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Sexual meanings, placemaking, and the urban imaginary

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Introduction

There is a well-developed literature on neighborhoods, as well as one on sexual identities and communities, but little research brings these two subfields together to explore the relationship between sexuality and the city. In this chapter, I suggest that urban sociology can meet the sociology of sexualities through culture. I use the reasons straight people provide for wanting to live in a gay district as an opportunity to reflect on how sexuality informs our imaginations of place. By examining residential logics, scholars can conceptualize "the city" as a culturally saturated site where neighbors negotiate the meanings and material significance of their sexuality alongside their sexual differences from others.

Culture and the city

What is the role of culture in urban sociology? Some scholars downplay culture because they see it as epiphenomenal, an aggregation of individual interests, while others consider culture outright irrelevant. Gans (2007:159) offers a strong position: "Culture *per se* is not a useful explanatory tool," he argues, because researchers overextend the concept to include values and beliefs, meanings and shared significance, art and expressive symbols, and identities and memories. All these are "worthy research topics," Gans (2007) hastens to add, but we cannot sweep them under the single term "culture." His concern, a conceptual one, resurrects an insight expressed earlier by Fine (1979:733), who described culture as "an amorphous, indescribable mist which swirls around society members." Hence, the concept "adds nothing," Gans concludes, and it "cannot lead to significant new insights" about the city (2007:160). If anything, it presents a paradox – and a particular problem of measurement, as I have shown in my work (Ghaziani 2009). By masquerading as everything, culture is uniquely nothing. The conundrum accounts for why some scholars use the concept to restate the "obvious" in "technical language" (Gans 2007:160). Gans (2007) also takes issue with cultural explanations for displaying "antipathy toward structural issues such as hierarchy, inequality, and power." He ultimately disavows culture as an "Uncaused Cause" (ibid.). Reflecting on his own study of urban villagers, Gans says that culture is a descriptive tool, and he advises scholars to examine "how urban cultures and practices *are shaped by*

economic, political, and other power structures" (ibid., emphasis added). Apparently, culture cannot be strong (Alexander and Smith 2010) and independent.

Urbanists have responded to his polemic – culture "plays second fiddle" to economic and structural forces (Borer 2007:158) – by showing that people actively engage with meanings and symbols in nearly every aspect of city life. It is the cultures of cities (Zukin 1995) – from tall towers to toilets – that account for outcomes that range from individual happiness (Montgomery 2013) to abstract attitudes about gender (Molotch and Noren 2010). Culture explains why we sort into diverse social groups (Fischer 1975) or choose to live in ethnic enclaves (Abrahamson 2005). Culture is at work when we talk about neighborhood diversity (Deener 2012) and how that diversity provides a shared symbol of progressive politics (Berrey 2015), especially for young people as they seek places that will nurture a creative ethos (Florida 2002). Culture informs interpersonal interactions between building tenants and their doormen (Bearman 2005), tourists and their guides (Wynn 2011), and it influences how musicians and government leaders organize festivals (Wynn 2015), pride parades (Bruce 2016), and other expressions of the Warhol economies (Currid 2007) and neo-bohemias (Lloyd 2006) that transform cities into entertainment machines (Lloyd and Clark 2001) that are teeming with fashion shows (Mears 2011), nightclubs (Grazian 2008), and cocktail bars (Ocejo 2014). Together, these studies direct researchers to look at the authenticity and aesthetics of a place (Zukin 2010), its unique feel (Silver and Clark 2016), and its characterological distinctiveness (Molotch, Freudenburg, and Paulsen 2000).

Sexuality and the city

Culture has arguably been more foundational to sociological studies of sexuality, although here scholars have focused on identity, community, politics, and queer theoretic frameworks (Stein 1989; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Warner 1993; Stein and Plummer 1994; Gamson 1995; Seidman 2002; Ghaziani 2008, 2011). There is, however, a growing body of work that examines sexuality, culture, and placemaking. In my research on "gayborhoods" (Ghaziani 2014a, Ghaziani 2015), I argue that struggles over what a place means (its cultural character) and who belongs in it (its composition and symbolic boundaries) are indistinguishable from political factors like municipal governance and the growth machine coalition, as well as the economics of land, labor, and capital. Despite the influence of the Chicago School (Park 1925), this line of reasoning has deeper roots in anthropology (Newton 1993; Weston 1995), geography (Lauria and Knopp 1985; M. Brown 2014), and history (Heap 2003; Aldrich 2004) than it does in sociology.

