Pleasure and propriety: teen girls and the practice of straight space

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Abstract. Heterosexuality is often perceived by geographers to be a dominant social force in the production of space, yet the ways that heterosexuality achieves this domination have not been scrutinized. In this paper I focus on two straight girls' narratives to explore, first, how they sexualize space and thus make space heterosexual; and, second, how space and spatiality imbue their everyday social and sexual practices and thus exist as a central component of subjectivity. I argue that considering the spatiality of their sexual practices presents a theoretical advantage over current feminist conceptualizations that place girls in gendered relationships in which boys maintain control. Instead, I suggest that a close reading of the pleasures and proprieties of sex and sexuality in these two girls' stories illustrates how the girls become invested with and perform social—sexual norms and meanings through spatialized practices.

1 Introduction
The spatiality of heterosexual social and sexual practice rarely surfaces as a topic of geographic research (Hubbard, 2000), despite frequent calls supporting the expansion of sexuality studies in the discipline to include heterosexuality (Bell and Valentine, 1995, page 12; Binnie and Valentine, 1999, page 183). Instead, the primary concern of sexuality studies in the discipline has revolved around urban homosexual identity and activity, sexual dissident citizenship (Bell, 1995a), and gay and lesbian space (Brown, 2000), although recent forays into other areas—such as children and education, race, rural sexualities, and tourism, to list just a few (see Binnie and Valentine, 1999; Holloway et al, 2000)—are attempting to expand the scope of analysis. Of course, the studies on homosexual identities, sexual practices, and spaces do not themselves confine the focus in geography on sexuality; indeed, these scholars have exploded notions of what constitutes geography and ‘proper’ geographic scholarship (Bell, 1995b). The task at hand is to learn from existing work and continue to cultivate new critical approaches to the study of sexuality, and particularly heterosexuality.

One course of action is to queer the study of both homosexuality and heterosexuality in geography (which also implies including the sexualities and practices that exist in the shady areas that this dichotomy disallows). Queer theory problematizes a descriptive focus on sexual identity and suggests that retaining identity as an organizing analytic insinuates a liberal project of autonomy and freedom (Butler, 1993; Sedgwick 1990; Warner, 1993). Even the concentration of geographers on homosexuality and gay and lesbian spaces, as G Derrick Hodge recently argued (2000, page 372), will maintain a “limiting identity-based politics and culture” unless it seeks to “push beyond the borders” which confine it. To be fair, queer theory has been initially explored in geography (particularly through applications of the performativity theory of Judith Butler), and, as a label, queer is popping up more and more in titles (see Antipode 2002) and as a desiginator for all things gay (see Bell, 2001). However, the potentials of queer geography for scrutinizing the functions of sexuality regimes and ideologies (Foucault, 1978; Halperin, 1995; Warner, 1993) and the fundamental spatiality of the production of
heterosexual identities remain underdeveloped. Geographers have neglected the functions of heterosexual space, although it is often posited as a dominant space that queers must negotiate (Bell and Valentine, 1995; Valentine, 1993a; 1993b). Jon Binnie even goes so far as to state, “Heterosexual space and heterosexual desire are all pervasive—just there. Heterosexual identity is ubiquitous and thereby placeless” (see Binnie, 2001, page 107, emphasis in original). The pervasiveness of heterosexuality, however, does not imply that it is placeless; ubiquity masks the production of straight spaces and subjects.

This identifies an imperative geographic project—to explore how straight identities and spaces are produced. By engaging this undertaking, geography can begin to confront the perceived aspatiality and placelessness of heterosexuality, and the ability of heterosexuality, according to David Halperin, to “define itself without problematizing itself” (1995, page 44; see also Berlant and Warner, 1998). Queering straight sexuality is to examine how heterosexuality and its spaces are jointly produced through those seemingly invisible everyday activities and practices of sexual subjecthood—the practices of subjects in and through space. By considering the everyday ways that straight subjects make heterosexuality, and how these are fundamentally spatial, more tentative, though still normative, spaces emerge, rather than the monolithic heterosexual spaces that are insinuated by their ubiquity. Heterosexual spaces and subjects exist through the social and spatial practices that give them meaning and form; thus, geographic studies on sexuality can contribute to the project of underdetermining heterosexuality and straight space and to the study of sexuality more broadly, which often neglects spatial process.

In this paper I offer examples of the sorts of practices that create and reproduce the identities, subjects, and spaces of heterosexuality from my research with teenage girls. I read these through Butler’s theory of performativity, which conceives of power, subjectivity, and subject positions as foundational effects of repeated, everyday practices (Butler, 1993; 1997a; 1997b). Performativity theory has steadily achieved greater application in geography, and its benefits, shortcomings, and potentials have been explained, debated widely, and empirically explored (see, for example, Aitken, 1998; Bell et al, 1994; Bondi, 1998; Domosh, 1999; Duncan, 1996; Gregson and Rose, 2000; Laurie et al, 1999; McDowell, 1999; Nash, 2000; Nelson, 1999; Robinson, 2000; Thrift and Dewsbury, 2000; Valentine, 1996). Performativity theory rethinks the processes of identity and the ways that sexuality is powerful and powerfully produced, although geographers have applied the theory in vastly different situations (and rarely in studies of sexual practices). It fits within a queer geography by insisting that normative identities and spaces are effects of regularized and identifiable practices, rather than reflective of ‘inner’ selves (compare Foucault, 1978).

