



Critical Geographical Queer Semiotics

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Critical Geographical Queer Semiotics: Semantics, Syntactics, Pragmatics

This Themed Section assembles scholarship on sexual and queer geographies and socio-linguistics to pursue – what we, a collaborating geographer and semiotician, frame as – *critical geographical queer semiotics*. We regard this as an on-going episteme-techne research frontier at the crossroads of language-focused geographical inquiry (see, e.g., Brown, 2002; Leap and Boellstorff, 2004; Valentine et al., 2008; Browne and Nash, 2010; Murray, 2016) and the unfolding sociolinguistic subdiscipline of linguistic landscaping (see, e.g., Shohamy and Gorter, 2009; Blommaert, 2013; Stroud and Jegels, 2014; Blackwood et al., 2016).

At the core of critical geographical queer semiotics are simultaneous knowledge-doings to challenge signs and symbols at the nexus of sexuality, identity and space. This entails a perpetual, unfinished language-driven project, uncovering how text is intrinsically informed by other texts (see intertextuality in Barthes, 1982). Text therefore encompasses a dynamic socio-spatiality interwoven fabric (see Lovejoy, 2004), and can be articulated along multi-scalar, multi-

temporal as well as multi-semiotic dimensions of, in this case, everyday sexual citizenship (see Zebracki, 2017). Hence, critical geographical queer semiotics probes into the processes of how discursive systems constitute and deconstruct sexuality-modulated identities of what is known and sensed as ‘place’ (e.g., Scollon and Scollon, 2003). Importantly, we embrace critical geographical queer semiotics as an interdisciplinary and transnational commitment to catalyse place meanings across different language contexts beyond the Anglo-Saxon dominion.

This Themed Section adheres to the premise of both sexuality and space as socially constructed within a sphere of (anti-)normative resistance. Foucault (1978, 56) defined the latter as “an incitement to discourse”, entailing how the normative discursive apparatus is used to ‘fit in’ the deviant and how the deviant is concurrently articulated to ‘fit out’ normative categorisations along queer renderings. We probe into the sexuality–identity–space nexus along power-ridden language/communicative expressions of highly ambiguous, fluid positionalities of the self/other, odd/normal(ler), etc. (see Warner, 1999; Motschenbacher, 2014) to provide deeper insights into intersectional methods of language research and thereby into the complexity of everyday intersectional and (anti-)normative realities (see MacKinnin, 2013; Block and Corona, 2016).

Critical queer semiotic endeavour is not confined to language systems alone (see Murray, 2016). We propose a holistic epistemic approach towards investigating the space of language as everyday socially practised, enveloping myriad imaginable, ‘unwritten’ sites, and expressions, ‘doings’, of sexuality. Therefore, the language of the coming (ab)outs and outcomes of multisensorial lived spaces of sexuality are subject to comprehensive, more-than-text-based examination. This Themed Section geographically progresses linguistic landscaping and queer studies by way of differentiating and applying three layers that are key in semiotic scholarship (e.g., Suhor, 1984):

(1) Geographical queer *semantics*:

What are the relationships between signs and symbols and their *meanings*? Correspondingly, how do these signs and symbols *represent* sexuality in the spaces of the everyday life (e.g., street, home, work, online)?

(2) Geographical queer *syntactics*:

How do signs and symbols relate among each other? Hence, how are they *intertextually combined* in space to *constitute* sexuality expressions?

(3) Geographical queer *pragmatics*:

How do signs and symbols relate to their users and how are they used in *social contexts*? Accordingly, how is sexuality expressed in space as socially constructed by these interlocutors (i.e. sign/symbol-using agents)?

