

Yvette Taylor and Michelle Addison (eds.) 2013, Queer Presences and Absences

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Queer Presences and Absences, an edited collection by Yvette Taylor and Michelle Maddison, offers the reader thirteen essays on queer lives in a wide variety of temporal and geographical settings. Showing a “persistent need to be attentive to inequalities across places and positions” (p. 2), the editors question which queer lives, bodies and identities have ‘gained’ a position of recognition and inclusion, while others are left behind in ‘othered’ and excluded spaces. Indeed, Taylor and Addison argue that existing literatures of sexuality have placed an enduring focus on “*certain* sexual subjects: Anglo-speaking, urban, white, middle-class, able-bodied lesbians and gay men in the global North” (p. 2). The book provides a platform for those stories often left untold or voices left unheard, shedding light on queer lives as everyday lives, performed within everyday spaces. The editors choose to extend this line of thought in their selection of the authors – the choice for ‘early career’ scholars is deliberate, and so is the diversification of ““geographies of sexualities’ beyond limited and geographically specific contexts” (p. 3).

Put simply: the book consists of three main sections. The first section deals with the multiple ways of being of queer lives. The second, and most straightforwardly geographical, section centers around ‘public’ and ‘private’ places and its meanings for queer lives. The third and final section explores changing institutional and parental spaces of queer lives.

Queer Movements, Marginalities and Mainstreams

The book opens with a sexological study on the construction of deviance during ‘normalisation’ (1968–1989) in Czechoslovakia (*Kateřina Liřková*). The second chapter investigates how this affected gays and lesbians in their everyday life and their identity construction, both in communist Czechoslovakia as in the Czech Republic (*Kateřina Nedbálková*). Where the first chapter sheds light on the context in which the second chapter should be understood, Liřková also creates insights

into the political dynamics of knowledge production and the disciplining of sexual knowledges. Nedbálková uses a more geographical perspective in her analysis of how social spaces were governed, claimed and/or informed by limits, rules, norms and values on what is perceived as normal. She investigates how gays and lesbians tried to comply, negotiate, circumvent and resist the disciplining of their bodies in everyday life. This theme continues in the third chapter by *Francesca Stella* on lesbian lives in late Soviet Russia, a topic that has been overlooked both by queer and Russian studies (p. 4). Indeed, leaving same-sex attraction to ‘professionals’ and ‘experts’ has led to a clinical discourse in which queer practices were deemed perverted. As such, this chapter beautifully (and tragically) combines the importance of a critical reflection on presences and absences in knowledge production (chapter one) and its effect on everyday lives and experiences of queer subjectivities (chapter two), almost as if it was written as a trilogy. Going onto chapter 4 by *Jan Simon Hutta and Carsten Balzer* on *travestis* in Brazil could therefore easily have been perceived as a major rupture. However, by following the tune of studying queer lives as everyday lives within everyday spaces, one can easily shift from one geographical context to another and still feeling to be part of one coherent story, as if the differently pitched chapter is simply another song on the same music album. Hutta and Balzer’s chapter proves to be an apt example of research that “critically [engages] with sexual cultures and identities beyond the Global North,” which is precisely what the editors wanted to provide in their book (p. 5). More than any, this chapter challenges the reader to think through taken-for-granted notions of queer and LGBT-activism in hegemonic Anglo-Saxon literature, its value becoming only fully apparent after reading the whole collection. This complex, multi-layered song might in hindsight easily become my favourite song of the album.

Queer Mediations and (Dis)Locations

At first sight, *Andrew Gormon-Murray’s* chapter on older gay men in Sydney might seem to be the opposite of the previous chapter, as it deals with queer subject who are very much present in academic debates – namely white, middle-class, Western, homosexual men. That would be, however, a preliminary conclusion. The strength of this chapter lies exactly in the fact that “queer presences and absences can equally be found in white, Western, middle-class spaces” (Guyan, 2014: 132), a theme that will be continued throughout the whole second part of the book and strengthens the importance of an intersectional approach within queer studies. Gormon-Murray takes up the often overlooked subject of aging and the importance of home and belonging for older gay men in a city with a vibrant gay scene. The potential of home as a site of identity and wellbeing is an interesting and thought provoking perspective, challenging notions of home as refuge or closet. Or to continue the music metaphor: Gormon-Murray stripped down a well-known song, changed the composition, and as such challenges mainstream music and allows for a new sound to be heard. *Youngsook Choi* takes up this beat and turns it into a protest song, when shedding light on the meaning of home for transgendered people. Choi provides us with a tragic story