I hope that this paper will contribute to the project of developing performativity for geography by first, in section 2, examining the social-spatial practices that produce heterosexual space, and, second, exploring how identity and subjectivity are spatial processes. (I explain these further in the following section.) To these ends I explore two straight teenage girls’ narratives about sexual ideas and activities. In section 3, after a review of relevant literature, I offer a geographic analysis of heterosexual performative practice as a lens for contextualizing one girl’s sexual relationship with her boyfriend. Currently, the primary focus on teen sexual behavior comes from feminist scholars, who often view sexual decisionmaking aspatially and focus primarily on power differentials between girls and boys. I suggest that a spatialized understanding of sexual practices allows a different view of adolescent sex to emerge, one that allows the multiple pleasures and identifications involved in gendered and heterosexual practices to be seen. In section 4 I examine another girl’s ideals of sexual space and activities in an attempt to understand how she learns straight sexual
propriety and practice. Her stories and desires indicate how she both internalizes and practices heterosexuality, and thus contributes to the performative production of normative heterosexual space and subjecthood. By focusing on pleasure and propriety in the sexual practices of these girls, in both sections I emphasize the social, cultural, and spatial meanings and norms that the girls reproduce and cite. These include race, gender, sexuality, age, place, religion, and class. The girls’ narratives underscore the impossibility of separating these social and spatial signifiers and the importance of considering these as interconnected, dynamic, and practiced phenomena.

2 Understanding the sexual practices of girls

It is important to begin any discussion on teenage girls’ sexual practice with a look at the existing feminist literature on girls’ sexual activities, as it has framed the research on girls for many years. This significant body of work has conceived of female adolescent sexuality as an example of women’s devalued femininity in patriarchal, sexist society (Warr, 2001, page 244). Indeed, from the perspective of the literature, it is difficult to imagine girls’ sexuality as anything but problematic (Driscoll, 2002). Deborah Tolman, a particularly prolific and influential scholar on teen girls and sex, suggests that girls lack a strong voice that could enable them to say ‘no’ to sex or, alternatively, to articulate their sexual desire and thus develop sexual agency (Tolman, 1994a; 1994b; Tolman and Higgins, 1996). These muted capabilities, she and others likewise explain, stem from girls’ weak feminine positions in gendered and sexist contexts (see also Holland et al, 1994; 1996; Tolman, 1999). Tolman writes, “By definition, to be an acceptable young woman within her social context, she must not know or exercise her own agency [to act on her desire], a lesson in being appropriately feminine” (Tolman, 1994a, page 268). Janet Holland et al suggest that only when “women are able to take control of their sexuality in an active femininity” will they be able to consider consciously their embodied sexuality and “govern their own sensuality” (1994, page 22; also Tolman, 1999). More recently, research has shown that young women’s sexuality must be thought beyond sex itself, particularly to include their relationships with peers and boyfriends (and their ideals of romance within these relationships) (Stewart, 1999; Tolman, 1999; Vanwesenbeeck, 1997; Warr, 2001). Broadening the scope of research, they advise, will give greater insight into how girls reproduce femininity (even in its devalued forms) and make sexual decisions that they may not find sexually or erotically pleasurable, or that are not sexually or physically healthy (Stewart, 1999).

Hopefully this research agenda will challenge a limiting model of teenage feminine subjectivity in the feminist literature. Catherine Driscoll even suggests that feminist inquiry relegates adolescent girls to an uncertain present and fixes them with ‘immature’ subjectivities. Girls are “presumed to be more subject to ideological manipulation than women.” She writes that, because the end goal of feminism is a feminist adult subject, “Feminists and feminism are interested in girls, but less on their own terms than as necessary precursors to women/feminists” (Driscoll, 2002, page 130).1) Fiona Stewart similarly laments, “Subject positions for [young] women which are other than object, are all but foreclosed” in feminist scholarship (1999, page 374, emphasis in original). Even as girls reproduce femininity, they are victims to it. This sort of equation begs a larger question involving subjectivity and the processes of social

1) Geography’s own engagements with kids, girls, and sexual subjectivity provide a refreshing insistence that teens are more than “becoming adult” (Aitken, 2001; Holloway and Valentine, 2000). Geographers have also considered the heterosexual and gender identities of girls (Holloway et al, 2000; Hyams, 2000; Skelton and Valentine, 1998), but less so their sex practices and the spaces of teenage sex acts.
and cultural reproduction: how do girls become invested in and practice the subject positions that feminists show to be injurious? How does the process of a gendered hetero sexual subjectivity progress?

In contrast, geographic accounts of pleasure and sexuality, especially recently by David Bell and his coauthors, concentrate on sexual pleasure and the spatial and corporeal pleasures of sexuality to insist on the embodiment and spatiality of pleasure (Bell et al, 2001). I attempt, therefore, to merge an approach sensible to the spatiality of pleasure with one curious about girls’ production of gender–heterosexuality, so that girls’ sexual behaviors and practices can be rethought beyond the confines of a devalued femininity and feminine identity (see also Hyams, 2000). Placing sexual practice in space extends discussions about teen girls and their identities beyond the so-called ‘crisis’ they encounter in the ‘problematic’ era of adolescence (for example, Pipher, 1994; Tolman, 1994a, page 251) and allows an interpretation of girls’ sexual activities to resound more accurately with girls’ own interpretations. Examining the spaces of sex, I hope to show, allows us to consider the motivations of girls’ sexual practices and decisionmaking.

However, it is important to remember that these ‘decisions’ and practices are performative and are repeatedly carried out in contexts of powerful, normative, and enforced social meanings. Butler insists that practices are not performed by a subject; they enable a subject, such that without social identity subjects could not exist or come into being (imagine a nongendered subject if you can). In other words, subjectivity and social identity are effects of the regularized and socially coherent practices of subjects; practices are performative in that they mask their own ability to bring into being what they name. As Butler writes, identity and the practices of identification “introduce a reality rather than report on an existing one” (Butler, 1997a).(2) It is important to note that norms are assumed or appropriated through a subject’s identification with them and ongoing iteration of them (Butler, 1993, page 15) and thus are a constant process of practice. In other words, norms do not exist or materialize outside of the reiterative practice of them, although they are regulatory in the sense that a subject is forced to cite norms in order to ‘exist’ (see pages 13, 95).(3) Practice consists of the citations of these norms, and ensures the ongoing materiality of the subject and power. Performativity theory steers feminism away from the idea that girls may take ‘control’ of their sexuality and gender, and ‘govern their own sensuality’ (Holland et al, 1994, page 22); instead, girls are invested in gender–heterosexuality, because without these social signifiers they could not be subjects at all.

