



Heterosexuality and home: Intimacies of space and spaces of touch

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the notion of touch to understand further the production of heterosexual bodies and home spaces. Specifically, it argues that the everyday geographies of heterosexual touch are an important constituent of homemaking. Considering the ordinary acts of heterosexual touch and home encourages a more nuanced reading of the mutually constitutive relationship between bodies and space. It challenges normative notions about the naturalness and normality of heterosexuality. Drawing on data from joint semi-structured interviews, solicited diaries and self-directed photography with 14 women in heterosexual relationships who live in Hamilton, Aotearoa New Zealand, I offer an in-depth, critical and nuanced analysis of sexualised touch. Building on suggestions that touch is more than simply cutaneous contact, I show that heterosexual bodies touch and feel bodies, spaces and objects in a variety of ways.

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1. Introduction

Over the course of the past two decades there has emerged a sustained geographical inquiry into embodiment. Geographers are well-attuned to the importance of including embodied experience in geographical discourse and there are numerous studies on a variety of bodies and the spaces they occupy (Bain and Nash, 2006; Bell and Binnie, 2000; Johnston, 1996; Longhurst, 2005; McDowell, 1995). This focus on embodiment has since given rise to an awareness of the importance of considering emotion, sensuous experience and haptic knowledges when thinking through the relationship between people and place. Indeed, there is now a blossoming of geographical work which seeks to understand what it is to *feel* through the body.

Attending to the ways that people feel through their body may mean thinking about embodied experience in a visceral sense (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2008; Longhurst et al., 2009; Probyn, 2000) or as represented through language, discourse and representation (Davidson and Milligan, 2004). Feeling may also be conceptualised materially, for example, reaching out and physically touching something or someone. Touch is an integral part of everyday embodied experience (Rodaway, 1994). Touch can occur between bodies, places and things. It can be intimate, sensual, and sexual; and it can be annoying, unwanted, and restrictive. Touch can be an everyday experience and a site of embodied and social politics. And, touch is always situated somewhere; place is crucial to the ways in which bodies may or may not touch. The social

politics and embodied experiences of touch therefore vary from place to place, person to person, encounter to encounter. With an eye to this broader literature, my own research looks at the ways in which touch – the sensuous and sexual experiences of touching, being touched, and the embodied emotions associated with touch – can offer new ways of thinking through the relationship between heterosexual bodies and home.

The relationship between heterosexuality and domestic space is widely taken-for-granted as 'normal' and 'natural' and as such is under-researched and not well-understood (although see Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Gorman-Murray, 2007; Robinson et al., 2004; Thomas, 2004). As the unmarked norm, the heterosexual body is often presumed to be the subject of most studies of home, such that the materialities of heterosexual embodiment and the ways in which homes become heterosexualised through performance and practice, have been largely overlooked. A focus on touch, however, encourages an appreciation of the ways in which heterosexual bodies and domestic spaces are mutually produced and constructed. In this paper, I offer a means to re-theorise geographies of sexualities and home by fleshing out 'heterosexual bodies that touch' and making them explicit in the production of geographical knowledge. Using the notion of touch to explore the mutual constitution of heterosexual bodies and domestic space is a strategic move to displace ontological assumptions about the naturalness and normality of heterosexuality (Blum and Nast, 1996).

In the next section of this paper I review some of the geographical work on touch. I bring together the limited references geographers have made to touch, sexuality and place. Here, I highlight why touch, for the most part, has been absent from geographical research. I then

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briefly discuss the methodological process used to carry out this research. Attention is turned to the everyday practices and domestic spaces of heterosexual touch, focusing on the lived experiences of 14 women in heterosexual relationships. I argue that the practices of heterosexual touch are an important part of homemaking. Specifically, home is a key site of touch for heterosexual couples, despite the relative ‘freedom’ they have to express love and intimacy in public. Considering the everyday ways that sexual touch produces heterosexuality and home encourages a more critical understanding of the normative ways in which heterosexual bodies and spaces are mutually constituted.

2. Haptic geographies of heterosexuality and home

In geography there is an emergent body of work that engages directly with the senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch – and the manner in which these work alone, or in concert, to facilitate relations between and amongst people and place (Dixon and Straughan, 2010). Geographers have paid considerable attention to sight, privileging the visual in terms of their objects of analysis and also in relation to their modes of enquiry (Rose, 1993). Much less work has been conducted on geographies of touch.

Those that have included an explicit discussion of touch in their research have focused on the affective experiences of Reiki massage (Paterson, 2005); technologies of touch (Paterson, 2006); touch and visual impairment (Heatherington, 2003); and bodies in relation to the landscape (Obrador-Pons, 2007). This work can be loosely classified as haptic geographies. Paterson (2009) provides the first coherent overview of the treatment of haptic experiences in geography and looks at the methodological implications for exploring such knowledges. He points out that the type of touch being invoked in much of this work moves beyond simplified conceptualisations of touch as immediate skin contact, that is, cutaneous touch (Paterson, 2009). Instead, the multisensory complexity of touch is emphasised, wherein the senses (cutaneous touch, sight, smell, sound, taste) work together to produce individually felt haptic experiences, geographies and knowledges. Touch, then, is a complex set of sensory practices and emotionally felt experiences that connect people and place. Touch, felt in and through the body, shapes people’s everyday geographies and plays an under-recognised role in sexuality and space scholarship.

