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# Gender and sexuality II: There goes the gayborhood?

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**Abstract**
I consider the iconic place of the urban gay neighborhood across the literature. Noting, but also qualifying, its early preponderance, I trace its relative decline as both an empirical concern and also a theoretical one. I argue that this trend reflects a queer pluralization of 'sexuality' as well as a growing sophistication of how geographers handle place and scale. There has been a resurgence of interest in the 'gayborhood', however, within and beyond geography, and so I consider this counter trend in relation to the changing structurations of sexualities and space, as well as the forces pushing to maintain such zones in the city.

**Keywords**
gay men, neighborhood, sexuality, urban geography

## I Introduction

The gay ghetto (Browne and Bakshi, 2011; Levine, 1979; Miller, 2005; Sibalis, 2004), the gay village (Bell and Binnie, 2004; Nash, 2006; Pritchard et al., 2002), the gay district (Collins, 2004; Ruting, 2008), the gay mecca (Chisholm, 2005; Visser, 2003; Waitt and Markwell, 2006), the gay neighborhood (Gorman-Murray and Waitt, 2009; Knopp, 1997; Reed, 2003), or more colloquially 'the gayborhood' (Christensen and Caldwell, 2006; Kuhr, 2004; Reuter, 2008) – while these terms sometimes refer to distinct entities (Lewis, 2013; Nash, 2006), collectively they describe the territoriality of gay-male (and to a lesser extent lesbian, trans*, bisexual and queer) sexuality within the cities across the global north and elsewhere (Brown, 2008). Just as the range of cities that have gayborhoods has increased, so has the range of those studied expanded beyond the icons of the Castro or Canal Street. The rise of these neighborhoods fueled the longstanding interest in marginalized groups and the city and tracked economic restructuring in the city. After 30 years of research or more, the gayborhood has become a touchstone of sexuality and space studies (Brown, 2008; Knopp, 1995; Quilley, 1997), and a classic piece of urban social geography (Davies and Herbert, 1993; Hubbard, 2011) that relates sexuality and identities to a particular and visible zone of the city.

Most recently, however, in both popular media and academic literature, there seems to be wide recognition that the gayborhood is not just changing (Rosser et al., 2008) but receding in size, scope and function (Brown, 2007; Ghaziana, 2010; Lovett, 2011). A recent pictorial of American gayborhoods is downright nostalgic in portraying them as yesteryear (Reuter,

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2008). Gayborhoods are now said to be 'post-gay' or 'post-mo' (Nash, 2012). The number of exclusively gay or lesbian bars appears to be declining as the nature of clubs and taverns become more queer or pan-sexual. Sex and commodities can be accessed online. Structurally, relentless gentrification, rising housing costs and greater homonormativity and toleration also mean sexual minorities appear residentially in suburbs and rural areas (Christensen and Caldwell, 2006). And there is a certain heterosexualization of these areas, if even by gay-friendly allies (James, 2011). Yet, despite these centrifugal restructurings, there remains a consistent need for and symbolism around the gayborhood (Grewal, 2008). It seems like an appropriate time, then, to ruminate on the place of this archetypical urban form.

## II An urban geography classic?

While the city has long been recognized as a likely situation for homosexuals and other sexual dissidents (Harry, 1974), the formation of neighborhoods signified by homosexuality – specifically gay male sexuality – appeared as a marker of post-1960s sexual liberation, even if analogous zones existed previously. Early on, Levine (1979) used a social-ecology approach to validate ontologically the gay ghetto as a sociological (and spatial) concept, indicated by institutional concentration, culture areas, social marginalization, and residential concentration. This clustering spatially structured not just community but identity (Miller, 2005). It also fostered a degree of safety through urban territoriality, a non-trivial (and under-studied) form of homosociality. The neighborhood's presence as an undeniable and highly visible element in the urban mosaic combatted the heteronormative and homophobic closet that isolated and erased homosexuals from both public and private spheres (Binnie, 2004; D'Emilio, 1983; Whittle, 1994). Hindle (1994) classified gay neighborhoods as constituted by: visibility; activities; and social, financial, and political organization.

