

Lesbian Neighbourhoods: The Disappearance and Displacement

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Introduction

Gay neighbourhoods, defined by their high concentration of gay men and unique culture, have seemingly become a staple in major cities in the United States, Canada, and Europe. Their notion of a 'safe space' has allowed gay men to socialize and find partners, initiate successful political movements and the protection of gender and sexuality rights, and be their authentic selves (Ghaziani, 2015). Geographers and sexuality scholars have been researching the implications of physical space and the importance of occupying neighbourhoods for gay men, as their gentrification and consumerist culture has drawn significant attention (Bell & Binnie, 2004). However, scholars have overlooked that while gay men have been creating neighbourhoods, so too have lesbians, with their formation and sense of community impacted by heteronormative and patriarchal boundaries.

Throughout the process of creating a systematic review on gay neighbourhoods, I noticed a lack of attention to valuable discourses about where lesbians occupy, why they occupy certain neighbourhoods and institutions, and how the transformation of the gay neighbourhood impacts the future of lesbian neighbourhoods. Moreover, those articles included in the review are rooted in feminist scholarship and extend the discussion beyond what is relevant to the initial study, which is why I have created this short review to discuss the history of lesbian neighbourhoods, their slow disappearance, and urge researchers to consider why lesbians patterns of occupying are changing.

Methods

This systematic review and thematic synthesis are a continuation of my work with Dr. Sean Waite on gay neighbourhoods. Gay neighbourhoods are characterized by their residential concentration, institutions such as bars, pubs, retail space, community centres and non-profit organizations that are run by and for gay people, and a community culture. (Levine, 1979; Adler & Brenner, 1992; Greene, 2014). These geographical spaces were developed predominately by gay men, with lesbians, transgender, and queer communities either excluded or their inclusion limited to one or two institutions (Ghaziani, 2015). Due to the complexity and limited literature on gay neighbourhoods, the systematic review included broad descriptors of the gay neighbourhood, and key themes were then coded for the thematic synthesis. Those coded lesbian focus or included discussion on the transformation of gay neighbourhoods to queer neighbourhoods will be included in this review

Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted for literature relating to gay neighbourhoods in June 2022. The search was limited to articles written in English and were peer reviewed, therefore literature that was omitted due to these specifications were not considered. Initially, a list of 15-25 search terms was created for LGBTQ+ identity, neighbourhood space, and employment, the latter due to Dr. Sean Waite's specialization in the labour market. After conducting multiple searches and alternating whether terms were found in abstracts, subject headings, or anywhere but the full paper, Dr. Sean Waite and I realized that we were too limited with the results of such an extensive search. A list of terms commonly used to refer to a gay neighbourhood was then accumulated in order to produce a broad result of information regarding gay neighbourhoods, that was then later coded in categories such as geography, history, race, health, etc. The final search was conducted in ProQuest's Sociology Collection database: ab(gay neighbourhood*) OR ab(gay neighborhood*) OR ab(lesbian neighbourhood*) OR ab(lesbian neighborhood*) OR ab(queer neighbourhood*) OR ab(queer neighborhood*) OR ab(transgender* neighbourhood*) OR ab(transgender* neighborhood) OR ab(transsexual* neighbourhood*) OR ab(transsexual* neighborhood) OR ab(gay enclave*) OR ab(queer enclave*) OR ab(gay village*) OR ab(gayborhood) OR ab(gaybourhood) OR ab(gay district), which accumulated 406 results.

Inclusion Criteria and Data Extraction

Once the search results were completed, the results were exported, and a manual review of the articles were completed by analyzing the title, keywords, and abstracts. Inclusion criteria included primary or secondary research about gay neighbourhoods, rather than in gay neighbourhoods, which was commonly seen for sampling purposes due to their concentration of gay and/or racialized men. After excluding irrelevant literature and duplicates, a total of 114 articles were included in our primary systematic search and thematic review, and twelve of those were focused on lesbian neighbourhoods, which are the primary focus for this discussion.