Despite this growing interest in the haptic, sensuous and emotive experiences of bodies and place, geographers have had little to say about the everyday realities of gendered and sexed bodies and sexualised touch. Most work on touch, even that which discusses its intimate character (see for example Irigaray, 1993; Patterson, 2004), does not look at the ordinary practices and processes of embodied sexual experience. Sex itself is a series of touches, feelings and embodied sensations. Indeed, heterosexuality is, at one level, about sex: sexualised bodies touching; touching bodies sexually.¹ Heterosexual subjectivities are wrapped up with the embodied experiences of oppositely sexed bodies and gendered desires. As such, it seems untenable to separate heterosexual subjectivities from the embodied practices of touch. Yet, as Nast (1998: 192 emphasis in original) argues, geographers interested in sexual and spatial relations have tended to distance “ourselves from the *sexed* nature of heterosex.” Much of the work on heterosexuality focuses on its institutionalisation and how it impacts on the construction and lived experience of feminine (Jackson, 1999) and masculine subjectivities (Gorman-Murray, 2008a; McDowell,

1995) as opposed to heterosexuality as a set of sexual experiences, practices and gendered desires. The work that does look at the sex in heterosexuality focuses primarily on ‘non-normative’ or ‘deviant’ forms of heterosexuality, such as prostitution (Hubbard, 1997; Hubbard and Whowell, 2008).

In saying this, some scholars from across the social sciences are increasingly turning their attention to the ordinary day-to-day practices, experiences and subjectivities of heterosexuality (Jackson, 1999, 2008; Johnson, 2005; Richardson, 1996). Geographers have contributed to this corpus of work by showing that heterosexual bodies and the ordinary spaces of everyday life are mutually constituted (Hubbard, 2000; Johnston, 2006; Little, 2003; Phillips, 2006). Crucially, these geographers have challenged ontological and epistemological ideas about the naturalness and normality of heterosexuality and its spaces by revealing it as a sexual subjectivity constituted through embodied performance and practice.

The notion of touch provides further opportunities for re-conceptualising the relationship between heterosexuality and space. Heterosexuality has long been considered the bedrock of society (VanEvery, 1996); the ‘pre-given’ sexuality from which all others deviate. Heterosexuality, as Richardson (1996: 2) writes, is “constructed as a coherent, natural, fixed and stable category; as universal and monolithic.” Heterosexuality’s ubiquity and taken-for-grantedness means that, in many ways, it is thought to be aspatial and asexual (Nast, 1998). Indeed, the naturalisation of heterosexuality means that it is often deemed to be a set of social relations devoid of any erotic value (Hubbard, 2000), which is located everywhere and at the same time nowhere (Binnie, 2001). The naturalisation of heterosexuality structures the spaces of everyday life and as a result certain places, particularly the home, are deemed to be paradigmatic spaces of heterosexuality. As Johnston (2006) argues, however, it is impossible to talk of heterosexual space *per se*; rather the spaces of heterosexuality are constituted through performance and practice. Applying this notion of performance and practice to the domestic spaces and subjectivities of heterosexuality affords an opportunity for thinking about the everyday geographies of touch as homemaking practices (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Gorman-Murray, 2006; Gregson and Lowe, 1995).

Within Western societies, home has traditionally been constructed as ‘private’ space away from the ‘public’ world. This means that people can generally touch each other ‘behind closed doors’ in ways considered inappropriate in public. In this way, the haptic geographies and boundaries of the body are organised and performed differently in ‘public’ and ‘private’ spaces. Moreover, as a ‘private’ space home is the primary location where specific forms of touch are normalised and legitimatised. The dominant scripting of home has been in terms of monogamous heterosexual coupling, institutionalised in marriage, social discourse and public policy (Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Gorman-Murray, 2007; Johnston and Valentine, 1995). This means that home, both materially and imaginatively, is deemed to be the ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ place for bodies to touch and feel. Likewise, touch between loving, monogamous heterosexual couples is the ‘typical’ framework for intimacy at home. In this way, touch works to reproduce hegemonic and naturalised notions about the relationship between heterosexuality and domestic space.

I am not the only one who has noticed the dearth of writing on the sensuous, embodied and emotional aspects of sexuality and space. Binnie (2004, 2007) for instance, argues that within queer and/or sexuality studies there is a considerable turn away from exploring erotic dimensions of people and place. As a result, the everyday materialities of sexual life often go unremarked upon. It seems to me that the body is somewhat absent in studies of the spatialities of sex-itself, particularly the heterosexual body, in relation to domestic space. Even those geographical theorisations that seek to draw attention to the practices of everyday life beyond discourse and

¹ Heterosexuality also encompasses ‘ordinary’ and taken-for-granted institutions, such as marriage and family life; every practices and routines, like domestic and emotional labour. It includes and partially structures all domains of life (Jackson, 1999; Robinson et al., 2004).

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