I am not, therefore, advocating a view that girls’ sexual practices and spatial pleasures are innocuous or merely agential. These pleasures (for example, of space, gender, heterosexuality) exist within a social field that requires subjects to accept them in order to achieve social visibility (Butler, 1997b). Furthermore, I insist in this paper that spatiality inculcates this social field. Thinking about the spaces of sex for girls as pleasurable to them helps to illustrate how social meanings such as gender–sexuality exist through the practices of subjects, and form the spaces through which social meaning is reproduced. Girls engage in sexual activities, for example, because they are pleasurable and socially rewarded, even as these pleasures themselves are powerfully

(2) These personal and social practices and expressions are the keys to the subject’s ongoing constitution and rearticulation, rather than to a subject’s stable and coherent ‘self’.

(3) Butler’s theory of gender–sexual performativity has been explained in great detail in recent geography publications, including in this journal. Rather than reiterate what has itself become a regularized practice, I refer the reader to these sufficient explanations of performativity (Bell et al, 1994; Duncan, 1996; Gregson and Rose, 2000; Houston and Pulido, 2002; Laurie et al, 1999; McDowell, 1999; Robinson, 2000; Thrift and Dewsbury, 2000).
made, enforced, and experienced; however, the pleasure may not be physical or erotic, or socially or personally advantageous, in time–space and across scale.

3 The spatial pleasures of sexuality
I begin by examining one girl's narrative from my research on teenage girls in South Carolina. I interviewed twenty-seven girls (white and African-American) between the ages of fourteen and nineteen in Charleston over a seven-month period in 2000. All but two of the twenty-seven girls identified as straight at the time of our interviews. My research project explored girls' social and sexual practices in the city, home, and school, in order to question how spatial-social ideals and activities constitute practices of self and identity. I asked the girls details about their everyday lives and relationships, and considered with them the meanings they attributed to various spaces and places. I also asked what started as simple questions about their sexual and romantic experiences, which, more often than not, girls were more than willing to engage and expand [for a similar depiction of talking to teenage girls about sex and romance, see Thompson (1995)]. Through this work, I specifically sought to explore how spatiality is inherent to social identity production and the everyday embodiment of social norms. [For more details of my methodology and the broader project, see Thomas (2002).]

In this paper, I draw on only two of these interviews. I chose these two girls’ narratives because it was only through considering them that these arguments developed; I suppose it is more realistic to say that the interviews chose me for this paper. Furthermore, I am less interested in providing a characterization of ‘the teenage girl’ by offering a representative sampling of multiply positioned and identified youth (however, I also would not describe either of these girls as extraordinary). Instead, I engage these two girls’ narratives to consider how their stories and activities provide a context to delve into questions of social and sexual subjectivity, identity, and the internalization and enactment of social norms. I think that this can be accomplished without drawing on interviews with many girls, and, indeed, a closer reading of fewer narratives allows me to engage these two girl’s words and social lives without the need to ‘prove’ broader representation. I am attempting to explore the ways that these two girls create and reproduce social space and meaning, and the ability to accomplish this does not require a comparison to other girls.

Monique, one of the twenty-seven girls I interviewed, was fourteen years old when I met her. She lived in downtown Charleston, South Carolina, with her mother and eighteen-year-old sister. Her father was absent (and had been throughout Monique's entire life) and her mother worked as a housekeeper in a hotel. Monique spent the vast majority of her time in her home neighborhood, a predominantly black and poor area of the city (Monique is black). She rarely left her neighborhood or even downtown Charleston, given her limited mobility as a fourteen year old. However, the downtown city is located on a peninsula, and is small, compact, and easy to navigate on foot. The proximity of friends and the ease they found getting around as pedestrians were important aspects of Monique's social–sexual activities.

Monique (who, like all the participants, chose her own research name) was sexually active and pregnant at the time of our interview. I asked her questions about where she hung out with friends, what she did socially, but it was only when we started discussing her boyfriend (Monique's boyfriend was fifteen) that she began narrating stories. The discussion previous to this entailed my questions and her brief responses. When she told me about how she and her friends made the time and space for sex with their boyfriends, though, Monique became expressive, detailed, and animated. In fact, Monique exhibited delight in the storytelling, laughing frequently as she explained how they went about it.
Monique: “My cousin used to go with my boyfriend’s friend, and [my other friend] used to go with my boyfriend’s friend, too. So all of us used to stay together, and this is what happened!(4) [laughing] All of us at the same time. … It’d be my house, because my mama used to go to my auntie’s house for a little while, they’d go out somewhere, out to eat somewhere, and she’d leave us there. And she don’t think no one would be there, but I seen my boyfriend’s brother to go get him, that’s how come we so close, I used to pay him to go and find his brother. I used to give him five dollars just to go get his brother, and they’ll come, and they’ll be so much of them looking out the window, seeing if my mama come [laughing].”

The sexual spaces for Monique and her friends were made by the teens’ collective efforts to find each other in the neighborhood or at home at opportune times, namely when Monique’s mother and sister were away (usually at work, but also, as she indicates, when they were out with friends and family). They protected the space–time from discovery by adults by keeping watch for each other, often teasing each other by pretending to spot Monique’s mother’s return. Monique told me that “they used to play on the door, act like my mother was coming. That’s when we thought it was my mother, but it wasn’t.” They were never caught.

