

Queer Geographies

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A Queer Geographer's Life as an Introduction to Queer Theory, Space, and Time

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I used to be afraid to get in bed with theory, and queer theory was no different. What the hell were these theory people talking about? Who could ever capture queer life in theory? As an urban, queer, feminist geographer and psychologist, as well as a lesbian-queer-dyke-feminist-trans non-op, non-hormone dyke, I have had to come to grips with theory, queer and otherwise. The liberatory practices of what I call *queering space* and *spatializing the queer* eventually helped me to make sense of the world and even to make sense of my life and my place(s) in the world. Now that theory has equally and happily gripped me, it is worth spreading the answers to these questions. In this essay, I explain how I came to love theory through geographic theories, LGBTQ geographies, and queer theory. I write of my experience of queering geography and geographizing the queer so that you can begin to see how these different elements can be put in conversation with one another. I share my story and these theories to help you expand the way you read the art and essays in this book, and even illuminate and extend the ways you experience everyday life. I conclude by ruminating on what queer geography is and could be, and I do so in the hope that you might happily find yourself in bed with theory too.

(First) Came Space: On Meeting and Getting to Know Geography

Geography was and continues to be a field that allows me to run where and how I want to with my ideas, for all I need to do is examine the world through the lens of space—and I do that already. Unlike studies of culture (anthropology), society (sociology), or the psyche (psychology), geography is foregrounded in its literal and physical grounding in space. Our lives are riddled with geographic experience—nothing takes place outside of space, from neighborhood gentrification to riverbed development under global warming, from telecommunications in global cities to the hybridization of the space of human and animal bodies. Geographic metaphors are ways of explaining the everydayness of life that often has no other way of being clarified: where your head is at, standing your ground, know your place, I am here, and so on. But, in my college studies I wondered: where did the gay fit in?

Upon admitting my question to a faculty member during my undergraduate studies in the late 1990s, her eyes wide and holding her breath, she proffered a copy of *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities* (Bell and Valentine, 1995). The way that she slowly and softly handed me

the volume was as if she were turning over the material apparition of a queer secret. What lay inside charmed me and stuck with me. LGBTQ geographies and geographies of sexuality were not only existent, they were exciting and important stuff. It would be another decade before I took up LGBTQ geographies again, exploring other passions and occupations before returning to the academy.

My calling as a geographer is fueled by an attempt to make sense of the complicated yet essential experiences of spacetime in our everyday lives in order to make further steps toward both social and spatial justice. Sociospatial justice involves confronting inequalities through social and spatial means such as demanding equal distribution of resources, combating environmental racism, and fighting gender inequalities in the workplace, as well as the production of queer art projects, performances, and installations like those in this book that call for a more just world. I elaborate my research questions through participatory methods in which I work *with* participants instead of learning *about* subjects; and from there, I build theory to make sense of trends and ideas. I eventually focused my studies of women and geography by turning the course of my dissertation research to lesbian and queer spaces.

Human geographers today, spanning the social and cultural, begin from the idea put forth by social theorist Henri Lefebvre (1992): “(Social) space is (socially) produced.” In other words, each person is agentic and responsible in creating, occupying, and enacting space. Space is not absolute or fixed in the Kantian sense but is constantly produced in how it is all at once created, conceived, and lived. This *production of space* perspective is echoed both by the artist-activists in this book, and in the work of those who came before them. We can see the claim to sociospatial justice and other forms of justice by the 99 percent in the Occupy and Arab Spring movements; in the in-your-face organizing tactics of international LGBTQ organizing groups like ACT-UP, Lesbian Avengers, and Queer Nation in decades previous; and in the U.S. civil rights movement, Indian independence movement, and in other movements and efforts toward liberation before that. For LGBTQ people, our own revolutionary activism still prove how important it is to produce our own space as there is often no other recourse but to uproariously alter the everyday spatialities of heterosexuality. Just imagine or remember what it was like to throw blood on the head of the U.S. Center for Disease Control; eat fire and bear your breasts in public;

and dump thousands of condoms from the top rows of a nationally televised baseball game in NYC to encourage safe sex for all. As a field, geography is heavily influenced by ideas of Marxist and feminist thought, which seek, in their own ways, to enact equal redistribution, recognition, and representation in the work toward social and spatial justice. As a geographer, I ask people about their experience of spaces and places that have helped shape not only their identities but the meaning and experiences of justice and oppression in their lives. The findings from my work help re-present the way liberation can and does operate in everyday life. Building from these ideas and actions, there is no limit to the world we can create.

