Urban Studies

The place of transversal LGBTQ+ urban activisms

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Abstract

This special issue on placing LGBTQ+ urban activisms seeks to affirm the plurality of LGBTQ+ activisms and expand the geographic lens to consider places that have been side-lined as sites of LGBTQ+ political ferment. In this article I reflect on the ways that the collection also gestures towards the importance of 'connective' LGBTQ+ urban activisms, complicating existing theorisation that has primarily focused on transnational relations. Approaching it through the particular space and time of London during the Covid-19 pandemic, I interpret the collection as a call to explore the knowledge that becomes available – and the praxis that is foregrounded – when we examine the connective dimensions of LGBTQ+ urban activisms. Bridging feminist, queer and urban studies, I conclude by arguing for the particular analytic lens that emerges when 'place' is brought into critical tension with 'transversal politics' as a way to think about both those connective LGBTQ+ urban activisms that already exist and those which are urgently needed.

Keywords

feminist, LGBTQ+, queer, transversal activisms, urban justice

摘要

本期关于男女同性恋、双性恋、变性人和酷儿群体 (LGBTQ+) 城市激进主义的特刊旨在确认LGBTQ+激进主义的多元性，并扩大地理视角以考察已作为LGBTQ+政治温床而被边缘化的地方。在本文中，我探讨本辑在哪些方面突出了"连接性"LGBTQ+城市激进主义的重要性，从而将主要关注跨国关系的现有理论精细化。我通过新冠肺炎 (Covid-19) 大流行期间伦敦的特定空间和时间来探讨这一问题，并将本辑解读为一个号召，呼吁在研究LGBTQ+城市激进主义的连接性维度时探讨新出现的知识以及前瞻性的实践。在结论部分，我试图在女权主义者、酷儿和城市研究之间搭建一座桥梁，我主张采用一些当"场所"与"横向政治"处于关键的紧张关系时出现的特定分析视角，作为一种思考已经存在的和迫切需要的连接性LGBTQ+城市激进主义的方法。

关键词

女权主义者、男女同性恋、双性恋、变性人和酷儿群体 (LGBTQ+)、酷儿、横向激进主义、城市正义

Introduction

The unthinkable yet persistently imagined has happened: the world is in the midst of a global pandemic. Covid-19 has profoundly altered our relationship to public assembly, to travel within and across national borders, to home, to neighbourhood and to community. The virus, a slew of articles caution, threatens the city itself (Daley, 2020; Kimmelman, 2020). For LGBTQ+ people, who have so often made their home in urban environments (Weston, 1995), this is a particularly dire pronouncement. For some in the 'global gay city' of London, where I have been living and researching LGBTQ+ life for a decade (Spruce, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020), job losses lead to visa retractions and rent shortages, forcing processes of intra- and international displacement; temporary venue closures hit profit margins, risking further contraction of the already diminished LGBTQ+ social scene; and LGBTQ+ targeted services, suffering from two decades of austerity, privatisation and bureaucratisation, are called upon to do even more with even less (Campkin and Marshall, 2017; Dasgupta, 2020; Wakefield, 2020).

Even as the death of the city is heralded, however, lampposts on my London street are wrapped with offers of help, flyers fill the mailbox announcing mutual aid groups; a call to action and a promise of support, and conversations with neighbours move beyond the likelihood of rain to share worries about friends and family, information on the stock levels at local shops. LGBTQ+ activisms in the city quickly organise. A community campaign group, Friends of the Joiners Arms,[1] sends out a weekly 'Queerantine Newsletter' packed with information about online events, workshops, funds, resources and fundraisers. The Outside Project[2] responds to the increase in domestic abuse the LGBTIQ community faces during the pandemic by opening 'Star Refuge'. The queer activist group Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants – unable to carry out their 'bucket shakes' on the streets of Soho[3] – go online to raise money and establish a migrant and asylum-seeker centred mutual aid group. Paradoxically, as we are asked to social distance, connection comes to the fore.

This special issue seeks to affirm the plurality of LGBTQ+ urban activisms, reflecting 'the myriad of actors and actions constitutive of the political', and expanding the geographic lens to consider places that have been side-lined as sites of LGBTQ+ political ferment (Bain and Podmore, forthcoming, this issue). In this article, I reflect on the ways that the collection also gestures towards the importance of urban activist connectivity, adding to existing theorisation by offering a spatial analysis beyond the transnational, which has dominated analyses of connective LGBTQ+ activisms thus far. After briefly elucidating my framing in queer-feminist theory, I track several insights that crosscut the articles in this issue and begin to outline a research agenda for thinking about the place of connective LGBTQ+ urban activisms. I conclude by arguing that a transversal politics of urban places has much to offer researchers at the juncture of sexuality and urban studies.

