

Media Spaces of Gender and Sexuality Introduction

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In this age of dissent, surveillance, and migration, the study of media is often also the study of the precariousness and dynamism of the spatial. Investigating the spatial necessarily involves a consideration of the diverse ways bodies negotiate, access, and produce various spaces. In turn, the culturally inscribed body's centrality to questions of spatial mediation suggests the urgency of tracing the interconnections between space, media, gender, and sexuality. Film and media scholarship historically came of age through its study of the relationship between gender, sexuality, and media. Much has been written about the status of women as objects of the cinematic gaze, as well as about the status of female and queer-identified subjects as media spectators.¹ Yet gender and sexuality remain crucial sites of contestation and exploration in 21st century film and media texts, practices, and scholarship.² Such contestation reveals the need for new explorations of gender, sexuality, and media, especially ones that consider the relevance of the spatial to contemporary feminist inquiries.

This issue of *Media Fields* investigates various media spaces through the lenses of queer and feminist theory. Inspired by the spatially-inflected work

of scholars such as Nick Couldry, Anna McCarthy, and Lynn Spigel,³ we include papers that raise questions of how media spaces construct gender, and how gender, in turn, constructs media spaces; how spaces condition and are conditioned by gender performances and sexual practices; and how gender legibility limits (or allows) access to various media spaces. Many of the articles included here engage the intersections between gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class. These important intersections exceed the label “identity politics”—a label that we feel is now often deployed in order to debunk the continued relevance of gender and sexuality to any scholarly conversation. While we do indeed offer political approaches to gender and space—essays informed by the agendas of feminist and queer activism—we stress that gender and sexuality are not merely areas of special interest, but are instead structuring principles of discrimination that continue to organize our lived experiences on a number of different registers.

As coeditors, we originally envisioned this special issue as a response to a need we already felt; it seemed to us that there was still a great deal of relevance in Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane’s 1989 assertion that “feminist film and media theory has been cut off from its original sense of bold innovation and political purpose.”⁴ With feminist and queer theory increasingly absorbed into the media studies canon—though often only nominally—and with postfeminism imbuing academia with a dangerous sense of apathy, we found ourselves concerned about the possibility of getting too “comfortable”—of forgetting that feminism is never complete. We were further reminded of the importance of this conversation as we began the process of constructing our call for papers. We were surprised to encounter some skepticism about the theme of this issue, but any doubt quickly dissipated when we received an overwhelming number of submissions from scholars around the world. This response highlighted the fact that feminist and queer media scholars have a great deal to say about the linkages between gender, sexuality, and media spaces. As such, we see this issue as part of an ongoing and vital conversation within film and media studies.

True to this journal’s aim, each of our authors considers this important conversation in the context of media and space. Our first two essays both examine online spaces of resistance, taking into account how these online spaces intersect with public spaces in the physical world. Timeka Williams

and Dora Sobze look at the ways Black women interact on social media sites like blogs about hairstyles, carving out a space apart from a white Eurocentric mainstream that polices and scrutinizes Black bodies. They argue that these online spaces make room for a freedom of expression that resists dominant cultural expectations, though they caution that these “complex coalitional spaces also engender essentialist aesthetics that disavow some women’s claim to Blackness.” Refusing to idealize or condemn the space of the Internet, they instead explore what possibilities the Internet opens up as an alternative to physical public spaces, while insisting that the Internet’s spaces are nevertheless never fully independent of the body politics of the real world.

Anita Brady’s essay also examines the ways people use the Internet as a tool of resistance, creating coalitions that manifest in real world public spaces. She writes about the kiss-ins that occurred shortly after the 2012 exposure of the Chick-fil-A corporation’s donations to anti-gay organizations. These kiss-ins, or the staging of queer public kisses directly outside Chick-fil-A restaurants, were made possible by social media sites that spread the news of Chick-fil-A’s politics and organized the resistance to it. Yet even as Brady acknowledges the resistance such online spaces enabled, she, like Sobze and Williams, does not idealize the Internet. The social media groups that encouraged resistance also attempted to delimit how the participants in the kiss-in movement should dress and behave, policing queer performativity and circumscribing the queer public image in ways that left many marginalized. Thus both these essays show the possibilities for resistance that the cyberspaces may facilitate, but resist utopian visions of the Internet as an alternate sphere in which norms of gender, race, and sexuality may be set aside fully.