Results

History and Development of Lesbian Geographies

Gay and lesbian neighbourhoods began to develop in port cities in the United States during World War II- instigated by the discharge of servicemen and women for their sexuality- whether real or perceived (Ghaziani, 2015). Once discharged, many family ties had been damaged due to their sexual identity, and therefore settled in said cities (Spring, 2013; Kelly et al., 2014). This created a unique opportunity to create a sense of community, and the presence of other homosexual men allowed those who were dishonourably discharged to come to terms with their "legitimate

minority” status (Ghaziani, 2015; Spring, 2013). This progressed to relocation of homosexual college graduates and veterans to these port cities with a sparked interest in cultivating community-one that offered social support, network building, and feelings of solidarity (Kelly et al., 2014). These spaces became one for leisure and entertainment, as well as political and economic development, in which gay men could flee the heteronormative society that deemed their sexuality unacceptable. Gay neighbourhoods were established elsewhere, such as in Europe, Australia and Canada, which tend to follow Collins’ four-stage model of development. First, there is a declining value in an area that happens to have a gay pub or establishment (Collins, 2004; Brown, 2014). Second, the venue lures gay men and lesbians to visit, which then becomes a sight for entrepreneurs to open other gay-friendly establishments in the area (Collins, 2004; Brown, 2014). Third, gay men and lesbians move into the neighbourhood and establish a community culture, which leads to the final step, the community identifies itself as a gay neighbourhood, becoming a tourist destination for both gay and straight individuals (Collins, 2004; Brown, 2014).

The development of gay neighbourhoods was predominately done by gay men, as opposed to lesbians and those of other gender and sexual orientation identities. Castell’s (1983) work on lesbian and gay space argued that lesbians were not territorial in the ways that men were, as they were dominant and strived for spatial superiority, while women lacked territorial aspirations and were drawn to social relationships (Castells, 1983; Valentine). This sparked controversy among urban sociologists, geologists, and gender and sexuality scholars, sparking new research development and a variety of arguments to rebut Castells’ initial findings. Lo and Healy (2000) argue that lesbians do in fact occupy space and create communities with their research in Vancouver, Canada, although they are more hidden and less privileged, due to a lack of resources, providing for children, and fear of violence towards women- regardless of sexuality. Not only did women lack the economic resources to establish a neighbourhood like those of gay men, but it was also safer for them to remain ‘underground’ and play a lower profile (Lo & Healy, 2000). Research by Adler and Brenner (1992) confirms this finding, stating that smaller lesbian communities were created as women did not have cars, and therefore could walk to their friends’ houses as socializing is a key element of cultivating lesbian culture. They also add to the discussion of use of public space and attribute the lack of visibility to fear of violence from men, as well as the gentrification of gay neighbourhoods and men’s ability to hold and maintain property, leaving lesbians no other choice than to create their own space (Adler & Brenner, 1992). A lack of capital due to gender and sexuality discrimination regarding work, family, and owning property meant that lesbians could not be picky of where they settled, however, they found counter-cultural neighbourhoods to be open to their settlement (Adler & Brenner, 1992; Valentine, 2000; Podmore 2001), as they are ‘shared spaces’ among different race, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities (Podmore 2001). This meant that not one group or community owned the neighbourhood, and was a dynamic blend of different identities accepting, or ignoring, each other’s identity (Podmore, 2001). Therefore,

lesbian neighbourhoods were established, although were only visible to other lesbians, and remained 'underground' due to lack of capital, the increasing living costs of the gay men's village, and fear of violence perpetrated by men.

