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Sexuality and the City: What are the Links?

Abstract: What are the links between gender and sexuality? Further, how do these links matter in people's everyday lives and their experiences of urban spaces? This paper explores these questions by looking at the theory and practice of gender and sexuality in the city. The first segment highlights the connection between gender and sexuality and their relationship to other axes of social difference, positing these as foundational to the logic of the city. The second segment unpacks the significance of gender and sexuality in people's everyday lives by examining municipal social policies and practices. Opportunities and challenges for inclusion are explored through three examples: rainbow crosswalks, city services and data collection, and safety.

Introduction

Sexuality is a critical and foundational component of cities, in terms of both functionality and the built urban form. Just as dominant frameworks of gender, race, and settler-colonialism contribute to the shape of cities and their service provision, so do dominant norms of sexuality. While this is widely recognized in geographical scholarship (see, e.g., Brown, Muller Myrdahl, & Vieira, 2016; Doan & Higgins, 2011; Hubbard, 2001; Knopp, 1992), it is less readily discussed in the context of planning or urban governance. As municipalities strive to embrace the mandate to achieve equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in their workplaces and in municipal programming and service provision, it is critical that sexuality be understood as a key organizational logic of urban life. The purpose of this short paper is to illustrate links between sexuality and the city, in both general and specific terms. For the latter, I will draw upon examples from municipal policy, looking primarily but not exclusively at the City of Vancouver.

Organizing Logics

Sex and sexuality are part of the urban DNA (Hubbard, 2001). We can understand this conceptually by thinking about capitalist urban development and its reliance on the reproduction of wealth. In masculinist, heteropatriarchal discourse, empire-building (one city block at a time) and inheritance (through which empire is maintained) are assumed to emerge from heterosexual unions sanctioned by church and state. Here, specifically, settler imperialist notions of kinship are legally codified and imprinted into urban morphology through such mechanisms as "marriage, the transmission of property, home ownership, [and] zoning" (Rifkin, 2011, p. 14). Dakota scholar Kim Tallbear speaks and writes extensively on this point in her work on critical polyamory. In a podcast interview called "Decolonizing Sex," Tallbear (2019) defines the idea of compulsory monogamy and the historical and contemporary stakes for citizenship and property ownership:

[Compulsory monogamy is] the idea that that is the normative standard to which we all aspire. So there's that in a kind of informal way...but there's also the way it's been imposed legislatively in the U.S. and Canada. For example, in relationship to Native people, we talk about the Dawes Act, we talk about the break-up of the collective tribal land base into individual allotments, we talk about the role of blood talk in that. Monogamy was just as central. The imposition of state-sanctioned marriage was just as central. You get one hundred and sixty acres if you're head of household, but you get eighty for your wife and you get forty for each kid. So there's a real incentive there to be married and to biologically reproduce....You cannot be a good, legitimate, upstanding, moral citizen unless you're monogamous: that is the law. Tallbear helps us to understand how particular notions of sex and sexuality provide the foundation for how space is organized via private property at the scale of the household and beyond.

In Vancouver, the transmission of property is a racialized discourse; property ownership is brokered not just through the mechanisms of settler-colonialism but through whiteness as well (Baldwin, Cameron, & Kobayashi, 2011). This translates to a history in which the urban form reflects both the growth of the settler population and efforts to erase Indigenous histories, residents, and practices. In the *c̓asnaʔəm: The City before the City* exhibit at the Museum of Vancouver, this was captured precisely by an image of the landscape after the imposition of the grid [see Figure 1], which enabled stolen land to be subdivided, claimed, and owned as property (see Blatman-Thomas, 2019).

After this subdivision, Indigenous presence was further erased through the naming practices used to mark property; these same practices also served to confirm Anglo-male dominance. Such practices are portrayed “as being beyond politics because their primary ‘function’ is to provide a means of spatial orientation,” as Reuben Rose-Redwood (2011, p. 40) notes. Far from being apolitical, place-naming provides visibility for dominant norms as part of our everyday landscapes; in doing so, place names become understood as “common sense” and contribute to the hegemony of normative frameworks. Taken together, then, these practices show the intricate *co-production* of sexuality as part and parcel of systems of settler-colonialism and dominant notions of whiteness and patriarchy in the development of the urban landscape.

