

Editorial

Sexualities in the Margins: Creating a Space for Conversations

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Although intrinsic to one's being, sexuality remains a controversial and taboo subject around the world. While certain cultures may appear to be more forthcoming in discussing certain aspects of sexuality, holistic discussions are still in short supply everywhere. In addition, whereas open conversations on sexuality are almost invisible in certain regions, in others they are mostly limited to the heterosexual, white, non-disabled, monogamous and marital realms. In some regions, the mainstream discourses on sexuality are limited to ambits of reproduction and reproductive health alone, thereby rendering invisible conversations on, for example, non-marital and non-heterosexual sexualities. In others still, it may be easier to talk about sexuality in the contexts of public health and/or sexual abuse and assault. However these discussions may again be limited to specific populations. For example, it could be claimed that it is more acceptable to talk about sexual violence

against women and girls, but these conversations become strained in the context of sexual assault of men and boys as the social construction of masculinity imagines men as only the perpetrators, but never the victims and survivors, of sexual violence. Thus, although conversations around sexuality have undoubtedly shifted and expanded in the past few years, they still remain confined to the stereotypical stranglehold. Discussions and debates around affirmative sexuality and sexual rights remain scarce or limited to certain spaces, and we often find that even when sexuality is discussed, certain sexualities are deemed legitimate while others are pronounced perverse, immoral, unhealthy or illegitimate.

This special edition of the Graduate Journal of Social Science (GJSS) is inspired by a unique event, which sought to create a space to talk about marginalized aspects of sexuality. The 2011 NOISE (Network of Interdisciplinary Wom-

en's Studies in Europe) summer school ran in Breukelen, the Netherlands, under the title *The Miraculous (Dis)-Appearing Act of Sexuality: Mapping the Study of Sexuality in Europe, 1960-2010*. It was there that we, the editors of this special issue, met as participants. The academic institute created a space for conversations on an eclectic selection of subjects – including the history of sexualities in Europe, lesbian and gay sexualities, the emergence of heterosexuality as a concept, intersexualization, homonationalism, as well as nuanced discussions on homosexuality, bisexuality, queer and transgender politics, amongst other topics. Conversations during this academic institute opened up avenues to reflect on many of the unconventional, the invisible and the marginalized aspects of sexuality. *Sexuality in Focus* emerged from the discussions and debates in Breukelen, and we hope that this diverse collection of papers will speak to a diverse range of readers and academics who are engaged and invested in the broader realm of sexuality studies.

In this volume, Agata Pacho's paper *Establishing Asexual Identity: The Essential, the Imaginary and the Collective* shares conceptual interlinkages with Ayisigi Hale Gonel's paper, *Pansexual Identification in Online Communities: Employing a Collaborative Queer Method to Study Pansexuality*. Pacho discusses the need for acknowledging and

accepting asexual identities and creating spaces for their expression. She contends that the existence of asexuality challenges the notion of the 'universal innate sexual drive' particular to human experience. She further emphasizes the need for revising perceptions of sexual orientation, gender relations and family formation. In her paper, Gonel discusses the concept of pansexuality as 'sexual attraction regardless of gender, sex or lack thereof'. Her paper puts forth the argument that the very idea of pansexuality is destabilizing, particularly since we live in societies that uphold normality and where the gender identity of a person is seen as intimately linked to their sexual orientation. Pansexuality thus leaves not only the person to whom one is attracted to in gendered terms abstract, but also the sex/gender of the desiring subjects themselves. Both concepts of asexuality and pansexuality challenge the heteronormative norm and open up a diverse set of possibilities, which destabilize the notion of binaries in the context of sexuality. Furthermore, both Pacho and Gonel push forward the idea of online groups as a different form of community-building. That both scholars relied on online spaces to research people's experiences of asexuality and pansexuality speaks about potential marginalization and invisibility of such groups, which brings forth the significance of representation: who and what gets represented in

the mainstream and, consequently, who and what is rendered invisible in this process?

Moving along the same lines of problematizing gender and sexuality, Lena Eckert's paper *From the 'Polymorphous Perverse' to Intersexualization: Intersections in Cross-Cultural Ethnographies* examines the quest for the male, the female and the intersex. Eckert uses the concept of the 'polymorphous perverse', a psychoanalytic term coined in the nineteenth century in sexological discourses, and traces its subsequent usage in ethnological and anthropological work in the twentieth century. She examines the work of Gilbert Herdt in his anthropological research in the 1990s on Sambian people in Papua New Guinea and his usage of the concept of 'polymorphous perverse' to depict hermaphrodites in the Sambian culture. Eckert claims that the concept has been used not only to depict the fissures within the gender and sex binaries, but also to talk about 'arrested development' in non-Western or supposedly primitive cultures. This argument lends immediate relevance to our contemporary lives when Eckert draws analogies between the nineteenth century usage of the term to depict the homosexual and/or the hermaphrodite as abnormal and the racialized discourses in the twentieth century to talk about the non-Western or the less developed.

The first three papers in this issue

thus pose many questions about the 'normal' and the 'natural'. They all underscore the fact that within a 'normalized' society, only certain sexual identities, genders, sexualities and sexual orientations are recognized. Within this worldview, it is heterosexuality that is married and aimed at reproduction that gets recognition and primacy. Intersex people who challenge the binary nature of sexes thus fall through the cracks. Other forms of sexual expression and desire (or the lack of it), such as pansexuality and asexuality, pose challenges to the structures of hetero/ homosexuality. Taking this conversation forward, the next set of papers in this issue discusses the ways in which certain discourses within sexuality get marginalized. They ask: in what ways do these discourses get submerged, who decides what enters discussions on sexuality and on what basis?

