

## Cultural Archipelagos or Planetary Systems

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Amin Ghaziani's important new article (2019) in this special symposium suggests that researchers studying traditional gay villages need to expand their horizons. While gay villages (or "gayborhoods") were important components of social and political developments in the wake of the gay liberation movement (Boyd 2003; Castells 1983; Chauncey 1994; Newton 1993; Stryker and Van Buskirk 1996; Weston 1995), they have attracted a considerable amount of research to the detriment of other types of LGBTQ neighborhoods and more broadly habitation patterns. In his seminal book, Ghaziani wonders about the future of such gayborhoods (2014). In this issue of *City & Community*, Ghaziani (2019) uses the concept of cultural archipelagos representing a kind of spatial plurality to better characterize "geo-sexual complexity" across a full range of queer spaces. This paper is written to respond and react to his concepts.

### WHAT IS AN ARCHIPELAGO?

At first glance the archipelago concept is quite intriguing and seems a significant advance on Robert Park's concept of a city as a set of neighborhoods as a mosaic (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1925). A chain of islands in a sea like Indonesia or the Philippines certainly carries the association of rich cultural diversity since the differences between the islands encourage the growth of differences and break down narrow conceptions of singular neighborhoods. I really like this metaphor because it suggests many types of neighborhoods that are connected and yet distinct. However, islands are also quite fixed in place and the urban theorist in me wonders about neighborhoods that don't easily change. This concern is important because neighborhoods and their inhabitants, and especially LGBTQ residents are in a constant state of metamorphosis.

To explore further the implications of Ghaziani's fascinating metaphor, I will draw on a variety of interviews I have had with LGBTQ people in several cities. In addition, since Stone (2018) suggests that we shift research away from the northeast and west coasts of the United States and that social scientists should devote more time to the study of queer issues in the south, I will draw on interviews from Tampa and Atlanta that illustrate this fluid movement around queer spaces. In these various interviews, a common characteristic of many LGBTQ people is that they are always moving in and/or around a neighborhood that is in a state of near constant flux. Often it seems like they are orbiting around the queer neighborhoods, sometimes living quite close, sometimes in it, and at other times moving away in search of less expensive housing. This movement is most

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pronounced when LGBTQ individuals first move to a city, and then make multiple moves seeking to find just the right space that may or most likely may not be in the most popular LGBT neighborhood. Sometimes changes to the original neighborhood force an outward movement, at other times, it is life events experienced by the individuals or their partners. Some will never actually reside within the neighborhood, but may certainly visit to go to bars or restaurants, attend political rallies, or just generally find community. Lewis (2015) describes a similar process in Washington DC, where many gay men, no longer living in the traditional gay areas and often living outside the District, return to the iconic queer spaces intermittently for entertainment and in search of companionship.

## REFLECTIONS FROM YBOR CITY IN TAMPA

In my current research on the Ybor City neighborhood of Tampa, I heard many stories about living and visiting Ybor among the LGBTQ people I interviewed. Ybor City thrived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as a home for immigrant workers in the cigar industry. The neighborhood is now a designated National Historic Landmark, but over the past 100 years it experienced a series of economic booms and then busts. During the most recent economic recession, the GaYbor District Coalition was formed to promote Ybor City as Tampa's most LGBT friendly ethnic neighborhood.

For example, I spoke with one man, a gay Cuban-American who was born in Ybor, who described his impressions of the neighborhood as it became a focal point for the LGBTQ community.

I wanna say, there was always gays, they were just more low profile, and it was frustrating. I remember when I bought this house . . . I loved Ybor really showing signs that it was going to come back . . . and I said to myself, God you know what you really need to do is you need to go down to Ybor City, believe in the district that ya know, this precious district that is fading away, do what they did in Key West, do what the gays did in Key West, come in here, buy some of these homes, restore em.

(Source interview by Doan, in revision)

Another gay Cuban-American (Pablo) reflected that "I've been here since 68 in Tampa, and so I primarily lived in south Tampa, like Hyde Park, the Bayshore area . . . and then now I live in Seminole Heights which is another up and coming area." Pablo also lived in Ybor for a time and helped to redevelop several small casitas and turned one into an art gallery, but ultimately, he prefers to live in Seminole Heights not in Ybor. This perspective was confirmed by Reggie, another gay white resident of Ybor, who suggested that fixing up old houses was part of the ethos of what it meant to him to be gay.

I think the nature of the gays is to take a place, regentrify it, and move on to the next place, and we used to do that here with Seminole Heights, now Seminole Heights is becoming very gay. A lot of folks moving there because the prices are inexpensive, and when they turn it around, they know they'll make money on it, and everyone's starting to flock there.