(Second) Came a Queer Interjection: The Rise of Queer Identity and Queer Theory

When I say queer, I mean all the multiple ways of being and doing queer. Going way back, queer has been a derogatory term for homosexuals in the Western context since the nineteenth century. By the 1980s, a reclaiming began of the term, taking this language back just as feminists took the streets back. By the 1990s, the term queer had taken on a radical identity that refused traditional binaries of man-woman, gay-lesbian, or even even—gasp!—bisexual. As Michael Warner and the Social Text Collective write of the reclaiming of queer from its negative uses, “The insistence on ‘queer’—a term initially generated in the context of [invoking] terror—has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence” (1993, xxvi). Queer theory hatched as a broader theory that destabilizes the assumptions and privileges of secure heteronormative models of study and everyday life, and that politicizes and acknowledges the fluidity and instability of identities, spaces, and societies. Proponents of queer theory argue for the acceptance and understanding of the more complex reality in which we live. As such this way of theorizing provides scholars, activists, and others with ways of thinking and talking about life beyond fixed assumptions. While queer theory is especially helpful in fighting homophobia and transphobia, it is also used beyond the realm of gender or sexuality. For example, when studying the politics of racial, ethnic, or class identities, scholars may wish to “queer the subject” by writing about these identities as fluid rather than as rigid or binary subjects.

It is my own understanding that queer theory always seeks to make room for the opposite and opposing as well as the fleeting and the fragmented through critiquing and problematizing from the situatedness of everyday life. As such, the practice of queering is often used to herald difference, question powers behind normativities, and situate pleasure and politics side by side. But, as I began my advanced studies of people, space, and place, I still wondered: what do these identities, politics, and

theoretical calls for celebrating the topsy-turviness of life have to do with space?

(Third) Came Space + Queer: Living and Studying LGBTQ Space and Place

I hate to break this to you, but there is no such thing named “queer geography” in the academic world as of yet. To date, the academic subdisciplines include LGBTQ geographies (studying LGBTQ spaces and experiences of space), and geographies of sexuality (studying sexual spaces, or the sexualized experience of space). What I call *queering space* (using queer theory to read geography) and *spatializing the queer* (using geographical theory to read the queer) is a bridge and conversation between queer theory and geography that is not a subdiscipline but a practice among queer theorists and geographers. While that which is gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans can equally be spatialized, I am not as much interested in identities but rather the action of queering: refusing the normative and upsetting privilege for more radical, just worlds, even those not yet imagined. To get you in bed comfortably with the practices of queering space and spatializing the queer, I need to share how LGBTQ geographies grew from actual LGBTQ experience, or what is now known as LGBTQ studies. It is that LGBTQ experience that, in turn, informs the ways we queer space and place in geography today.

The geographical imagination—homo, hetero, and/or otherwise—often associates LGBTQ people with cities. However, imaginaries are just this and must be unpacked. For example, the city retains an equally strong narrative about being a place for men, but women purportedly find themselves locked in their urban homes for safety and, as such, generally invisible (E. Wilson 1992; Pain 2001; Pain and Smith 2008). Furthermore, while LGBTQ studies has begun to extend itself to prioritize rural and other nonurban environments (see Binnie and Valentine 1999; Knopp and Brown 2003, 2003; Halberstam 2005; Gray 2009), studies of the urban are still both important and needed.