This framework is helpful for spelling out the contributions of this collection to the multidisciplinary readership of *ACME*. The collection finds its

provenance in a Call for Papers issued for an interdisciplinary geographical conference forum, entitled *Queer, Semiotics and Space: Understanding Queer Identities Through Language and Space*, held at the Annual International Conference of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) with Institute of British Geographers (IBG) in London, 26–29 August, 2014 (Zebracki and Milani, 2014). This forum was followed by an on-going concerted interdisciplinary dialogue about what a critical geographical queer semiotic approach may have to offer for studying sexuality, identity and space across the geohumanities and social sciences, across scholarly positionalities and ensuing research agendas, as well as across empirical contexts that traverse the Global North and South.

The upshot is a compelling mix of novel and topical studies which are geographically located in France, Sweden, South Africa, Japan, New Zealand, Australia and the USA, as well as in the over-layering socially networked spaces of the World Wide Web. The studies, each on its own terms, amalgamate semantics, syntactics and pragmatics to question, ‘queery’, sexual identity expressions in space. As such, this collection especially makes socio-linguistic inquiry more accessible to queer-*cum*-geographical scholarship. Also, it stresses the value of employing critical geographical queer semiotics as compass in broader scholarship for guiding intersectional research beyond concerns with sexuality alone – including (trans)gender, geographical origin, race, class, age and (digital) literacies.

Dissecting the Collecting

This anthology overall reveals widely varying social and cultural geographies of semiotics-inflected sexuality expressions. The contributions by Martin Zebracki and Brian King recognise the importance of emerging (mobile) digital technologies for agents to confer and exchange matters and expressions of sexual identity through actual–virtual participation and interactivity in offline-online interfaces. Both contributions especially challenge digitally mediated heteronormative spaces. Extending situated knowledges (Haraway, 1991) to the digital age, Zebracki’s virtual ethnographic and social media case-study analysis queered digitally networked ‘partialities’ engendered around Paul McCarthy’s temporary 24-metre inflatable *Tree* in Place Vendôme square, Paris, 2014 – a permanent material variant was unveiled in Rotterdam’s city centre in 2008 (see Zebracki, 2012). *Tree* became notoriously known under the French hashtag #pluganal over social networking sites. The study manifests how this public artwork, commonly perceived as postmodern, anti-permanent and ‘sexualised’, did, so to speak, not square with the square’s classical architecture, romantic urban imageries of Paris and the heteropatriarchial society more broadly.

King reveals how heteronormativity is sustained, or subverted, on the basis of an in-depth discourse analysis of text-only interactions between self-identified men in online chat/dating rooms, as geo-located across Australia and the USA. The study shows how sexual (self-)identities, mostly ‘gay’, are discursively sexed and

queered by participants through lived experiences of, after Lemke (2000), intersecting spatial trajectories (i.e. chronotopes) and time scales (i.e. heterochrony). The study explicates how the texts are mediated in and beyond the place semiotics of the chat rooms.

This collection shows a substantial commitment to queering the status quo of queer cultures, which have been foremostly pursued from Euro-American, and especially Anglo-Saxon, contexts and scholarly perspectives. Accordingly, they have been mediated through predominant contexts of Western academic outlets, global media and lesbian, gay and, to a lesser extent, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities. We acknowledge that scholarship has made large strides to examine conceptual and empirical understandings of heteronormativity in these contexts. More comparative and distinctive thought, however, remains needed to deconstruct conformist queer cultures through alternative geographical settings and intersectional, more-than-LGBT concerns.

Thomas Baudinette shifts the attention of dominant linguistic landscaping to urban queer development in Shinjuku Ni-chōme in central Tokyo, Japan. Featuring 300 self-advertised gay male bars, this neighbourhood is claimed to be the world's densest area of queer establishments. The author presents an ethnographic analysis of the role of both permanent and impermanent signage in understanding meanings, intertextual coherence and social contexts of Japanese subcultural gay communities and subjectivities (i.e. *Types*).

