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The Gendered Metropolis

by **Amin Ghaziani**

What are we to make of the many anxieties that surround the alleged demise of iconic gay neighborhoods like the Castro in San Francisco? The media, including *The New Yorker* ([here](#)), *Salon* ([here](#)), *Time* magazine ([here](#)), *Huffington Post* ([here](#)), *BBC Radio 4* ([here](#)), *Yahoo News* ([here](#)), and the *Advocate* ([here](#)), have all taken a keen interest in this hot-button topic.

In the course of conducting research for my new book ([here](#)), I discovered an astonishing diversity of queer spaces. Researchers, however, emphasize the experiences of gay men, and in doing so, they erase the lives of lesbians. To set the stage, consider the words of sociologist Manuel Castells. “Lesbians, unlike gay men,” he says, “tend not to concentrate in a given territory.” He thinks that they “do not acquire a geographical basis.” Gender differences between men and women are to blame. “Men have sought to dominate,” Castells continues, “and one expression of this domination has been spatial.” On the other hand, “women have rarely had these territorial aspirations.” For gay men – as men – “to liberate themselves from cultural and sexual oppression, they need a physical space from which to strike out.” Lesbians – as women – “tend to create their own rich, inner world and a political relationship with higher, societal levels.” This perspective leads Castells to conclude that “they are ‘placeless.’”

I disagree.

Lesbian geographies exist. Sometimes they overlap with the more visible, gay men dominated districts—but they are also quite distinct, as the following table illustrates:

Table 4. Highest Zip Code Concentrations of Gay Men and Lesbians

Male couples				Female couples			
Zip code	Location	% of all households	Median price per sq. foot	Zip code	Location	% of all households	Median price per sq. foot
94114	Castro, San Francisco, CA	14.2	671	02657	Provincetown, Cape Cod, MA	5.1	532
92264	Palm Springs, CA	12.0	146	01062	Northampton, MA	3.3	187
02657	Provincetown, Cape Cod, MA	11.5	532	01060	Northampton, MA	2.6	189
92262	Palm Springs, CA	11.3	136	02130	Jamaica Plain, Boston, MA	2.4	304
33305	Wilton Manors, Fort Lauderdale, FL	10.6	206	19971	Rehoboth Beach, DE	2.4	187
90069	West Hollywood, Los Angeles, CA	8.9	481	95446	Guerneville, north of San Francisco, CA	2.2	197
94131	Noe Valley / Glen Park / Diamond Heights, San Francisco, CA	7.4	564	02667	Wellfleet, Cape Cod, MA	2.2	340
75219	Oak Lawn, Dallas, TX	7.1	160	94619	Redwood Heights / Skyline, Oakland, CA	2.1	230
19971	Rehoboth Beach, DE	7.0	187	30002	Avondale Estates, suburban Atlanta, GA	1.9	97
48069	Pleasant Ridge, suburban Detroit, MI	6.8	107	94114	Castro, San Francisco, CA	1.9	671

Source: 2010 U.S. Census, analyzed by Jed Kolko, *Traffic Trends*, “Welcome to the Gayborhood,” *Huffington Post*, June 15, 2012.

This table shows that lesbians do in fact cluster. Although they share some of the same areas with men (Provincetown, Rehoboth Beach, and the Castro), they more often live in less urban areas. All of their neighborhoods are less concentrated overall than those of gay men.

Why does this happen? Some scholars, like Castells, argue that gay men and lesbians have different needs to control space, and this makes lesbians placeless. The table above challenges this view.

Others stress women’s lack of economic power. Although the gender wage gap has narrowed, women still earn, on average, less than men across the board (77% of what men earn, as of 2010). The table confirms that women households are located in lower-income areas.

Subcultural differences also matter. Men are more influenced by sexual transaction and building commercial institutions, while women are motivated by feminism and countercultures. Lesbian neighborhoods consist of clusters of homes near progressive organizations that existed in the area before they even arrived—like artsy theaters, alternative bookstores, coffee shops, bike shops, and cooperative grocery stores. This gives lesbian districts a quasi-underground character, makes them seem hidden, and thus makes them harder to find for those who are not in the know.

Family formation is an important part of the landscape as well. Women same-sex partner households are more likely to have children, and so they have different needs for housing.

Related to this are preferences for city life. Lesbians are also more likely to elect rural locations, gay men choose bigger metropolises.

Finally, some lesbians reject gay neighborhoods because they find them unwelcoming. Gay men are still men, after all, and they are not exempt from sexism.

These reasons may circumscribe lesbian territoriality, but they do not negate it. On the contrary, lesbians are “canaries in the urban coal mine,” to borrow from sociologist Sharon Zukin ([here](#)), and they often augur economic and cultural changes that a neighborhood will eventually experience.

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