Cities are historically theorized as a site for the deprived and the delinquent, i.e., home to the homosexual (Burgess, Park, and McKenzie 1925; Wirth 1938), and such ideas still permeate everyday life (Abraham 2009). These hateful ideas formed from the large population of LGBTQ people who left rural and suburban environs for the anonymity and independence of city life (Weston 1995; see also Chauncey 1995; Luibhéid 2008). The myth of urban promise has a social and economic basis. Cities afforded LGBTQ people a place to find privacy in public, as historian George Chauncey (1995) puts it, and for lesbians and queer women to seek work away from standard gender roles (D’Emilio 1983a; 1983b; see also Bérubé 1983; Faderman 1992; Kennedy & Davis 1994; Chauncey 1995; Aldrich 2004).

In geographic work, work on lesbian and gay spaces in the 1980s began by counting lesbian and gay people in order to prove their existence and make them visible in the heterosexual public eye (see Binnie 1996). This research was both revolutionary and foundational as even writing about these most common stories and spaces was an entirely new and radical act throughout the 1990s. In fact it was only in the late 2000s that academic ethics review boards removed the label of “at risk” (for unfair treatment) from LGBTQ study populations, other at risk populations being prisoners, children, and the mentally ill.

When I was coming out, I took refuge in the ideas of these places as much as the experience of them. While these models—namely the “gay” city, as well as the neighborhood and bar—were and continue to be exciting spatial models for producing LGBTQ community, it was how these models often focus on certain groups of gay and queer men that inspired my work on lesbian-queer spaces. For example, much of the early research subsumes the spaces of lesbians and queer women under a study of generic homosexual spaces privileging men’s abilities to claim public space that inspired my own interest in queering what *is* queer. Practices of gay male cruising are often praised as radical claims to queer public space (Berlant and Warner 1998; Delany 2001). Yet the privilege of mostly white male bodies in recent years to make use of these spaces with considerably less harassment than men of color, the poor, or homeless is invisibilized (see Manalansan 2005), and lesbians’, bisexual women’s, and queer women’s comparative lack of cruising has only recently been discussed (Gieseke 2013). As such, those who define and enact queer in the heterosexual public eye and mainstream media becomes white, male, able-bodied, urban, and middle- and upper class. It was these trends that drove me to record the narratives of 47 multigenerational lesbians and queer women for my dissertation—across classes, races, and ages—who are so often erased from mainstream and sometimes even LGBTQ society. What then could queering our geographical imaginations do? Whatever could queer theory offer my participants and me, yet another invisibilized dyke?

(Fourth) Came Queering Space and Spatializing the Queer

Over the last two decades, queer theory has grown into a core theoretical approach across academic disciplines and is equally used in activism, artwork, and even the spectacular and mundane elements of everyday life. In fact, queer theory, along with feminist theory, may be the most applied theory at work today outside academic discourse. LGBTQ people are perhaps the only group that derives many of the ideas about themselves from theory. LGBTQ people are just as likely to cite the work of Queer Nation to claim and find their purpose and shared

meaning as they are to discuss philosophers Judith Butler or Michel Foucault. Where else could and did a positive history of LGBTQ lives come from but the academy? In this section I reread through the lens of geography some queer concepts and ideas that excite me and that, usually, dominate queer theory, in order to shed light on what queer geography is or could be through the acts of queering space and spatializing the queer.

Historian Michel Foucault had proved years earlier that the word “homosexual”—and therefore the concept of the deviant body and being attached to it—was not used until 1870. It was Gayle Rubin, then an anthropology PhD student, who stood up at the now renowned Barnard Conference on Sexuality in 1982 and finally cleaved gender from sex and sexuality. In other words, biological determinism was officially dead and gender was clearly socially constructed. It was less than eight years later that philosopher and feminist Judith Butler powerfully argued that sex and sexuality are socially constructed too. Produced spatially? OK. But temporally and even my identity too? It hit me hard that all the world was staged. And I was invigorated. These agentic chances for production speak to what David Harvey (1973; 2005) theorized as the *geographical imagination*, which spatialized and politicized C. Wright Mills’s (1961) “sociological imagination,” a concept that examined personal biographies in dynamic relation to the social history in which they are situated. The concept of the geographical imagination has broadened into a tool to describe and analyze both the literal and metaphorical ways people imagine and render space (see also Gregory 1994; Said 2000). I use the geographical imagination in my own work as both a concept and tool to register how participants negotiate the slide between spaces material or imagined. If gender, sex, sexuality, and space are all produced, then the only limits are those we allot ourselves, that we agree to, that we give in to. While there are always materialities in our lives to be faced, the social opened up before me and for many other LGBTQ people as well.