Yet sexuality serves another role in the basic organization of the city through its framework of normative land uses: residential zoning here, industrial zoning there, red light district even further afield. Notions of “legitimate” (reproductive) sex and illicit sex and sexualities are cornerstones of the urban. Often, the only time this relationship becomes visible is during campaigns to “clean up” the city. Elizabeth Walker (1999) details how early street names in Vancouver were changed—Dupont to East Pender in 1907, and Union to Adanac in 1930—to distance them from an association with brothels and sex work (as cited in Mackie, 2020). So-called “urban renewal” efforts have achieved similar effects on a much greater scale. Writing in the early 1990s, Gayle Rubin delineates how urban renewal zeroed in

on the main areas of prostitution, pornography, and leather bars [in San Francisco and New York]... Anti-sex ideology, obscenity law, prostitution regulations, and the

alcoholic beverage codes are all being used to dislodge seedy adult businesses, sex workers, and leathermen. Within ten years, most of these areas will have been bulldozed and made safe for convention centers, international hotels, corporate headquarters, and housing for the rich. (Rubin, 1993, p. 119)

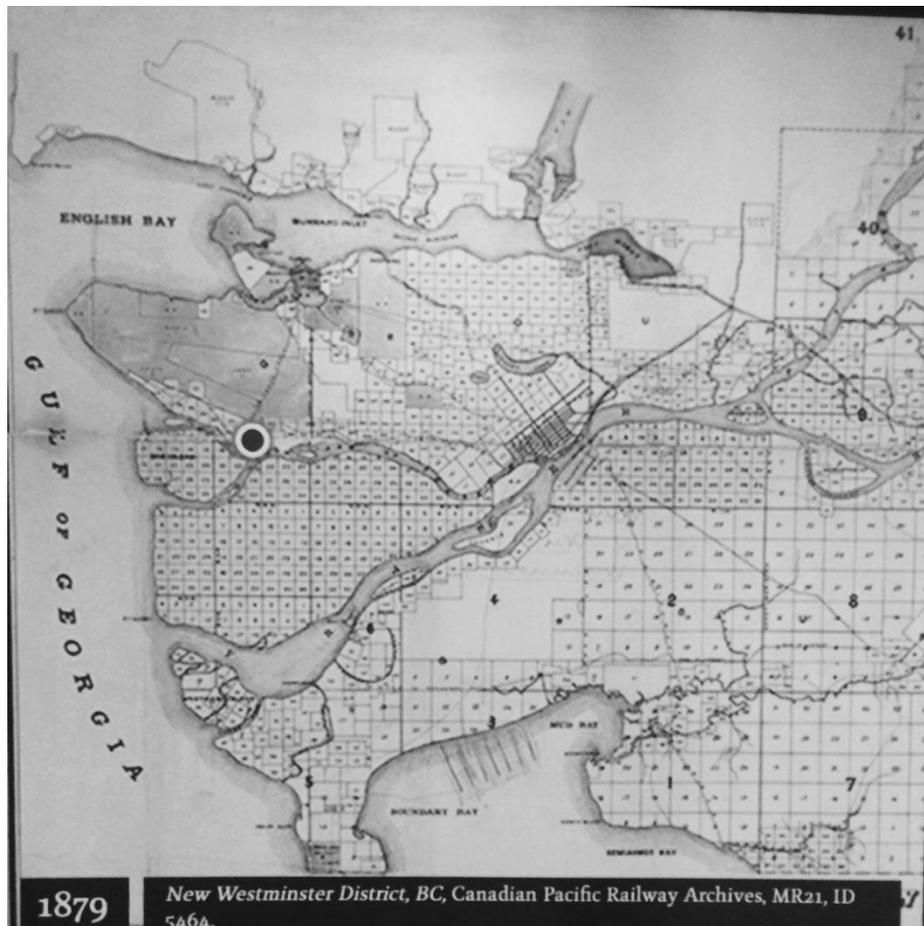


Figure 1: The imposition of the grid on Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh territory and what would become Greater Vancouver, 1879. *čəsnaʔəm: The City before the City*. Photo taken by the author.