At first, Monique did not expound on the sex acts themselves; she concentrated on the fun that she had with her friends and boyfriend creating the space for the sexual exploits. Playfully, they guarded the house from adult intrusion and also pretended that Monique’s mother was returning—the teens found this funny because they would have to dash to put the house in order, put on clothes, hide the guys, or begin to push them out of the house. This was clearly exciting and fun to Monique. This play, however, is not trivial, but through it the teens enact powerful social and spatial meaning. The juvenile games invoke heterosexuality and, accordingly, produce heterosexual space and identity through the sexed and gendered activity of the teens. The creative and pleasurable production of space fuels the sex-making of the kids as well, demonstrating the fundamental spatiality of social identities and activities such as heterosexuality and gender (McDowell, 1999), and of sex itself. The playing house, the games, ferreting lovers around the neighborhood all produce sexuality, rather than reflect the kids’ inherent sexual identities. These rituals, therefore, are spatially performative of sexuality.

I also asked Monique what she thought about the sex. Her response illustrates that the sex acts, like the space for sex, were collaboratively encouraged and produced. Monique explained to me that she and her friends had sex at least partially in response to the boys’ efforts and each other’s sexual activities. Monique clearly did not physically enjoy sex with her boyfriend, although she was nonchalant about that aspect of her sexual activities. (During the interview, she focused instead on the fun they and other friends had together collectively setting up the space for sex.)

Mary: “So did you like having sex with your boyfriend?”
Monique: “Once in a while. I didn’t want to do it sometimes, but he get mad, and I don’t like when he get mad, so I just go ahead.”
Mary: “So how come you wouldn’t want to do it?”
Monique: “I used to get tired of it. He only used to do it because my cousin never had like to have sex with her boyfriend, so he just trying to be the first one and always get the most, or do this or do that.”

(4) Monique is indicating her pregnancy by saying, “this is what happened”; and that all three of them were having sex “at the same time”. Neither Monique’s friend nor her cousin were pregnant when I talked to Monique. Monique’s aunt took her cousin to “get the shot” (Depo-Provera) after she found out about Monique’s pregnancy. Monique did not want to use birth control because she was eager to have a child.
Mary: “Do you like kissing him and stuff though?”
Monique: “Nope.”
Mary: “Why do you?”
Monique: “I don’t, he kiss me, but I don’t kiss him back. I don’t know why.”

Monique did not describe a time when she did enjoy sex, although she vaguely said she likes it “once in a while”. She explained that she liked him, had fun talking to him, and wanted to please him and avoid his anger if she tried to avoid sex. The two also planned Monique’s pregnancy; Monique told me that they had tried for her to get pregnant “since June, but it didn’t happen ’til November”.

Monique is clear that sexual, erotic pleasure did not drive her sexual decisionmaking, and she told me that her boyfriend did not forcefully coerce her into sex. Instead, Monique sought out her boyfriend for sex, despite her lack of articulated desire and her occasional weariness with sex. She sent for him through his brother when the time–space for sex opened up via her family’s absence, and she unmistakably enjoyed this time–space for sex, if not the sex itself: the pleasures that drove Monique’s sexual practices were spatial. The teenagers’ party-like bantering and joking produced the home space for sex as much as the sex acts themselves. Monique described this creation as fun, lively, and collaborative, in stark contrast to her portrayal of having sex with her boyfriend, whom she would not even kiss. These social and spatialized pleasures—for example, the party-like atmosphere—were fundamentally personal, subjective pleasures for Monique. This also indicates that the social inheres in the personal (compare McNay, 1999), such that the social cannot be ‘exterior’ to an ‘interior’ subjectivity; it is impossible to articulate gender identities outside of the fields of meaning and power that enable them (Butler, 1997b). The sexual activities of Monique and her group of friends install heterosexuality and gender as social signifiers through their practice of them; however, these activities do not report on naturalized identities, but rather (re)create them. Therefore, social-spatial as well as sexualized pleasures motivate and enact the gendered practices of this heterosexual relationship.

I am also arguing that one reason that Monique has sex is because it was fun to make the space for sex. This is not to insinuate that pleasure is unproblematic; actually, pleasure is not immune to relations of power and at times unequal ones at that. What is at stake here, however, is an understanding of the social-spatial processes of Monique’s sexual activities. The issue is not one clearly resulting from gender and weak femininity, as some feminist scholars might have it. Instead, Monique’s situation illustrates the ambivalent construction of subjects—as within power but also as wielders of power (Butler, 1997b; McNay, 1999)—and the contradictory consequences of practice. Monique forms the gendered and sexualized meanings of heterosexuality through the emotional and social-spatial pleasures of her relationships. These occur in multiple, layered spaces of Monique’s life, such as her home and neighborhood. However, at multiple scales and in space, these practices also may work against Monique, in that femininity is devalued along with teenage heterosexual practice, especially that resulting in black teenage pregnancy. Monique is herself performing social identities that subordinate her—including femininity. I am not, of course, suggesting that Monique can practice her way out of a racist and sexist society by not having sex or becoming pregnant. The dominant meanings and values of the social signifiers of things such as teenage pregnancy and femininity, however, are forcefully taken on by subjects in order to be subjects.

