

74. Transgressive Sex, Transforming Bodies

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Anthropology has long held a fascination for sex and the sexual body as deviance, eroticism, violence, sexual politics, ritualised sex and commercial transaction. Scholars have examined theories of sex and sexual desire in a wide variety of cultural contexts and in debates about the politics of sex. Public and private relations mediating the sex act and sexual activity render the politics of sex problematic. They raise questions concerning moral judgments about sexual relations in communities where sex, like politics and religion, is both important and 'a dirty business' (Sargisson 2000: 58). In these contexts, sex can also be a risky business, transforming permissible boundaries and restructuring bodily engagements. The public and private spaces of sexual encounter are fluid like the porosity of bodily substances: blood, sweat, saliva and semen seep into and between boundaries of the social fabric. Thus, the politics of sexual transgression are volatile with the power to reconfigure perceptions of bodily communication, sense, touch, taste and social norms of interaction. This panel seeks to interrogate the ways in which transgressive sex is a politicised arena of social action; how can transgressive sex alienate, resist, ground and inform community action and interaction; how do public and private spaces of encounter mediate transgressive sexual interaction; in what ways are bodies transformed by transgressive sex; and how do the politics of transgressive sex inform fieldwork and research strategies?

Transgressive child sex in Thailand: metaphor or morality tale?

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Adult/child sex is commonly seen in the modern industrialised West as one of the most transgressive forms of sexual behaviour imaginable. When this is overlaid with a commercial aspect and adults pay children for sex, it becomes even more so. In the 1990s, the commercial sexual exploitation of children, especially that involving Western men and children from developing countries, became an issue of particular concern and pressure from non-governmental agencies forced changes in international law and practice.

However, the often prurient emphasis on the horrors of child sex, as presented by the media and campaigning organisations, obscured the wider political battles that were taking place. Child prostitution became a symbol for all that was wrong with Thailand's relationship to the West. Images of rape, penetration and deflowering used about child prostitutes took on other metaphorical meanings and attempts to talk about transgressive child sex revealed much deeper social anxieties. This paper will examine the ways in which the images of the unspoilt body of a child being used for selfish Western gain took on wider meanings and will examine the gulf between the views of child prostitutes themselves and the campaigning organisations that claimed to speak for them.

Youth, Sex and the Carnavalesque: 'Transgressive' Desire at the English Seaside
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Moral panics abound, at least in the United Kingdom, regarding the promiscuity of youth, with the rise of sexually transmitted diseases and increases in teenage parenting in particular seen as indicators of moral decline. Hence, young people's sexuality and desire tend to be placed within a framework of transgression and deviance and become the subject of state intervention in a highly politicized arena. This paper is concerned with situations in which young people confront, negotiate and utilize this putatively transgressive sexuality. More specifically, drawing on research conducted amongst young people in an English seaside resort between 2000 and 2003, the paper explores the ways in which transgressive sexuality is created and sustained as a defining feature and quality - and economic base - of the carnival atmosphere and experience. However, while the anticipation, if not always the fulfilment, of transgressive sexuality is experienced both by some holiday makers and seasonal workers as a temporary thrill, for other young people who live and work in these situations year round, it is part of the permanent context of their daily lives. The effect of this situation is simultaneously to empower and disempower them in gender specific ways.

Sexually transgressive and life-threatening acts in South Africa

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Based on ethnographic research conducted in Cape Town in 2003, the paper will explore how young South Africans live with violence as part of everyday practice. It will focus on how and why strategies of safety are gendered, and how notions of safety influence gender roles and sexuality in particular. Rather than focusing on violent acts per se, the paper analyses the cultural meaning of violence as it manifests itself as fear, imagination and reality.

The risk of violence influences the everyday dispositions of men and women, and informs their negotiations in intimate relationships. Women stay safe from violence by using their sexuality to access networks of safety; they exchange virginity for safety. We argue that the female body is constructed as open to both sex and violence, and that women have embodied a need of 'protectors' to shield them from sexual penetration and violation. Sexually transgressive acts therefore become highly problematic, since challenging virginity means challenging safety. Sexually active girls have difficulty staying safe without simultaneously being violated. Sexual transgression therefore excludes personal safety. Our analysis points towards the need to recognise the gendered nature of living with violence, and also the need for academic research on the relatedness of safety and sexuality.

