

Book Review Symposium – Queer Geographies

Lynda Johnston, *Transforming Gender, Sex, and Place: Gender Variant Geographies*, New York: Routledge, 2019. ISBN: 9781472454799 (cloth); ISBN: 9781315550312 (ebook)

In her new book, *Transforming Gender, Sex, and Place*, feminist geographer Lynda Johnston provides a multiscalar and transnational scope on trans and gender variant embodied experiences of the everyday in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australasia. Johnston begins by setting the current scene with a powerful anecdote about the everyday negotiating gender and identity in today's world. She juxtaposes "gender reveal" parties that reify gender binaries fixed at birth, with Facebook's proliferating gender identities, which portray an increasing number of representations of trans and gender variant people in popular culture all the while legal documents fix female and male bodies. Out of these contradictions, Johnston poses the central questions of her book: "how are place and space transformed by gender variant bodies, and vice versa? Where do some gender variant people feel in and/or out of place? What happens to place and space when binary gender is unraveled and subverted?" (p.4).

The broad framing of these important questions enables Johnston to investigate a number of microgeographies of the everyday, with chapters dedicated to the following, in the order that they appear in the book: coming out spaces; home and places of family; bathrooms (private and public); spaces of protest and activism; workplaces; nightscapes; and legality and the governance of trans and gender variant bodies. Overall, Johnston argues that the everyday embodied experiences of trans and gender variant people need to be recognized and highlighted in scholarship because there are specific legal, ontological, and physical exclusions and acts of violence enacted towards non-conforming and/or non-passing bodies, within LGBTQ social

movements and beyond. Building from the work of feminist geographies and geographies of sexualities literature (namely, Robyn Longhurst, Andrew Gorman-Murray, Elspeth Probyn and Heidi Nast, among others), Johnston contributes to this field by forwarding the specific embodied differences of those queer bodies historically marginalized even within LGBTQ communities. Thus, this book contributes to the burgeoning field of trans geographies developed by geographers Kath Browne, Catherine Nash, Sally Hines and Petra Doan.

Johnston uses the term “gender variant” when speaking broadly of the populations in her book along with transgender, because “there are many people who may not identify as ‘trans’ or ‘transgender’ yet who experience persistent gender identity discrimination” (p.6). When introducing individual narratives, though, Johnston uses the terms used by her participants, again exemplifying the wide, fluid range of lived gender identities that intersect with age, ethnicity, class and so on. For example, Johnston profiles the fa’afafine, fa’atamaloa, and fa’afatama third genders in Samoa (which roughly translate to, respectively, “like a woman”, “tomboy”, and “transman”), the takatāpui (an umbrella term used for sexually diverse Māori), and the ways in which the specific histories of colonization and Christianity in Australasia inform the uneven recognition of these embodied subjectivities and the impacts of globalization. In another example, she talks with Sally, who is a transgender Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent) woman in her seventies. Sally describes her experiences of transitioning while working in a large city’s farmers market. She discusses “her concerns about her changing body, and the way in which she self-polices her gendered behavior” along with the fear that she may “damage her breast implants ... and now struggles when lifting the caravan awning” (p.103). These narratives ground the work in the experiences of the material body, which is an exciting and radical turn and should be used as an example of how to deal with the fleshy body itself as also informed by space and place from the bathroom to the nation-state and beyond.

Johnston works to answer questions of how space, bodies and identities are co-constituted and negotiated primarily through the narratives of her participants, producing an

empirically driven text that expounds on her already strong talents and research achievements with these methods (Johnston 1996; Johnston and Valentine 1995; Longhurst et al. 2009). In *Transforming Gender, Sex, and Place*, she strikingly and deftly brings together over *two decades* of her own ethnographic research with 22 participants throughout the book. Johnston primarily conducted face-to-face interviews and did “participant sensing”. Participant sensing aims to engage all five senses in research encounters and in recording them. One of the weaknesses in the text was that these multisensory experiences do not come through as they might. A longer methodological section would be appropriate and exciting in this instance, especially since it has the potential to ground non-representational and affective geographies in practice and continue conversations around positionality in the field and the role of the body in research (Longhurst et al. 2008).

