

– ‘GAY ENCLAVES FACE PROSPECT OF BEING PASSÉ’: How Assimilation Affects the Spatial Expressions of Sexuality in the United States

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Abstract

Journalists, activists and academics alike predict that gay neighborhoods in the United States will disappear, yet many of their claims are unsubstantiated or overly determined by economic factors. This article examines 40 years of media accounts to identify the mechanisms that explain why these urban areas are changing. I begin with the observation that the rate of assimilation of sexual minorities into mainstream society has accelerated in today’s so-called ‘post-gay’ era. Assimilation expands the residential imagination of gays and lesbians beyond the boundaries of a specific neighborhood to the entire city itself. Furthermore, as sexual orientation recedes in centrality in everyday life, residents opine that few care if a person self-identifies as gay or straight. These two respective mechanisms of expansion and cultural sameness bring existing economic wisdom into dialogue with a cultural and political perspective about how our shifting understandings of sexuality also affect the decisions we make about where to live and socialize.

Reports of the demise of American gay neighborhoods are in no short supply. Can it be that ‘gay enclaves face prospect of being passé’, as *The New York Times* predicted in its front-page headline (Leigh Brown, 2007)? The journalist, reflecting on the complex urban changes unfolding in the Castro district, lamented: ‘These are wrenching times for San Francisco’s historic gay village, with population shifts, booming development, and a waning sense of belonging that is also being felt in gay enclaves across the nation’ (*ibid.*). The trends that motivated this story—gays deselecting urban areas associated with them while more straights move in—have sounded alarms. California’s GLBT Historical Society hosted three standing-room-only roundtable sessions on the theme ‘Queers in the City: GLBT Neighborhoods and Urban Planning’. Commencing the series was a conversation that urgently asked: ‘Are Gay Neighborhoods Worth Saving?’. As panelists debated threats to queer spaces, board member Don Romesburg reminded them: ‘Our neighborhoods get built within particular economic, political, and cultural circumstances. When those change, so do our neighborhoods’ (GLBT Historical Society, 2006).

Journalists, scholars and everyday people are all preoccupied with the question of whether gay neighborhoods are disappearing (Usher and Morrison, 2010; Doan and Higgins, 2011; Brown, 2014; Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2014). Unique commercial spaces like bars and bookstores are closing, more straights are moving in and sexual minorities are dispersing across the city. Demographers who analyze the US census confirm that zip codes associated with traditional gay neighborhoods are ‘de-concentrating’ (Spring, 2013): fewer same-sex households lived in them in 2010 than in 2000. In fact, same-sex partner households now reside in 93% of all counties in the country (Gates and Cooke, 2011). Although queer life increasingly ‘blends with other aspects of the city’ (Aldrich, 2004: 1732), demographic research offers a descriptive and disembodied understanding of it. What underlying attitudes animate these statistics of declining sexual segregation? How do gays and lesbians explain in their own words why they wish to live in other parts of the city?

In this article, I provide two explanations for why gay neighborhoods are changing. Based on reflections of current and former residents, I depart from the convention of prioritizing economic factors and instead stress competing cultural and political developments. I begin with the observation that the rate of assimilation of sexual minorities into mainstream American society has accelerated in recent years. This inspires two types of urban expressions: first, assimilation expands the residential imagination of gays and lesbians beyond the boundaries of one neighborhood to the entire surrounding city; and second, many residents suggest that fewer people these days care if someone self-identifies as gay or straight. The scarlet letter of sexuality, they say, is receding into the background of social life. These two respective notions of expansion and cultural sameness create disincentives among some gays and lesbians for living in a gayborhood, while straights are drawn to them in larger numbers.

Sexuality and the city in a post-gay era

A gay neighborhood, or gayborhood for short, has several qualities. It has a distinct geographic focal point: locals and tourists can point it out on a map, usually by singling out one or two specific streets (Keller, 1968; Bergquist and McDonald, 2006). It has a unique culture: gays and lesbians 'set the tone' (Chauncey, 1994: 228) of the place, which is why symbols like the rainbow flag are visible along the streets and ritual events like the pride parade often take place in the area (Bruce, 2013). These cultural markings allow sexual minorities to challenge 'the heterosexualisation of urban space' (Brickell, 2000: 163)—or the assumption that it is necessarily straight (Valentine, 1993; 1996). Gayborhoods also have a concentration of residences: everyone who lives in the area does not self-identify as gay or lesbian, of course, but many people certainly do (Gates and Ost, 2004; Gates and Cooke, 2011). Finally, gayborhoods have a cluster of commercial spaces and non-profit organizations that appeal to residents and visitors alike (Murray, 1979; 1992; Gorman-Murray and Waitt, 2009).

There are numerous benefits that gay districts provide. They allow sexual minorities to find each other for friendship, fellowship, sex and love. Gayborhoods incubate unique cultures, political perspectives, organizations and businesses, families, rituals and styles of socialization. In doing so, these areas stand guard against an entrenched problem of amnesic ancestry. At the end of a long day, they promise a sense of safety, a place where gays and lesbians can seek refuge from discrimination, bigotry and bias. The more we look, the more we see that gayborhoods have a hand in nearly every aspect of modern life: from the municipal promotion of urban spaces to city planning and the shaping of real estate values; from the institutional development of queer communities to their civic engagement; and from pride parades to protests and electoral influence (Gates and Ost, 2004).

