not be heterosexual lives in a city does not mean they will know how to access information and community in their environs. Often, important connections will be with distant others through forms of digital intimacy ranging from Facebook posts to informational websites.

Second, one of the biggest developments in the digital realm since the mid-2000s has been the rise of mobile devices like smartphones and tablets. The prominence of these devices has shaped a growing use of the internet for localizing as well as globalizing connection. As the internet increasingly moves with us in real time, queer urban identity, community and practice is simultaneously online and offline, and this overlay between the digital and the physical is certain to reshape cities. For instance, the experience of public transportation is vastly different now that riding a bus or train typically

means engaging with mobile devices at the same time. This means being in a state of privatized online connection— using a personal device rather than watching a shared monitor – even while in a public vehicle moving through an urban environment.

Third, the digital does not simply play a derivative or secondary role compared to the physical. The growing omnipresence of internet engagement means that the offline is gradually becoming experienced as the state of being temporally not online. There can thus emerge forms of online sociality that have their own logics, norms and even digital places that cannot be reduced to any one physical-world place or social context. From virtual worlds to online games and some social network sites and other browser-based venues, we find urban denizens engaging in forms of digital placemaking – even participating in virtual cities that exist only online.

Needless to say, these three impacts of the digital on urban experience are not exhaustive. They simply point towards some of the many ways that online socialities will continue to transform urban experience. As with any other technological disruption, these effects of the online could be exclusionary or inclusive, corporatized or community-based, in service of social justice or contributing to forms of discrimination. It depends on what we do with these technologies, and for that reason alone continuing research on them is desperately needed.

Conclusion

While there is, of course, no singular way that queer cities 'see', in this discussion I have sought to track key intersections of queer sexualities and urbanisms. Worldwide, the trend towards greater urbanization continues apace, particularly in non-Western contexts. Our cities of the future could be dystopian slums of despair, utopian metropolises of progress, or both at once, zoned into uneasy coexistence.

Given that queer communities have been central to the development of the modern city in Europe and beyond, attention to the place of sexuality in urban life could provide pathways towards a better understanding of how urban life might contribute more powerfully to human flourishing. If we try seeing like a queer city, just for a little while, what new vistas might emerge?

Notes

- 1 See Boellstorff, T. (2007a), *A Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Indonesia*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 9–10; Boellstorff, T. (2012), 'The politics of similitude: Global sexuality activism, ethnography, and the western subject', *Trans-Scripts*, 2, 22–39, p. 25; Gessen, M. (1991), 'Soviet queers fight coup: Gay newspaper became printing plant for Russian resistance', *The Advocate*, 24 September, p. 50.

- 2 See Boellstorff, T. (2005a), *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Boellstorff, T. (2005b), 'Between religion and desire: Being Muslim and Gay in Indonesia', *American Anthropologist*, 107(4), 575–85; Boellstorff (2007a).
- 3 Boellstorff, T. (2008), *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Boellstorff, T., B. Nardi, C. Pearce and T. L. Tylor (2012), *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- 4 Ong, A. (2006), *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- 5 Hall, S. (1988), *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*. London: Verso, p. 165.
- 6 Gibson-Graham, J. K. (1996), *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Gibson-Graham, J. K. (2006), *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- 7 Wiegman, R. (2012), *Object Lessons*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- 8 Boellstorff, T. (2004), 'The emergence of political homophobia in Indonesia: Masculinity and national belonging', *Ethnos*, 69(4), 465–86.
- 9 For example: Duggan, L. (2003), *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- 10 Foucault, M. (1978), *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books, p. 101. For further discussion: Boellstorff, T. (2007b), 'When marriage falls: Queer coincidences in straight time', *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, 13(2/3), 227–48; Boellstorff, T. (2011), 'But do not identify as gay: A proleptic genealogy of the MSM category', *Cultural Anthropology*, 26(2), 287–312.
- 11 Valverde, M. (2011), 'Seeing like a city: The dialectic of modern and premodern ways of seeing in urban governance', *Law & Society Review*, 45(2), 277–312.
- 12 Scott, J. (1998), *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- 13 Valverde (2011), p. 280.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid., p. 289.
- 16 Ibid., p. 290.
- 17 Ibid., p. 291.
- 18 Agamben, G. (1998), *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- 19 Valverde (2011), p. 291.
- 20 Ibid., p. 292.
- 21 Ibid., p. 294.
- 22 Ibid., p. 295.
- 23 Boellstorff (2005a), p. 129.
- 24 Boellstorff (2005b).

- 25 Bunzl, M. (2002), *Symptoms of Modernity: Jews and Queers in Late-Twentieth-Century Vienna*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. ix.
- 26 Bunzl (2004), p. x.
- 27 See Boellstorff (2005a) for a detailed discussion.

Further reading

- Agamben, G. (1998), *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Boellstorff, T. (2004), 'The emergence of political homophobia in Indonesia: Masculinity and national belonging', *Ethnos*, 69(4), 465–86.
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- Wiegman, R. (2012), *Object Lessons*. Durham: Duke University Press.