Johnston mostly turns to queer and feminist theories, in particular relying on Judith Butler’s work on performativity and the heterosexual matrix as guiding forces to describe power’s exclusionary norms in Australasia and Aotearoa New Zealand (and beyond). Integral to her understanding of how spaces become exclusionary and policed – informally and formally – is Michel Foucault’s concept of surveillance and other theorizations of abjection. Following Butler, Julia Kristeva, Mary Douglas, and other feminist scholars, the author asserts that the abject is that which threatens a stable identity and sense of self, and the presence of certain bodies as abject enables other bodies to feel secure. In this case, trans and gender variant bodies are those that are abject and excluded. Though she only ever really explicitly engages with these latter concepts in Chapter 4 (on bathrooms), the reader senses that these theoretical frameworks remain strong undercurrents throughout, and especially inextricable from Butler’s theories.

I particularly enjoyed the fourth chapter, “Public and Private (In)Conveniences”, which focuses on gender variant experiences of bathrooms and the ways in which bathrooms and their designs reify biological and gender binaries, and these designs inform and reproduce social and cultural norms. Johnston first contextualizes current anxiety and gender panic by explaining the

history of public toilets and theories of abjection. Through her participants' experiences that narrate a wide range of trans and gender variant persons bathroom preferences as well as harassment that they have received in them, the author illustrates how the "anxiety and fear experienced by gender variant and transgender people in relation to bathrooms is linked to social and cultural norms about what and who is deemed to be in and/or out of place" (p.67). Again focusing on the changing material body, regulatory norms and discourses, and institutions and laws (all of which also change over time), Johnston argues that negotiations of space and identity are constantly taking place across scales, which in turn inform and shape one another.

Beyond spaces that have come to be naturalized as heterosexual – or even "hyper-heterosexual" (p.68) like the public bathroom and prisons – the author argues throughout the book that even spaces made for and by LGBTQ populations in Aotearoa New Zealand can be unsafe or exclusionary to gender variant people and queer people of color. Johnston suggests that hierarchies within these communities negatively impact the ability of gender activism to form coalitions across different populations. The author focuses on these challenges in Chapter 5, primarily focusing on the paradoxes of Pride groups and movements that reveals the contestation of what actually constitutes LGBTIQ activism. This builds on her own work on Pride (Johnston 2005, 2007; Johnston and Waitt 2015). She highlights No Pride in Prison (NPIP; now known as People Against Prisons Aotearoa or PAPA), a radical, necessary prison abolition group concerned about the treatment of incarcerated trans people. Angered over the institutionalization of Pride that enabled the police to march in the Auckland parade while in uniform, the group protested the festival in 2015 and created an alternative march in 2016. She also uses the NPIP protests to discuss ways in which trans and gender variant people are at high risk for incarceration because of exclusionary practices and transphobia and how that intensifies in prison (Rosenberg and Oswin, 2015). (Of note, I did find it troubling when she used US prison data without acknowledging the different national contexts.) She also makes an explicit effort to

include Māori-led activism and the Hui Takatāpui, a biennial event in response to the AIDS epidemic in 1980s “and the homophobia often experienced in Māori communities” (p.95).

Notably, while Johnston utilizes feminist, queer, and trans theorists and theories, scholars of color, postcolonial and critical race theories are largely absent from the book. Especially since Johnston’s research is based in Aotearoa New Zealand and because some of her participants are Māori, employing these latter theorists and theories would only enrich the ideas and data in the book. Overall, though, *Transforming Gender, Sex, and Place* would be of interest to a wide range of geographers, especially to those who are interested in pushing forward the field of queer and trans geographies, in studies of the public and private in the everyday spaces of the home, bathrooms, workspaces, and nightscapes. As it highlights experiences often otherwise subsumed into a monolithic, hegemonic LGBTQ narrative arc, Johnston’s book will be an excellent fit for any graduate seminar on global sexualities and/or gender, sexuality and space (which, of course, there should be more of to begin with).

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