Standard scholarly accounts stress economic forces, especially gentrification and municipal promotion campaigns, to explain the 'de-gaying' of gayborhoods (Ruting, 2008: 260). Urban renewal efforts in the United States proceeded in two waves. Federal interventions fueled the first, which was a response to the inner-city decline that white flight caused in the 1960s (Wilson, 1987). This wave involved isolated investments in 'islands of renewal in seas of decay' (Berry, 1985). Participants, many of whom were gay, imagined themselves as pioneers 'taming the urban wilderness' (Spain, 1993; Brown-Saracino, 2007) as they searched for affordable places to live (Gale, 1980; Knopp, 1990). Gentrification resurged in the late 1990s in a second wave that corresponded with rising home prices. Changes in the financing system, increased privatization and the demolition of public housing incited this second surge (Doan and Higgins, 2011). While gays and lesbians used the first wave to build their neighborhoods, the 'super-gentrifiers' of the second wave are mostly straights who are transforming them into 'visible niche markets for retail commerce and realty speculation' (Hanhardt, 2008: 65). Second-

wave financiers and straight newcomers prefer larger chain stores which threaten ‘the cultural icons of queer neighborhoods’ (Doan and Higgins, 2011: 16).

Another economic argument looks at municipal promotion campaigns, especially those that situate gayborhoods in a ‘geography of cool’ (Rushbrook, 2002: 183). In the late 1990s, a group of demographers and economists created a ‘Gay Index’ that ranks regions in the United States based on their concentration of same-sex households. Florida (2002) has publicly championed it, and city agencies use it ‘because of its highly touted claim to predict economic competitiveness in a global marketplace’ (Hanhardt, 2008: 63). Defining gayborhoods as ‘entertainment districts’ (Lloyd and Clark, 2001; Lloyd, 2006) signals a shift in how the state perceives these areas: from a ‘regulatory problem’ that required repression and containment in the 1970s and 1980s to a ‘marketing asset’ in recent years (Rushbrook, 2002: 193). Cities like Chicago, Philadelphia and Manchester have a municipally marked gayborhood that locals and tourists can consume at a ‘cosmopolitan buffet’ (Rushbrook, 2002: 188; Anderson, 2011). They have become ‘the chic social and cultural centres of the city—the place to be seen ... regardless of one’s sexual preferences’ (Collins, 2004: 1793, 1798). Motivated by neoliberal economic policies (Duggan, 2003), such commodification of gayborhoods (Skeggs, 1999; Binnie and Skeggs, 2004) robs them of their cultural distinctions, leading residents and visitors to perceive them today as ‘locations to be experienced by the nouveau cosmopolitan citizen’ (Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2014: 759)—an urban area unhinged from any particular sexual orientation.

We cannot deny the role of economic forces in gayborhood change. Consider three sets of numbers. First, in areas where male same-sex households comprise more than 1% of the population (which, incidentally, is three times the national average), we see a 13.8% increase in housing price. In areas where female same-sex households comprise more than 1% of the population, we see a 16.5% increase in price. The national average, as a point of comparison, is 10%. These figures are year-on-year, with prices to the end of May 2013 and population to mid-June 2013 (Trulia, 2013). Second, same-sex households in 2000 earned on average US \$15,000 less per annum than their opposite-sex counterparts. The wealth gap persisted in 2010 (and 20% of same-sex households were living in poverty, whereas this was the case for just 9% of heterosexual households).¹ Finally, straights will always outnumber gays. The most recent numbers from a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention survey show that 1.6% of the population identifies as gay or lesbian and a further 0.7% identifies as bisexual (National Health Statistics Reports, 2014). These numbers pose puzzles about gay neighborhoods. These areas experience greater increases in housing costs, yet gays and lesbians, who comprise a small proportion of the population, earn less than heterosexuals. Gayborhoods are not residentially sustainable, therefore, unless gays and lesbians never move or, if they own their homes, they only sell to others like them. Neither is plausible.

These arguments are well-rehearsed, and it is what most of us tend to think and talk about in the context of gay neighborhoods. Such statistics define gays and lesbians as principally economic actors (Black *et al.*, 2002; Florida, 2002; Collins, 2004). They are invaluable for understanding urban change, but they are incomplete for three reasons. First, they are historically myopic. Why now at this particular moment are we witnessing so much gay flight (that is, why are they rapidly ‘de-gayng’)? And why are straights expressing an interest in living in gay neighborhoods in numbers greater than we have ever seen before (that is, why are they suddenly ‘straightening’)? Economic approaches better explain why gay neighborhoods first formed, rather than the reasons for their contemporary decline, and we must not invoke the concept for analytically

1 See The Williams Institute (2013a) for earnings statistics and The Williams Institute (2013b) for a discussion of poverty.

distinct questions of origins and change (Zukin, 1987). Second, analyzing gayborhoods through the lens of gentrification cannot completely explain residential turnover, since class diversity is a documented aspect of contemporary gay districts (Trulia, 2012). Finally, economic approaches mute the role of politics and culture in city life (Borer, 2006). A common conclusion that the media makes is that gayborhoods are 'passé' for gays, as *The New York Times* declared, yet desirable for straights. This implies variation in resonance. Neighborhood change 'occurs in forms beyond gentrification' (Owens, 2012: 346), yet economic approaches elide how cultural understandings of sexuality also affect the decisions we make about where to live (Ruting, 2008).