A gay neighborhood has a distinct geographic focal point; people can point it out on a map, usually by singling out one or two specific streets (Keller 1968). The area has a concentration of residences (Gates and Ost 2004) and businesses (Murray 1996) that cater to LGBTQ people. These districts also stimulate extralocal attachments among nonresidents who make territorial claims (Greene 2014). Gayborhoods foster a quasi-ethnic (Murray 1979; Epstein 1987) culture; LGBTQ people "set the tone" (Chauncey 1994:228) of the place, which is why rainbow flags line the streets and ritual events like the pride parade are often staged there. The pursuit of sex and sociality in the safe, countercultural context of a gayborhood empowers "pleasure seekers" (Armstrong 2002) to create "sexy communities" (Orne 2017) that are removed from the straight gaze. Sexuality is an important part of life for all of us, but gayborhoods provide a crucible for the cultivation of a collective life that is visible and culturally queer.

Gay districts 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 LGBTQ communities to their civic engagements (Usher and Morrison 2010).

They promote policy discussions around sexuality and enable public health organizations to distribute critical resources (Carpiano et al. 2011). The presence of a gayborhood signals a city's commitment to diversity and tolerance, and research shows that officials can boost their local economy when they invest in them (Florida 2002). Gay districts facilitate the search for friendship, fellowship, sex and love for a group of people who are not corporeally marked (Laumann et al. 2004). Historically, LGBTQ people have used them as a base to organize as a voting bloc or social movement (Armstrong 2002). Because the personal is political, gayborhoods also represent a free space (Evans and Boyte 1986) that blunt the effects of heteronormativity (Wittman 1970). All these findings help us appreciate why LGBTQ people would want to live in these districts today, despite their past reputation as ghettos that exacerbated marginalization, exclusion, and inequality (Levine 1979; Castells 1983).

Straight to the gayborhood

A key lacuna in existing research is straight people. What is their relationship to the gayborhood? Why do they want to live there? Despite a surge of recent scholarly attention to heterosexuality (J. Katz 2007; Dean 2014; Ward 2015), few cultural or urban sociologists have addressed the question. In this section, I draw on my research to explain why straights seek to reside in gay districts. I use their rationales to reflect theoretically on how sexuality and culture jointly affect placemaking efforts in the gayborhood and the urban imaginary more broadly.

Safety

Castells (1983:161) characterized gay men and lesbians in the 1970s and 1980s as "moral refugees" who were seeking safe spaces. Four decades later, straights have appropriated similar claims and located them in gayborhoods once they realized that crime rates are lower than in other parts of the city (O'Sullivan 2005). Writing for the *New York Times*, one journalist remarked, "Predominantly gay neighborhoods have arisen in a dozen major cities over the last two decades, sometimes making tired neighborhoods safer and more attractive to heterosexuals" (De Witt 1994:A14). Florida (2002:xvii) offers a scholarly account for how claims to safety inform placemaking initiatives among heterosexuals: "I've had straight people, especially single women, tell me they *look* for cities with lots of gay people when they are hunting for a place to live and work." These accounts suggest a cultural reimagination of the gayborhood away from an area that provides a protective shield for gays to a place that promises lower crime rates for straights.