Nomothetic models have been offered by Collins (2004) and Reuter (2008). Collins charts a general, four-stage model of these districts. The first begin in declining or marginal areas that happen to have a gay pub. That venue acts as a beachhead that draws other services and vendors, which in turn bring more gay customers into the neighborhood. Services then widen in size and scope as the in-migration of gay residents continues. The neighborhood then becomes a tourist destination for gays. Finally, the gayborhood 'integrates' (Collins, 2004: 1802) by drawing in more heterosexuals who also patronize gay businesses. This produces an emigration of gays to other/suburban areas. Some exception has been documented by Ruting (2008) and Sibalis (2004). Reuter (2008: 9–11) characterizes the gayborhood as: (1) close to employment areas; (2) often in socially marginalized parts of the city; (3) often a small series of enclaves that become chained together in the landscape; (4) exhibiting traces of previous cultural geographies of that district; (5) displaying overt signs of homosexuality in the landscape; and (6) offering at least one promenade for visibility and street cruising.

Of course, Castells' (1983) work is benchmarked as the start of the theorization of gay male urban districts (Davies and Herbert, 1993; Jackson, 1989), arguing that this new spatial form was a territorial expression of new social and cultural possibilities afforded by the city. FitzGerald (1986) echoed that utopian impulse. This territoriality provided autonomy and safety (Almgren, 1994; Hindle, 1994; Knopp, 1995) for gay men as it took on both material and symbolic forms. For instance, the gayborhood also afforded electoral clout and victories in local and state politics by spatially concentrating gay voters and their allies. Harvey Milk's Castro-district election to the San Francisco's Board of Supervisors was the classic example of this (Shilts, 1982; Stewart-Winter, 2009), but similar

urban political geographies were forged in other cities too (Atkins, 2003; Davis, 1995; Forrest, 1995), which reflected and reinforced the territoriality of the gayborhood. It also promoted (but did not necessarily ensure) safety for gays and lesbians in public space (Almgren, 1994; Hindle, 1994; Knopp, 1997). Thus, despite critiques of its unidimensionality (more on this later), the gayborhood has long been recognized as a multidimensional spatial form.

Quickly, the tenor of study turned quite critical in the literature. Somewhat against Castells, the gayborhood was rapidly and consistently theorized as an instance of gentrification (Bouthillette, 1994, 1997). Thus the capitalist processes of urban land economics underpinned the territoriality of sexuality, raising questions about class appropriation, displacement, and inequality (Knopp, 1997; Lauria and Knopp, 1985). Gay men gentrified either via the rise in social class of those early gay settlers or through in-migration of upper-class gay men. Thus the gayborhood was marked by an ironic displacement of poorer households, low-wage service work, and upward pressure on housing prices and rents.

A tangent of this economistic framing of the gayborhood was its theorization as part of the entrepreneurial (later neoliberal) urban sustained by cosmopolitanism and boosterism that targets certain non-normative sexual activities and figures (Bell and Binnie, 2004; Binnie, 2004; Binnie and Skeggs, 2004; Quilley, 1997; Ross, 2012). The gay tourism literature also exemplifies these trends by highlighting the deleterious effects, exclusions, and costs of gay tourism in the gayborhood (Hughes, 2002; Visser, 2003). Waitt and Markwell (2006) note how gayborhoods present culturally significant destinations for queer tourists and have become strategic marketing elements in the selling of gay-friendly cities to tourists. They also may be coded or consumed by straight tourists as exotic, cool, and even safe: what Oswin (2005) critically identifies as 'value-added queerness'. A fascinating take on this line of argument that foregrounds sex, rather than just sexuality, has recently been offered by Andersson (2011) in Vauxhall.