In taking a critical view of economic approaches, it is not my objective to refute their validity but rather to bring them into conversation with other forces. Consider that the same increase in tolerance that allows gays and lesbians to feel comfortable beyond the borders of gay districts also contributes to straight residents feeling more at ease living and socializing in them. Charles Blow (2010) captured this cool in the title of his essay in *The New York Times*: 'Gay? Whatever, Dude'. Straights have always lived in gayborhoods, of course, but they have become 'a common site on the streets' in recent years, notes Dan Levy (1996) in his story for the *San Francisco Chronicle*: 'Two decades of struggle for equal rights have translated into real economic and emotional progress for homosexuals—and many heterosexuals', he explains. 'If lesbians and gays no longer feel confined to a homosexual safe zone, straights are increasingly less likely to be threatened by same-sex attention. Relaxed attitudes about sexual identity have led to a greater permeability' (*ibid.*). Residential turnover in this context blends stage theories of gentrification (Gale, 1980; Kasinitz, 1988) with cultural change: it is a function of demand among straights for urban areas that become fashionable due to their association with gays and lesbians (Florida, 2002). As demand increases, so too do housing costs and rents, which prices out all but the most affluent residents (Bell and Binnie, 2004). Thus, tolerant attitudes, reduced discrimination, neighborhood preferences and economic factors mutually influence one another to produce change in gay neighborhoods.

To better appreciate the interplay of these factors, we need to link the present with the past. Gay neighborhoods first formed in the United States following the second world war (Berube, 1990: 106, 244; D'Emilio and Freedman, 1997: 289) during the 'coming out era' (Ghaziani, 2011), a period which lasted until the late 1990s. Many gays and lesbians were discharged from the military for their homosexuality, and rather than return home disgraced, they remained in particular cities. Bars cemented dense networks that made them more visible to one another and inspired them to assert a right to gather in public places (Meeker, 2006). These efforts gained momentum during the 'great gay migration' (Newton, 1993: 44; Weston, 1995: 255) of the 1970s and 1980s, which itself was triggered by the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City (Duberman, 1993; Carter, 2004). Large port cities were the strongest magnets in this demographic movement of gays and lesbians to urban centers, but their visibility also surfaced in smaller places like Worcester, Massachusetts; Buffalo, New York; Columbia, South Carolina; and Des Moines, Iowa (D'Emilio, 1993: 472).² Gay and lesbian 'moral refugees' (Wittman, 1970: 67–8; Castells, 1983: 161) of the time perceived their emerging concentrations as a 'beacon of tolerance' (Weston, 1995: 262) and 'liberated zone' (Castells, 1983: 139, 168) that promised reprieve from heterosexual hostilities. Gayborhoods thus first formed as 'a spatial response to a historically specific form of oppression' (Lauria and Knopp, 1985: 152). The political status of sexual minorities and their spatial expressions are linked.

Gay and lesbian life today exists 'beyond the closet' (Seidman, 2002: 6) in places like Canada (Nash, 2013), the United Kingdom (Collard, 1998b) and the United States (Ghaziani, 2011)—despite the persistence of heteronormative biases in the state,

2 A rich literature is emerging on non-urban queer spaces and location patterns (Lynch, 1992; Newton, 1993; Brekhus, 2003; Browne, 2008; Gray, 2009; Herring, 2010; Kennedy, 2010; Tongson, 2011).

societal institutions and popular culture. While the coming out era was typified by being open and out about one's sexuality and having almost exclusively gay social networks (Valocchi, 1999b; Armstrong, 2002), today's 'post-gay' period is characterized by a rapid assimilation of gays into the mainstream. Coined by British journalist Paul Burston in 1994, the phrase found an American audience four years later when *Out* magazine editor James Collard (1998a) used the term in *The New York Times* to argue: 'We should no longer define ourselves solely in terms of our sexuality—even if our opponents do. Post-gay isn't "un-gay". It's about taking a critical look at gay life and no longer thinking solely in terms of struggle. It's going to a gay bar and wishing there were more girls there to talk to'. Two months later, in a *Newsweek* article in which he attributed the phrase 'post-gay' to Burston, Collard (1998b) clarified the urban implications of this provocative new idea: 'First for protection and later with understandable pride, gays have come to colonize whole neighborhoods, like West Hollywood in L.A. and Chelsea in New York City. It seems to me that the new Jerusalem gay people have been striving for all these years won't be found in a gay-only ghetto, but in a world where we are free, equal and safe to live our lives'.³ A similar term arrived in Canada when Paul Aguirre-Livingston (2011), writing for Toronto-based magazine *The Grid*, published an article entitled 'Dawn of a New Gay', in which he describes the emergence of 'a new type of gay' he calls 'the post-mo' (short for postmodern homosexual).

Post-gay can express a mode of self-identification, describe the vibe of a specific space or an entire neighborhood and summarize the *zeitgeist* of a historical moment (Sullivan, 1996; Harris, 1997; Seidman *et al.*, 1999; Warner, 1999; Seidman, 2002; Nash, 2013). Individuals who identify as post-gay define themselves by more than their sexuality, disentangle it from a sense of militancy and struggle, feel free from persecution despite persisting inequalities and prefer sexually mixed company—hence Collard's lament for more girls in gay bars. Some see their identity as 'fluid, open, or flexible', while others resist existing labels like 'gay', 'lesbian' and 'bisexual' (Russell *et al.*, 2009: 888). A post-gay space like a bar is one in which 'the need to clearly define and delineate our sexualities is largely deemed unnecessary' (Brown, 2006: 136), while gayborhoods no longer demand 'the assertion of one identity or another. Most times they contain a majority of heterosexuals' (*ibid.*: 140; Nash, 2013).