Child-friendliness

A headline from *SFGate* identified an emerging trend of young straight families who seek out gay neighborhoods:

> After 25 years at the heart of the gay movement, San Francisco's Castro district is going mainstream. Families and chain stores are moving in, and some are lamenting the loss of what has become an icon to gays and lesbians.
>
> *(Levy 1996)*

The baby stroller is a potent symbol in this conversation, as the *New York Times* notes: "The influx of baby strollers is perhaps the most blatant sign of change" (P. Brown 2007). The corresponding journalist interviewed a realtor who explained how the meaning of the area has

changed as more straight people carve out a place for themselves in the gayborhood: "The Castro has gone from a gay-ghetto mentality to a family mentality" (P. Brown 2007). Another story from the same paper remarked on the cultural and institutional effects of straight in-migration: "In the Chicago area known as Boystown, business owners and residents say the influx of young heterosexual families has rendered the neighborhood's name an anachronism. The gay bookstore now sells more children's books than gay books" (Zernike 2003:A16).

Gays and lesbians also have children, of course, but it is the specific presence of straight families pushing strollers that has ignited the most controversy. "In just about any other place, the sight of a man and woman pushing a stroller would be welcomed as a sign of stability and safety," noted a journalist writing for the Associated Press (2007). But not necessarily in a gayborhood. "Gay leaders in the Castro and other gay neighborhoods around the country fear their enclaves are losing their distinct identities. These areas are slowly being altered by an influx of heterosexual couples" (Associated Press 2007). The overtime acceptance (Loftus 2001; Andersen and Fetner 2008) and normalization (Warner 1999) of gay and lesbian relations increases the perception among heterosexuals that gayborhoods are family-friendly areas. The greater number of straights that results on the streets is evidence that the symbolic boundaries of homosexuality are shifting away from signifying sickness and sin (stereotypes of gay men as child molesters) to safety and child-friendliness (gay bookstores that sell more children's books than LGBTQ books).

The cool quotient

In tandem with broad changes in public opinion, the state has also shifted its perception of gayborhoods away from a "regulatory problem" that required repression and containment in the 1970s and 1980s to a "marketing asset" in recent years (Rushbrook 2002:193). Redefining gayborhoods from red light to entertainment districts allows straights to "overcome their discomfort with being 'out of place' in gay space" (G. Brown 2006:133) and to feel at ease entering gayborhoods and other culturally queer spaces such as bars and community centers. This transforms gayborhoods into "the chic social and cultural centres of the city – the place to be seen . . . regardless of one's sexual preferences" (Collins 2004:1793). A writer for *Orbit* magazine reflected on evolving perceptions of the gayborhood:

> The rainbow flag that gays planted signaled to other assorted demographics – hipsters, liberal-leaning couples with young kids, actual artists, myself – that the neighborhood had been conquered, with flair. So we came, hungry for . . . a higher cool quotient.
>
> *(M. Katz 2010)*

These days, gayborhoods are less quasi-ethnic and more like tourist destinations for straights "on safari" (Orne 2017). The commodification of the gayborhood contributes to its "Disneyfication" (Zukin 1995:128), and it strips the area of its cultural and political significance.

Gentrification

In the late 2000s, the *New York Observer* published a headline that did not mince words: "Neighborhood Got Gays? No? Then You Don't Want To Live There" (Koblin 2007). What was "the first tip" that the journalist received from a realtor about "how to find the next hot neighborhood?" Three words: "Find the gays" (Koblin 2007). This sentiment embodies "gentrification," a word that Glass (1964) first coined to describe cycles of cultural, economic, and infrastructural renewal efforts in the city (see also Zukin 1987). Widespread urban

revitalization in the United States proceeded in two stages. Federal interventions fueled the first, which was a response to white flight and inner-city decline in the 1960s (Wilson 1987). This stage involved isolated investments in "islands of renewal in seas of decay" (Berry 1985). Participants, many of whom were gay, thought of themselves as pioneers who were "taming the urban wilderness" as they searched for cheaper housing options (Brown-Saracino 2007). Gentrification resurged in the late 1990s in a second stage that corresponded with rising home prices. Changes in the financing system, privatization, realty speculation, and the dismantling of public housing incited the second surge. Although gays and lesbians built their gayborhoods in the first wave, the "super-gentrifiers" of the second wave are mostly straights who are transforming those same districts into "visible niche markets for retail commerce and realty speculation" (Hanhardt 2008:65). Second wave financers and straight newcomers prefer larger chain stores which threaten "the cultural icons of queer neighborhoods" (Doan and Higgins 2011:16). Once the culture changes, demographic transitions ensue as more straight residents replace gays and lesbians. These shifting spatial dynamics of the gayborhood give straights more power in their placemaking efforts.