(Source interview by Doan, in revision)

Other respondents spoke of finally finding Ybor and realizing that they were home. For example, Brad, a gay resident of Ybor in his 50s, shared his reaction to Ybor after living in Hyde Park.

I'm not yuppied enough for Hyde Park. So, we decided to try Ybor for a year and see if we liked it and within a month, I said to my partner you can live anywhere you want as long as it's in Ybor. And then ever since, I loved it.

(Source interview by Doan, in revision)

Another interviewee (Roger, a gay man in his 30s) said that he had never lived in Ybor City though when he was younger he spent many nights in Ybor partying, always returning in the early hours to his residence on Davis Island or several other neighborhoods. And yet as a realtor, he likes to bring his clients to Ybor

to introduce people to Tampa... and I'll take them to a restaurant here on 7th Avenue and it's a great way to walk around and kind of talk about the history of Tampa... I think Ybor City's good for exposing straight people to gay people because you see them walking down the street holding hands or you walk by a gay bar and you kind of peer in and you'll be like, 'What's going on in there.' So they can see it.

(Source interview by Doan, in revision)

Finally, Mack (a white gay business manager in his 50s) confirms that there are not enough gay men in Ybor to support the variety of bars, and they must continue to draw visitors from other areas of the Tampa Bay area.

Yeah, if we had to rely on residents of Ybor or even on Channelside, the doors will close. There's not enough. It's largely—I couldn't guess a percentage, but I would say more than 50% are from outside Ybor.

(Source interview by Doan, in revision)

## REFLECTIONS FROM ATLANTA

In Atlanta the traditional gay village since the 1980s has been Midtown, although in the last two decades gentrification has made it difficult for many LGBTQ people to be able to afford it. A nearby city, Decatur, has been called by some "Dyke-catur" and is a popular place for lesbians, but it is also becoming more expensive. In the Atlanta metro area both Midtown and Decatur function as loci around which LGBTQ people circle looking for housing and community. This is consistent with Ghaziani's observations (2014).

Gay men tended to focus on Midtown, especially if they were lucky enough to move before the prices went up. Ronald, a middle-aged gay man, describes his process.

I first moved to Sandy Springs, but I lived in Buckhead for ten years, then Midtown... Living in Midtown, I know probably everyone on my street by sight, and I know probably 75% of them by name... I mean, I moved into residential Midtown before it was *the place*... it was the gay Mecca, but it was still a pretty run-down neighborhood.

(Source interview by Doan and Higgins, GALIP Project not previously quoted)

Other gay men cannot afford the rents in Midtown and live elsewhere. For instance, in an earlier piece of research we interviewed Charlie, a gay man in his 30s, who indicated that most of his gay crowd did not live in Midtown, but regularly visited queer spaces in Midtown "to go to the gym, get a drink, buy a book or magazine, and, well, for sex" (Doan and Higgins 2011: 15)

Another respondent (a gay black man in his early 30s) told a similar story. In his interview he explained that when he moved back to Atlanta after several years away, he

purchased a suburban home in Stone Mountain (east of Decatur), but he reported that he was just not comfortable in the suburbs, so he moved back into Atlanta.

It was just too restrictive out there [Stone Mountain]. I am a city person, so I found a place south of the capital near the stadium. But I am very comfortable at any place in Midtown. . . . The thing is there are different tastes between the Black and White communities, especially in terms of musical tastes. I like house music, and you just don't find that in most places in Midtown, so I mostly go to these mobile parties that are advertised by a text message the day of the party. (Interview quoted in Doan 2015b: 149)

And yet Midtown retains its iconic presence. In an interview with Joe, a gay political activist in his 50s, he recognizes the continuing pull of Midtown for a broad spectrum of LGBTQ people.

There is a strong perception that 10<sup>th</sup> and Piedmont is the heart of the LGBT community in Atlanta. A very real perception. A lot politically goes with that perception. It is the heart and soul of the Atlanta community; when the community has a need to gather. (Interview quoted in Doan 2014: 204)

Lesbians followed a similar pattern of searching for spaces either near Midtown or Decatur. One African-American lesbian in her 40s described her search for housing with her white partner as follows:

I really wanted to be in Decatur, because I heard that that was the lesbian place to be. And we scoured Decatur. . . . I begged her to drive through neighborhood after neighborhood of houses . . . but they were expensive. . . . So, we tried Midtown, and all of the places that we saw had rents that were just astronomical . . . we're looking into other neighborhoods.

(Source interview by Doan and Higgins, GALIP Project not previously quoted)

Another white lesbian couple in their 50s described a similar process of seeking housing at the edges of more recognized queer places, but ultimately not finding what they were looking for in the center.

