

# Geographies of Sexualities: displacing hegemonies? An interview with Kath Browne

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Kath Browne is an important geographer in the new generation of researchers in the geographies of sexualities' field in the Anglophones countries. Kath Browne's promising work addresses several issues relating geography, sexualities and gender. Covering a number of themes pertaining to lesbian women, trans population or research on sexism and discrimination against the LGBT population.

The interview explores the work of cooperation and integration of geographies of sexualities in the Royal Geographical Society and the cooperative work in which she became involved during the organization of the First European Conference on Geographies of Sexualities in 2011, as well as the interaction between research and activism.

**Paulo Jorge Vieira e Joseli Maria Silva - Kath is one of the most important authors of the new generation of geographers of sexualities. One of the innovations that this generation developed was the creation of the Space, Sexualities and Queer Research Group (SSQRG) in RGS. How was the process of building this group?**

**Kath Browne** - I decided to enquire about setting up a 'space and sexuality' group as part of the Royal Geographical Society Institute of British Geographers in 2004. At the time Jason Lim and I were doing it together. In 2005 Gavin Brown signed up to the group as well. For me it was about

establishing a network, a group of people who would work together but also support each other. I/We drew heavily on experiences and ethos of both in the Women In Geography Study Group and the Sexuality and Space group (as part of the Association of American Geographers). In particular, we wanted the group to be more than about research but also to advocate for sexual and gender difference within the academy. We were keen that the group would work to support Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex people, and contest the gender/sexual normativities of the discipline of geography. Our purposes were:

To encourage geographic research and scholarship on topics related to sexualities and queer studies.

To promote educational ways for communicating geographic perspectives on sexualities and queer theories that will inform both curriculum and pedagogical needs.

To promote interest in geographies on issues related to sexualities and queer studies. To promote the exchange of ideas and information about intersections between sexualities, queer studies and geographies.

To offer a supportive environment for the exchange of ideas and the development of social networks to fight discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and/or practices, gender dissonance and other forms of gender/sexual prejudice

We hoped that research in this area would

be challenging to the hegemonies of the geographical academy, as well as contesting discrimination that we wanted to be part of the mission of the group. We thought this would be mainly in a UK context, where there was/is still a lot to do!

For me, the recognition of the RGS/IBG and being part of this respected and official body has validated geographical studies of sexual and gender difference in the UK. More than this, our very presence in this organisation makes us part of what geography 'is', at least in terms of research and higher education. We are the group that is consistently picked out by the media when it is said that geography has 'gone too far' or has 'lost its way', yet we are supported throughout the hierarchy of the RGS/IBG both in terms of our work and our place in the institution.

**Paulo Jorge Vieira e Joseli Maria Silva - In 2011 you, Kath Browne, and the Space, Sexualities and Queer Research Group (SSQRG) participated actively in the organization of the first European Conference on Geographies of Sexualities. What balance of the process of organizing and realizing the conference you made? How do you think that this event contributes to boosting academic spaces beyond the Anglophone geographies of sexualities?**

**Kath Browne** - There can be little doubt that there is an Anglo-American hegemony in geographies of sexualities and although I am Irish, I know that I am part of the Anglo-American 'canon'! What I learnt in my work with Count Me In Too was that breaking down hegemonies, challenging privileges and working across boundaries, cultures and difference, should be difficult. If it is not hard there is something not being questioned, cultures are being accepted rather than

interrogated and dominant power relations usually 'win' during this process. This kind of work should question our values, predominant ways of working in order to be collaborative and inclusionary. This is not easy! I feel that from this conference we established ways of working, expectations and learned important lessons. Many of these were not recorded and may not be remembered! However, one of the key pragmatic issues to come out was the importance of key/local organizers undertaking practical tasks with a group of advisors to do the directional work. This directional work needs to be done collaboratively- yet recognizing the multiple pressures academics can be under.

At the conference Joseli Maria Silva's paper at the European Geographies of Sexualities Conference was for me was challenging, forcing a consideration of my privilege that I hope I will not forget. Thinking about our privileges is troubling and unsettling and it should be! I know I am not the first to consider this form of privilege but it feels as if geographies of sexualities is only just starting to grapple with this. Too often we discuss activism or some other forms of common ground - because it is easier. But there is work to do in addressing geographies of sexualities' Anglo-American thinking hegemonies and 'stars' of queer thinking, in no small part because the field loses out from these exclusions. Challenging Anglo-American privilege needs to place our thinking- reaffirming where we theorise as mattering to what and how we theorise (see Brown, 2012 for an excellent discussion of this in relation to homonormativities). More than this we need to do the difficult work of addressing our privilege, displacing hegemonies in ways that feel difficult for those of us in, and reproducing, 'the canon'. This work needs to be done respectfully and carefully- understanding the investments of

self in our work and in questioning our privilege we are critiquing our work and its 'value'. It will be painful as well as rewarding.

