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Introduction: Transnational Lesbian Cultures

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Abstract

This Special Issue examines the transnational shape and shaping of lesbian lives and cultures in and across China, India, the UK and the U.S. It uses the expression “transnational lesbian cultures” to suggest that despite sometimes radically different socio-political and cultural contexts, the lived experiences of same-sex desire and their emotional attachments create particular affinities between women who love women, affinities that reach across the sometimes radically different cultural and social contexts that shape them. The articles brought together explore lesbian subcultures, film, graphic novels, music and online intimacies. They show that as a cultural and political signifier and as an analytical tool, lesbian troubles and complicates contemporary sexual politics, not least by revealing some of the gendered structures that shape debates about sexuality in a range of critical, cultural and political contexts. While the individual pieces cover a wide range of issues and concerns – which are often highly specific to the historical, cultural and political contexts they discuss – together they tell a story about contemporary transnational lesbian culture: one that is marked by intricate links between norms and their effects and shaped by the efforts to resist denial, discrimination and sometimes even active persecution.

Keywords: lesbian, transnational, contemporary, culture, politics, queer, feminism, China, India, UK, US.

This Special Issue takes the recent “transnational turn” in gender and sexuality scholarship as its prompt for exploring the global shapes of lesbian intimacies and their cultural inflections. The essays brought together here move in and across varied lesbian landscapes. Some of them are located in certain geopolitical spaces - China, India, the UK and the US – while others explore the role of different forms of cultural production as the mediators of intimacy, identity and belonging. The different genres and media discussed, which include film, music, graphic novels, YouTube and the influence on popular culture of a reality show song contest, indicate the range of contemporary lesbian cultural production and document how the emergence of new forms of representation is located alongside more established modes of cultural production. While Heike Bauer turns to Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoirs to consider the role of books both in shaping a queer sense of collectivity and negotiating the “felt experience” of hurt and rejection that all too often continues to shape lesbian lives, Sam McBean examines how a love affair conducted via social media blurs the boundaries between the personal and the political. Lucetta Kam’s study of the popularity of masculine lesbians in Chinese TV in turn explores the complex role of consumerism and global markets in forging lesbian collective identities, while Matt Richardson’s examination of Meshell Ndegeocello’s music provides a self-reflective reading of the singer’s influence on the construction of Black female masculinities. The essays by Amy Villarejo, and Churnjeet Mahn and Diane Watt, which both focus on India and on film, consider diverse representational strategies used in depicting female same-sex love in India, and their politics. Where Villarejo traces increased lesbian visibility through a range of films produced over the past two decades, Mahn and Watt examine closely the film *Fire* for the insights it provides into the constructions of female intimacy in India across time, and the ways in which it has been interpreted by Indian and non-Indian critics.

Together, these articles examine the similarities and dissonances in contemporary representations of lesbian lives. They show that while lesbian affinities are shaped by the contexts in which they are formed, they are by no means bound by spatial, temporal or linguistic boundaries. The aim of this volume is to trace some of the transnational pathways that have emerged in generating lesbian identities. From migrating models of gender to virtual lives and political activism, the subjects of this volume are not defined by conventional definitions of nation or culture.

Transnational Lesbian Cultures

Both “transnational” and “lesbian” are contentious words in contemporary critical discourse where they have been criticized for their apparent privileging of Anglo-American perspectives on sexuality and difference and global politics (Gopinath, 2005; Suchland, 2011). Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan have noted that while “the term *transnational* can address the asymmetries of the globalization process ... is has already become so ubiquitous in cultural, literary and critical studies that much of its political valence seems to have become evacuated’ (Grewal and Kaplan, 2001: 663). The same ubiquity cannot, however, be asserted for the word lesbian, as discussions of nonnormative forms of desire and intimacy and related social and cultural formations around the world tend to favour queer. In a recent study of writing in the Americas, for example, Agnieszka Soltsyik Monnet has argued that when discussing non-Western contexts “the word queer can be useful precisely *because* of its foreignness – its very distance and awkwardness contributing to its utility, reminding users that it does not describe a natural fact but a tentative concept” (Monnet, 2011: 26). Yet while the association of queer with the crossing of boundaries undoubtedly lends itself to discussing intimate lives that run against heteronormative conventions across cultural and national contexts, and while the tools of queer theory are invaluable for the insights they provide into

the constructions of gender and sexuality, queer scholarship nevertheless still all too often reproduces what Linda Garber calls “the same ‘male homosexual studies’” (Garber, 2005: 29).