The realizations and invigorations did not end there. Literary theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick took queer theory to a new level for me when she made the very notion of *anything or anyone* as normal a blissful impossibility. In her book *Epistemology of the Closet* (1991), Sedgwick puts forth a series of axioms, the first of which is “People are different from each other.” At first, I remember being bored and shocked that this counted as theory, but as she went on to describe distinctions and differences I had never realized or seen, my mind and life were revolutionized. For example, she states that everyone has sex differently and everyone is attracted to and turned on by something or someone completely individual. In the same vein, the poet and literary scholar Adrienne Rich (1980) had already described the concept of *compulsory*

heterosexuality a decade before literary critic Michael Warner (1993) gave us the word *heteronormativity*. While compulsory heterosexuality showed how lesbians and gays were forced into heterosexual roles and behaviors, heteronormativity took these enforcements to the level of a constant permeating oppression for only the hetero to be normal.

Historian Lisa Duggan (2002) took the normal in a different direction. After decades of LGBTQ people being sold out and selling out through processes of commodification and commercialism, some members of the community felt they had it good “enough.” Duggan describes this faux liberation through capital as a phenomenon of *homonormativity*. Homonormativity is the “normalization and hierarchization of particular forms of homosexuality within particular sexualized, classed, gender, and ethnic norms” (Browne 2006). Recognition of this level of distinction inspired me. If we use this thinking around space, it makes sense that each place works differently for each person. Environmental psychologists and geographers have posited ideas of *place identity* (Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff 1983) and *place attachment* (Altman and Low 1992) that show how individuals and groups work from different models and meanings of space and place. As much as globalization seeks to ubiquitize people and their places, they still retain their own qualities, sensibilities, and experiences. Why is Stonewall so revered, really? Why is Paris gay and Berlin queer? Why are Tijuana, Copenhagen, and Beirut unusual places for work on queer space? Or why are they not? Simple yet revolutionary once you really take it in: just as people are different from one another, spaces are different from one another.

Over time, geographers saw that the production of space Lefebvre described extended not only to territories and places and the nation-state, but to our bodies, intimacies, and identities. Queer theory extends that even further. I work from multiple theories of the body in my own research to make sense not only of difference but the various layers of components of material and social worlds. Most well-known is Judith Butler’s (1989) *performativity* theory, which argues for a process-oriented, nonfoundational, ceaseless performing of identities. Identities are inscribed by the person in *and* on the body as much as the cultures, economies, and societies surrounding them (see also Bell et al. 1994). While bodies contain qualities that are not easily erased, bodies are also produced and therefore malleable in some ways, through the fissures that open up and point to possibilities of difference within the regulatory structures and discourses of our daily lives (Butler 1993). The geographer Lise Nelson (1999) criticizes Butler for fixing and exhausting identities in specific spacetimes. In my work, I found that the “fissures” Butler discusses that arise in the course of performing one’s identity give rise to other possibilities

that allow for more nuanced conceptualizations of identity and space. Lesbians and queer women I interviewed always found a way to resist and move forward by breaking through the crack between binaries. Instead, I find performativity’s weakness to be its failure to account for the visceral, corporeal body, which my participants referenced often. It is the work of philosopher Elizabeth Grosz that helps me to fill this hole, as she sees bodies as “concrete, material, animate organization of flesh, organs, nerves, muscles, and skeletal structure which are given a unity...through their psychical and social inscription as the surface and raw materials of an integrated and cohesive totality” (1996, 243).