This is not to say that it is only Anglo-American privileges that need to be acknowledged and explored. The conference offered that- but, as has long been argued, we need to explore privilege wherever we are manifesting it. Be that in the spaces of the academy, through our researcher identities including invisible ethnicities, gendered privileges and the multitude of other ways that social difference is manifest. As I have said, it is too easy to focus 'elsewhere' for our privilege and instead seek commonality around our marginalisation or activist work. Whilst this is important, we also need to take opportunities where privileges can be (uncomfortably) highlighted and not look to mitigate against this by seeking something that makes us 'feel better'.

**Paulo Jorge Vieira e Joseli Maria Silva - Your work is prolific in diverse subjects: in some of your writings (Journal of Rural Studies, 2011 is an example) you paid particular attention to lesbian issues. How important is to you, and your work, to research specifically lesbians? And what do you think about the correlation, or not, between research on lesbian by geographies of sexualities and the research of feminist geographies?**

**Kath Browne** - Dealing with gender through lesbians, women who are mistaken for men and trans people is very important to me. Masculinity and male privilege still predominates the academy and that is no less true in geographies of sexualities. Whereas we have numerous studies that focus on gay (cis)men, explicitly naming this focus or using more 'umbrella' labels but then only speaking to men, there is far less work done

specifically with women, lesbians and trans people.

My work takes different lenses in exploring gender and gender difference, but throughout my career I have attempted to work at the boundaries between feminist geographies and geographies of sexualities and gender difference, letting neither forget the implications of the other. That means addressing the heterosexism that can be found in feminist geographies mainly through implicit assumptions of heterosexuality (for example Browne, 2007). On the other hand I also see it as important to contest the ways in which gay men can stand in for sexuality/queer unquestioningly. Gender is always important and the hegemonies of masculinity, both in who is doing the work and who is the subject of such work, is important and necessary reflect on. As we know from early lesbian geography authors- and it continues to be the case - gender recreates sexual spaces.

With more of a focus across lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans lives, activisms, subjectivities and how these create space - gender difference and solidarities across this category have questioned both the assumptions of male/female dichotomies that characterised feminist and geographies of sexualities/queer geographies. Trans geographies have only just had its first special issue in *Gender, Place and Culture* (2010, volume 17 issue 5). Catherine Nash, Sally Hines and I saw it as important that this should go in a feminist journal with strong links to geographies of sexualities. Messing with gender in the contestation of stable male/female boundaries also alters the main tenants of both feminist and geographies of sexualities. Yet fucking theoretically with the boundaries of gender does not negate inequitable relations between men and women, or the at times horrific experiences of those who question gender norms. For me it

is these power relations that are of interest and are central in my work.

**Paulo Jorge Vieira e Joseli Maria Silva - In one of your early papers - Genderism and the Bathroom Problem: (re)materialising sexed sites, (re)creating sexed bodies - you propose the concept of genderism. What means now for you this concept?**

**Kath Browne** - Genderism was an attempt to name the policing of gender within specific heteronormative ideals. I used this term to 'articulate often unnamed instances of discrimination based on the discontinuities between the sex/gender with which an individual identifies, and how others, in a variety of spaces, read their sex/gender.' (Browne, 2004: 332; Browne 2005, 2006b). I spoke in this work about the experiences of women who are mistaken for men and the policing of their bodies, particularly in the gendered spaces of toilets. This paper purported that experiences of othering recreated these toilet spaces as male/female and simultaneously reproduced sexed bodies. This concept has developed in relation to discussions of cisgenderism, a conceptualisation that often is used to discuss trans people and gender variance (Ansara and Hegarty, 2009). Genderism, for me, can apply to the policing and denigration of trans people, however what I identified was where cisgendered women, in that their secondary sexual characteristics matched their gender identities, were being in their eyes misread. For this group then cisgenderism doesn't match the policing that they experienced. Their experiences clearly indicate the arbitrary (mis)reading of bodies, and how such readings play a crucial role not only in gendering bodies but also in gendering spaces within male/female dichotomies.