Transformation and Future of Lesbian Neighbourhoods

Although lesbians did establish 'underground' neighbourhoods, there is research that those neighbourhoods are now disappearing (Podmore, 2006), as a part of the greater gentrification of gay neighbourhoods (Lewis, 2013). Gay and lesbian neighbourhoods have seen a surge in heterosexual residents, establishments and venues closing their doors, and the title of 'queer neighbourhood' replacing that of 'gay neighbourhood' (Lewis, 2013). There has been much discourse on why this is the case. One argument states now that homosexuals, transgender, and other queer individuals have rights and protections in developed countries (where most, if not all, gay neighbourhoods are located), there is no need to gather on political and human rights grounds, and neighbourhoods are losing their cultural significance (Ghaziani, 2015; Spring, 2013). On the other hand, another argument is the gentrification of these spaces has led to a lack of affordable housing opportunities, and the social acceptance of LGBTQIA+ individuals means that there is a tendency to live in suburbs surrounding major cities, and then commute into gay neighbourhoods for consumerism and socializing (Lewis, 2013; Spring, 2013; Brown, 2014; Kelly et al., 2014). Geographers and feminist scholars have also made note that lesbians are far more likely than gay men to have children (Spring, 2013), and therefore geographers are discovering clusters of lesbian couples with children in suburban areas rich in establishments and amenities for children, arguing that the needs of lesbians are different than gay men, and are more likely to move away from downtown, city centres as they move through life stages (Spring, 2013; Ghaziani, 2015).

The rise of the internet and social networking sites adds further debate to the disappearance of gay neighbourhoods. With geo-locational features on dating sites and networking applications, there is no longer a need to go to a bathhouse, a bar or pub, or bookstore in order to make social connections and find intimate partners (Kelly et al., 2014; Brown, 2014; Collins & Drinkwater 2017). The internet also reduces geographical barriers to organizing, creating global political movements regarding LGBTQIA+ rights, women's rights (in the case of lesbians), and a globalized gay community, therefore unifying gay cultures across different gay neighbourhoods and rural areas (Brown, 2014; Collins & Drinkwater 2017).

These findings lead to the assumption that lesbians have now moved into gay neighbourhoods, making them queer neighbourhoods, due to their financial ability to maintain professional positions and afford living in gentrified residential neighbourhoods (Ghaziani, 2015). However, Podmore (2006) argues if lesbians have desired and succeeded to claim territory and establish their own neighbourhoods through the 1980s and 1990s, what's changed? Is it the increasing acceptance of lesbians and reduced misogyny of gay men? Is it the social acceptance of

homosexuality among heterosexuals? Is the internet removing the need for lesbians to live in physical proximity? Are values among lesbians changing, leading them more likely to stay close to home communities and have children? There are many different factors that affect where lesbians live, or don't live, and perhaps a combination of these factors are leading to the geographical dispersion of the gay neighbourhood and its culture.

Discussion and Conclusion

Lesbians are navigating a hetero-patriarchal society, where they are faced with both gender and sexual identity boundaries to establishing their own neighbourhoods with affordable housing while avoiding harassment and violence from men. Although women and those who identify as LGBTQIA+ now have the political and economic equality to live, work, seek entertainment, and ultimately live their lives where they please, there is a lack of research showing where lesbians are living and why. There is a handful of studies that detail previous or existing terms for lesbian residential areas (Adler & Brenner, 1992; Valentine, 1995; Valentine, 2000; Podmore, 2001; Podmore, 2006; Spring, 2013), however, studies often rely on limited census data that fails to include non-coupled lesbians and gay men, or risks including mother-daughter households (Spring, 2013). The transformation of the gay neighbourhood to an all-encompassing queer neighbourhood provides researchers an opportunity to investigate its impacts on lesbian geography and where they cluster. Moreover, there is a gap in the literature regarding lesbian's use of geo-locational technology and its impacts on their residential location, which has been identified as a factor in the transition of gay neighbourhoods to queer neighbourhoods, as well as gay men leaving the neighbourhood (Kelly et al., 2014; Brown, 2014; Collins & Drinkwater 2017). It would be interesting to investigate whether there is a similar pattern and importance on technology within the lesbian community. Overall, scholars continue to draw attention to the implications of geography and sexuality (Spring, 2013), and although this has led to a predominate focus on gay men, I urge scholars to reflect on the LGBTQIA+ community as a whole and consider other groups that may have fascinating geographical tendencies, like lesbians.

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