We use the expression “transnational lesbian cultures” to suggest that despite sometimes radically different socio-political and cultural contexts, the lived experiences of same-sex desire and their emotional attachments create particular affinities between women who love women, affinities that reach across the sometimes radically different cultural and social contexts that shape them. Sara Ahmed has argued that the shared experience of desire for other women opens up new forms of representation, what she calls a “lesbian landscape, a ground that is shaped by the paths that we follow in deviating from the straight line” of heterosexuality” (Ahmed, 2004: 20). Such a conception of lesbianism rejects essentialist definitions of human bodies and desire that claim a narrow “truth” about who counts as woman or lesbian. Instead the emphasis here lies on the constructions and contingencies of gender and sexuality, and the acknowledgement that a sense of individual and collective identity is always fashioned out of intersecting forms of identification, such as gender, sexuality, race and class, but also the affective pull of particular forms of cultural production including music (as discussed by Kam and Richardson), literature (as discussed by Bauer), film (Mahn and Watt, Villarejo) or social media (McBean). By bringing together these queer intersections under the label “lesbian” we seek to emphasize the gendered contingencies of sexual desires and identities and document the wide range of contemporary female same-sex subcultures.

The project thus turns attention to the range and richness of contemporary lesbian life and cultural production, both to understand better how female same-sex desire forges individual

and collective forms of being and to insist on the political and critical presence of lesbian.

This work extends recent cross-national and cross-disciplinary scholarship on the history of sexuality and sexual subcultures across the world, which has both emphasized localized specificities and insisted on decentring the Anglo-American conceptual focus on “differences” or “otherness” in favour of new attention to localized histories and contexts (e.g. Chiang and Heinrich, 2014; Martin, 2003; Mackintosh, 2010; Martin, Jackson, McLelland and Yue, 2008; Puar, 2001). These studies have complicated understanding of the meanings of sexual identity and the multitude of words used to identify nonnormative sexualities in non-Western, particularly Asian, contexts. By tracing transnational lesbian affinities through a range of genres and modes of production, however, we are aligned especially with scholarship on what Leila Rupp calls “sapphistries” (2009), scholarship that takes seriously the point that female same-sex desire creates queer affinities that reach across time and space (Giffney, Sauer and Watt, 2011; Martin, 2010; Sang, 2003; Tinsley, 2010; Vanita, 2002). The essays in this special issue by Kam, Mahn and Watt, and Villarejo, which focus on non-Western contexts, offer new perspectives on female same-sexuality in India (Mahn and Watt, Villarejo,) and China (Kam), while the pieces by Bauer, McBean and Richardson reassess the shaping of female same-sex intimacies across and beyond Anglo-American contexts. Individually, these studies examine complex, temporally and culturally inflected same-sex subjects and collective identities. Together they offer comparative insights into a range of contemporary lesbian cultures and thus also draw out some of their affinities.

Present Politics

Cultural politics is always intricately linked to everyday lives and experiences. Cultural representations in turn help to deepen understanding of the often paradoxical contingencies of lesbian existence. It is important to note that no simple narrative can be told about LGBT life,

either at national or global levels. For while in many countries, lesbian and gay people have gained increasing legal rights, these political changes do not necessarily reflect changes in social attitudes and many queer people still suffer discrimination, violence and a sense that they lead what Judith Butler, in a different context, has called “the pervasive sense of their own unreality, which can lead to suicide or a suicidal life” (Butler, 2004: 219). While in some countries battles are fought over the introduction of gay marriage rights (Kollman, 2007) – an institution that itself has a long history as an instrument in the oppression of women – other countries criminalize same-sex relationships outright. During the completion of this special issue, in December 2013, the Supreme Court of India reinstated Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, the colonial-era legislation outlawing same-sex relations, which had been withdrawn in 2009 by the Delhi High Court. Overnight, same-sex sexuality has once more become a crime in the world’s largest democracy. The Indian legal turn is an extreme example of the precariousness of lesbian and gay life. The country’s high rate of crimes against women, which has been publicly debated since the brutal and deadly gang rape of a young woman in December 2012, furthermore indicates the links between sexual violence and oppression, and the precarious reality of many lives.

By exploring contemporary lesbian cultural production, the special issue aims to raise questions about the complex issues at stake in creating liveable lives for everyone. The essays brought together here document the intricate relationship between feelings and the social, providing insights into what Ann Cvetkovich has called “the felt experience of everyday life” (Cvetkovich, 2012: 12) even as they reinforce the importance of cultural production to shaping individual and collective senses of belonging. Such a focus on diverse lesbian cultures also gives a new specificity to transnational studies. For it makes clear that the lesbian has a currency that is of value to women-who-desire-women in diverse locations and

contexts. The articles show that as a cultural and political signifier and as an analytical tool, lesbian troubles and complicates contemporary sexual politics, not least by revealing some of the gendered structures that shape debates about sexuality in a range of critical, cultural and political contexts. While the individual pieces cover a wide range of issues and concerns – which are often highly specific to the historical, cultural and political contexts they discuss – together they tell a story about contemporary transnational lesbian culture: one that is marked by intricate links between norms and their effects and shaped by the efforts to resist denial, discrimination and sometimes even active persecution.

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