of transgressors for whom the home is often a place of "relentless gender policing" (p. 118), reinforcing and reproducing gender binarism. Home is positioned as an ambivalent closet space in which constant negotiations and battling against gender binarism might as well be a space for the queering of these conventions adopted in the home. As such, Choi underpins the political potential of home as suggested in the previous chapter. *Mark Casey* expands the geographical territory of 'private' space to other 'everyday spaces' such as the street, work and leisure spaces of lesbians and gay men in Newcastle-upon-Tyne (UK). This chapter might easily go unnoticed within this broad collection of good to exceptional essays, yet Casey's (successful) attempt to overcome binaries of mundane versus extraordinary spaces has a value of its own within the book. He makes an excellent point on how difficult being 'present' might be and how this might still depend on classed, gendered and sex(ual)-ed normativities. *Yvette Taylor* also takes up the theme of class in her chapter on working-class lesbians and introduces 'spatialities of class'. Similar to Casey, Taylor asks for a "more intersectional politics of class, and a more materially located sense of queer" (p. 160). *Jen Gieseck* closes the second part of the book with a chapter on Park Slope in Brooklyn, New York City (USA). Maybe less subtle than Casey's chapter, the message is consistent: even within so called inclusive and queer spaces, being present depends on particular cultural and economic capitals, righteously noting that these are not easily claimed by all and are highly dependent on class, gender and ethnicity.

Queer Presences and Absences: Everyday and Everywhere?

The third themed section on institutions starts with a chapter on lesbian parenting by *Karina Luzia* which reflects on accounts by queer families with real and perceived privileges within a 'homonormative' status, and how this nonetheless cannot prevent struggles in a variety of ways. *Max Biddulph's* chapter sheds light on how a teacher and self-identified queer aging man constantly negotiates which aspects of one's identity to emphasize or hide within a tightly policed space such as education. Not only do the challenging tensions between presences and absences make this chapter worth a thorough read, but the author's innovative format of weaving fictionalised facts into an auto-ethnographic story is also worth the reader's attention. From secondary education to business schools, *Nick Rumens* discusses the queering of organisation studies. Twenty years after Seidman's plea to combine queer theory with sociological analysis of economic and political institutional processes, Rumens shows how Organisation Studies are not nearly queer enough. This chapter shows that also within the academy, being present for queer lives remains a challenge. Not nearly queer enough can also be said about the centralised Italian legislation and policies. *Chiara Bertone and Beatrice Gusmano* investigate the potential and struggles of local administrations as to oppose the national standstill by focusing on the rhetoric of 'urban safety'. The five case studies presented in the chapter show that even in cases where attention is giving to queer subjects, a focus on marginalised and victimised

subjects can still undermine collective actions and as such limiting the ‘speakability’ of all subjects involved.

What is queer?

The collection does not launch new (definitions of) concepts; nonetheless, it serves as a state of the art collection of contemporary queer research. It seems a deliberate choice of the editors not to define ‘queer’ either, yet they do explain that LGBT-lives are not to be captured as “queer-in-themselves” (p. 2). They state that “the queer subject as an intervention/alternative/challenge is resituated here not as *automatically* capacitated as subversive but as a subject worthy of careful consideration” (p. 3, original emphasis). This is an added value to literature which sometimes tends to lean towards a framing of LGBT-lives as queer-in-themselves, but also focusing on the extraordinary and “exotic dimensions” (Guyan, 2014: 133) of queer. The focus on normal and/or everyday spaces of queer subjects is one that I appreciate not only personally, as it provides space in which queer subjects negotiate intersections of hegemonic normativities in all its diversity and normalcy. The strong emphasis on the *particularity* of concepts, spaces, subjectivities contrasts nicely with often taken for granted notions, such as queer or heteronormativity. Taylor and Addison arrange the book in such a way that its composite essays not only speak for themselves, but they also go one step further – challenging the reader to chart their own course amidst the linkages and divergences in concepts and geographical settings. It also allows the reader to discover how concepts of the Anglo-Saxon literature might even become lost in translation, as the chapter by Hutta and Balzer clearly showed.

The downside on a focus on normalcy and everyday spaces of queer lives might be that this excellent collection goes unnoticed and stays below the radar for many scholars working on geographies of sexualities. Yet, it’s a collection that deserves more than normal attention, as it especially sheds light on *academic* absences of queer lives (don’t expect a reference to ‘50 shades of Grey’ or Grindr). This publication is a timely reminder that there is a “persistent need to be attentive to inequalities across places and positions” (p. 2).

References

- Guyan, K. (2014) “Book review: Queer Presences and Absences”, *Gender, Place and Culture*, 21 (1), pp. 132–135.
- Taylor, Y., and Addison, M. (2013) *Queer Presences and Absences*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.