The primary feature of the post-gay era is a dramatic acceptance of gays and lesbians into the mainstream (Sullivan, 2005; Ghaziani, 2011). Changes in public opinion provide one indicator for this. A Gallup (2010) poll found that 'Americans' support for the moral acceptability of gay and lesbian relations crossed the symbolic 50% threshold in 2010. At the same time, the percentage calling these relations "morally wrong" dropped to 43%, the lowest in Gallup's decade-long trend'. A Pew Research Center (2012) poll found evidence for this acceptance in all regions of the United States, and in urban and rural areas alike. Finally, a poll jointly conducted by ABC News and *The Washington Post* (2013) showed that 'public support for gay marriage has hit a new high', with 58% of Americans now believing that it should be legal for lesbians and gay men to marry, while 36% say it should be illegal. The pollsters noticed that 'public attitudes toward gay marriage are a mirror image of what they were a decade ago: in 2003, 37 percent favored gay nuptials, and 55 percent opposed them' (*ibid.*). Indeed, with the legalization of same-sex marriage in many states, the elimination by the US Supreme Court of a portion of the Defense of Marriage Act, the increasingly positive portrayal of gay and lesbian lives in the mass media and the development of a straight allies movement of 'politically gay' heterosexuals (Meyers, 2008), it stands to reason that many gays and lesbians will feel less pressure today than those of prior generations to concentrate in the few enclaves that have traditionally been associated with them (Castells, 1983; D'Emilio, 1983; Chauncey, 1994).

3 For research that asks whether it is valid to conceptualize gayborhoods as 'ghettos', see Levine (1979).

The theoretical issues implied in this conversation pertain to residential choice (how do we decide where to live?) and urban forms (what accounts for the character and composition of neighborhoods?). These questions have inspired sociologists since the early days of the Chicago School (Park and Burgess, 1925), and they remain central to the new Chicago School (Clark, 2011) and the new urban sociology (Zukin, 1980). Although we know much about these matters in general, we know little about gay neighborhoods specifically. This oversight promotes a biased 'heterosexist project' (Frisch, 2002), one that erases the lives of non-heterosexuals in the city (Brown-Saracino, 2008). Sexuality is epistemologically distinct from race and class (Sedgwick, 1990); therefore, we can predict that it will operate as a unique driver for an otherwise common process of urban change.

Methods

As we saw earlier, same-sex households were less segregated in the United States in 2010 than they were in 2000. Demographers arrive at this conclusion by calculating an index of dissimilarity from census data. This statistic enables them to make inferences about the 'separation of socially defined groups in space' (Massey *et al.*, 2009: 74). The census asks about 'unmarried partners', a group that researchers use to approximate how evenly distributed gays and lesbians are across geographical subareas of the city (Gates and Ost, 2004: 20). Unfortunately, the index underestimates the size of the non-heterosexual population since it excludes those who are not partnered (about a quarter of gay men and two-fifths of lesbians are in relationships at any given time), those who do not live with their partner, those who are not willing to self-identify as gay or lesbian, those who self-identify as bisexual and those who self-identify as transgender (Doan, 2007; Doan and Higgins, 2011: 22; Hayslett and Kane, 2011: 139). In addition, statistical segregation is silent about attitudes and motivation. This creates a methodological opportunity to exploit the advantages of qualitative research, which can identify the underlying mechanisms of urban change that stem from assimilation. What is behind the drop in sexual segregation that demographers have documented? Why are we witnessing a diminishing desire among some gays and lesbians to live in a gayborhood?

To find answers, I analyzed 617 articles from 17 newspapers across the United States. These articles report on 27 urban, suburban and rural locations and span 40 years of coverage (1970–2009). Because the media often produces an experiential echo on the ground, I use it to infer how people make sense of urban changes (see Brickell, 2000 for a similar approach). It directs and delimits, reflects and arbitrates the 'public voice' of sexuality (Richardson, 2005: 524), especially those viewpoints that reflect 'dominant explanations' (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009: 445) for which there is some agreement (Gamson *et al.*, 1992) and those that blend ideas about geographic space with its lived realities (Miller, 2005). There is no superior source that can produce a national—let alone qualitative—portrait of contemporary life in gayborhoods across the United States. I first read all the articles to clarify persistent claims of demise. But just as every coin has two sides, so too did I reread every article against its own grain to push past any dramatic headlines in search of more nuanced themes. This dual reading has several benefits: it allowed me to take advantage of the thousands of interviews that these articles contain, to appreciate the complexities of life in actual gayborhoods and to gain some distance from potentially sensational claims.

I relied on the following sources: *The Advocate*, *The Boston Globe*, *Boston Herald*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *Philadelphia Daily News*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, *USA Today*, *The Village Voice*, *The Washington Post* and *The Washington Times*. I selected them using maximum variation sampling (List, 2004). This approach directed me towards those cases 'from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance', rather than 'gathering

little information from a large, statistically significant sample' (Patton, 1987: 52). The strategy approximates probability sampling by extending the statistical principle of regression to the mean. Thus, my sample includes attitudes that may be extreme but also those that represent the way many people think (Shadish *et al.*, 2002). That said, it is important to remember that gayborhoods have never been uncontested sites of belonging for all minorities. The media accounts that I use sometimes focus on a privileged subset of non-heterosexuals to stand in for more broadly shared expressions of sexuality in American cities. My data most faithfully represents the urban imagination of 'proper' gay subjects (Puar, 2007), particularly those who are white (Nero, 2005), middle class (Valocchi, 1999a) and cisgender (Doan, 2007) and who live in densely populated cities of the US and their satellite towns. This anti-essentialist challenge does not foreclose an investigation of how queer residents experience urban change. Rather, it invites us to remain alert as to how the experience of life is inflected by socio-demographic diversity.