We also include three essays that consider the diverse ways in which the gendered body is placed under surveillance in spaces understood as both “public” and “private.” Crucially, the authors of these essays reveal the mechanisms through which gender is inextricably entangled with race and social class at the site of the body, underscoring the new linkages between media technologies, surveillance, and cultural inscription. Sarah Kember addresses this issue through her investigation of facial recognition technology, showing that the practice of “reading” the human face depends on gendered and racialized assumptions that are built into the technology

itself. This technology also depends on the public environments into which they are woven, internalizing the capitalist and normative logics of spaces such as the airport to “spatialize”—and, in Kember’s formulation, to objectify—the dynamic human faces that fall within this technology’s purview.

Toby Beauchamp similarly examines the disciplinary gendering and racialization of bodies in public space, analyzing the city of Chicago’s media campaign against teen pregnancy. Beauchamp suggests that the campaign’s “impossible” images of pregnant teen boys “work in tandem with the routine scrutiny and regulation of gender-nonconforming youth in public space. That is to say, the ads present seemingly unthinkable bodies in the very settings in which such bodies are regularly exposed and policed.” These bodies are presented to viewers in a racialized hierarchy, where those read as “white” inhabit a tamer public space while those read as “black” inhabit an impoverished, incarcerated space.

Finally, John Vanderhoef considers the media campaigns that continue to construct an idealized domestic space for those who purchase the Kinect videogame technology. Vanderhoef argues that “presenting a multicultural, “diverse” cast of players, an implied racially colorblind one, these commercials evacuate any signs of difference in favor of a homogenized understanding of class and social values, albeit ones couched in culturally feminized interior designs and gestural gameplay.” Yet Vanderhoef also suggests the potential of the technology itself, pointing to its tendency to cause users to deconstruct the domestic space, however temporarily.

Two of our essays, by Bhaskar Sarkar and Lucas Hilderbrand, reflect on similar spaces—a queer fuck club in the 90s and gay male nightclubs in the present day, respectively—but focus on different forms of mediation of those spaces. Hilderbrand writes about the repetition of certain songs, like those of Rihanna and Brittany Spears, that seem to unite gay nightclubs “across cities and scenes,” creating a sense of homogeneity within the gay male community. He speculates about the importance of these female pop figures at the center of this homogenization, who may appear unlikely as gay male icons. Hilderbrand suggests that their “dance music’s appeal comes both from how it makes the body move and from the lyrical commands for audiences to lift repressions and shamelessly celebrate carnal experience.” The “giddy surge” these songs elicit despite their near interchangeability helps give life to the

multiple dance club spaces that are home to a united, though not uniform, gay male community.

Both Hilderbrand and Sarkar place themselves within these mediated spaces, thinking through their own bodies' habitation of and movements in these spaces. Sarkar's reflection on a particular queer club of his past, *Fuck!*, is mediated multiply: partly by the memories of his own bodily presence at the club—a space where bodies were front and center—and partly by a dusty box filled with memorabilia. He writes, "The materiality of these print artifacts helps materialize an ephemeral past, conjuring up a set of sensual relations for the researcher: beyond a literal or even figural 'reading' of this material, it becomes possible to divine a series of sensate mobilizations, to speculate on an economy of queer desires." These multiple approaches perhaps echo the multiplicity inherent to the space itself. Sarkar writes of the club *Fuck!* as a diverse space, filled with seeming contradictions: "At once the site of playful perversion and serious politics, safe sex and barebacking advocacies, body mutilation and muscle worship, disco shamanism and high art, *Fuck!* drew both activists and gawkers, druggies and vegan health junkies, sexual outlaws and cultural pundits." Both essays examine how these places make space for communities built around the sometimes marginalized embodiments of queer desire.

As a way of closing our special issue, we offer a section dedicated to the practice of media production. We first include an article by Jörgen Skågeby and Lina Rahm that conducts a much-needed pedagogical analysis of the classroom as a gendered media space "where bodies, information, media, power, and architecture co-constitute each other." Moving past a mere analysis of this phenomenon, the authors also provide a pragmatic set of suggestions for "1) Working with official documents 2) Methods and forms of teaching, and 3) Working with motivation and resistance" in the film and media studies classroom. Rather than simply describing the disciplinary space in which issues of gender and sexuality have so often been silenced, these authors provide concrete suggestions for ways of recognizing and combating forms of privilege, sexism, and racism that operate in the classroom, the discipline, and beyond.

Our second essay for this section on media practices examines the production of zines, publications that author Red Chidgey argues have historically been

understood as produced predominantly by white, middle class youth. Chidgey describes and critically reflects on alternative zine productions—Tenacious and The People of Color Zine Project—in order to better understand “the mobile and regulated sites where these media forms are made and accessed and the critiques of power and privilege carried out within their pages and broader communication channels.” As Chidgey asserts, zines are “mobile sites capable of negotiating the intersections of race, ethnicity, sexuality, class and history.” In this vein, Chidgey calls attention to and analyzes these spaces—and the people who create and operate within them—that are often omitted from discussions of media production.