The patriarchal structuring of both the gayborhoods themselves and scholarship about them has formed another line of critique. Challenges to Castells assumptions about the inherent maleness of territoriality were made by Adler and Brenner (1992) among others. Gay neighborhoods can exclude lesbians spatially by out-pricing rents and mortgages and privileging the male and masculine over the female and feminine. Taylor (2008) has documented the exclusions of working-class lesbians from the commercialized gay scene. Pritchard et al. (2002) document how Manchester's gayborhood disempowers lesbians while accommodating heterosexuality. This exclusion can be quite precise: Casey (2003) documented this in particular with respect to the privileging of heterosexual women over lesbians and some gay men in the gayborhood. Gayborhoods and other queer-friendly or community spaces can be quite exclusionary and alienating to trans* folk as well, as Doan (2007) poignantly shows.

Several geographers argue that lesbian neighborhoods are not homonormative but socially and culturally mixed areas (Bouthillette, 1997; Podmore, 2001; Rothenberg, 1995). There is also now a great deal of evidence on the formation of lesbian neighborhoods and territoriality at the intra-urban scale. Interestingly, these are often done from a historical or historical-geographic perspective (e.g. Enke, 2007; Gallo, 2007; Lapovsky-Kennedy and Davis, 1993; Nestle, 1997; Podmore, 2006; Retter, 1997).

Other forms of exclusion and marginalization have been rather less studied, but no less significant. The gayborhood is a space of whiteness, and queers of color have long noted this unacknowledged privilege. They have also documented the racisms working through gay (white male) territoriality. Nero (2005) critiques Knopp's elisions in his case study of the

Faubourg Marigny neighborhood in New Orleans. In the South African context, both Visser (2003) and Tucker (2009, 2010) map the whiteness (and classism) of the gayborhood, DeWaterkant, and the vestiges of apartheid that help exclude queers of color from it. Using the concept of striated space, Caluya (2008) conversely reveals the 'ghetto with a ghetto' situation of racial segregation in Sydney's Oxford Street. In somewhat of a contrast, looking at Birmingham UK's commercial gay scene, Bassi (2006) traces how capitalist positions of ownership and labor can at times work to promote racial equality and visibility in queer space.

In terms of age, Valentine and Skelton's (2003) piece on the spatialities of coming out highlight how the 'scene' can be a dual space of self-identification and risk for young people: unsafe sex, alcohol, drugs, and a conformist homonormativity. Rek (2009) has documented how homeless queer youth are relentlessly marginalized and excluded from 'even' Castro. Research on the exclusion of older gays from the gayborhood has yet to appear, however, and work by Sothern (2007a) and Valentine and Skelton (2003) suggests that there may be sharp exclusions and erasures for queer folk living with disabilities in the ableist gayborhood.

Collectively, this spate of literature suggests a zero-sum game of identity and territoriality. The gains of some marginalized identities come at the exclusion, domination, or oppression of some other. The implications of this critique, however, remain under-theorized presently. Without that critical reflection, it also potentially reinforces rather essentialist representations of identity and space that ironically bend back the queer critique through which they are so often made (Oswin, 2008).

## III Resurgence of interest?

Amid this panoply of sites and scales, has queer geography left the gayborhood? The latest edited collection of sexuality and space studies, for example, captures this breadth of scales, but yet has no chapter on this topic (Browne et al., 2007). A recent monograph on sexuality and space that is wonderfully attentive to multiple scales also does not pay much attention to this site and scale (Johnston and Longhurst, 2010). Should we conclude that the gayborhood is as intellectually passé as it is culturally?