Culture and Silence: Custom, Courts and Sexual Transgression in Australia

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Transgressive sex in Australian Aboriginal societies has become a key issue in the cross-cultural context of Australian legislation on domestic violence. Aboriginal women have become more vigorous in speaking about rights to protect themselves and their 'promised' daughters in situations of domestic violence. At the same time, leaders within their own communities argue for the right to uphold indigenous customary law and for the sexual rights of husbands to take underage girls in polygamous relationships. This paper considers what is meant by transgression in Aboriginal ontology in north east Arnhem Land and shows how sexual transgression presents a cross-cultural problem for the community and the courts. Research on sex and violence across cultural boundaries also has implications for the role of the anthropologist as both friend and researcher dealing with transgressive situations in the field.

'Let us be heard!': Queering post-socialist Poland

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In contemporary Poland, sexuality and desire have gradually been gaining recognition in both academic and socio-political debate. However, some aspects of sexuality are still rarely discussed in the public domain, particularly those that have an apparently political agenda. Queerness, for instance, is barely noticeable in the dominant public discourses, while homophobic voices accompany attempts to legalise same-sex partnerships, and the social and political initiatives of gay and lesbian activists are denigrated and even condemned in the media.

Nevertheless, even though the validity of transgressive sex and erotic desire are not widely recognized, these expressions of sexuality have helped to create important new social and political spaces in post-socialist Poland. In this paper I focus on the activities of a queer studies group active at Wroclaw University involved in various academic and political action aimed at queering (that is, liberalizing) Polish society. Members of the group have different ideas about transgressive sex, sexuality and desire as the bases of a common identity; different visions of the possible connections between the privacy of sex, sexuality and desire and the publicity of socio-political acts; and different concepts of the permissible links between academic and political action, including what specifically should constitute such action. These differences result in frequent clashes. Despite this, through the group's initiatives transgressive sex, sexuality and desire have entered and begun to transform the academic, social and political spaces of the University, and of the city of Wroclaw more generally, thereby queering a small part at least of post-socialist Poland.

The taming of the bush: HIV research and gay sex in public places

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This paper focuses on the space-time dynamics of secret encounters between men who seek sexual partners in city neighbourhoods associated with sex workers and gay cruising. It examines the interaction between these sexualised public spaces and urban planning, and the cyclical redesignation of such spaces according to the time of day or night. The material presented is based on ethnographic fieldwork in a city in

southern France, and shows how the transgressive sexuality openly and normatively practised after dark becomes hidden and invisible during the day.

Urban planning can facilitate or inhibit certain kinds of activity through the design of urban space, and as such has a powerful and active influence on the creation of ‘moral spaces’ within the cityscape. The actions of ‘do-gooders’, to borrow from R. E. Park, such as AIDs prevention outreach teams and the strategic identification of their ‘target populations’, have a similar impact. The material and discursive practices which ‘moralise’ the city in this way are considered in this paper.

‘I’m sick of all these bestialphobes telling me how to live!’: crossing the human - animal boundary

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In the majority of contemporary Euroamerican societies, sex between humans and animals is taboo, as well as illegal. However, an identity based upon sex with animals, and a lifestyle known as zoophilia has become an increasingly assertive presence on the internet during the last twenty years. Using internet resources, from the First Church of Zoo to marryyourpet.com, this paper investigates the importance of zoophilia in the new kinds of relationships that are emerging between humans and animals at the present time.

Barometer Falling: Homosexuality, Media and the ‘Crisis’ of Public Morality in Barbados

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While the Caribbean has long been identified as a ‘homophobic’ region in popular and academic literature, there has been a notable increase in mostly negative coverage of issues and events pertaining to homosexuality in the region’s media (primarily newspapers and commercial internet sites) over the past five years. This paper begins by questioning assumptions about the uniformity of homophobia throughout this region by exposing how a limited set of hegemonic, gendered, sexual and racial representations circulate and reinforce an overly determined portrait of what in actual fact is a rapidly shifting, dynamic and complex cultural terrain. At the same time, however, we must account for the notable increase in hostility towards homosexuality in publicly mediated discourses. Using Barbados as a case study, I suggest that one of the reasons may be rapid social and economic change brought about in part through the Barbadian government’s support of a neo-liberal free market economy, resulting in increased public anxiety over a society in ‘moral decay’ where homosexuality operates as one of the key indices of social crisis. I argue that the ‘choice’ of homosexuality as an index of public morality has to do with tensions between locally produced and globally circulating constructions of gender, sexuality and race which are in turn linked to long-standing unequal political, social and economic relations between ‘marginal’ postcolonial and powerful Euro-American nation-states.