Furthermore, Butler suggests that power cannot divide the social meanings of gender, sex, and heterosexuality; they are viable only through their conjunction (Butler, 1990). This decidedly queer view draws out the value of trying to understand Monique’s story of sex and pleasure as one indicating the productive aspect of gender and heterosexuality.
Reading teenage sexual activities as results of girls’ devalued and disempowered femininity (as feminists have), rather than as productive of it, produces a problematic effect of a placeless heterosexual identity by assuming that identity just is and that heterosexuality just functions through its domination. I suggest, instead, that Monique’s practices of sex and gender produce her social subjectivity (Butler, 1993), and, importantly, that these practices are spatialized. What this points to, then, is that the social imperative of gender heterosexuality functions through the social-spatial activities and pleasures of Monique and her friends. The ubiquitous space of straight sex(uality) exists through these kinds of everyday practices, practices which mask their own productive elements (Butler, 1990; Halperin, 1995). Additionally, these performative practices are lived through the social-spatial meanings of being young, black, and poor, although this is not to say that being poor and black lead to underage promiscuity. Rather, Monique’s practices indicate that the social meanings of race, class, space, and age are lived through sex and gender. Sex comes only through racialized, aged, gendered spaces, for example, and these social norms and signifiers are enacted through Monique’s practices of sex and sexualized relationships. The question is not how race or class determines Monique’s sexual practices, but how sexuality is lived through race and its spaces.

Monique’s narrative highlights the social, spatial, and peer nature of identifications such as race and age, and heterosexuality. The straightness of these kids’ spaces, of course, is collective—and collectively enforced (Butler, 1993)—and not simply reducible to individual subjects and their personal activities and decisionmaking. For example, Monique indicated that her boyfriend’s interest in sex stemmed from his competition with his friend to see who could be ‘first’ and ‘get the most’ from the girls. Like the boys, Monique and her friends also pushed each other to have sex, or encouraged each other to share a sexual experience that one was considering or had done. Monique first had sex at age twelve (“going on thirteen”) because a friend decided to have sex. She said, “I was just following up a friend. You know you have a friend trying to get you to do something cuz she about to do it. That’s how it was, but I was scared, so.” She felt hesitation, she was scared, but she decided to do it anyway, to share the experience with her friend.\(^5\)

The collectivity of the competition and the joint pacts to engage in and enforce sex is clearly pivotal to the sexual activities and space-making of these teenagers. It operates among the boys, the girls, and beyond these gender divisions to couples. The teens’ interactions affect what kinds of sex they have, when they have it, and with whom, which indicates that to conceptualize more individualized identity and practice misses the mark by assuming personal or couple-relationship prerogatives in their heterosexual activity. The gendered relationship between Monique and her boyfriend, in other words, is not the only relationship functioning between the two; the link between romance and gender is in fact incompletely theorized in some feminist research which assumes its insularity. Heterosexuality, and the gendered relations it requires, are publicly performative through the communal practices that form them.

\(^5\) Competition also includes fights between girls over boys. For example, Monique fought another girl who was “messing” with her boyfriend just after school on the street: “He won't mess with anybody else, cuz I had a fight with this girl, about a week before I got pregnant, I had a fight with this girl, and he never messed with another girl, because the girl's face was messed up. And he said he didn’t like that, so he said he wouldn’t mess with another girl.” The fight took place with others looking on, and Monique said that “everybody want me to fight her”. Her boyfriend showed up just as the fight was over. Monique explained that “by the time he had come 'round the corner, I had already finished fighting her.” This example also illustrates how Monique seeks to discipline her boyfriend’s sexual–romantic activities; she indicates that she fights the girl to stop him from messing around.
It is the very sexual competitiveness of the teens, furthermore, that evokes the modes through which heterosexuality becomes normative and validated. This may seem somewhat of a contradiction given the antinormativity of teenage sex in an adult society, particularly so-called underage sex between African-American teens that leads to pregnancy. However, the kids learn that straight sex, even as it must remain hidden from adults as long as possible, is condoned and encouraged in their peer community and among intimates. Ultimately, heterosexuality is also rewarded by a homophobic society (especially as the girls become adult sexual subjects), and the taking on of heterosexuality by the youth is a function of its normativity. The kids, as they collectively engage in heterosexual sex, thus enact the performativity of gendered heterosexuality: they produce the normativity of heterosexuality through their practice of it. This peer, communal, and oftentimes public encouragement of heterosexuality frames the sexual and gender practices of Monique and her friends. Straight sex is something they learn to announce and aspire to, for confirmation of their social subjecthood in the murky spaces (not private or public) between their specific relationships in the bedroom to the social groupings and displays of sexuality among friends and peer groups. Heterosexuality does not exist just within the private space of sex, but it permeates all of these spaces and subjects.

The pleasures of sex are not merely gendered—sexed, but are social and spatial in wider contexts and situations than identity categories might allow. Indeed, the heterosexual social pleasures of shared, open, and public sexuality actually institute subjectivity, as being asexual or asocial—or homosexual (see Butler, 1990; 1997b)—disallows proper subjectivity, even as sexual practice is supposed to be private and confined to the bedroom among adults (Berlant and Warner, 1998). This seems to me critical evidence for the reasons that youth, and, in this case, poor, black youth, engage social meanings that work towards their social disadvantage at different scales and spaces. They have peer-based and localized social and spatial motivations for early sexual activity, competitiveness, violence, pregnancy, and other situations that are devalued in other spaces and by other subjects. Normativity is not always equally shared or defined similarly by all social subjects; the norms of this peer group differ from those of normative adult, white, and middle-class US society.

For example, Monique's pregnancy provides social value in her peer group, and also adds visibility to her heterosexual activity and practice in everyday social spaces. Her baby was her boyfriend's second; he had another child by "his first date", as Monique described her, a little over a year before I met Monique. Among her peer group, children are indicators of the ties between teen lovers, even former ones. Monique mentioned to me that he regularly has his first child with him, even though he no longer dates the child's mother. Babies are signs of power in and of heterosexual relationships because they tie lovers together and claim their intimacy, and these signs are informed by the racialized and classed views of teen pregnancy which do not necessarily see motherhood at a young age as a 'problem' (see Kelly, 1996, cited in Chin, 2001).