Interestingly, the case study engages with multimodality (Blommaert, 2013; see also Milani, 2013), implying how text and the visual mutually inform and reproduce each other. The study evinces how the combined reading and usage of signage, including specific eroticised gay male imageries, scripts in Japanese, language choices and colour schemes, create and reinforce global queer norms as well as endemic homonormativities – in this case gay male hegemonies. The study uncovers how Shinjuku Ni-chōme is dominated by a heteronormative identity of masculinity: *ikanimo-kei*, the 'Obviously Gay' *Type*. The latter chimes with, and is partly informed by, global (entrepreneurial) trends in (youthful) queer culture, which simultaneously stratify this neighbourhood into distinct market-driven subdistricts. The study offers a useful critique of how the spatial politics of non-conformist masculinity is socially marginalised and pushed to the geographical margins of the neighbourhood.

Queer spatial politics is also engaged in Lucas Gottzén's contribution, yet beyond the dominant LGBT purview. The author critically reads, from a life course perspective, the spatialised affective dimensions of coming-out stories to interrogate underpinning male hegemonies and normativities. This research niche is further deepened by attending to a particularly understudied stigmatised positionality, namely the 'coming-out' narratives of partner-violent heterosexual men. Based on in-depth interviews in Sweden, Gottzén analyses the narrated spatial and temporal relationship-based dimensions pivoting on intimate partner violence.

The study asks how the trope of the closet and associated narratives and geographies of ‘coming out’ and its consequences (see Brown, 2000) – which are mostly associated with narratives derived from LGBT people – are employed to disclose violence in particular places and at particular times.

Gottzén’s study articulates profound spatio-temporal impacts on sexuality expression and social mobilities for partner-violent men. It divulges similarities with stigmatised groups beyond the LGBT community alone and within wider intersectional contexts (e.g., alcoholic, chronically ill and disabled people). Casting off self-shame appeared to be a recurrent practice, especially in everyday encounters in public life and at work. The queer semiotic analysis illustrates the *wheres* and *whens* of how coming-out stories serve as strategic discursive devices to disembodify the self from the identity category of a ‘violent man’. It elucidates how such stories, including both ‘closeted’ and ‘uncloseted’ experiences, may subtly shift the positionalities of perpetrator and victim. This process may conceal and potentially explain away abuse in tactical discursive socialisations, which is consonant with the psychological mechanisms of oppression within broader cultural and sexual normativities.

The queer look at the under-examined topic of partner violence is succeeded by a queer look at ‘green violence’ in the context of South Africa. Scott Burnett and Tommaso M. Milani apply a geographical-linguistic approach to queerly screen anti-poaching discourse. Their semiotic discourse analysis particularly dovetails Gilmore’s (2002) geographical study on ‘fatal’ couplings of power, race and difference with Fanon’s (2008) psycho-existential work adorned with the telling allegorical title *Black Skin, White Masks*. The study by Burnett and Milani elicits how specific gendered and sexualised constructions of racial subjectivities are discursively employed to justify unauthorised killings of rhino poachers – as the authors, for example, discuss on the basis of a bumper sticker reading “Dried testicles of rhino poachers can cure AIDS”. Under the moniker of fatal masculinities, the analysis engages with queer geographical, sexuality and sociolinguistic scholarship to expand and deepen the sexuality–identity–space nexus along gender and race in South Africa’s postcolonial, post-apartheid Global South context.

The contributions discussed so far centre on geographical queer semiotics from both textual and non-textual angles. The photo essay by Andrew Gorman-Murray and Chris Brickell is a particular case in point in engaging with the power of both the visual and the performative (i.e. art-making) beyond textual recitation alone to heighten how we can make an embodied sense of queer spaces. The authors, in their blended collaborative positionalities of geographer-artist and historian-artist, reflect on their photomedia installation *Over the Ditch*. Shown during the On Islands exhibition in Sydney in 2014, the installation consisted of 22 route markers epitomising the journeys of seven trans-Tasman gay New Zealanders and Australians from 1931 to 2014. Based on their diaries, stories and blog entries, the exhibition presented an assemblage of photos from these queer trans-Tasman

people along with ethnopoetry created by Gorman-Murray and Brickell. The diachronic analysis of visual and textual language, as well as performative enactments thereof, explores queer semiotic epistemologies of the under-studied intersections between art practice, geography and queer history. Thus, on the basis of trans-Tasman queer experiences over time and space, the authors particularly aim to provide profound insights into queer mobilities (see also Murray, 2016).