I gathered articles using Lexis-Nexis Academic, a comprehensive full-text database of newspapers. I searched for six keywords over a 40-year period (1 January 1970 to 31 December 2009): gay enclave(s), gay ghetto(s), gay neighborhood(s), gay village(s), gayborhood(s) and homosexual neighborhood(s) (for a keywords methodology, see Williams, 1976; Ghaziani and Ventresca, 2005). I chose 1970 as my start date in light of arguments that gayborhoods flourished after the 1969 Stonewall riots (Castells and Murphy, 1982: 254; D'Emilio, 1989: 467). The phrases for which I searched are the ones that academics, city officials, advertising agencies, journalists, activists and everyday people tend to use.

Some readers may wonder whether lesbians are adequately represented in my sample, especially since some women perceive gayborhoods as exclusive, patriarchal and marginalizing (Podmore, 2013b; Brown, 2014). Gender is a key differentiator in the spatial expressions of sexuality, and there are distinct 'lesbian geographies' (Valentine, 2000; Browne, 2007; Ghaziani, 2015) in many cities that exist apart from the more visible gay-male-dominated districts. This happens because men and women sometimes make different residential and commercial decisions. Some scholars argue that gay men and lesbians have different needs to control space (Castells, 1983), while others stress women's comparative lack of economic power (Adler and Brenner, 1992; Badgett, 2001; Black *et al.*, 2002: 69; Taylor, 2008). Subcultural differences also matter. Men are more influenced by sexual marketplaces and institution building, women by feminism, countercultures and informal businesses (Brown-Saracino, 2011). Then there are those scholars who emphasize family formation. Female same-sex partner households are more likely to have children, and so they have different needs for housing (Bouthillette, 1997). Finally, lesbians are more likely to live in 'less populous regions' (Cooke and Rapiano, 2007: 295) like rural areas (Wolfe, 1979; Kazyak, 2011; 2012), while gay men are more likely to select bigger cities.

To remain sensitive to these gender differences and as a robustness check for my own sampling strategy, I searched for the phrase 'lesbian neighborhood(s)' within the same sources. I retrieved only five results. Two articles were already in my sample, and two others had nothing to do with the effects of gender (the phrase was part of a longer string such as the 'Columbia Heights Gay and Lesbian Neighborhood Association'). This means that I missed one article, which reported on the Park Slope neighborhood of Brooklyn. Fortunately, several stories in my sample discussed this well-known lesbian neighborhood (Rothenberg, 1995).

With the exception of the *The Advocate*, I did not do a similar search within the LGBT news media because journalists use gayborhood-related keywords more casually in this genre. Including those articles would have artificially inflated my sample size while reducing the number of articles that specifically addressed the questions that are of interest to me. For example, when I searched for my keywords in the 'LGBT

Life' database (a functional equivalent of Lexis Nexus), I retrieved 2,928 articles. It is difficult to systematically sample from within this population, which can introduce selection bias into my results.⁴

The 617 articles in my sample averaged 1,153 words and ranged from 31 to 8,656 words. Sixty-six (10.7%) appeared on the front page. There were 567 (91.9%) news stories and 50 (8.1%) letters and op-ed pieces. I coded articles deductively by looking for indicators of assimilation and the post-gay era, along with evidence for economic theories for balance. This strategy is called 'multiple operationalism' or 'critical multiplism' (Cook, 1985). I used it to extract claims about identity, inter-group interactions, urban integration, network structures, anti-gay stigma and discrimination, real estate, rents, gentrification and economic development.

There may be some concerns in my dataset about the journalistic standard of balanced reporting, which takes the form of a reporter selecting outlier quotes. Studies that use newspaper data are more likely to present such a bias if they have a small sample size (I include 617 articles); if they rely on one or two sources (I selected 17 presses); if they rely on select regions of the country (I resolve this with maximum variation); or if the researchers fail to triangulate their findings (I also use the census and opinion polls). Interviewing is an alternative, of course, but it is difficult to collect a large-N national sample within reasonable constraints of resources. However, I conducted my content analysis in a way that simulates interviews. I sought answers to questions that I could 'conceivably have asked' (Krippendorff, 2004: 139) residents had they been accessible to me. This innovative qualitative approach eliminates the validity threats of reactivity and social desirability that inhere in interview data. Although ethnographic research is an ideal method of assessing place-specific nuance, my focus on the interviews that generations of journalists conducted over 40 years and across the United States provides a snapshot of how major gatekeepers of public discourse, along with those with whom they spoke, make sense of the startling transformations that are unfolding today.

Results

– The gay city effect: an expanding residential imagination

In this section, I consider the first of two ways in which assimilation contributes to the declining significance of gayborhoods: it expands the residential imagination of gays and lesbians beyond the bounded streets of a gayborhood to the entire surrounding city. Consider the legendary Castro district of San Francisco. The city's Convention and Visitors Bureau chief Joe D'Alessandro lives there with his same-sex partner and their six children. D'Alessandro is quoted as saying that 'the gay community in his previous home of Portland, Ore., a city without a historically gay neighborhood, is a model because gay and lesbian residents comfortably live in the mainstream. "They do not live in a ghetto", D'Alessandro said. "And I think they're stronger because of it"' (Buchanan, 2007). Don Romesburg, co-chairman of the GLBT Historical Society of Northern California, added: 'What I've heard from some people is, "We don't need the Castro anymore because essentially San Francisco is our Castro"' (Leff, 2007) If everything is the Castro, however, then nothing is uniquely so. Hence a peculiar post-gay paradox: assimilation expands the horizon of residential and social possibilities, but it also erases the roots of sexuality in specific urban spaces.

Evidence for an expanding residential repertoire comes from many big American cities. When a reporter asked about the gayborhood in Chicago, one resident remarked: 'The gay neighborhood? It's pretty much all of Chicagoland' (Ghaziani, 2014: 71). A New

4 There are differences between mainstream and LGBT presses. The latter focus more on symbolic and expressive aspects of queer urban life, whereas mainstream journalists tend to emphasize economic issues (Forest, 1995). Therefore, to find evidence about the cultural effects of sexual identity in the mainstream press would make those findings especially robust while ensuring that I also capture important economic processes.