What Rubin describes continues to happen across many North American cities, where developers have nearly unlimited access to capitalize on areas that have been subject to disinvestment. The discourse of “beautification” is a key tool at the disposal of developers (see, e.g., O’Keefe, 2017; Zeidler, 2017); it is also attractive to municipal governments, who benefit from privately funded “improvements” aimed at high-income workers and residents. It has even been used by gay activists in an effort to claim respectability (Ross & Sullivan, 2012). Central to this practice, as Rubin notes, is pushing sex work elsewhere, ostensibly to make neighbourhoods “safe.”

Despite these many links, sexuality is largely ignored when attending to the urban. Whereas renewed and well-deserved energy and attention are being paid to women and gender in cities, sexuality is too often absent from the discussion. Yet normative notions of

gender are not all that constrain women's mobility and facilitate toxic forms of masculinity. Such boundaries are also rooted in fears of abject sexuality, coalescing around lesbians, "loose" women, and other perceived threats to heteropatriarchal dominance.

Contemporary Illustrations

The dominant norms of heterosexuality—or heteronormativity—may be embedded into the foundations of the urban fabric, but they are also visible in the everyday practices and spaces of North American cities. In everything from housing policies to leisure spaces, notions of sexuality are at work. In *Feminist City: A Field Guide*, Leslie Kern (2019) asserts that households where "chosen families" of friends reside together make sense because friendship (especially among women) includes not only emotional support but also "the very material support of shared childcare, elder care, transportation" and other essentials under the category of care labour (Kern, 2019, p. 82). Yet the shape of housing continues to rely on an outdated model of nuclear families as the dominant norm (Kern, 2019). The reasons for this are numerous: governments' reliance on private developers; developers' assumptions about what consumers will buy; zoning that restricts "the number of 'families' that can occupy a shared space; and condos and other multi-unit dwellings...not [being] designed with the needs of different kinds of family shapes and sizes in mind" (Kern, 2019, p. 83). The result is a shape and type of housing— and, concomitantly, cities—that respond to and reinforce sexual norms.

In a different part of city life—urban leisure—similar dynamics are at play. In the mid- 2000s, I documented the relationship among gender, sexuality, and the city by attending to the spaces of professional women's sports. My findings (related primarily to women's professional basketball and the Women's National Basketball Association in the US, but also to US women's professional soccer) suggested that cities and sports leagues had uneasy relationships with lesbian fans. On the one hand, both cities and sports leagues had an economic incentive to welcome a diverse set of fans. The idea of diversity had begun to take on more importance for cities; wooed by the notion that creative economies could solve some economic woes, many cities clamoured to embrace certain forms of (high spending) diversity (Muller Myrdahl, 2011; McLean, 2017). Likewise, sport leagues struggled to counter the still-dominant notion of sport as men's exclusive domain, needing to cast a wide net in order to grow their economic base; neither league I examined could afford to alienate fans. On the other hand, not all diverse bodies were equally embraced. For the sports leagues in particular, the fear that lesbian fans would disrupt their well-crafted image of heteronormative family-friendliness prompted leagues to adopt practices (such as outreach to Evangelical Christian groups) to dissociate from the spectre of the lesbian fan (see Muller, 2007; Muller Myrdahl, 2010).