Instead, the girls consider pregnancy and motherhood as a shared situation and indication of their sexual—romantic relations with their boyfriends, perhaps especially if the boys had other children with other women. On the other hand, Monique did not fear the short-term or long-term consequences of teen motherhood. Monique's cousin had also tried to get pregnant at the afternoon sex gatherings. And, although Monique was scared to initially tell her mother about the pregnancy, her sister had twins as a single teenager and Monique knew she would not be ostracized or face rejection from her family. She gained status among her peer group, which values motherhood even at such a young age through the repute it affords to mothers. Girls strive to be mothers, and plan pregnancies even at young ages, because it makes sense to them. While the
gendered body, to Butler, is the effect of normalizing gendered practices, the pregnant youthful body of Monique likewise inhabits the values and norms of social life and space. Her pregnancy itself is performative through the teenage citation and enactment of early motherhood, gendered heterosexuality, and collective, youthful social space.

Monique’s and her friends’ power-laden and spatial-social practices function as the building blocks of the dominant space of heterosexuality that geographers have carefully critiqued. However, Monique’s stories also point to the importance of spatialized pleasure in the practice of gender and heterosexuality, even despite the powerful race, gender, and straight norms that may ultimately operate to her social disadvantage in other spaces or scales. Ironically, the antinormative position of Monique having sex as a very young, black teenager ends up as one serving the normative authority of heterosexuality itself. The challenge for feminism and scholars is to consider the spaces and pleasures of identity practice and the pleasurable investments that girls have in social-cultural meanings that we may doubt or lament. The contradictory influences and consequences of practice present profound issues in the project to understand and address girls’ sexual decisionmaking, as well as the wider conceptual project of theorizing subjectivity and identity.

4 Spatial propriety, sexual propriety

Butler argues that subjects cite norms through their practices and identifications and thus, through this citational repetition, actually enact the power of norms themselves (1993, page 9). In the last section I considered how Monique’s spatial practices of sexuality and gender were pleasurable and how sexuality is practiced through the specific contexts of her social relationships and identifications. Her various social, sexual, and spatial practices, I argued, instantiated heterosexuality and straight spaces through their connection to these other social meanings. In this section I want to examine another girl’s sexual practices in order to consider how different norms are enacted through other types of heterosexual practice. Susan—who like Monique was also fourteen years old and black, but unlike Monique was intent on higher education (her mother was a teacher), was active in her church, and lived with greater economic means(6)—also illustrates the spatiality of heterosexuality through her narrative and practices. Both girls produce heterosexuality and heterosexual space. However, Susan questions the social and personal appropriateness of having sex as a young teenager, and thus enacts different norms than Monique to justify her sexual decisionmaking. This sort of juxtaposition—of very different practices and the citation of different norms—highlights the necessity for scholars to consider the processes through which identifications (such as gender and race) are made, rather than reading subject positions through categories such as gender or heterosexuality. In other words, girls’ gender and sexual identities do not stem from gender power relations that ‘act on’ the feminine subject; girls enact gender and sexuality through the citation of interconnected norms and by denying other possibilities of identification, as I will show (see Butler, 1993, page 15). As I stated in the introduction, this type of inquiry lends itself to a project that problematizes a descriptive focus on sexual subjecthood and identity as it explores the spatiality of heterosexuality and straight subjectivity. This means that prescriptions for girls living in a sexist society cannot be uniform, or driven by identity politics, but must be derived from girls’ differing social spaces.

(6) Monique’s mother was a housekeeper at a hotel, and Susan’s mother taught special education at a public school and had a college education. Both girls lived in single-mother homes, but I assume that Susan’s mother had a higher income and received benefits through her job, unlike the minimum-wage labor of Monique’s mother.
I interviewed Susan individually once, then together with her friend Bryana for a follow-up discussion. The girls are best friends and much of our conversation revolved around boys and sex; these topics were clearly well rehearsed by the girls. What was striking to me during these interchanges about their activities and ideas about boys, sex, and romance was the clarity with which Susan and Bryana identified youthful sexual propriety as inherently spatialized. Susan, whose narrative I concentrate on below, defines the appropriateness of sexual practices according to the spaces and places they occur in or potentially could occur in; sexual propriety, to her, is also spatial propriety. She utilized the language of space and propriety to explain her sexual decisionmaking and gender, age, and sexual identities; that is, Susan defined sexuality and outlined the norms of sexual and gender teenage behavior in and through space. Her practices invoke these stated goals and rules, in turn contributing to the performative space of heterosexuality and integrated social meanings.

In identifying what is sexually proper and what is not, Susan often laid out the rules of sexual engagement and morality in terms of the places and spaces for sex. For example, she was horrified when another teenage girl she knew gave a guy oral sex in a church parking lot. Sex itself—of all sorts—was not necessarily a shocking event, as many in Susan's peer group were sexually active. Susan was appalled that the sex act took place at church. In fact, she mentioned church three times in our interviews in conjunction with dating or sexual situations, once in our interview alone (about the oral sex) and then twice with Bryana in our joint follow-up interview. She articulated her keen sense that church space was not the place to be messing around with boys in.

Susan: “At our church, a lot of people hook up at the church, it’s kind of sad!”

Mary: “Why’s it sad?”

Susan: “Cuz that’s not what you’re there for!”

Church space indicated to Susan an accompanying, proper set of mores and behavior, based on the religious and spiritual connotations and events that define church space and its purposes for her. These mores did not just inform her ideas about sex, though. Her sexuality and sexual identity is itself made through her articulations of the spatial norms of sex. In this sense, she is drawing on the norm of asexual religious and church space through her narrative and practices, and buttressing the ideal of asexual religious space and practice by positioning herself as a moral, Christian subject. She also reproduces the ideal of asexual religious and church space.