Yorker similarly said: ‘The entire island of Manhattan’s gay’ (*ibid.*). All three ideas—San Francisco is our Castro, the equation of the gayborhood in the Windy City with all of Chicagoland and an assertion that the entire island of Manhattan is gay—converge with remarkable consistency to illustrate the essence of this ‘gay city effect’. Statistical analyses of the census show descriptive out-migrations from gayborhoods across the United States, while articulations about an expansive residential imagination provide one explanation for why it is occurring. We are moving away from gay neighborhoods towards gay cities.

A demographic reordering is happening in smaller places as well. Travel with me next to Northampton, Massachusetts, a town that foregrounds the geography of gender (Forsyth, 1997). According to Julie Pokela, a lesbian businesswoman and former head of Northampton’s chamber of commerce: ‘There are other gay enclaves, but there’s no place I know where the gay population is so integrated into the community’ (Gaines, 1999). Although some people have dubbed the entire area ‘Lesbianville, USA’, Pokela thinks that locals discourage segregation: ‘The town is too small and the lesbian population is too big to have ghettos’ (Kantrowitz, 1993). Diane Morgan, who coordinates an annual summer festival, agreed: ‘If you’re looking for lesbians, they’re every where’ (*ibid.*). If being gay does not matter anymore in Northampton, then why bother calling it ‘Lesbianville, USA’? This creates another paradox: proponents of post-gay arguments must discern the outlines and social boundaries of the very entity that they believe is otherwise waning in its cultural significance.

Consider finally Gulfport, Florida. A correspondent for *The Boston Globe* reflected on how the town had changed between 1996 and 2006: ‘What Gulfport really has become is a place for everyone, a place where “diverse” is not a buzzword. During a stroll along the mostly commercial Beach Boulevard on a Saturday afternoon in early February, there were children playing in front of a worn duplex, 20-somethings shopping, traditional families with children, bikers, grandparents, great-grandparents, and gay couples’ (Daniel, 2006). Greg Stemm, an openly gay man and executive director of the Gulfport Chamber of Commerce, agreed with this assessment: ‘We at the chamber call the community “bohemian” ... There’s a real desire not to make this a gay ghetto. We very much value an eclectic mix. For a small town, we have a remarkable blend of people’ (*ibid.*).

To position ‘bohemian’ as the opposite of ‘gay ghetto’ carries with it a sense of historical irony. The places where gays and lesbians gathered in the coming out era were also bohemian (Chauncey, 1994), yet they were more segregated. Residents today deploy a rhetorical strategy that allows them disentangle what was once a unity between bohemia and concentration. On the other hand the interplay of diversity, eclecticism and bohemianism that we hear of in Gulfport alludes to the possibility that queer geographies are becoming plural—not passé. This surprising finding contrasts with theoretical expectations that gays and lesbians are beyond the closet (Browne, 2006; Podmore, 2013a) and thus potentially placeless.

– Cultural sameness

One additional mechanism also explains why some gays and lesbians are leaving the gayborhood: they say that they do not feel all that different from heterosexuals. Reflect for a moment on what reporters writing for *The Advocate* refer to as ‘once-sleepy blue-collar suburbs’ that are now ‘attracting large numbers of gay people’ (Christensen and Caldwell, 2006): these areas appeal to those gays and lesbians who ‘don’t feel ostracized by society’ and who ‘feel perfectly comfortable in the burbs’ (*ibid.*). Newcomers call themselves “regular Joes” and “suburban” (*ibid.*). In one instance an interviewee (a straight man named Andy, a Florida realtor) summarized this post-gay mentality by observing that his area (Fort Lauderdale) ‘is the most boringly accepting place. No one gives a good goddamn if you are gay or straight’ (*ibid.*).

Consider next an example from New York, where Dick Dadey, once the executive director of the Empire State Pride Agenda, explained to a reporter from *The New York Times* why local gays and lesbians are rejecting gayborhoods: 'There is a portion of our community that wants to be separatist, to have a queer culture, but most of us want to be treated like everyone is ... We want to be the neighbors next door, not the lesbian or gay couple next door' (De Witt, 1994). Dadey equates minority cultures and communities with separatism, which post-gays consider anathema to 'being treated like everyone else'. This impulse towards normalization—or cultural 'sameness' (Richardson, 2005)—is a powerful pathway that undermines the resonance of existing gayborhoods, even if Dadey and others incorrectly assume that to adopt mainstream values requires them to renounce their unique cultures. Integration is compatible with an impulse to preserve a distinct way of life.

Now travel to Houston, where 'sexual minorities ... have not only grown in number and visibility, but have spread out from Montrose, the community's historic center', observed the *Houston Chronicle* (Christian, 2001). The reporter interviewed a gay male couple about their decision to live elsewhere. 'Some of this is because Montrose has become too expensive' (*ibid.*), said Harry Livesay, confirming the importance of economic wisdom. 'But it also has to do with increased acceptance' (*ibid.*), continues the article, pointing to the joint effects of cultural and economic factors in gayborhood change. Livesay (a former chairman of Houston's Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus) and his partner purchased a home in Westbury, rather than the Montrose gayborhood. 'Ten years ago, Westbury homeowners probably would have said they didn't want gay neighbors ... Now they say, "We're so glad you're here" ... We're not "those people in Montrose". We're the people next door' (*ibid.*). Livesay's sentiment in conservative Texas resembles what Dadey said in liberal New York, hinting at the generality of the post-gay phenomenon.