While North American social norms have shifted since I undertook this research, and the embrace of sexual diversity is a little less uneasy and more widespread for both women's professional sport and municipalities, concerns about *which* diverse bodies are welcomed remain at play. Discomfort arises, for instance, around bodies that disrupt the normative gender binary. In a sporting context, we see this in the case of athletes like Caster Semenya; the #LetHerRun campaign arose as an effort to combat discriminatory outcomes stemming from this discomfort (<https://letherrun.com.br/en-us/>). In the

municipal context, such discomfort can be seen (for example) in trans and non-binary people's experiences using public transit, where reports of harassment and violence are commonplace (see, e.g., Lubitow, Carathers, Kelly, & Abelson, 2017). Taken together, these examples demonstrate the "trouble" associated with bodies that reject or otherwise do not correspond with gender norms. When we recall that assumptions of sexuality are read through a person's presumed gender identity and gender performance, the link back to heteronormativity becomes clear: bodies that disrupt the gender binary are also understood to trouble hetero-norms. These instances of disruption can enable us to see what hegemonic structures often render invisible.

Challenges and Opportunities

What can we take from unpacking the heteronormative framework at play in North American cities? Two illustrations come to mind, each of which offers insights into the opportunities for and challenges to inclusion. The first is the rainbow crosswalk. The rainbow crosswalk has become a somewhat ubiquitous symbol in North American cities as evidence of a municipality welcoming diversity and inclusion. Typically, it is a municipally funded project in which one or more pedestrian crosswalks are painted in the colours of the rainbow flag symbolic of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. When funded by the city and situated on a city street (rather than on private property), the addition of a rainbow crosswalk requires approval by city council. In bigger cities, these crosswalks are often located at symbolic intersections such as the entrance to the historic gay village. In smaller communities, their siting may be more random; nevertheless, they occupy an important place in the symbolic landscape of the city for many. As one news report featuring the rainbow crosswalk in Terrace, BC explained, "Although the rainbow crosswalks originated as symbols of the LGBT community, increased social acceptance also means a reduction of homophobia and transphobia, both of which can be used against people who aren't LGBT" (Takeuchi, 2015).

As shown by my research in Lethbridge, Alberta, a regional centre with a population of just over 100,000, the uptake of the rainbow crosswalk is driven by a number of factors. Some of these factors are tangential to urban governance, such as changes to federal marriage legislation and provincial human rights codes. The proliferation of gay-straight alliances in secondary schools has been another important driver, to the side of City Hall. Other factors have more direct links: for instance, a number of municipalities have joined the Coalition of Inclusive Municipalities (previously titled the Canadian Coalition of Municipalities Against Racism and Discrimination), which compels cities to approve (and, ideally, implement) a framework of inclusion that fosters equity and diversity.

However, a willingness to address some barriers or forms of exclusion does not ensure motivation to address all of them. Indeed, one aspect of my Lethbridge research (Muller Myrdahl, 2019) highlighted strict limits to the willingness of municipalities (councils and staff) to engage in conversations about sexuality or see sexual diversity as part of the City's business of inclusion. A particular example centred on City leadership and administration's response to homophobic harassment faced by a local theatre company; when presented with an opportunity to show how inclusion frameworks must explicitly address barriers faced as a consequence of homophobia, the City fell short. Instead, despite

a painted rainbow crosswalk and an annual rainbow flag-raising at City Hall, most City officials refused to recognize how homophobia played a role both in the initial harassment and in the City’s handling of the situation. In other words, rainbow crosswalks may provide a critical element of visibility, especially in smaller urban centres, but inclusive practices must extend beyond the painted streetscape.



Figure 2: Rainbow crosswalk in Terrace, British Columbia, population 11,643 (Statistics Canada, 2017). Photo taken in April 2018 by the author.

A second example can be found in the City of Vancouver, where changes in Park Board services have resulted in significant knock-on effects. There are many reasons why the City of Vancouver should be applauded for the way sexuality is embedded in its framework for inclusion. Sponsorship of Pride events, symbolic gestures like flying the Pride and Trans Equality flags over City Hall, and heightened visibility of gay activism and same-sex relationships abound, at least in limited parts of the city. Jim Deva Plaza is one example of the latter: redesigned as a vibrant public space that commemorates gay activist Jim Deva, this plaza was built and is maintained by the City as part of its public space improvements. However, the most remarkable shift came out of a consultation process related to local parks and recreation services. In 2013, the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation struck a working group to “identify barriers to equal access to park and recreation services” (TGVI Working Group, 2014). Recently renamed the Trans, Gender Diverse and Two-Spirit Inclusion (TGD2S) Advisory Committee, this working group produced 77 recommendations that would make park and recreation services more accessible to all. One signature programming change—notable because it was subsequently adopted by several other municipalities—is the “All Bodies Swim” (Zeidler, 2013), a program aimed at making pools available for every type of body and eliminating the body shame that can accompany using pool facilities. One important feature of this work is that