Together, performativity theory and theories of the visceral body account for the social-biological body, for a body is never distinct as either. In other words, “it is not as if the outside or the exterior must remain eternally counterposed to an interiority that it contains: rather, the outside is the transmutability of the inside” (Grosz 2001, 66). Space can be similarly recognized in the material and the imagined, the social and the emotional—i.e. space, like bodies, contains difference through the messy, fleshy indeterminate stuff of everyday life (see Katz 2001a).

Such performed and visceral bodies are never one identity or another, but rather the intersection of multiple standpoints that are always being produced. Legal and critical race theorist Kimberle Williams Crenshaw (1996) suggests using *intersectionality*, whereby you draw upon all your identities (gender, sexual, race, class, ability, age, etc.) to produce knowledge. Feminist geography similarly encourages *situated* experience and knowledge in producing knowledge (see Katz 2001b). Similarly, feminist science studies scholar Donna Haraway’s (1990) notion of the *cyborg* describes the technological prosthetics that blur the line between human and technology. Geographer Matthew Wilson (2009) suggests that the cyborg can be used as a model for human life and spaces that is constantly being and becoming, an ontology that fits strongly within the fragmented and fleeting aspects of queer theory. These models of being-doing-in-difference come together most closely for me in the science-fiction writer and queer theorist Samuel Delany’s (2001) masterpiece *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*. The book details the cruising and hustling of New York City’s Times Square neighborhood filled with porn theaters, peep booths, and sex toy and video stores before its purported rehabilitation into the Disneyesque new version of Broadway and a mega-shopping hub for tourists (see also Kunstler 1994). Delany uses his own cruising experiences to theorize the distinction between contact and networking. For him these spaces afford the production of actual community and connection in the form of cross-class and cross-race *contact*, versus the distanced practice of *networking*. Queer geography then becomes the ability to make what

one can of life, where one can, and incorporating all aspects of oneself.

The body in space spans many scales, from the global to the intimate (see Pratt and Rosner 2012). Recent and important debates to consider as you pore through the experiences of the artists in the very different places of this book relate to the scale of the family and the nation-state. Michel Foucault's work on the disciplining of the body also helped to break from previous limitations. In his studies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Foucault found that the nation-state regulates human bodies through *biopower*, "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations" (1990, 140). In other words, citizenship is defined by one's role in being complicit to a heteronormative state; geographers David Bell and Jon Binnie refer to *sexual citizenship*, which seeks to unpack who has rights and where one can refute the state's use of biopower. The literary critic Judith Jack Halberstam's (2005) notion of *queer time* helps to break apart the heteronormative understanding of time in our everyday lives. Halberstam describes how LGBTQ lives do not run in the patterns and paces of heterolives but have distinct social and economic conditions, including patterns of mating, childbearing, home buying, and retiring. With women making seventy-seven cents on the dollar in the U.S. alone, with similar numbers or less across the world, the ability for two women or two men to secure such patterns is radically different, and specific to place as well.

The atrocities in Israel-Palestine illuminate how queer bodies are not refused but rather are used to meet the needs of the nation-state, i.e. through what activists termed *pinkwashing*. It was often the mark of a "civilized" country to demonstrate how good it was to women—part of the U.S. justification for invading Afghanistan and Iraq was the way both countries treated their women. The current claim to cosmopolitanism is pinkwashing, which entails claiming the beneficial treatment of LGBTQ people while ignoring atrocities against other groups. Queer theorist Jasbir Puar (2005) discusses pinkwashing as an instance of *homonationalism* whereby LGBTQ people are welcomed at the expense of the exoticized "other." I am using my own research to show that pinkwashing is a process of modern globalization. My example is how New York City aims to pinkwash through its internationally advertised "gay pilgrimage." Urging wealthy lesbians and gays to shop and see the famous Stonewall bar where the LGBTQ movement is identified as beginning, the NYC government pinkwashes the fact that the Stonewall riot entailed LGBTQ people responding to police violence with more violence. The forgetting of our history and our oppressions can be as violent as the invisibilization and violence done to other groups, and much healing can be done by interceding not only in the fight for social justice

but spatial justice as well in the ways places and people are represented and recognized.

