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Towards an intimacy ‘turn’ and the development of intimacy ‘languages’ in geography

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Katie Walsh, *Transnational Geographies of the Heart*. Wiley Publishers, 2018; 978-1-119-05045-2, Hardcover £60.00; Paperback £24.99; Ebook £22.99 SAGE

With her book *Transnational Geographies of The Heart*, Katie Walsh convincingly calls for an intimacy ‘turn’ in geography. Her core argument is wide and far-reaching. Simply stated, intimacy is ‘at the heart of meaningful social life’ (Walsh, 2018: 145). And her main ambition in this book is to open up an understanding of intimate subjectivities as broad personal relationships. I will review this book in a three-fold way: firstly, her ‘push’ for this ‘intimacy turn’ in the discipline. Then, I will reflect on her contribution to what can be called ‘intimacy languages’ in geography. Finally, I will discuss the disciplinary horizon of intimacy in geographical thought, both in the past and for future inquiries.

Firstly, Walsh weaves together complex relationships between migration, home and belonging. She does so through inquiries into the intimate subjectivities formed in communities through friendships, families and sexual encounters. Certainly, Walsh has done her bit to pave the way for an ‘intimacy turn’ during the last decade by a much broader focus on a wide range of relationships. Sex, desire and romance can be relevant parts of such relationships, but nevertheless intimacy is more far-reaching into other realms of human life.

Walsh’s explorations of these themes are rich in many senses. She takes the reader to a rapidly ‘globalising’ city in the early 2000s and grounds her empirical analysis in colonial and postcolonial histories of Dubai and the mobilities of privileged (white, relatively well-off, heterosexual, often highly educated) British migrants. In this rather unique space, intimacies interweave personal love relationships and communities, friendships and encounters in settings where we meet ‘alike’ people, encounter ‘difference’ and forge deeper relations to each other. The push of the ‘intimacy turn’ therefore is achieved through the novel focus on communities. Lifestyle sports clubs, malls, bars, and night clubs are sites of complex intimacy webs and encounters. And so the streets we walk daily, the homes and neighbourhoods where we live, become close to our hearts and make us cry when we leave. Further, Walsh fleshes out friendships as intimacy. We inhabit places and they become dear to us through the friendships contained therein. Moreover, relocation transforms friendship itself. She also goes deeper into the understanding of family homes and relationships as sites of intimacy. The built environment, interior of houses, objects and family stories revealing rituals and ‘the character of the family’ (Walsh, 2018: 136) all form intimate subjectivities. Migrants care for places as home, recreate homes left behind and thus create anew

meaningful webs of relationships between humans, seemingly mundane kitchen appliances and family routines. Intimacy in everydayness, which is often taken for granted, is felt with huge intensity in migrant lives. Finally, she uses research on sexual encounters to further understanding of intimacy. While the author does not equate intimacy with physical contact and closeness only, sexuality is a crucial part of intimate lives. Sexual encounters happen in communities, are shaped by temporalities in migrant lives, shift from fleeting encounters to friendships, and ultimately add a more layered portrayal of spatiality in intimate subjectivities.

Secondly, I see this book as a contribution to 'intimacy vocabularies'. Words and notions matter in how we perceive and interpret the world and human relations in it. While geographers have well-versed 'vocabularies' of a 'sexuality turn' (Bell and Valentine, 1995; Hubbard, 2018; Mai and King, 2009), a more inclusive take on a broad range of intimate subjectivities is still emerging. Walsh (2018: 5) convincingly claims that intimacy is one of the 'most significant, yet unacknowledged discursive points in migrant narratives of belonging' and tries to push the boundaries not only of where and how intimacy is forged but also how it is portrayed in words. As she points out, there were very few references to 'geographies of the heart' when she began her research in 2002. Her vocabularies stem from social constructivism (social spatialisation) and relational geography. In this way she contributes to the still new languages of embodied, emotional and sexual turns in geography, including the role of love migration in new temporalities and spatialities of migration (King, 2002). Walsh further develops the vocabularies of intimacy through her ethnographic positionality and methodology. Participants' ready-to-tell relocation stories initially seem to be centred on unsurprising economic and amenity-related motives: 'career', 'higher pay' and 'sunshine'. It takes time for intimate subjectivities to emerge as the deeper reasons that people moved away from Britain. It takes Walsh's well-honed ethnographic craft to expose and make sense of these intimate subjectivities. She also expands our vocabularies theoretically, positioning mobility and intimacy as co-constituted in translational relations, demonstrating that geographers are theoretically and empirically well equipped to study intimacies through embodiment and encounters in space and time (Wilson, 2017). In my reading, Walsh's most productive contribution lies in its reminder that we can hardly live without intimacies; whether high-flyers or domestic workers, migrants eat, sleep, and carve out homey spaces and develop meaningful relationships. At the same time, seemingly mundane relationships and intimacies are formally and informally regulated and governed through migrant status, class and gender. What is new, indeed, is Walsh's fine-tuned vocabularies, expressing in new words how dear and deeply felt are our mundane relationships to objects and people.

Thirdly, there is surely lots more to do for geographers who have become 'attuned' to intimate subjectivities. But as much as we can discover new themes and pose new questions on relations in space and time, we can also appreciate the importance of geography's legacy of phenomenological and humanistic scholarship. Adopting these perspectives and staying alert to Walsh's call for a more inclusive focus on everyday intimacies, I would argue that intimate subjectivities can be explored in multiple ways geographically. Revisiting Buttimer's (1976) existential geography and her phenomenological inquiry into the 'lifeworld', for example, ushers in a myriad of intimacies we take-for-granted. Also, sensory experience, deeply felt intimate relations to places, and to each other through friendships, community histories and, importantly, environment and the natural world, form the very basis of Tuan's (1974, 1977) writings and the formation of the sub-discipline of humanistic geography. My own work has been productively informed by these perspectives that have

shaped geography in the 20th century. The smell of a fresh-cut grass, the more-than-representational bodily affects when landing after a long absence from home, the soil in one's home-town graveyard (Lulle, 2014) – such intimacies are crucially linked to all the lived world beyond social relations. The richness of the philosophies underpinning humanistic geography, bridging it to the natural and artefactual world, can certainly inform today's studies of intimate subjectivities. Moreover, I foresee productive links between intimate subjectivities and the strands of literature on atmospheres (Anderson, 2009) and emotional and affectual (Pile, 2010). 'Sunshine', whether as warmly 'touching' or 'blistering' can shape intimate subjectivities and geographies to a great extent, and so does the built environment in the city and the homes we live in and leave behind.

Finally, and importantly, the geographer's focus on intimacies portends hope and imagination for the future. Walsh rightly calls for further research on new forms of intimacies in times of rapid expansion of technologies, instant messaging and video conversations. Such research is already emerging. And it is not only about how technologies enable or disturb intimacies, but why it is important for us to create, maintain and not give up on 'geographies of the heart', the warmth of togetherness, and intimacy in both geographical scholarship and our daily lives.

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