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Japonica BROWN-SARACINO, *How Places Make Us: Novel LBQ Identities in Four Small Cities* (Chicago, USA, University of Chicago Press, 2018)

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*How Places Make Us* cautiously presents a very radical claim: that sexual identity varies by location, and thus sweeping national or transnational accounts obscure remarkable local variety. Japonica Brown-Saracino (JBS) displays considerable ethnographic acumen in detecting these different constellations of lesbian, bisexual, and queer (LBQ) women's identity, and makes pioneering inroads to explaining why and how "the streets on which we spend our days shape a matter as intimate as our sexual identity" [235]. In so doing, JBS addresses one of the most pressing questions about LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex) identity in an era of rising social acceptance: was oppression necessary for the creation and sustenance of LGBTQI culture, networks, and organizations? Similarly, she addresses a key question for urbanists and pundits: does the homogenization of high streets engender a loss of regional and local distinctiveness? *How Places Make Us* argues a qualified "no" to both, and in literatures dominated by iconic cities with famous gay (male) neighborhoods, offers a refreshing corrective: lesbian enclaves exist and are varied, women have diverse placemaking practices that have been ignored, and we have much to learn from smaller cities.

The four American cities featured here are likely to be little-known except to those who live nearby. However, they were all chosen for their demographic and regional similarities and the density of their LBQ populations: Ithaca, New York; San Luis Obispo, California; Portland, Maine; and Greenfield, Massachusetts. That these places are little-known is precisely the point: by eschewing over-studied cities like San Francisco and New York City, JBS demonstrates that iconoclastic sociological phenomena are present in the places most people actually live, and that they have the potential to overturn much of what we know about sexualities and urbanities alike.

JBS introduces the concept of "sexual identity cultures" to describe these constellations of difference among LBQ women: "the way they talk about or describe themselves varies by city, as do their coming out

practices and even whether they prioritize being ‘out’ and ‘proud,’ the degree to which they seek to build ties with heterosexuals, and their attitudes about contemporary LGBTQI [...] politics and issues” [3-4]. The book details a “spectrum” of identity outcomes, from the all-lesbian socializing in San Luis Obispo to the “ambient community” in which LBQ women eschew identity labels and lesbian organizations in Ithaca. In between are the “queer identity politics” of Portland in which residents eagerly adopt labels and LBQ networks [106] and the two identities in Greenfield: “lesbian feminist longtimers” versus “post-identity politics newcomers” [153]. These can be placed along a continuum, with an essentializing, identity-loving pole that transitions to a “post-identity-politics” pole that values integration with like-minded heterosexuals, one that other researchers have called “post-mo” and “post-gay” [194]. That identity politics flourish in a “post-gay” era will surprise many, from the proponents of “post-gay” politics to the anti-identitarians among queer academics. It will surprise no one at the all-lesbian “Big Gay Brunch,” however, nor attendees of the queer burlesque show.

Theory-wise, *How Places Make Us* is firmly grounded in classic urban ecology, and it is to ecological factors that JBS turns to explain the different LBQ identities she detected in her research sites. Firstly, LBQ residents respond to the “abundance and acceptance” of a city. This variable refers to the sense of safety LBQ women feel in their city, their perceptions of the scarcity or abundance of other LBQ women with whom to date or network, and the reception their LBQ status elicits from neighbors and local politicians. As JBS explains its influence relative to the opposite poles among her cases, “Abundance and acceptance serve a crucial orienting function for sexual identity cultures, positioning a collective compass toward or away from integration and identity politics” [207].

Secondly, sexual identity cultures are in harmony with the “place narratives” by which residents of cities narrate their places to each other. Detected both on tourism websites and in the accounts by which women describe their choice of place to live, place narratives “help to shape how LBQ residents fashion their identity politics, with Portlanders approaching identity as a personal project and opportunity for self-expression, and San Luis Obispo residents presenting it as a fact to be acknowledged and incorporated, not played with or displayed” [210]. It would be easy to be skeptical that bumper sticker slogans have any causal influence on identities, but JBS provides

ample evidence that her 170 interviewees spontaneously used such cultural “stuff” to frame their interior lives.