However, the norm of asexual church space was not thoroughly materialized by the girls' activities. Susan and Bryana also related several stories to me about the social—sexual aspect of church and church trips. For example, the girls went to a church retreat together with Susan's youth group. It was held in a college dormitory that combined youth groups from around the area, and Susan and Bryana met a boy who invited them to his room after curfew and asked them for their room number so he could sneak down. The girls did not go, nor did they give him the number, and in the morning he asked, according to Bryana, “what happened to you and your little friend?” I asked why they did not sneak down, and Susan replied with a laugh, “That’s inappropriate!” The connotation of the space implied to Susan that it was an inappropriate space for sexual activities; the space did not fit with the activity. (Susan had snuck off with boys in other spaces, like her neighborhood, as I explain below.)

However, Susan's rules are tenuous in that she is engaging in sexualized activities, such as flirting with boys. She is able to draw the line with sex play; sex play in church space is prohibited by Susan and this spatial and sexual propriety forms what Butler calls the domain of constraints for practice (1993, page 94). There has to be something that remains excluded from practice in order for norms to operate through practice—norms are made through constraints or foreclosures as much as through enactment.
(Butler, 1993). The ideals of religious space and sex practice provide the terms of constraint for Susan. In fact, for Susan to appear to be a consistent subject, these constraints must remain hidden in space and, indeed, unconscionable.

Constraints also function through space for Susan. She was sexually curious and experimented with sex play in nonchurch spaces. For example, she detailed a story to me about making out with a boy in his house. The story arose when she and Bryana were telling me ‘how far they had gone’ with boys, and Susan told me she had once secretly visited a guy who lived near her. The two made out and some clothing came undone—but it was not taken off, she was clear to me about that—and the two did not have intercourse. When I asked her if they went into his bedroom to fool around, she adamantly replied, “No! No, no! We just stayed in the living room!” The bedroom was off limits for Susan because she did not want to have sex with the boy, she wanted only to kiss and make out. The living room, however, was fine. The space helped Susan regulate the activity because, to Susan, the bedroom indicates a sexual looseness or vulnerability. At fourteen, she did not yet want to have sex, and staying in the living room helped her to stay a virgin.

Susan's spatially defined and practiced moral code, evidenced through the spatial practices of regulating sexual activities and desires, produces and thus determines heterosexual space and her personalized sexual identity. In other words, Susan cites sexual norms through her production of social and sexual space and the activities and narratives through which she subjectively enacts power relations. Indeed, these relations of power that she embodies and performs provide the tangibility of heterosexuality and straight space. In order to be a proper heterosexual girl, Susan must choose the proper path and avoid the types of sex that endanger her cohesion as a feminine, middle-class, educated, and self-respecting and respected Christian girl. Susan’s story about sneaking to a boy’s house and fooling around one night, however, highlights the tenuous position of these identities. They are all too easily practiced out of being through improper sexual decisionmaking. Space and sexual—spatial propriety combine the norms through which Susan enacts her rules for maintaining proper social positions and identities; following these spatial rules allows a proper sexual and social subjecthood and neglecting them would indicate a slip of social propriety—and may provoke a crisis of subjectivity.

Heterosexual identity, space, and activity are in turn effects of the propriety Susan enacts. The sexual—spatial practices of Susan, therefore, are not merely modes of her identities, but are also modes of heterosexuality as a cultural, social, and spatial force itself. Heterosexual space, despite seeming to just ‘be there’ ubiquitously, is created through these sorts of practices of subjects. The combined power of heterosexual space is what makes it seem monolithic, but interrogating the practices behind the powerful social and spatial meanings of straight subjects and spaces reveals how normativity is daily enforced through practice, and thus made, and how this proceeds through the disavowal of other social identifications (or disidentification) (Butler, 1997b).

For these two young teens, creating fantasies and paradigms about first intercourse also illustrates their investments in social norms based on certain disavowals, and the methods through which heterosexuality becomes not only produced, but idealized and powerful in its effects on the meanings and power of gender, age, and class. Their fantasies about losing their virginity combined indicators of social visibility—class, adulthood, and proper gender—sexuality roles. Susan explained that

“I want my first time to be special, with somebody that I love and stuff. And my doctor was like, I advise you not to, because it’s more enjoyable as you get older. I don’t want it to happen in the backseat of somebody’s car or nothing. Pickup truck!”
Mary: “What’s your ideal setting for that then?”

Susan: “The Omni!” (7)

Susan wanted to wait for maturity and love. Love and sex, at least her first time, belong together, and Susan’s love story relies on the proper combinations of idealized, gendered romance and heterosexuality (compare Butler, 1990). Gender ideals combine with sexuality and sex so that heterosexuality exists through normative feminine–masculine compatibility. For Susan, straight sex, heterosexual identity, and femininity cannot be questioned, but they are presumed and indeed are articulated only through one another. She also has a romantic notion of what the space of the first intercourse should be: luxurious, perhaps quixotic, but definitely not trashy or ideally not low class like a pickup truck or backseat. She brought up her doctor to add authority to her decision not to have sex at fourteen: waiting adds potential enjoyment (and takes away potential risk). Further, Susan’s ideals of love are temporally and spatially specific, and these time–space indicators are her personal values and the enactment of these. For example, the backseat or a pickup truck indicate lower-class standing, and Susan is clear that that space is not for her. Incorporating her doctor’s advice into her decision making also provided a self-representation of having sense and good judgment, which are both similar indicators—and performatives—of refinement. Loving space implies a naturally feminine–masculine pairing. These scenarios provide the identifications for Susan—and she creates the possibility of identification through her enactment of them in her narrative—and this involves the disavowal of other identifications. The idea that she would have sex in a truck (or with a girl) would threaten her social identities and evict her from proper femininity and social success (compare Hyams, 2000).

Importantly, Susan explained that age and time, as well as space, are factors in creating the space for sex, and age and maturity (that come with time passing) clearly affect her ideals of proper behavior and gender–sexuality. Amorous activities at her age, she thinks, should remain fun and casual.