My simple answer to that question is no. There has been some resurgence of interest. The relatively recent uncloseting of same-sex couples in the United States census has allowed geographers and demographers to place gay and lesbians in space and statistically correlate their presence with other variables (Elder et al., 2010; Gates and Ost, 2004; Hayslett and Kane, 2011). Using a neoclassical economic model, Florida and Mellander (2010) found that gay and bohemian populations have significant positive effect on housing prices by contributing a series of amenities to the price of housing in US metropolitan areas, regardless of other variables (such as income) and region size. Such models bulwark arguments in favor of zoning regulations that would encourage such districts in order to improve their social and fiscal health (Ten-Brink, 2012). Of course, this move involves several problematic assumptions and distortions, most notably the use of same-sex coupling as an indicator or proxy variable for all GLBTQ, or even gay and lesbian people (Brown and Knopp, 2006). Nonetheless, this queer population geography shows a certain dimension of gayborhoods, and significant – but not complete – overlap of lesbian and gay households in the city.

Gorman-Murray and Waitt (2009) have pushed the literature further by focusing on queer-friendly neighborhoods. These are areas where GLBTQ people and businesses are in the minority, but still present. They may represent the future morphology of the declining gayborhood. In their study of two such Australian neighborhoods, Gorman-Murray and Waitt (2009) examined the extent of social cohesion

there. They found emphasis was placed on the supportive role played by sexual minorities in helping to stake the area's reputation and feel as diverse, alternative, and cool. It also worked against a certain homonormativity. The material symbolism of queer presence in the landscape (rainbow flags, pink triangles, etc.) was an important and quotidian iconography, but one that could be coded as either exclusionary or inclusionary. Adding complexity to this finding, Gorman Murray and Waitt stress that queer-friendly neighborhoods are not wholly absent of homophobia; and they take this finding to underscore the partial, negotiated, and iterative dimensions of the 'queer-friendly' adjective. This work obviously resonates with policy concerns about social cohesion, but it also has potential resonance with recent work in social geography on the urban encounter (Brown, 2012; Matejskova and Leitner, 2011).

Furthering questions about the shifts and changes in gayborhood, and in many ways countering the existing presumptions about gay gentrification, Doan and Higgins (2011) trace the decline of a gayborhood due to gentrification. Through a case study of the Atlanta metropolitan area, they find that increased housing costs in the gayborhood pushed GLBT people out and dispersed them. They also find a decrease in tolerance and a decline in GLBT businesses. Interestingly, they highlight in particular how zoning changes, such as transit-oriented development, balanced, pedestrian-friendly areas, and the creation of a neighborhood improvement district, prompted the gentrification process.

Nash (2012) stresses the generational dynamics in the 'post-gay' restructurings of the Toronto gayborhood. Through a textual analysis of an online debate over the nature and range of gay men's performativities, she documents an intense and wide-ranging debate between a provocative twentysomething writer and older interlocutors. She identifies three trends distinguishing the post-gay affect between those in their twenties and older gayborhood residents: articulations of the self that deprioritize one's sexuality over other dimensions of identity; a decline of importance in political activism sparked by gay identity; and a rejection of certain performances of masculinity (specifically the twink and queen) in favor of heteronormative ones (e.g. straight-looking, straight-acting). These generational shifts, Nash holds, have spatial resonances that are potentially part of the shift or decline in the gayborhood. The younger generation is no longer limited to the gayborhood or the territoriality of pride parades as much as older generations, it is claimed, because of either online interaction or the broader heteronormative tolerance and acceptance of gay men. Once again, we see the intersectional axes of privilege working through homonormative figurations.

Lewis's (2012a, 2012b, 2013, forthcoming) recent work stresses the continuing importance – materially, but especially psychically – of the gayborhood to gay men. The visible presence of bricks-and-mortar elements of the gayborhood was stressed in his interviews probing gay men's migration decision making. They held deep symbolic and cultural significance even if these establishments were not used regularly by the men. The gayborhood thus remains important in social support and community-based identity forging. His evidence shows that this is true for young gay men, but also for those across the life course. In particular, his research on Ottawa squarely takes on the decline of the gayborhood (Lewis, 2013). Stressing that the gayborhood is a market and psychic entity, he traces the forces behind the creation of a small gay district in this capital city after years of homophobic and heteronormative resistances.