Thirdly, and most reflexively, sexual identity cultures vary by their “socoscape,” by which JBS means the “broad and sometimes abstract concept that encompasses the demographic, social, and cultural characteristics of city residents, particularly of LBQ residents” [214]. This variable, influenced by the shared meanings that LGB women attribute to the first two variables, forms a “positive feedback loop” by which all three reinforce each other [215]. JBS summarizes this mutual relationship thus: “together with place narratives, then, a city’s particular stew of population traits—which is inextricably linked to stories that LBQ residents convey to one another about who they are—encourage city-specific responses to shared ecological conditions” [215]. Such reflexivity, which JBS admits is “inelegant” and perhaps “tautological”, nevertheless “accurately captures how informants experience city ecology on the ground and day by day: as something that dominates them but that they also shape, even if only subtly” [220]. It was unclear to me whether any great utility was gained by introducing a third variable that is dependent on the other two, given the persuasive evidence that backed those. Cultural geographers may be satisfied, however, as might those who appreciate JBS’s attempt to model complex relationships among cultural variables.

Key evidence for JBS’s argument comes from the migration narratives of interviewees: women describe the transitions in their identity after moving from one place to another as developmental or life-course based. JBS demonstrates, however, that these are geographic constructions that are present in the accounts of old, young, and middle-aged: bisexual and queer women become “lesbian” in San Luis Obispo, just as mere “lesbians” become queer hyphenates in Portland Maine (“queer kinky poly high femme dyke”) [106]. In these two cities with such different identities, moreover, LBQ women are nevertheless similar in that they “are comfortable with the notion of ‘essential’ and life-defining identities; they readily embrace identity labels, articulate a sense of shared fate, and rarely articulate an ‘integrationist’ ideology” [201]. This integrationist identity is on full display in Ithaca, as women in long-term partnerships who move to town learn to resist old labels of any kind and instead celebrate their deep ties with heterosexual neighbors. Greenfield women display two distinct identities depending on which of two waves of LBQ migration they experienced; an earlier one of lesbian feminist identity, and

a latter one of label-eschewing integrationists. Again, these waves include women of multiple age groups, showing that newcomer retirees share an identity and networks with new college graduates that are distinct from their “lesbian” predecessors.

Additionally, the book gains much analytic purchase from the ways in which very similar women in different cities downplay or emphasize shared characteristics. Women ensconced in the lesbian identity politics and community of San Luis Obispo regularly negated their sexual attractions to men, experiences that women in Portland eagerly embraced as evidence of their queerness, or that women in Ithaca might describe—when they could be pressed to admit to any label at all—as bisexuality. Integrationists of Ithaca likewise downplayed experiences that contradicted their place narratives of safety, radically underestimating the number of hate crimes in their city and region; such hate crimes were foremost in the minds of Portland residents.

The recursive repetition with which the author makes her argument may be a function of the interrelationship of the three variables that JBS outlines, or it may be the caution with which the bold argument is being made and alternative explanations are evaluated before being discarded as insufficient. Hurried readers may lose patience with the detail in the data chapters, covering 174 pages, but they will benefit from the remaining 95, which detail the argument, methods, sampling frame, literature contributions, and helpful charts of the logic by which JBS conducted her meticulous investigation.

The book’s engagement with gender is at times parenthetical [233], but likewise has great potential for future researchers. Some chapters discuss LBQ women’s relationships to local networks of gay men; others do not, although the ratio between gay couples and LBQ couples is explained as ecologically relevant. Only one chapter discusses transgender men at any length (transgender women are largely absent from the text). Given how contentious the relationship between some women’s communities and transgender people has been, questions about transgender people in sites where they were absent might have been instructive about the ways in which sexual identity cultures inform (or are informed by) what a future researcher will inevitably discover as gender identity cultures.

The author makes a stunning case for comparative research generally, and for comparative ethnographic investigations specifically. The sheer volume of labor this investigation entailed cannot be overstated, nor the care with which hypotheses are evaluated and discarded. This is a potential monkey wrench for any claims about

national cultures, especially those found in much transnational comparative research. Extrapolating to the nation from a single-city case was always suspect, especially a large or unique one, and is now even more untenable.

JBS also continues a venerable tradition of sociological critique of the extreme forms of cultural constructionism embodied in 1990s queer theory by which all identity is infinitely malleable and discursive. In *How Places Make Us*, it is cities that “provide an organizing structure for the culture stuff we unpack when we move to a new place [...] providing structure and meaning for our identities” [237]. JBS similarly unsettles claims about the permanence of the self, including among her own interviewees, showing how proximate context shapes the self we present.

It is a truism of American Congressional elections that “all politics is local.” Second-wave feminists argued that “the personal is political.” Japonica Brown-Saracino makes an equally bold claim: that sexual politics are local, that identity is so responsive to local environment that it varies wildly among cities. This radical claim should resonate far beyond the literatures with which she engages.

G R E G G O R M A T T S O N