Placing LGBTQ+ connective activisms

Feminist scholarship has long contended with the role, conditions of possibility and

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risks of the activisms that I have glossed here as 'connective' (Hooks, 1986; Mohanty, 1984, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 1999). Whilst the terms 'solidarity', 'coalition', 'collective', 'alliance' and 'transversal' are not synonymous (nor, indeed, is this an exhaustive list), and each has ideological and praxical specificities that require dedicated interrogation (see below), they are nevertheless united in calling attention to the ways in which activists have sought to build connections across difference. Feminist academics, invariably activists themselves, have sought to document and analyse this work, critically engaging the potential and limitations of efforts to mobilise collectively for social justice (Cole and Luna, 2010). Often influenced by this feminist scholarship, attention to LGBTQ+ activisms has also been preoccupied with questions of connection.

A significant volume of interdisciplinary work has examined the ways in which LGBTQ+ activisms struggle (with varying degrees of commitment and success) to make connections both 'across the acronym(s)' and in relation to other differentiators, notably of race, class, disability and age (Binnie and Klesse, 2013; Chávez, 2013; Gould, 2012; Labelle, 2019; Moore et al., 2014). Connection is also at the heart, however, of the immensely generative scholarship on transnational sexualities that implicates activisms. As they travel, the otherwise often taken-for-granted 'good' of connective activisms has been critiqued for enacting imperial saviour narratives and projecting inappropriate epistemologies of sex and gender (Massad, 2002), whilst the neologism of 'homonationalism' (Puar, 2007) speaks to the convergence between LGBTQ equalities' agendas and nationalisms in a range of sites. Even as some LGBTQ+ activists find themselves in positions of relative security and are asked – or feel compelled – to 'reach out', this is a complex, unpredictable and potentially

politically fraught manoeuvre as connective activisms at every scale are shot-through with power dynamics that scaffold – to paraphrase Spivak (1993) – who can speak, who is heard and which issues are taken up.

Indeed, scholarship on LGBTQ+ activism increasingly reflects on its culpability in solidifying linear and progressive narratives of LGBTQ+ activisms as emerging from a time (the 1950s and 1960s), place (New York and San Francisco) and people (predominately white gay men). And yet, given that connection is a crucial component of political life, an understanding of LGBTQ+ urban activisms must engage this difficult terrain. To do so, we need a richer conceptual vocabulary that builds from everyday grassroots experiences of political mobilisation across a range of urban places and communities. One such intervention is offered in *Vulnerability in Resistance* (Butler et al., 2016), which elaborates a feminist politics of interdependence and shared vulnerability as the grounds for collective resistance. Tantalising glimpses of a spatial analysis of connective politics emerge in this work's emphasis on the architecture[4] that enables activisms: echoing urban theorists such as Harvey (2012), Butler points to the significance of the city-street and the plaza as both sites of resistance and public goods that must be defended (Butler et al., 2016: 13, 26; see also Butler, 2015). Whilst this provides a rich point of departure, further empirical attention needs to be devoted to the spatial dimensions of LGBTQ+ urban connective activisms. I build on themes in this special issue to begin to sketch the parameters of this important research agenda.

There are three 'connective' themes that weave across the contributions. First, the majority of articles reflect on the roles that alliances play in the increasingly heterogenous social, political and legislative sexual landscapes that LGBTQ+ activists navigate. As the articles by Ramdas (2020),

Payne (2020) and Hartal and Misgav (2020) show, LGBTQ+ activist strategies of connection require contextualisation not only in relation to transnational and national sexual politics but also through localised histories of trauma and resistance. Paying attention to the specificities of place, these analyses complicate simplistic characterisations of assimilation, homonormativity or homonationalism to reveal LGBTQ+ activist alliances as contingent and ambivalent. Whilst these articles reflect on connections between LGBTQ+ activisms and those who hold more power, the contributions from Catungal et al. (forthcoming, this issue) and Andrucki (2020) consider the relationship between LGBTQ+ activisms and urban inequalities. Whilst Catungal et al. critically unpack the overdetermined association between sexual 'issues' and sexual identities (in this case HIV/AIDS and gay men), and the constraints that they have on the reach of activist-led service provision, Andrucki highlights the potential that queer social reproduction has for intervening in the injustices of the neoliberal city.