Similar to an expanding residential imagination, the theme of cultural sameness also stretches from urban to non-urban areas. Writing for *The New York Times*, Josh Benson (2004) interviewed a lesbian couple who had relocated to a New Jersey suburb. Neither woman considered herself 'any sort of activist' (*ibid.*). On the contrary, both wanted 'to have a suburban family life that is almost boringly normal' (*ibid.*). But why did they reject areas that had a concentration of other gays and lesbians? 'We're specifically not moving into gay neighborhoods here. Within the state of New Jersey, we feel comfortable living anywhere', said Diane (*ibid.*). Her partner Jeanne added: 'Here, we're just part of a neighborhood. We weren't the gay girls next door; we were just neighbors. We were able to blend in, which is what you want to do, rather than have the scarlet letter on our heads' (*ibid.*). In California, Tim Nolan, formerly president of the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors and candidate for Congress in 1992, echoed the sentiment: 'There are still people who clearly want to live in the gay ghetto ... But a whole lot more, I'd guess. want to lead their lives like other people live their lives' (Gross, 1991).

References to cultural similarities between gays and straights emerge repeatedly in media coverage of gayborhoods. Just as the post-gay rhetoric was traveling from the UK to the US, Edward Guthman (1997) interviewed Quentin Crisp for the *San Francisco Chronicle*—he asked the celebrated English writer: 'What do you think of gays living in their own self-contained neighborhoods—in "gay ghettos" such as the Castro District?'. Crisp quipped in reply: 'When I asked somebody, "Why do you want to cut yourself off from nine-tenths of the human race?", he said "I have nothing in common with them". But he has everything in common with them except his funny way of spending the evening' (*ibid.*). Although Crisp reduces the richness of queer cultures to the alleged comedy of the night, his insight captures how assimilation affects the decisions we make about where to live and socialize. In a similar vein, Bill, a gay resident

of Sarasota, pointedly asked: 'Why should we be in a gay ghetto? No way. Why shouldn't we be in a mainstream community where it's beautiful?' (Wilson, 1994).

Consider finally the heated situation that Richard Goldstein, executive editor of *The Village Voice* in New York, experienced when he published the following: 'There is apprehension about the banalizing impact of mainstreaming—fear that it means the end of gay culture' (Taylor, 1998). This remark provoked vitriolic letters to the editor. One reader wrote with fury: 'May I ask Mr Goldstein what exactly is so wrong with being "mainstream"?' (*ibid.*). Said another even more explosively: 'What the hell is "gay culture" anyway? "Fruity masculinity and feminine gravitas" in mainstream images of gays? Those stereotypes are insulting enough. Sparky the Gay Dog in South Park?!! Give us a break!' (*ibid.*). The writer then dismissed gayborhoods altogether: 'If Goldstein spent much time outside of his gay ghetto (or New York), he would discover that all gay Americans (i.e. non-urban, rural, redneck, "mainstream" gays) want is for others to acknowledge that sexual orientation doesn't make a damned difference about anything ... Goldstein doesn't realize it, but he's doing incredible harm in encouraging the notion that gay people are fundamentally different and exist outside the mainstream' (*ibid.*). Goldstein responded in one fell swoop: 'I suspect that if this writer were to assert her identity—say, by holding her lover's hand while shopping at Wal-Mart—she would soon be wrenched from her illusions, and reminded that, to dispel stigma, one must first be aware of it' (*ibid.*).

Ironically, we can detect a sense of 'gay shame' (Halperin and Traub, 2009) across these presumably progressive transcripts. What is wrong with being the gay girls next door? And why is the opposite of 'blending in' having a 'scarlet letter'? Furthermore, if mainstream means beautiful, as Bill from Sarasota says, then are gayborhoods somehow distasteful? It may be the case that urban life today simply cloaks itself in the language of assimilation and cultural sameness. These puzzles suggest that the post-gay era is not cleansed of the stigma against homosexuality. The subtle contradictions in what residents say caution us against overstating that all the world is post-gay, that the urban outcome is singular or that we are traveling on a one-way ticket towards the dilution and disappearance of all queer spaces.

The tone of these transcripts allude to scholarly debates. On the one hand are those who argue that gay and lesbian life is normal and virtually indistinguishable from heterosexuality (Sullivan, 1996; 2005; Seidman *et al.*, 1999; Seidman, 2002; Savin-Williams, 2005). Others retort that there is an endemic 'trouble with normal' (Warner, 1999), that sexuality is still central in our self-identity (Russell *et al.*, 2009) and that the charmed circle (Rubin, 1993) continues to exclude homosexuality. Thus, while expansion and cultural sameness provide novel sociological explanations that breathe life into demographic statistics that show a decline in sexual segregation, they introduce complexities alongside clarifications.

Conclusions

The literature on urban change risks presenting us with an economically dominant view in which residential decisions represent consumers' rational responses to home prices, rents and other issues related to affordability and amenities in a neighborhood context. Gays and lesbians certainly play a part in urban renewal, and the process can eventually price some of them out of their homes. It is also true that the presence of a gayborhood in a city and its local economic growth are related (Florida, 2002). But economic arguments overlook a crucial insight: gayborhoods are 'a spatial response to a historically specific form of oppression' (Lauria and Knopp, 1985: 152). When the nature of oppression changes, so too will the spatial response. Urban change in general is inevitable, but gayborhoods are transforming in unique ways as the long arc of the moral universe bends towards justice. As gays and lesbians feel accepted into the

mainstream of American society, more of them feel comfortable living in areas beyond inner-city gayborhoods. Statements like 'San Francisco is our Castro' or calling the entire city of Northampton 'Lesbianville' are the quintessence of this expansion mechanism—or gay city effect. Assimilation also motivates some gay people to feel a sense of cultural sameness with heterosexuals and, as a result, to live in locations where they can perform those similarities. Post-gays are just your neighbors, not 'those gays' next door who are stamped with a scarlet letter of a 'spoiled' sexuality (*cf.* Goffman, 1963).