Diversity

Young urbanites prize diversity (Jacobs 1961), even if this "powerful and plastic symbol" causes controversies among residents who share the same streets (Berrey 2005:143). One realtor in Chicago observed, "As far as attracting the straight community [to Boystown], young people today aren't bothered by diversity. They're used to it" (Sharoff 1997:E1). Consider as well an observation from Gulfport, Florida, where a local reporter remarked:

> What Gulfport 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. . . "We at the chamber call the community 'bohemian,'" said Greg Stemm, executive director of the Gulfport Chamber of Commerce.
>
> *(Daniel 2006:D8)*

Florida (2002:227) praises "places with a visible gay presence." He spoke with many young people who "oriented their location search to such places, even though they are not gay themselves." A young woman of Persian decent recounted to him:

> I was driving across the country with my sister and some friends. We were commenting on what makes a place the kind of place we want to go, or the kind of place we would live. We said: It has to be open. It has to be diverse. It has to have a visible gay community.
>
> *(Florida 2002:227)*

Florida explains this preference by citing the changing meanings of sexuality. "Homosexuality represents the last frontier of diversity in our society," he argues, "and thus a place that welcomes the gay community welcomes all kinds of people" (2002:255–56). Over the years, more frequent interactions between gays and straights have produced a greater tolerance for cultural differences (Gorman-Murray and Waitt 2009), which in turn has nurtured pro-equality sensibilities (Kanai and Kenttamaa-Squires 2015).

Conclusion

Three conclusions about culture emerge when we examine the gayborhood. First, culture has an autonomy (Alexander 1990), and it is not always reducible to the conventional variables that scholars use to explain urban change. Gans's critique of culture as an "uncaused cause" traps us into an infinitely circular search for analytic independence. There is no Garden of Eden for causality. Let us ask not whether culture is casual but instead how it makes a difference overall. A cultural sociology of the gayborhood illustrates the many ways in which sexuality informs our imaginations of place, contested efforts at placemaking on the ground, and the constitution of the urban imaginary.

Second, gayborhoods draw our attention to an understudied relationship between sexuality, space, and inequality (Brodyn and Ghaziani 2018). These districts first emerged following World War II as "a spatial response to a historically specific form of oppression" (Lauria and Knopp 1985:152). When the nature of oppression changes, so too should the spatial response. This hypothesis suggests that cultural explanations for the formation of gayborhoods and explanations for why they are changing today do not evince antipathy toward issues of inequality and power. The reduction of scholarship into binary propositions and analytical dualisms (Archer 1996) such as culture *or* structural inequality reduces the degrees of precision for our analysis, and it needlessly circumscribes how much of the variation of a phenomenon we can explain.

Finally, to ensure that a cultural sociology of the gayborhood remains rigorous and vibrant, future researchers should specify the "observable analytic units" (Ghaziani 2014b:375) of culture on which they focus. By bringing sexuality and the city into the cultural fold, I have hinted at several possibilities for how to study sexual meanings, placemaking, and the urban imaginary, including an examination of residential logics and extralocal attachments, intergroup interactions, the composition of businesses, the particular role of "anchor institutions" (ibid.) such as gay bookstores, contested symbols like strollers on the sidewalks or diversity discourse in conversations, community iconography like rainbow flags, ritual events such as Pride parades, and tourism campaigns. It seems to me that thinking about culture in terms of its observable analytic units can correct the "impossibly vague" (Sewell 1999:41) strategies of definitional and operational catholicity, and the propensity to see culture as "chameleon-like" (Binder et al. 2008:8). The problem is that chameleons "provide no particular angle or analytical purchase" (Sewell 1999:41) for the study of culture, especially as the concept is already plagued by an analytic mist (Fine 1979). The mandate for model specification should motivate us to place culture in the driver's seat. It is only by doing so that we can re-conceptualize the city as a culturally saturated site of meanings.

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