

Aligning Our Maps: A Call to Reconcile Distinct Visions of Literatures on Sexualities, Space, and Place

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Recent invitations to expand the geographic scope of analyses of place and sexualities beyond the “gayborhood” (Brown 2014; Ghaziani 2014; Stone 2018) are at once welcome and curious. In this response piece, I echo Amin Ghaziani’s call in his lead symposium essay to document heterogeneity, which he proposes scholars do by using his timely and important concept of “cultural archipelagos” (also see 2014). However, I also caution that by overstating gaps in the literature, our response to such calls can risk reinforcing the invisibility of populations and places that we seek to rectify. In doing so, I combine my reading of the literature and my ethnographic research in a variety of queer settlements, from a Chicago neighborhood and a high-profile LGBTQ vacation destination (Brown-Saracino 2004, 2007, 2009) to small cities in rural counties that are popular with lesbian, bisexual, and queer female households (Brown-Saracino 2011, 2014, 2015, 2017).

On the one hand, and again echoing Ghaziani, I often wonder what we would know about sexualities and place if our inquiries were more expansive. Indeed, the lesbian, bisexual, and queer women I have studied tell me that they struggle to find themselves in literatures that highlight places like Chicago’s Boystown or Philadelphia’s Gayborhood. As others’ research tells us, this sense of (near) invisibility in the literature is likely shared by many sexual minorities of color and transgender individuals (Doan 2007, 2010; Hunter 2010a; Moore 2011; Rosenberg 2018).

Yet, claims of how we have looked away from certain types of settlements and those who people them also tend to downplay or ignore scholars who *have* documented a variety of queer population concentrations, many of them outside of high-profile gayborhoods and constituting the “cultural archipelagos” that Ghaziani proposes in the title of his symposium essay (Ghaziani 2019). For example, to rely on studies of LBQ populations, Ann Forsyth writes of the peri-urban locale of Northampton (1997). Likewise, shortly before Manuel Castells insisted that lesbian territory does not exist (1983), Wolf documented lesbian feminists in Berkeley (Wolf 1980), and a decade and a half later Kristin Esterberg traced lesbian and bisexual identities in a small city (1997). I could go on (see Forstie 2018; Giesecking 2013, 2016; Gorman-Murray et al. 2008; Krieger 1983; Podmore 2006; Smith & Holt 2005). Put differently, the above literature supports Ghaziani’s claim that it is “obvious” that queer settlements extend beyond the gayborhood (see Barton 2012; Stone 2017).

At the same time, a recent essay by Amy Stone on the dearth of studies of “ordinary” cities and of specific U.S. regions provides compelling evidence that we have not yet succeeded in *making* this obvious (2018; see also Doan 2015). As Stone outlines, despite

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the above scholarship, research disproportionately features specific neighborhoods in specific cities possessing specific populations. Thus, we must wrestle with a tension. On the one hand, how do we reconcile criticisms of the literature as too narrowly focused on specific geographies with the existence of literature on precisely these other types of places? And why are scholars drawn to chronicle “gayborhoods” with greater frequency than other queer settlements, especially given the existence of pathbreaking studies examining other places (e.g., Brekhus 2003; Gray 2008) and documenting the durability of these queer settlements across time and space? In my view, there are four primary explanations for this tension.

First is how scholarship highlighting the experiences of cisgender male, white, and middle-class urbanites dominates the field. As a result, given the visibility of such spaces (Orne 2017; Reed 2003), this scholarship receives outsized attention, and has come to stand in for what is actually a more heterogeneous literature. Despite scholarship on queer women’s urban settlements (Podmore 2006; Tang 2011; Valentine 2013), the experiences of rural queer residents (Gray 2008; Halberstam 2005; Kazyak 2010, 2011; Kirkey and Forsyth 2001), and sexual minorities of color in the city (Greene 2014; Han et al. 2017; Hunter 2010a, 2010b; Moore 2011), work that primarily centers (mostly male) “gayborhoods” in central city neighborhoods has only peripherally engaged this parallel scholarship. Would the call for more heterogeneous studies of queer life be as urgent if the literature on queer women, racial minorities, and transgender individuals constituted our theoretical touchstones?

Second, and relatedly, the tradition of studying urban male settlements and of centering the findings they generate encourages and thus inadvertently reproduces further research in the same areas with the same focus. Many theoretical accounts of place and sexualities have emerged from studies of these settlements (Bell & Valentine 1995; Halberstam 2005); to test or expand those theories, scholars often return to the places that have, historically, been most frequently studied. This is particularly true as scholars seek to understand how these spaces transform with social, cultural, and political developments. This also means that, despite the rarity of the form, too often we use the “gayborhood” as a yardstick against which we measure alternate settlements. Even as we call for studies beyond this form, we often stop short of revamping conceptualizations of LGBTQIA population concentrations and patterns.

Third, beginning with Castells (1983), we have conflated queer settlements with commercial institutions and nightlife practices. Indeed, most studies of “gayborhoods” center these spaces. By default, this means that by using commerce to identify residential settlements, we are much less likely to examine the experiences of those with less capital to keep bars afloat; those too small in number to call out stable and enduring institutions; and those sexual minorities who, because of another identity trait, economic inequalities, and racial discrimination, reside at a distance from queer commercial centers.