Queering the Metaphor in Space

The collection shows a striking commonality in the particular use of metaphors in writing and presentation to deal with critical geographical queer semiotics. Gottzén jointly uses discursive images of the ‘monster’ and the ‘closet’ to analyse the queer spaces of partner-violent heterosexual men. The extent to which partner-violent men may come out, or not, for their ‘monstrous’ behaviour depends on certain places and certain times (e.g., giving oneself away in face-to-face conversations at treatment centres but remaining silent during socials at work; ‘open’ to ‘old’ (girl)friends yet ‘closeted’ towards new ones). The parabolic ‘monstrous’ masculine mask reverberates with Burnett and Milani’s queer analysis of the racialised dimensions of ‘fatal’ masculinity which revolves around the attacks on rhino poachers. Such incidents are embedded in a broader phenomenon symbolically described by Büscher and Ramutsindela (2016) as ‘green violence’.

The methods of analysis, and the writing style in itself, in the featuring articles is strewn with metaphorical usages. As the contribution by Zebracki conveys, this is evident for the academe that harbours an innate relationship with words to render knowledge. Queer theory especially holds a determined purpose to express, negotiate, challenge and reform gender and sexuality normativities by the primacy of language (see Ehrlich et al., 2014). Zebracki adopts various queer verb variants – including question and query – to discursively play with ‘deviant’ work of art – that is a butt plug cast as ambiguous ‘tree’. The treatise shows how this artwork was deemed atypical by some within the confines of material public space yet perceived by others as archetypical for the ludic and phatic communications that have come to characterise network sociality in the digitally mediated spaces of social media, in other words the Web 2.0. A compelling emblematic reference is made to the “teen girl Tumblr aesthetic” (Santos, 2015) to indicate new codes of expression through digital user-created content. Zebracki queries digitally mediated user agency and discusses how the re-appropriations, and do-it-yourself re-creations, of the public artwork via social internet activities appeared to largely bypass informational supply and profound dialogues – they rather alluded to the critical metaphor described by Hartley (2012) as ‘silly citizenship’.

King adopts the trope of ‘erotic oasis’ (Tewksbury, 2003) to portray how participants in chat rooms employ specific language as based on the affordances of the ‘metaphorical architecture’ of these digital spaces. The author critically discusses how the examined co-constructed discursive fields created a particular

and prevailing erotic atmosphere of e-messaging. The metaphorical architecture is explained by analysing tensions between imagined spaces and cross-timescale relations (i.e. heterochrony), which inherently arise from different beliefs, language usages, interaction orders, and ‘historical bodies’ moulded through power relations (i.e. longer-term selves). The analysis reveals multiple emerging and contested sites, thus queer heterotopian spaces within space-time continuums (see Jones, 2009; Lou, 2007). The trope of the ‘erotic oasis’ regards the examined men-to-men chat rooms as ambiguous online spheres part and parcel of a longer-term place-semiotic project. This project challenges heteronormativity and queer variants which roam the ‘erotic oasis’, experienced as an online refugee for sexuality expression.