Our third “In Practice” contributor, Madhuja Mukherjee, discusses a set of art installations she created as a way of reflecting on her historical research on women and Indian cinema from the 1940s to the 1960s. In Mukherjee’s own words, these media art installations “attempted to re-create the notion of cinema as a public phenomenon and underscored the conspicuous presence of women in it,” despite the fact that women have often been excluded from or disciplined within the various cinematic spaces that she analyzes. Mukherjee explains how her art installations engage the tensions between female objectification and female spectatorship, reconstructing certain media spaces in a way that illuminates the historical presence of women within them.

This issue highlights the important role of queer and feminist theory and criticism within spatial film and media studies, emphasizing a complex, multivalent feminist approach that moves beyond gender binaries and idealistic notions of a single, universal feminism. Judith Butler and other feminist scholars point to the need for temporary feminist “coalitions,” or groups of people coming together in various contingent configurations to work for common causes before dissipating and reconfiguring.⁵ This vision of an impermanent coalition, built not on a solid foundation of unanimity but instead on some common political goals among diverse voices, is what we hope this issue represents.

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Notes

- 1 A number of diverse theorists have contributed to the foundational body of scholarship to which we refer. We include some of them here, but this list is by no means exhaustive. See Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema," in *Notes on Women's Cinema*, ed. Claire Johnston (London: BFI, 1973); Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975); Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," *Screen* 23, no. 3–4 (1982); E. Ann Kaplan, "Is the Gaze Male?," in *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (New York: Routledge, 1983); Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams, eds. *Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism* (University Publications of America, 1984); Joan Copjec, "The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan," *Oxford Literary Review* 8, no. 1–2 (1986); Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Constance Penley, *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988); Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: the Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Jane Gaines, "White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory," *Screen* 29, no. 4 (1988); Judith Mayne, *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Ella Shohat, "Gender and Culture of Empire," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 13, no. 1–3 (1991); bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992); Trinh T. Minh-ha and Nancy N. Chen, "Speaking Nearby," in *Visualizing Theory*, ed. Lucien Taylor (New York: Routledge, 1994); bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Class, and Sex at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).
- 2 It would be impossible to list every recent discussion of the continued necessity of queer and feminist media studies. Because of this, we have decided to provide an array of examples that have appeared over the past decade in various journals devoted to feminist issues. Kathleen McHugh and Vivian Sobchack, for instance, note in a special issue of *Signs* that feminist film theory in the twenty-first century must be conceptualized both as "a changing cultural apparatus" and "a pluralistic cultural praxis." See

- “Introduction: Recent Approaches to Film Feminism,” *Signs* 30, no. 1 (2004): 1205–1207. Alexandra Juhasz argues against any nostalgia for the women’s liberation movement, a nostalgia that potentially obscures the work being done now: “The Future was Then: Reinvesting in Feminist Media Practice and Politics,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism Culture, and Media Studies* 21, no. 1 (2006): 53–57. Lauren Rabinovitz examines the necessity of a feminist film history that is still informed by feminist film theory: “The Future of Feminism and Film History,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism Culture, and Media Studies* 21, no. 1 (2006): 39–44. Cynthia Carter and Lisa McLaughlin remark upon the increased gender inequalities in late capitalism, despite fresh efforts at feminist communication scholarship: “Editors’ Introduction: The Tenth Anniversary Issue of Feminist Media Studies,” *Feminist Media Studies* 11, no. 1 (2011): 1–5. Robin Means Coleman analyzes the continued need for black feminist media criticism in an era where representations of black women continue to be impoverished: “Roll up your Sleeves! Black Women, Black Feminism in Feminist Media Studies,” *Feminist Media Studies* 11, no. 1 (2011): 35–41. Nahed Eltantawy explores the contested nature of the image of “the middle eastern woman” before and after the Arab Spring: *Feminist Media Studies* 13, no. 5 (2013): 765–769. And B. Ruby Rich discusses the cultural reasons behind the continued dearth of female film directors: “The Confidence Game,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, 28, no. 1 (2013).
- 3 Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy, *MediaSpace: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age* (New York: Routledge, 2004). Though she is not necessarily a media scholar, we are also inspired by the work of Doreen Massey, a feminist cultural geographer who has crucially examined chauvinistic tendency to privilege time over space and to align space with femininity in many philosophical traditions: *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 1994).
 - 4 Janet Bergstrom and Mary Ann Doane, “The Female Spectator: Contexts and Directions,” *Camera Obscura* 7, no. 2–3, 20–21 (May/September 1989): 5–27.
 - 5 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 2006).

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