From outside of geography, there has been growing interest in the gayborhood's relationship to gay men's health. For example, Rosser et al. (2008) found that, despite a rise in gay populations in cities, the gay community was declining due to factors identified above. They conclude that this irony presents a new complexity in sexual decision-making among men

who have sex with men (MSMs). This in turn presents considerable challenges for HIV prevention and education efforts as the geographical point of focus becomes more dissolute. Egan et. al. (2011) found that MSMs who recently migrated to a gay neighborhood reported lower levels of HIV infection, unprotected sex, and socializing with drug users (p. 39) than those who had lived there longer. In a New York City study, Carpiano et. al. (2011) found higher odds of drug use in long-term residents of the gayborhood than recent migrants, supporting contentions that gay neighborhoods have independent health effects on gay men. Buttram and Kurtz (2013) contrasted substance-using MSMs who lived in gayborhoods with those who did not. They found that receptive unprotected anal intercourse was associated with higher odds of living in a gayborhood. Methamphetamine use over the previous three months was predictive of living in the gay neighborhood. They also found lower rates of substance dependency and cocaine use and 'prosocial engagement' for gayborhood MSMs compared to non-resident MSMs.

These epidemiological studies are characterized by simple hypothesis testing using multivariate statistics, albeit often on small and non-random samples. They suffer from the typical problems of deductive research: excessive testing of simplistic hypotheses, a lack of ethnographic or qualitative data collection, reductionism, and under-explored assumptions. They lack engagement with queer geography or even critical social theory (especially poststructural strains) that might lead to more valid theoretical development prior to hypothesis testing. Recent work on geographies of alcohol and substance abuse might also intellectually enhance theory development in this literature (DelCasino, 2012; Duff, 2012; Evans, 2012).

## IV Future work?

What are some possibilities for future lines of inquiry? I offer three possible lines of inquiry. Foremost, more systematic, comparative, and empirical analysis on the changes that gayborhoods are undergoing is needed to offer a more valid and reliable picture of this urban form. Given the multidimensional indicators of just what makes up a gayborhood, (how) have these constitutive elements declined (or increased) over time (Brown and Knopp, 2008), and how has this process been uneven? Brown's (2008) review highlighted the possibility of these districts appearing outside of the global north. Have they declined as well? This work might also tap into recent attention to neo-geography and Web 2.0, where queer spatial information and popular cartographies themselves are researched as representations of the gayborhood and queered space (Wilson, 2011).

Second, more historical-geographical analysis would greatly help us to remember the processual nature of urban morphology. There is now a clutch of very impressive and spatially aware gay urban histories that encourage us to see urban sexualities as a historical-geographical process (e.g Atkins, 2003). In a recent essay on Seattle, for example, colleagues and I have stressed the need to appreciate gayborhood as itself moving and constantly shifting over time (Brown et al., 2011). And this mobility is certainly conveyed in the very few studies that take a historical-geographical approach (Nash, 2006; Podmore, 2006). There has been some recognition of futurity in queer geography (Oswin, 2012; Sothern, 2007b), and it seems to me that there are critical possibilities from these theorizations towards the gayborhood. Overall greater attention to the historicity and historiography of gayborhoods may well be a way to integrate critiques of exclusion without rejecting a focus on this spatial form.

Third, maintaining a critical eye on the exclusions and inequities that gayborhoods perpetuate necessitates attention towards how those excluded others themselves may (re)work the gayborhood: what are their resistances, challenges, and performative resignifications in

situ? Podmore's (forthcoming) research on Montreal's lesbians in the gayborhood offers an excellent example of such future research.

None of this should be taken as a call for geographers to cease being interested in the sexualities, spaces, and scales that they presently study (as if!). The gayborhood certainly does not capture or exhaust all sexualities-and-spaces, and it never did. Nonetheless, it is a classic and changing piece of urban geography and sexuality and space. While tales of its demise may ring true, and critiques of it abide, there also appear to be both cultural and material forces pushing for its endurance (Grewal, 2008) and so it deserves continuing attention.

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