Although I focused on arguments about the declining centrality of sexual orientation and its urban expressions, other processes are also operating in American cities. The cracks in the allegedly inclusive veneer of assimilation that we glimpsed in this article allude to a growing body of work in human geography which points to the role of 'new mobilities' (Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2014), local government initiatives surrounding social inclusion (Florida, 2005a; 2005b) and internet-driven digital cultures that are not always place-based (Usher and Morrison, 2010). In addition, while some scholars have found evidence that gayborhoods are changing, others have discovered the development of 'new LGBT constellations' (Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2014: 756), such as 'queer-friendly districts' (*ibid.*: 760). These are urban areas that have 'a heterosexual majority in residential and commercial terms, but where a significant presence of gay and lesbian residents, businesses, and organisations are welcome' (Gorman-Murray and Waitt, 2009: 2855). The defining feature of such spaces is the mutual interaction among queers and straights, similar to what we saw in Gulfport, and their attempts to 'foster understanding across sexual difference' (*ibid.*).

Queer-friendly neighborhoods are emerging alongside the declining centrality of gayborhoods. This suggests some simple truths worth stating: we cannot represent the urban landscape as a binary of gayborhoods versus all other undifferentiated 'straight spaces' (Frisch, 2002; Brown, 2008; Browne and Bakshi, 2011: 181). The dichotomy is invalid—for neither is monolithic. Neighborhoods are diverse in their household composition, income, housing stock, sexualities and ethnic demographics (Jacobs, 1961; Florida, 2002; Gates and Ost, 2004). Even the literature on gentrification does not suggest a universal process of renewal (recall the 'super-gentrifiers'). Politics and personal preferences generate an array of neighborhoods with different levels of tolerance for sexual differences (Butler and Robson, 2001; Brown, 2012). The fact that there is no official gayborhood in Northampton, for example, does not mean that there is a void of sexuality in that area, much like what we saw in suburban New Jersey. These towns have a queer presence. New geographies incorporate the positive aspects of traditional gayborhoods without relying on a singular or static notion of urban planning. This is why cultural sameness and expansion do not signal *ipso facto* the inevitable demise of sexual landscapes.

We live in a time of 'a queer pluralization of sexuality' (Brown, 2014: 1)—not a diminishing of options—as new residential and leisure spaces form 'across the whole city' (Brown, 2008: 1216). These homes and establishments are no longer based 'just in gay villages' (Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2014: 757). Plurality is the name of the game today, a time when sexuality infuses into nearly all aspects of urban life. Although same-sex partner households are less segregated in a post-gay era than they were in the prior closet and coming out eras (Levine, 1979; Sibalís, 2004; Miller, 2005; Wacquant, 2008), this does not mean that they are placeless.

Once we acknowledge that 'queer geographies' (Browne, 2006; Podmore, 2013a) transcend binaries by virtue of their diverse expressions—and that they exist in urban and non-urban settings alike (Bell and Valentine, 1995; Fellows, 1996; Kirkey and Forsyth, 2001; Halberstam, 2005; Browne, 2008; Gray, 2009; Herring, 2010)—then we can situate the questions that motivate this article into broader debates on the politics of post-gay life, identity and community. The rhetoric and reality of the post-gay era resonates most with those gays and lesbians 'whose sexual behavior conforms to traditional

gender norms, who link sex to intimacy, love, monogamy, and preferably marriage, and who restrict sex to private acts that exhibit romantic or caring capacity' (Seidman, 2002: 189). Those who are gender or sexually non-normative become 'a lightning rod not only for the hatred of difference, of the abnormal, but also for the more general loathing for sex' (Warner, 1999: 23). The gayborhood will continue to resonate for such populations. We saw a hint of this in Goldstein's response. Although beyond the scope of this article, his public interactions in the press reject the premise that existing gayborhoods are uniformly passé. Those who identify as queer or transgender, who are not middle or upper class, and who are not white or homonormative (Duggan, 2002) may continue to see them as safe spaces (Hanhardt, 2013). Therefore, although assimilation characterizes public discourse about what it means to be post-gay, only a certain type of diversity may be valorized in the end: a narrow range of racial, gender and class expression that is displayed within the already narrow parameters of the normal, palatable to heterosexuals, visible within major progressive metropolitan regions of the nation and feeding back into the goals of assimilation (Ghaziani, 2011).

Future research can investigate these and other critical matters that stem from race (Nero, 2005; Hunter, 2010), class (Barrett and Pollack, 2005), transgender identities (Doan, 2007), rural contexts (Kazyak, 2011; 2012) and areas outside Western nations, especially those in the global South (Fernandez-Aleman and Murray, 2002; Tucker, 2009). We must also exploit the strengths of multiple methods as we continue this line of work. My attention to broad trends at a national scale, for instance, may have obscured the ways in which expansion is inflected differently in interviews with a white lesbian realtor in Minneapolis, which has no single gay district, or with a single gay black man who lives in the Montrose gayborhood of Houston. The same goes for cultural sameness, which may have varying corporeal styles for a transgender resident in a gayborhood compared with how a white cisgender gay man moves along the streets of the city centre. There is much more to learn about the spatial expressions of sexuality in general, certainly, but also in the more granular expressions of expansion and cultural sameness.

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