In his paper *R v Peacock: Landmark Trial Redefines Obscenity Law*, Alex Antoniou unpacks what is considered obscene, who gets to decide what is considered obscene, and how the state enters discussions on obscenity. In discussing a particular landmark case from 2011-12 in which Michael Peacock, charged under an obscenity law, gets acquitted, Antoniou illuminates the machinations of the Obscene Publications Act of 1959 (applicable to England and Wales) and the changing discourses on obscenity. Antoniou makes an interesting ob-

ervation that the very strength of the obscenity test, which allows for the discretion and the interpretation of the jury, can become its weakness. He furthermore observes that the test of obscenity is not so much dependent on the effectiveness of the material in question, but on the effect on its potential audience. Therefore, although Peacock's material largely dealt with issues of male fisting, sado-masochism and urination conventionally considered obscene under the law, the potential audience he was catering to was well aware of the materials and their potential effects. As such, the acquittal of Peacock, while serving as a triumph for the freedom of sexual expression, also points towards problematic complexities underlying contemporary obscenity law.

Continuing with the theme of unpacking the dynamics that marginalize certain discourses on sexuality, Freya Johnson Ross examines the school-based Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) for young people in her paper *Are We Nearly There Yet? Struggling to Understand Young People as Sexual Subjects*. Johnson Ross challenges the commonly held notion that young people are asexual and illegitimate sexual subjects, critically assessing the nature of SRE in schools within England. Indeed, she finds that although sexuality-related information is transacted in schools, a large part of SRE focuses on the biological and reproductive elements of sexu-

ality, overemphasizing the risks and dangers of sex, safety and protection as well as teenage pregnancies and infection. By contrast, Johnson Ross argues, what this kind of education misses out on are important discussions around sexual pleasures, desires and expressions, affirmative sexuality and diversity of sexualities. Johnson Ross furthermore points out that this kind of approach upholds the Cartesian hierarchy of knowledge in which the mind is privileged over the body and therefore all physical elements of sexuality are regarded as the least valuable.

Isabelle Dussauge extends this discussion of Cartesian logic in the process of obtaining orgasm data of the brain in neuroscientific research studies of the 2000s. In these studies, the 'non-fleshy, non-bodily aspect of orgasm' is achieved through the subtraction of the 'imitation of orgasm data' from the overall 'orgasm data', thus erasing the muscular body data from the brain data. In her paper *The Experimental Neuro-Framing of Sexuality*, Dussauge discusses at large the biases, assumptions and pitfalls within this kind of research and makes interesting revelations about what is considered sexual (or not), who is considered a legitimate sexual subject, and what makes for a legitimate study of sexuality. For example, neuroscientific studies of sexuality tend to include only certain sexual subjects (for example, young people in their twen-

ties, males and heterosexual males). Interestingly, Dussauge observes that within the study on participants' sexual orientation in neuroscientific research, it is participants who occupy the extreme ends of the Kinsey scale and who are considered the bearers of idealized and ideally oriented homo- and heterosexuality that gain primacy. Dussauge claims that this is not because other forms of sexuality or sexual expressions do not exist, but possibly because they are considered expendable within the neuroscientific project. In separating the body from the brain, this kind of a research project also upholds the brain as the most important sexual organ.

Lastly, two interesting book reviews add to the scholarship on the miraculous (dis-)appearing of sexuality, the theme of this particular issue. Michelle Hutchinson Grondin reviews Lenore Manderson's book *Technologies of Sexuality, Identity and Sexual Health* (2012) and highlights the diversified ways of using sexual technologies in various parts of the world in unique ways signifying a process of empowerment for marginalized sexualities. Ellen Zitani reviews Laura Schettini's book, *Il Gioco Delle Parti: Travestimenti e Paure Sociali Tra Otto e Novecento* (2011) studying forms of gender non-conformity and transvestism in Italian history. In reviewing Schettini's work, Zitani emphasizes that studying gender transgression can be a useful method for historians to

understand the making of the Italian citizen and their relationship with the state.

In this special issue we have attempted to touch upon a variety of subjects within the ambit of sexualities; subjects which remain at the margins or, in some cases, entirely invisible. Although we have attempted to present a wide spectrum of subjects, we acknowledge that there are many others that remain invisible, for example, sexualities of people with disabilities, or the aging and their sexualities. However, as editors of *Sexuality in Focus*, we hope that this issue will further some conversations around marginalized sexualities. We hope it will contribute to the blurring of boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable sexualities and that it will highlight the shifting definitions and dynamics within the study of sexualities. In sum, we hope to stir up some thoughts and initiate some conversations. In this effort, we are indebted to the Chief Editors of this issue, Alexa Athelstan and Rosemary Deller, for their continued support in bringing this issue to life. We thank Boka En, the In-design Editor, Roberto Kulpa, the Web Design Editor, and Adam Pearson, the Liaison Officer for volunteering their valuable skills and services. We thank Megan O'Branski and Mercedes Pöll for their helpful and timely feedback during the copyediting process. We also thank all academic and peer reviewers who have rig-

orously and painstakingly reviewed the papers we received for this issue and helped *Sexuality in Focus* take shape. We welcome your thoughts and feedback on this issue. Please write to us at: editors@gjss.org.