**Paulo Jorge Vieira e Joseli Maria Silva - In what way does queer theory impact the way that we analyse in geography the links between gender and sexuality?**

**Kath Browne** - Clearly the fluidities of gender/sexual difference I identified in my work on women who are mistaken for men draws on and develops queer considerations of the performativities of identities and bodies. Queer, as much as it can be defined, does offer useful ways of exploring the intersections of gender and sexualities, however in geographies there continues to be divisions between the areas of feminist/gender and sexuality studies, with lesbian and trans geographies (see Browne, 2007; Browne et al., 2010) sitting awkwardly between these. Closer attention to the productive intersections of feminist and sexualities geographies (see Wright, 2010) would for me challenge both feminist and queer/sexualities geographies. For feminist geographies, there continues to be a need to address queer contestation of male/female (see Browne et al., 2010). In geographies of sexualities, gender can be overlooked and queer implicitly associated with (gay) men. Queer geographies are well placed to challenge the hegemony of both gender binaries and the male dominance that pervade discussions of geographies of sexualities.

**Paulo Jorge Vieira e Joseli Maria Silva - One of the innovations of your work is the strong link with participatory form of research as in the community research "count me in too .researching lesbian, gay, bisexual & trans lives in Brighton & Hove. Could you explain better what this research project is?**

**Kath Browne** - Count Me In Too is a research project where lesbian, gay, bisexual

and trans (LGBT) people shared their views and experiences, and worked with service providers and others to gather and present evidence that would promote positive changes for LGBT people. Data was gathered from LGBT people who live, work and socialise in Brighton & Hove. In 2006, 819 people completed questionnaires and 69 people discussed issues in focus groups. These included LGBT people with shared identities, such as older people, young people, Black & Minority Ethnic people, parents, hate crime survivors and Deaf people. The data was initially analysed by an Action Group composed of local LGBT people, and initial findings were published in June 2007 in an academic report with a parallel community report. Since then the project has produced 10 detailed policy orientated reports with LGBT people and local service providers on a range of themes. The details of the project and all of the reports can be found at [www.countmeintoo.co.uk](http://www.countmeintoo.co.uk) and the book *Ordinary in Brighton: LGBT, Activisms and the City* will be out in November 2013.

**Paulo Jorge Vieira e Joseli Maria Silva -  
And what kind of impact do you see in  
academy, and in activism of this kind of  
community research projects?**

**Kath Browne** - Community research projects such as Count Me In Too could be characterised as ‘participatory’, which seek to re-position communities, activists, service users and others as not simply subjects of research or recipients of services, but as ‘central to the solution of social problems’ (Taylor, 1999: 372). Yet, participatory approaches do not necessarily circumvent power, and participatory research is not inherently, or necessarily, progressive. These approaches are therefore not benign and Kesby argues that in the ‘dirty’ business of participatory approaches, we cannot but ‘sully

ourselves with power’ (2007: 2827, see also Kindon et al., 2008). There is a danger of seeing participatory/community/activist research as making the agendas developed in the academy ‘relevant’ and ‘useful’, as well as having ‘impact’. Whereas in many cases academics study those who are doing activism, drawing our thinking from their actions.

There is a real danger in undertaking this research that the power relations of the academy is reiterated rather than refused and subverted. In *Count Me In Too* the position of the academy, the usefulness of the University and the importance of research was constantly under question, as was my positionality as ‘expert’. Such precariousness is necessary to query deep-seated power differentials and privileges. My position on this form of research is thus that although we need to be constantly wary (and reminded) of the deployment of power as academics and the pushing of our agendas, participatory spaces can open up socio-spatial arenas that differ from everyday lives (Kesby, 2007: 2819). There are potentials in undertaking research to work with activists to effect positive social change. Moreover, being involved in co-creating research can be an empowering experience.

I would argue that what is missing from discussions of academic/activist relations are policy makers, and the activists who work with, or indeed are ‘them’. Too often a homogenous state is presented as ‘the enemy’ (see Browne, 2011). Yet alongside activism that seeks to work against the state, sexuality/queer geographers should also consider working with and influencing those charged with creating legislation that works towards more equitable worlds. In working across academia, activism and/or policy making, I continue to be nervous of participatory research that does not engage in critical self-reflection in order to

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acknowledge and address power relations as they emerge, and privileges held within the academy.