Baudinette explains signage in the ‘gaybourhood’ by the figurative use of ‘mapping’. This term is understood as the projection of subjectivities (i.e. *Types*) onto space through spatialisations of desire (see Bell and Valentine, 1995). The author clarifies how mapping serves as rhetoric device to grasp, normalise and challenge the privilege of heteronormative masculinity. The analysis elaborates mapping to show how semiotic systems dynamically operate in the (re)production of queer spaces and, accordingly, disseminate, or diffract, (dominant) sexuality knowledges, identities and performances. Such dynamic process of queer expressions and identity formations is a particularly important kernel of queer mobilities as analysed in the photo essay annex installation by Gorman-Murray and Brickell, which carries the metaphorical title [*Hopping*] *Over the Ditch*. This denotes vernacular idiom for trans-Tasman queer crossings between New Zealand and Australia, with the Tasman Sea as symbolic bridge – just as the blank line below serves as breathing space for crossing the metaphor and roaming the contributions in further detail.

Fleshing Out the Contributions

Overall, this collection offers new queerying insights into meanings (semantics), inter-relations (syntactics) and social contexts (pragmatics) at the convergence of sexuality, identity and space in diverse geographical and socio-linguistic contexts. It thereby offers essential conceptual and methodological frameworks for language-focused research to uncover the complex ambiguities and subtleties of queer geographies.

Zebracki develops a queer method and discusses the epistemological implications for the *re*-researcher to reiteratively inscribe the body–mind into the (digitally mediated) research field. This method demonstrates how (tacit) knowledges can be discursively assembled for simultaneous deconstruction through self-reflexive adherence. This resonates with the point by Jones and Adams (2010) that the verb queery (and its variants), rather than the static noun queer, implicates how theory is moved into methodological activism. By active involvement and self-reflexivity, the doing of queer geographies involves an intrinsic queerying of the dichotomy between episteme (i.e. knowledge as such)

and *techne* (i.e. practical knowledge) (Boellstorff, 2010), as well as between the researcher and the researched. This fluid positionality is particularly emphasised throughout the collection.

The discursive power of the gerund ‘queering’, as imparted by Zebracki, implicates a situated qualitative methodology. It suggests that the very ‘doing’ and its social transformative potential make geographical queer semiotics a critical project *per se*. The practice-based approach by Gorman-Murray and Brickell, as set within broader creative and experimental geographies, is an exquisite example of how such commitment is concurrently carried through in self-reflexive art-making and visual–textual rendering. The photo essay is an inspirational attempt to ‘do’ queer mobilities and maximise communicative impacts, a sense of believability, of the lived experiences of trans-Tasman queers on both arts spectatorship (i.e. viewers of the exhibition) and academic readership (including the one in hand).

The collection discursively queeries diverse hegemonic social and cultural norms and dualisms in the (re)production of queer spaces. Gottzén’s analysis of the socio-spatial life courses of partner-violent men not only addresses an understudied, and perhaps largely misunderstood, marginalised group. It both evokes and deconstructs coming-out stories – i.e. negotiations of secrecy and disclosure of stigma – which are largely identified with LGBT communities and ‘gay’ people in particular. Gottzén’s contribution is conducive to understanding the implications of disclosure, which may impact states of mind as well as movements and encounters in public social life. As the author explains, the strategic information control by partner-violent men’s (often one-sided) coming-out stories is distinct. The narrative usually attempts to pass as non-violent, or a normal man who ‘just’ happens to occasionally act fiercely, while keeping the abject, ‘monstrous’ behaviour in the closet. This queer semiotic analysis is particularly helpful in grasping the affective spaces of disclosing stigmatised behaviour as socio-psychological strategy to *not* embrace, or ‘closet’, an identity. As such, violence is kept silent and private so as to exercise power and sustain abuse.

Burnett and Milani critically discuss discourses of racialised fatal masculinity as connected to green violence. They scrutinise how the roles of poacher, protector and purchaser are normatively associated with black Africans, white Europeans and Asians, *respectively*. The authors develop a semiotic-ethnographic methodology for queering the dialectic between masculinity and race along text-space interactions which, as argued, are intertwined with power-difference couplings. In a related manner, Baudinette explains how permanent signage of semi-naked men might yield *meiwaku*, meaning discourtesy or annoyance, within ‘normal’, heteronormative society. As predicated by the hegemonic Japanese normative imperative of ‘appropriate behaviour’, *meiwaku* is evidently something to avoid.