The last and perhaps most exciting use of queer theory and space is the way queer theory makes the seeming oppositions of space into mutually constructed places. An ever popular topic is the concern over *public and private*. However, LGBTQ experience shows how the public is often off-limits—when is it not to women?—and we must construct our publics and forms of attention and pageantry for self-expression. Michael Warner (2002) proposed the notion of *counterpublics*, which spans those othered, queered publics that refuse heteronormativities. For lesbians and queer women in my research, claiming the streets and being visibly queer is part of their history of radical activism and radical being-doing to resist homophobia. Feminist geographer of sexualities Kath Browne (2004) has proposed the notion of *genderism* to describe how not only transphobia (fear of genders that queer or shift the binary male-female) but the regulation of bodies into binary genders takes place within public and private spaces in varying ways. In interviewing nontraditional-gender-presenting women, they described how the private space of the bathroom becomes a space for public regulation in their regulation or judgment.

A dimension of geography not yet queered but that I want to introduce here is the mutually influential concepts of time-space compression and time-space expansion. *Time-space compression* is geographer David Harvey's (1991) concept to describe the collapsing effect of globalization and technology as we are able to communicate and produce faster and closer. However, in her work in the southern Sudan and NYC's Harlem, the feminist geographer Cindi Katz (2001b) found a pattern of *time-space expansion* whereby the poor were driven to go farther from their homes to gain basic resources. In my work these two ideas are not merely opposing or mutually constructing but offer up other possible readings of shifts in spacetime. Queer space, identity, and life is inherently unstable, fragmented, and fleeting—how then can spacetime only compress and/or expand? There are varying forms of movement in, by, and through space. How can we encompass these multiplicities and refuse being used by the commodifying and fetishizing processes of capitalism? One such process is the way gentrification uses and is used by LGBTQ people in order to create territories and spaces of their own for safety and refuge, all the while displacing poorer neighborhoods of, most often, people of color, and, over time, being displaced by later waves of wealthier heterosexuals and LGBTQ people (see Knopp 1997; Doan 2010). One recent inspiring response to more multiple forms of understanding space and time is the work on autonomous or anticapitalist spaces. For example, the geographers Gavin Brown and Jenny Pickerill (2009) propose accounting for how the affective and emotional aspects

of space shape protest and resistance. It is all these ideas, concepts, and experiences that inform and incite my work and everyday life.

(Fifth) Come and Gone and Going On

In these four moments of coming to grips with queering space and spatializing geography, I have shared my story: a gendered perspective of and life in queer space. The worry that we do not get the queer or understand what letters to use in our alphabet soup of a community must be overcome—at times, lgbtqitsaa is too much to say let alone but we must try. Queering space and spatializing the queer are mutual practices that are ongoing, exciting, and can and must be embraced from multiple standpoints to effect the change they hope to create. While my own work sits with urban environments, these ideas and concepts cross scales, borders, and boundaries and can go wherever you wish to take them—or at least farther than the world may let us imagine for now. I hope this essay leaves you in the midst of these possibilities with the tools to join me and so many others in this work. To that end I provide a works cited to the materials I mentioned in this essay, as well as a series of recommended readings at the end of this book that fuel me and can maybe serve to light your fire as well.

I am still thinking and working with the stories of my participants. The work in this book from such different places, Copenhagen, Beirut, and Tijuana, helps me to open up those stories further, and to make change, in ourselves and the world. What does it mean for Camilla Tved to map a personal history of violence against lesbians in Copenhagen? What are the ramifications of writing but not picturing sex in Beirut as Akram Zaatar counters? And what are the problems in Tijuana translating “queer” into Spanish that Bradley Epps makes us critically aware of? Globally, more work remains to be done to account for queer difference, especially around race and class within the context of different places. *Queer Geographies* as a selection of experiences is one of those large steps forward to offer us ways to imagine and enact social and spatial justice, whether on the streets in protest, in the gallery and library with artworks, or in bed with theory or something even more exciting. I very much invite you to join in these questions and places, and often. ✨

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