Second, several of the articles dedicate attention to the particular geographical formations that shape connective LGBTQ+ activisms. Reflecting the crucial contribution that the special issue makes to exploring sexual landscapes beyond the familiar list of global gay cities, the connective dimensions of suburbs and small cities are foregrounded in articles by Bain and Podmore (2020) and Currans (forthcoming). Together, these complicate the longstanding claim that it is the urban population's characteristic diversity, along with the existence of a critical mass of LGBTQ+ people, which renders cities particularly fecund sites for activisms. In particular, Currans argues that the attachment to place in small cities, amplified through forms of activism that emphasise local political histories, can provide the basis for 'affinity activisms'. Complementing this diversification of

research sites, several articles examine the geographical imaginaries of LGBTQ+ activisms (Knopp and Brown, 2020; Ruez, 2020). These importantly draw attention to connections *across* space, emphasising networks of LGBTQ+ urban activisms and countering the analytic tendency to explore urban sites as discrete units.

The third connective theme that runs through the special issue complements and complicates the focus on place with detailed attention to activisms' spaces. Articles explore whose participation is enabled as activism travels from the home, to the bar, to the street, and beyond. Notably, Rosenberg (2020) and Johnston and Waitt (2020) highlight the significance of embodied experiences of space in understanding the (dis)connection that individuals feel in relation to the LGBTQ+ 'body politic'. These articles illustrate the value of an interdisciplinary analysis that seeks to understand the embodied material and affective dimensions of inclusion and exclusion. They also deepen and diversify our conceptual language for activisms by attending to the everyday, embodied forms of resistance that dispossessed LGBTQ+ people deploy to both disrupt, and lay claim to, LGBTQ+ urban belonging. It is to the vital project of enriching the conceptual terrain to better reflect the heterogeneity of connective LGBTQ+ urban activisms and their different potentialities that I now turn.[5]

Making a place for transversal LGBTQ+ activisms

Of course, I read this special issue *for* connection after months of social distance, quarantine and lockdown. In particular, I read the articles as the city reveals the deep fissures that distribute precarity unevenly, even as we are all, perhaps, rendered more aware of our interdependence.[6] Tracking

London's diverse LGBTQ+ activisms over the past few months reveals that many are responding to the challenges of Covid-19, as well as to the reckoning with colonial legacies made visible through the Black Lives Matter movement, with an intensified commitment to intersectional and connective praxis. A transversal politics of urban places can, I argue, help us to grasp, critically engage and amplify these vital LGBTQ+ activisms.

Drawing from activist vernaculars in Italy, Yuval-Davis (1999: 94) describes transversal politics 'as an alternative to the assimilationist "universalistic" politics of the Left on the one hand, and to identity politics on the other hand'. This exploration of the 'middle ground' as a site of radical intervention resonates with the conceptualisation of 'urbanism 1.5' that Bain and Podmore provide in the introduction to this issue (forthcoming). The geographic terms through which transversal politics has been theorised, moreover, echo the special issue's framing of the places of LGBTQ+ urban activisms as sites of complex interconnections (see also Binnie, 2014; Oswin, 2015). Bacchetta describes 'transversal connections of solidarity both within and across scale, such as within a local site, from one local site to another, from a local to a regional site, or transnationally, in a myriad of possible arrangements' (Bacchetta, 2002: 947, 2010; Puar, 2004). A transversal analysis is, she argues, a crucial intervention that pushes against the dynamics of representation and effacement that mean only certain forms of local LGBTQ+ activisms are recognised at the global scale.

Although Bacchetta (2002: 953, 2010) is responding to the effacement of diverse LGBTQ+ activisms that occurs as the (Indian) locale is read through the (US-framed) transnational lens, her call to 'reimagine queerdom' through 'a thickly historicised, contextualised, rescaled transversality'

also challenges metronormative accounts of LGBTQ+ activisms, which not only suggest that suburban and rural activisms are always derivative of urban activisms, but also paper over the complex, multiple and contradictory urban activist landscape with just a few neat stories (Bacchetta, 2010; Cohen, 2019). As Brown (2012: 1068) writes, 'even many of those who do live in those [metropolitan centres where homonormativity has been described, theorised and critiqued] do not live immersed in the spaces and social relations that have come to be described as homonormative'. Crucially, then, a transversal politics of urban places counters the reduction of LGBTQ+ city life to an account of the most elite people and the most visible places, stimulating an exploration of the small, disorderly stories of LGBTQ+ urban politics that remain underacknowledged and undertheorised, even in global gay cities such as London (Spruce, 2020). This contributes to the ethically and epistemologically vital task of centring QTPOC (Queer and/or Trans People of Colour), queer anti-poverty and crip[7] activist histories and presents in urban studies.