This commercial focus is surprising, given insights in the existing literature. For example, in his essay, Ghaziani writes that we mistakenly tend to think “queer life is curiously located in just one part of the city,” yet some scholars have already demonstrated the expansiveness of queer life within the city (Greene 2014; Hunter 2010a, 2010b). Even in a place as small as Ithaca, New York, for instance, LBQ residents make homes for themselves in a variety of neighborhoods, and outlying villages. Their locations depend, in part, on class, racial characteristics, and occupation. One would easily miss this if focusing research on a handful of downtown spaces (see Brown-Saracino 2011, 2015).

Indeed, many informants describe this dispersion as a defining feature of their lives; one Ithaca resident proclaimed, “Where are you [my sisters]?” (Brown-Saracino & Parker 2018), and a friend once said of Boston’s Jamaica Plain, “when I get off the train with my partner it is not like anyone is standing there holding a welcome sign” (Brown-Saracino 2018). They wrestle with the absence of an obvious (commercial and nightlife) center associated with “gayborhoods” that might stand in for “welcome signs”; in Ithaca or Jamaica Plain, and, in fact, in most locales, one would not find a North Halsted or 18th Street. Too often, this has meant that we have looked away from, or been unable to see, those noncommercial places. Theodore Greene’s (2014) work illustrates how we might find some actors—in his case, young African American men—in places like Boystown, but, because of racial and economic barriers, not inside the institutions so often at the center of studies (e.g., Baldor 2018; Green 2008; Orne 2017). Thus, there are lessons in the literature—and more yet to learn—about what we miss when we turn to commerce to study residence.

Fourth, there is a curious investment in the purported demise of the “gayborhood.” I suspect that this is, in part, because its transformation represents a broader set of changes, both enduring (the transformation of group identity with increased acceptance) and more contemporary (gentrification). Just as scholars and journalists often leverage the middle-class gay man as the archetypal gentrifier (Brown-Saracino 2009), we increasingly turn to the changing gayborhood as a symbol and symptom of broader urban transformations. Paradoxically, this elevates the gayborhood in the scholarly and popular imagination at the very moment when scholars report increasing residential dispersion (Ghaziani 2014) and reduced identity salience (Ghaziani 2011). The historical trajectory the gayborhood maps, when taken as universal, also risks overstating the degree to which cultural archipelagos are diversifying and multiplying for all. Part of how we might answer Ghaziani’s call to study these archipelagos is to map not just their multiplication but also their endurance and evolution.

What are the consequences of these four features of the existing scholarship? We have underexamined alternate places or “cultural archipelagos,” *and* we have looked away from lessons garnered from places beyond the gayborhood. By overlooking the heterogeneity of the “gayborhood” itself, and therefore the demographic and cultural dynamism of such spaces, we miss valuable insights about neighborhood interactions and politics across sexual and other lines (cf. Barton 2012; Brodyn & Ghaziani 2018; Gray 2009; Moore 2010; Silva 2018).

This is, of course, a pattern that extends beyond the study of sexualities and place; many community studies document a specific group in a heterogeneous neighborhood. Take, for instance, studies of Wicker Park and surrounding areas that have featured neo-bohemians (Lloyd 2006) or Puerto Rican residents (Perez 2004). Despite this caveat, one way to be more attentive to heterogeneity is to be straightforward about these choices, and about how they render some more visible than others—even within a neighborhood. For the most part, we do not study “gayborhoods” as neighborhoods. Instead, we examine specific groups within their bounds; thus, we have much to learn about even those spaces to which we devote the greatest attention.

This tendency means that we are sometimes overly confident in our assignment of “gayborhood” status to heterogeneous neighborhoods. Chicago’s Andersonville provides a vivid example. In 2010, I sat in a crowded coffee shop on the neighborhood’s northern edge. Graduate students, hipsters, and mothers conversed over espresso drinks. At my

communal table sat two women in their early twenties whom I took to be LBQ. One took a call and I heard her explain, “I’m in *Lesbianville*.” This caught my attention as a week earlier the *Chicago Tribune* published an article detailing the closure of a longstanding Andersonville lesbian bar (Huppke 2010). The article suggests that Andersonville, which LBQ individuals helped gentrify in the 1980s, no longer serves as a lesbian enclave and is increasingly a gay male enclave. What my seatmate calls “*Lesbianville*,” the author reports many now refer to as “*Mandersonville*”. From where I sat there was evidence supporting the article’s claims—gay men clustered at coffee shop tables, populated a restaurant, and operated a nearby antique store. More broadly, they owned an increasing number of homes, and frequented Cheetah Gym, Hamburger Mary’s, and Marty’s Martini Bar (Brown-Saracino 2009; Ghaziani 2014).