We live near . . . the realtor called it Dearborn Park [south of Decatur]. . . . We've also lived in Decatur and Poncy Highlands . . . between Virginia Highlands and Little Five Points [just east of Midtown].

(Source Interview by Doan and Higgins, GALIP Project, not previously quoted)

For the transgender community, queer spaces are especially important since part of the transition process for each individual involves spending time in public as the gender they feel they are (Doan 2010). Namaste (2000) argues that trans people are often ignored and virtually erased by the rest of society. This causes many problems. People are willing to travel long distances to find places where they can do their gender explorations. Accordingly, many trans people from around the Southeast look at big cities like Atlanta or Tampa as places to visit to find safety and acceptance as they pursue their gender journeys. Ghaziani references a study by Doan (2007), who describes the way that trans people continue to seek queer space as a kind of safe place, even though their welcome is not always clear. In a later chapter, Doan (2016) documents the journeys that trans folks make in search of identity as part of their coming out process that often involves regular visits to a larger city like Atlanta. At times there is an odd periodicity to these trips, sometimes monthly, sometimes less frequently, but often at least once a year.

However, there is often a legacy of discrimination, especially by some gay men toward trans women and especially trans women of color, that makes the discussion of the inclusiveness of queer spaces critical. Due to discrimination, some openly trans individuals have difficulty finding regular employment in legal venues and must pursue other means of surviving. While drag queens who perform on stage are acceptable, trans people who take their performance to the streets are seen as a disturbance whether or not they violate any laws (Doan 2015b). In Atlanta, some gay residents of Midtown tried to encourage City Council to ban prostitutes from returning to certain areas such as the Midtown gayborhood because their presence was “threatening” (Bagby 2012; Nourae 2008). Observers in other cities have noted similar efforts by white gay men to “police” their neighborhoods and keep trans women of color from strolling on “their” streets. In Toronto (Baute 2008) and San Francisco (Edelman 2011), gay men in gentrifying areas organized to drive transgender sex workers of color away from their neighborhoods. In Los Angeles, sex workers are highly marginalized by other sex workers and are often forced to work in poorly-lighted, remote areas that place them at risk (Weinberg et al. 1999).

## SOLAR SYSTEMS AND SPATIAL SINGULARITIES

All of this is to say that perhaps the metaphor of islands is too limited. Islands are mostly fixed to the sea bottom and don’t have the character of change and metamorphosis that might better characterize the kinds of places where LGBTQ people live, at least on a human time scale. Volcanic eruptions and tectonic shifts might cause islands to emerge or disappear, but these events tend towards the cataclysmic. But perhaps this kind of thinking is too tightly bound to the earthly sphere. Perhaps a solar system with planets rotating around a sun is a more apt metaphor for LGBTQ residents and residential areas, spinning and circling iconic queer spaces. Indeed, Ghaziani (2019) suggests a broader vision with his use of the term spatial singularity: “The assumption of spatial singularity veils our ability to see, let alone theorize, the relationship between multiple [queer] areas.”

One frequent use of the term singularity is a reference to black holes that occur after a large star first explodes in a super nova and then contracts into a black hole, warping the space time continuum. These occurrences have the tendency to suck nearby light and matter into this spatial singularity. Perhaps gay villages are like mini suns around which LGBTQ individuals orbit, some closer, some further away. Those gay villages that burn too brightly may run out of fuel, which some astronomers suggest might be the cause of the initial super nova before the black hole. Certainly, the ravages of the AIDS epidemic had a powerful demographic effect on the Castro and other notable gay villages (Rosenfeld et al. 2012; Rosser et al. 2008) by depriving them of the bodies needed for those spaces to burn brightly (producing what Ghaziani calls “gay Potemkin villages”). And yet the Castro continues like a black hole to have an inordinate effect on much queer space research, threatening to suck all available research into that singularity, blotting out all other possible foci for research. This might be the kind of biggie bang that Ghaziani’s informant suggested was one explanation for the end of queer space. Not a bang, but a super nova transforming into a spatial singularity.

Whether or not gay villages are at risk of going nova, it is critical to expand our focus beyond the binary and take a much more overtly queer perspective. LGBTQ spaces are most definitely *not* binary, as Ghaziani argues. They are in a constant state of becoming

and not becoming, of welcoming some LGBTQ people and driving others away. The question from a planning perspective is whether and how to intervene to enhance the process of becoming or slow the process of not becoming. Ultimately, the proper appellation for these unique urban neighborhoods can follow the same astrophysical metaphor. If not cultural archipelagos then perhaps spinning, rotating solar systems hurtling through space and time, until their sun uses up its own nuclear fuel creating a new super nova. The task for social science is to better understand these phenomena and perhaps avoid the collapse of these important spaces (Doan 2015a).

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