Taking the demand for contextualisation further, a transversal analysis of LGBTQ+ urban activisms also prompts an examination of their actualised and prospective interrelation with intersecting social justice projects. Access to green space, clean air, safe housing, adequate food, just policing – all of which have come to public attention and generated activist responses in London during the Covid-19 pandemic – may not be issues readily considered in an analysis of LGBTQ+ activisms, and yet sexual and gendered norms produced through classed and raced logics naturalise and depoliticise unequal access to these 'goods'. Access is often particularly uneven in urban contexts, which can lead to a competitive and disconnected activist landscape. Drawing on the lineage of critical urban theory as the 'critique [of] ideology [...]

and the critique of power, inequality, injustice and exploitation' (Brenner, 2012: 11), queer urban studies[8] has a key role in elucidating the respectability politics of gender and sexuality that justify logics of inequality (see also Hubbard et al., 2017). This identification of transversal gendered and sexual lines of oppression creates scope for further connective activisms with the potential to transform urban politics. To this end, working with the Museum of Homelessness (a London-based 'community-driven social justice museum'[9]) I have begun to conceptualise 'queer convergences'; points of conflation, association and overlap between housing deprivation and sexual deviancy that are made visible by a transversal, queer feminist reading (Spruce, 2019). These convergences offer an alternative framework for LGBTQ+ urban activisms which moves away from the racialised and classed logics of safety and market participation that have been prevalent (Hanhardt, 2013) and towards the articulation of a shared critique of insecurity and persecution.

Finally, whilst work has begun to explore the ways that 'sense of place' can ground connective activisms (Currans, forthcoming; Long, 2013), further research is required to consider the particular spaces that facilitate transversal LGBTQ+ activisms. Put another way, 'placing' transversal urban politics reminds us that movement building is also about the buildings where movements happen. As in many global gay cities, London's gay venues are being priced out (Campkin and Marshall, 2017; Shariatmadari, 2019); we need to understand what impact the contraction of the 'scene', as a place of intergenerational local knowledge transfer and politicisation, is having on urban LGBTQ+ connective activisms. Again, rather than thinking of commercial venues in isolation, a transversal politics draws out the connections with radical bookshops, queer-café's, women's centres and other sites of subversive and transversal

politics that struggle to maintain a physical presence under the ever-increasing pressure of urban real-estate markets. A similar move explores the lines that connect the apparent demise of the gaybourhood with the ever-increasing constraints on squatting – so intimately related to radical LGBTQ+ activisms in London and other urban centres (Cook, 2013; Hassan, 2014; Spruce, 2017).

Despite the backdrop of foreclosure and redevelopment, LGBTQ+ urban activisms (including those mentioned above) are finding ways to 'hack' the commodification of queer urban locations and the political currency of LGBTQ+ solidarity to create material and discursive spaces for transversal politics. These already existing activist practices serve both as a reminder of critical urban studies' commitment to an analysis of privilege and precarity that cannot be side-lined as we explore LGBTQ+ urban activisms, and as a source of enrichment for the conceptual vocabulary with which we approach transversal urban politics. My hope is that by drawing out the connective themes of this special issue and offering a fuller conceptualisation of a transversal politics of urban place, I have laid the ground for further research on the connective dimensions of LGBTQ+ urban activisms. Viewed through the lens of transversal politics, 'connection' quite clearly emphasises, rather than detracts from, the importance of 'placing' LGBTQ+ urban activisms.

Notes

1. For more on Friends of the Joiners Arms, see: https://thejoinersliveson.wordpress.com. See also Burchiellaro (2020).
2. The Outside Project is the UK's first community centre and shelter for people experiencing housing deprivation. See further: https://www.lgbtiqoutside.org.
3. Soho is London's most well-known LGBTQ+ neighbourhood. For more on Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants, see: http://www.lgsmigrants.com/about-us.
4. Butler uses 'architecture' both literally and figuratively: a more spatially attentive approach could productively explore this further.
5. Whilst I use this article to think through 'transversal politics', we would do well to critically engage the plethora of terms that describe connective activisms: working with the ways in which they are used in specific places and consciously committing to amplifying those terms of connection that are used in non-dominant languages and by marginalised groups.
6. Critiquing a masculinist disavowal of interdependency, Butler (2016: 21) theorises 'the human body as a certain kind of *dependency* on infrastructure, understood complexly as environment, social relation and networks of support and sustenance'.
7. Crip activisms are those activisms oriented towards the conjuncture of disabled and queer critique. See further McRuer (2018).
8. In this framing, queer urban studies complements rather than supersedes LGBTQ+ urban studies, distinctively orienting us towards a problematisation of the conceptual boundaries that define 'LGBT' and 'urban' research.
9. The Museum has close connections with LGBTQ+ activisms, including a joint creative residency with 'Queerseum' in the community space at the Outside Project. See further: https://museumofhomelessness.org/2019/08/02/residency/.

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