recommendations were implemented in a way that touched on people's everyday experiences of the city. Another is that programming is responsive to changing needs: for example, the All Bodies Swim has evolved into a TGD2S swim at a pool where staff have received TGD2S competency training (City of Vancouver, 2020).

Equally significant has been the scope of this inclusion effort across City Hall and how City operations have shifted as a result. Initial recommendations were developed further by a subsequent consulting report, which emerged out of consultation with City staff and other stakeholders and identified recommendations, quick-starts, and long-term strategies in five areas (pillars) within the City's jurisdiction: Public Spaces, Facilities, and Signage; Programs and Services; Human Resources; Communications and Data; and Community Consultation and Public Partnerships. To name one example, a key priority in the Communications and Data pillar is to "create and conduct TGD2S inclusive data collection methods" (Trans Focus Consulting and Equity Labs, 2016). This type of priority may seem less tangible than recreational programming, but it, too, has effects on people's everyday lives. Indeed, if there is no data to highlight community needs, these needs are much easier to ignore. Additionally, this example clarifies how City operations are implicated in addressing inclusion. The report notes that revising data collection methods "requires coordination between several City departments, including City Manager's Office and Human Resources/Digital Services and Information Technology Services" (Trans Focus Consulting and Equity Labs, 2016, p. 26). In other words, recommendations like these have the capacity to break down bureaucratic silos.

The strides made toward inclusion of sexual and gender diversity in City of Vancouver operations and services are commendable. As with any policy, however, the proof of the pudding is in the eating: Council may have supported these goals in principle, but whether and how they fund and support their implementation and evaluation is another matter. Moreover, policy should always be taken as a starting point, not an ending point: inclusion is not a destination where we arrive. The goal should be to support the evolution of policy and programming to ensure an ongoing commitment to inclusion work.

Concluding Thoughts

Consider the following topic, one that has been at the centre of many development agendas: the safety of women and girls. Innumerable decisions, policies, and programs have targeted women's and girls' safety around the globe. We have annual campaigns like the 16 Days of Activism; we have women-only transit options; we have global networks like Metropolis commissioning research on gender, safety, and public space (Metropolis and Women in Cities International, 2018); and safety for women and girls is at the heart of two United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (#5, Gender Equality, and #11, Sustainable Cities and Communities). While sexual violence is readily discussed in this context, sexual diversity and heteronormativity are rarely examined. As a parallel example, reports that address hate crimes targeting LGBTQ people, which do attend to sexuality and heteronormativity, rarely make the link to the work on safety for women and girls (see, e.g., ICPC, 2019). Yet, at their base, the issues of safety for women and girls and safety for LGBTQ people are fundamentally linked: the logics of patriarchy and heteronormativity, concurrently with white supremacy and, in many contexts, settler-colonialism, shape how

these problems are perceived and experienced. These logics also shape the ways that solutions are conceptualized. It is difficult to imagine that safety, which is a profoundly embodied experience, can be fully solved without attending to sexuality.

In a world that is becoming more urbanized—projections for urban growth suggest that 68% of the world’s population will be urban by 2050—sharp attention is needed to ensure equitable access to city programs and services across the many social divides embedded in our communities. While we have some robust metrics for belonging and inclusion, they almost never include or even hint at sexuality or sexual and gender diversity. As I have argued here, sexuality is an integral part of urban development historically, and dominant sexual norms continue to drive use and adaptation of the built environment as well as the policies and programs of City Hall. Given that, frameworks of diversity and inclusion must incorporate sexuality as one of the many co-constitutive elements that inform the experience of, and barriers to, urban life.

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