**Paulo Jorge Vieira e Joseli Maria Silva** - **Queer Methodologies** is one of books that you edited, with Catherine Nash. If the book is a proposal with a strong interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary examples, our question is how you see the influence of queer methodologies in Geography?

**Kath Browne** - As you say much of this book is transdisciplinary and applies to multiple disciplines and subject fields simultaneously. Firstly, it is important to note that in this book we are speaking about social science methodologies. Thus, we are not considering queer as a methodology, rather the implications of queer thinking for research methods. Taking your question in this sense, examining geography's use of social science methods has multiple possibilities. Geographers use of classic social science methods, such as interviewing, focus groups, questionnaires, as well as methodologies such ethnography has yet to fully grapple with the implications of gender and sexual fluidities as well as the questioning of normativities that queer thinking seeks. In specifically geography methods such as GIS the querying normativities in this area has enabled some innovative mapping of issues such as in the work of Mei-Po Kwan. What geography has to offer that could be interestingly linked to this is the work on non-representational geographies. Both Jason Lim (2007) and Rachel Colls (2012) have explored the productive potentials of linking this area with queer geographies, but there is much to be done.

**Paulo Jorge Vieira e Joseli Maria Silva** - **In a very recent paper - Don't look back in anger: Possibilities and Problems of Trans Equalities** – written with Leela Bakshi you spoke about the ways that austerity politics could influence LGBT and queer politics in Britain. In a very difficult moment to European economy and politics what kind of affects you could see in the future?

**Kath Browne** - The links between class and sexuality has been shown to be important in understanding the 'World we have won' (for example, McDermott, 2011), in terms of the gains for some sexual and gender dissidents across Europe. Many have argued that equalities legislations and the gains of sexual and gender legislations have affected LGBT people differently. However, the links between sexual and gender difference and issues of poverty have yet to be fully examined in geography. The implications of austerity will be spatially experienced and geographers are well placed to understand this, and also, hopefully, to intervene through influencing policy as well as activism. Whilst the issues of identities, practices, desires and relationships will remain key to the sub discipline; sexual and gender difference can also be addressed across the discipline including in for example medical geographies and housing studies. For the former issues of HIV, as well as access to medical interventions for trans people and fertility treatments could be key points of investigation. For latter there are key issues around the provision of housing for LGBT people who migrate to urban areas fleeing violence and seeking community, safety and inclusion. Finally, your question points me towards migration more broadly within and into Europe as a consequence of, and in spite of, austerity policies. The movement of

gender and sexual dissidents, who is legitimated as needing asylum, how LGBT communities engage with cultural and racial difference are just some of the areas that geographers are well placed to understand.

**Paulo Jorge Vieira e Joseli Maria Silva - And, for instance what do you think the implications of the rise of the far right in some many countries in Europe?**

**Kath Browne** – In contrast to the supposed ‘tolerance’ of Britain, North America and some parts of (Western) Europe, the opposition to LGBT equalities can be placed in ‘other’ places (most notably associated with certain Eastern European, African and ‘Muslim’ countries). This can overlook resistances to gender and sexual inclusions in places such as Western Europe and Canada, which are prevalent and question dominant narratives of ‘progress’ that are in turn used as justifications for oppressions (see Puar, 2007). There is a need to explore the reassertion of certain forms of hegemonic heteronormativities alongside the homonormativities that have exercised many queer scholars in recent years. Vocal and visible resistance can be seen in various heterogeneous sources including ‘pro-family’, religious organizations and conservative groups. Just as there are geographies to the ‘acceptances’ of LGBT lives, there are geographies to the forms and contexts of resistances to LGBT protections, reflecting far more complex spatial constitutions than monolithic terms such as the ‘Christian Right’ or ‘Conservative’ might suggest.

Furthermore, the development of digital media and transnational resistances means that these networks are facilitated, in part, by new media, the internet and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Given the internationalisation of organizations facilitated by new media, there is a need to

develop conceptualisations that can account for the transnational circulation of resistant discourses. This must be attentive to their spatial nuances, considering similarities and differences across national boundaries, between urban/rural, and the traveling of resistance discourses Catherine J. Nash and I are currently undertaking a project, supported by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (Canada) that addresses how these transnational resistances formulate political and social resistance to LGBT initiatives in geographically specific ways that reflect local and national contexts.

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