This collection deconstructs dichotomous social, spatial and temporal conceptualisations along the sexuality–identity–space nexus in multiple ways.

Zebracki expands public art theory, which hitherto has remained foremostly restricted to social engagements and practices of art-making within materials contexts. The queering hermeneutics of the digitally mediated ‘butt plug’ points out how it lived on as digital-only entity once this artwork was demolished just two days after its inauguration in Place Vendôme. The semiotic perusal unclothes how equivocal properties of the obscene, misplaced, ludic and radical were, in mainly text-image assemblages, negotiated within digitally mediated spaces of the public/private, here/there, present/absent, permanent/ephemeral, body/global etc. Zebracki’s study articulates how this process, accordingly, made sense, or not, in normative or anti-normative repertoires associated with engagements in material-digital (i.e. hybrid), online-offline (i.e. augmented) spaces. These practices offered digital along with mnemonic ‘immediacies’ through acts of remembering/forgetting. There is an arresting analogy between Zebracki’s argument here and King’s ramifications of the (anti)normative dimensions of the space-time continuums of queer chat rooms.

Burnett and Milani stress the dialectic between the discursive and the lived dimensions. They argue how ‘ethnographic fidelity’ in geographical semiotic research, after Stroud and Mpendukana (2009, 382), compels a meticulous engagement with how people appropriate media and put signs and artefacts within practices and ideologies of everyday language construction. Both Zebracki and King demonstrate the contemporary significance of virtual ethnographical research into queer spaces and lay bare how sexual and cyborgian citizenship coalesce in queer semiotics of hybrid and augmented spaces. This composite condition concomitantly involves the whole gamut of the internet of things: analogue/digital and hardware/software technologies, old/new media, the human and the inorganic, and so on. Compared to offline lived spaces, both studies suggest that outspoken expressions might sometimes be pulled off, and become accepted, to a considerably higher extent through the oft-anonymous, ‘safe’, digitally mediated environment – a virtual ‘oasis’ as put by King.

The queered dichotomies are co-existing and compound. Zebracki and Gorman-Murray and Brickell critically pursue the human–matter dyad – or the more-than-human, non-binary qualities of technology-mediated arts practice and engagement (see also Lovejoy, 2004). Baudinette shows how the signage-driven spatialisations of desire in Tokyo’s neighbourhood of Shinjuku Ni-chōme is in interplay with global *and* local, mainstream *and* subcultural sexual norms, as well as subversive *and* affirmative forces. This constitutes a ‘glocal’ queerness, highly distinctive of the concentration of queer establishments and the social fabric of lifestyles in the gaybourhood concerned. Baudinette’s analysis, similar to the other contributions, queries bodies and matter in the sense that not only permanent material landscapes can be appropriated as semiotic resources. The visual repertoires and expressions of the impermanent body can be employed as such, too – which, hence, questions the permanence/impermanence of queer spaces.

Gottzén offers greater insights into affective, ‘monstrous’ citizenship by attending to the social, spatial and temporal queerness of partner-violent men. The author challenges (non-)queer positionalities beyond the dominant ambits of LGBT spaces. This is done through the interlinked spatial and temporal conditions and liminalities, the in-betweenness, of paradoxically being inside/outside the closet. Where Gottzén discusses human-to-human violence, Burnett and Milani’s discourse analysis of ‘green violence’ directed at rhino poachers breaches the still dominant human-animal divide in scholarship. Their case study grasps how sexuality is mediated alongside the interconnected, fluid spaces and realities of gender and race through concerns with the non-human, i.e. animals. Geographical queer semiotics, thus, holds rich potentials for engaging with intersectionality and more-than-human debates via the language of social space (e.g., Levon, 2015). As a whole, we hope that this anthology serves as source of inspiration for further critical language-driven queer inquiry into sexuality, identity and space across the geohumanities and social sciences.

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