Despite this, I wondered whether the neighborhood’s transformation was as complete as the *Tribune* suggested. The neighborhood did not appear to be “*Mandersonville*” when LBQ women and transgender individuals filled the back room at T’s Bar, or at a salon specializing in women’s short haircuts. Why did the article fail to mention a wine bar (*Time Out Chicago* writes of the bar: “ladies looking for ladies: you’re in the right place”)¹ or the LBQ women who frequent Women and Children First? What of summer dance parties for LBQ individuals? The woman at my table clearly did not buy the notion that Andersonville had transformed from “*Lesbianville*” to “*Mandersonville*.” Indeed, the stark incongruity between the article’s pronouncement and her perspective reveal how we sometimes let one group stand in for others, not just by habitually studying places one might call a “gayborhood” or, in this case, “*Mandersonville*,” but also because of *how* we have studied those same places, which individuals and groups we have engaged within them, and the symbolic significance we assign to certain actors.

In response to concerns about the limited geographic focus of studies of sexualities, there is also a tendency to turn attention to understudied regions and categories, such as the South, “ordinary” cities (Stone 2018), and rural areas (Halberstam 2005). As I have argued elsewhere (2017), we must be careful not to mistakenly attribute differences between extant knowledge, based on studies of central city enclaves, and the findings that studies of alternate regions and place categories generate, to categorical attributes. This risks overlooking heterogeneity *within* understudied regions and categories (Brown-Saracino 2015). Moreover, there are both risks and benefits associated with shifting our lens from the micro (the bars, organizations, and small neighborhoods we have habitually studied) to units of analysis as broad as a region. Specifically, we risk overlooking meso-level dynamics, such as at the city, metro-area, or county level.

What is the best path forward? In 2008, I published an essay in the ASA’s *Community and Urban Sociology Section Newsletter* on the state of sociological research on place and sexualities, which offered the observation that “to date no one has chosen to publish an article in *City & Community* . . . that takes as its primary subject a neighborhood or town with a large queer population” (Brown-Saracino 2008). Today, such articles appear with increasing frequency. Indeed, in 2015 Mignon Moore published a symposium essay on the study of sexualities, space, and place (Moore 2015). In the same 2008 essay, I also noted a dearth of scholarship on smaller places, which has since begun to be filled (Barton 2012; Kazyak 2011, 2001, 2012; McFarland Bruce 2016). I also called for scholarship on those with limited access to gayborhood institutions, which researchers have also addressed (see Greene 2014; Han et al. 2017; Hunter 2010b).

Still there remain exciting prospects for additional research. As one example, Ghaziani writes in his lead essay that “geo-sexual complexities ... arise from within-group heterogeneity,” but my recent book, reveals that we must also consider how places *create* that heterogeneity, calling out different ways of thinking about self and group, as well as distinct ways of interacting and organizing (Brown-Saracino 2017). We might explore, for instance, whether the higher propensity for parenting among same-sex couples in certain states is a result of self-selection (i.e., prospective parents move there) or whether, instead, living in certain ecological environments encourages parenting.

There are also opportunities for more holistic studies of queer settlements that span population groups. Even our most highly visible gayborhoods are not singularly gay. Indeed, even the “gayest” zip code in the United States, Provincetown, remains predominantly peopled by heterosexuals (Brown-Saracino 2009; Faiman-Silva 2004; Krahulik 2007). By studying gayborhoods, we can actually study heterogeneous populations and interactions (see Brodyn & Ghaziani 2018; Hunter 2010b; Moore 2010). I do not wish to merely sound a call to scholars of place and sexualities. The vast majority of place-based research has overlooked the queer individuals who reside anywhere one might study. Indeed, urban sociology has a long history of rendering the world far more heterosexual than it actually is (Moore 2015). How do communities that are not demarcated as LGBTQ enclaves negotiate sexual difference? In short, despite much attention to sexual minorities’ residential integration, most still treat queer populations separately. Urbanists ought to busy themselves documenting sexual heterogeneity in their studies of a range of subjects, from urban schools to affordable housing. Likewise, scholars of sexualities and place can integrate enduring concerns of urbanists, such as those related to housing and neighborhood effects, in their inquiries.

As the field continues to develop and evolve, I call us to recognize how and why heterogeneity—or the existence of “cultural archipelagos”—does not surprise scholars who have, for decades, documented a range of queer settlements, as well as the residential mobility and vulnerability of certain populations (Carrillo 2018; Murray 2014). Awareness of this heterogeneity extends to everyday actors. Along these lines, an autobiographical example comes to mind. Twenty years ago, as a young queer woman visiting San Francisco, I discovered that my networks did not take me to the Castro, but instead to the Mission and beyond, to Oakland and Berkeley. I do not turn to the autobiographical lightly here. Instead, I seek to underline how, to a remarkable degree, assessments of what we know about queer settlements reflect our own identity categories and that of the specific groups we study and the places they make and inhabit. We should and must study uncharted territory, but we should do so with abundant awareness of what we already know when we liberate ourselves from narrow visions of queer residential concentration and the literatures this directs us to. This symposium offers a crucial step in aligning our maps and charting the best paths forward.

Notes

¹<http://www.timeout.com/chicago/bars/joie-de-vine>; posted January 28, 2014; accessed May 14, 2015.

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