Susan: “You don’t want to get involved with one person until later, because you’ll think, oh this is the person of my dreams, and you’ve never been with anybody else, really. … I just saying, a lot of people, just because you’re going with someone in high school, and you really like them, that’s the person of your dreams.

Because when you go to college it’s a totally different thing.”

Susan thought that teenagers should not get too serious romantically; it never lasts, she said, and there are better things coming with time and life changes. Susan’s youthful tenets framed her practices with boys. She hung out with many different boys (in groups only, because at fourteen her mother would not yet let her date), and she described this as most proper for her situation as a young teenager. Susan reflects a moralist adult ideal in her articulation to wait for sex, and in so doing invokes the meaning of ‘youth’ as that which is not-yet-adult, more playful, and less stressful. The performativity of age, in this sense, comes through Susan’s practices of age and enunciation of the adult norms that shape the category. These are also gendered. Susan’s ideas of age-based norms for relationships specified only some of her principles for dating; she added gender guidelines for relationships in addition to age. Specifically, she decided that, as a girl, she should not telephone boys. In a story about a former boyfriend, she said:

Susan: “He gave me his number, I gave him my number, but I didn’t call him first, I don’t believe in calling boys. At all.”

Mary: “You think boys should call you all the time?”

(7) The Omni Hotel was a 5-star hotel with upscale shops in downtown Charleston. It is now called Charleston Place, but many people still refer to it as the Omni.
Susan: “Mm hmm. . .”
Mary: “Why? If you like somebody, why shouldn’t you call them?”
Susan: “[That’s not how it should be.] I think, if you call a boy a lot, they’re going to feel like they need their space and that you’re pressuring them.”

Susan’s rules for dating—including her age and gender norms evident in her ideas about calling boys and waiting until college for commitment—appear to be based on an assumption that punitive actions by the boys she is eager to attract would result from more direct and aggressive practices. The adage that boys do not want relationships plays a role in Susan’s rules; her belief that she should not call a boy results from her hesitation to ‘push’ a boy too far. If a girl ‘pressures’ a boy with telephone calls, he will shy away and avoid the girl, and Susan’s restriction on telephoning seeks to avoid this situation. Susan integrated gender stereotypes and the ideal of feminine passivity into her dating practices, but her decision to not call boys, in her mind, is a resolution made through active, rather than passive, thought and consideration. In other words, a passive femininity to Susan is not lamentable, but is a strategy in her dating practices (and problematically so). She reproduces femininity even as she articulates an agency of gender.

5 Conclusion
It is ironic to think that two young, black, teenage girls in South Carolina are engaged in a project as supposedly monolithic as the production of hegemonic heterosexual space. Yet, to claim that heterosexual space is ubiquitous and powerful means that we also have to fit the everyday practices of straight subjects like Monique and Susan into the formula of a placeless, all-pervasive heterosexuality. An alternative is to examine the ways these girls perform heterosexuality, which I hope leads us toward a more tenuous production of straight space and away from a placeless heterosexuality, and thus aids in the queer study of understanding what Halperin delineates as the ability of heterosexuality to “define itself without problematizing itself” (1995, page 44).

In this paper I have tried to break down heterosexuality by detailing some of the social-spatial practices and processes that form its spaces and subjects. By advocating the performativity of straight space and sexuality, the ubiquity of heterosexuality can be seen as an effect of situated and spatialized practices. Performative practices produce the identities and social meanings they purport to reflect, and I have argued that these practices, and thus performativity, are inherently spatialized. Monique’s and Susan’s narratives and experiences illustrate how mundane and repeated practices (and sometimes titillating ones!) are productive of sexualized spaces and places; therefore, space is performative, as is identity (Gregson and Rose, 2000). This simple claim is an important step towards underdetermining the seeming monolith of straight space and inspecting the processes that hide the invisible and daily renewal of heterosexuality. I have placed this argument as a potential contribution to the recent project in geography to think about space as performative (Thrift and Dewsbury, 2000), as well as a part of a queer geography committed to problematizing heterosexuality and its spaces.

Sexuality as an identity and as activity comes to have meaning and power only through its spaces; in other words, the social and performative process of sexual subjectivity and identity is inherently spatialized. This point speaks back to feminist scholars who miss the fundamentally performative and geographic aspects of girls’ subjectivities. Monique’s narrative and stories illustrate the spatial motivations of her sexual and gender identities and practices as they are lived in personalized contexts of race, age, class, and place. The spatial pleasures of sex drove Monique’s sexual identities and activities, and considering these leads us away from the idea that her sexual decisionmaking results from her disadvantaged position as a ‘girl’. Rather,
her sexual-spatial practices enact gender and sexuality but through social, racial, peer, and normative spaces. For Susan, space and spatiality also enable sexuality and sexual norms, but obviously through very different practices than for Monique. Susan enacts different norms than Monique, even as class, age, and place remain at the heart of both their narratives.

Subjectivity is not a result of preexisting social signifiers such as race, heterosexuality, and gender, as they impact on subjects—as Butler writes, power does not ‘act’, but there is a reiterated acting that is power (1993, page 9). This is an important distinction if feminist scholarship on girls is to relate to girls themselves. Monique, for example, is not simply disempowered by her race, age, gender, or sexual identities; she is enabled as a subject by their meanings, and she finds pleasure through them and their spaces, albeit in ways that may lead to social marginalization in other scales. The challenge lies in thinking about how subjects produce (dis)identifications and become invested in and by the social identities that also may marginalize them. It is not enough to advocate an autonomous femininity to girls (compare Holland et al, 1994), as girls themselves produce the very norms and identities they are urged to resist. Considering the performative spaces and processes of identity and identification, I argue, is principle to the project of theorizing girls’ subjectivity and understanding their social lives.

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