

Queer Cultural Archipelagos are New to US

Theodore Greene*

Bowdoin College

A framework advancing the spatial plurality of queer communities in cities is long overdue. Ghaziani's notion of queer "cultural archipelagos" offers an important and timely intervention for reimagining queer place-making and communities in the city. It arrives at a pivotal turning point in urban studies, when scholars are redefining contemporary cities as sites where new claims of local citizenship arise out of everyday exercises of organic (Lew 2017) and insurgent (Holston 1999, Hou 2010b) place-making (see also Douglas 2014, Hondagneu-Sotelo 2014, Hou 2010a, Kidder 2014, Lefebvre 1996, Purcell 2002, Sassen 2005). Incorporating this body of scholarship amplifies the analytic purchase of cultural archipelagos for investigating the socio-spatial complexity of the queer urban landscape, drawing attention to a range of diverse urban actors often erased by the privileging of iconic gay neighborhoods.

The neologism of queer cultural archipelagos belies the longstanding spatial plurality of sexual communities within cities. Despite assumptions centering on a singular "gayborhood," iconic gay neighborhoods have always existed alongside other spatialized expressions of queer life. The iconic status of San Francisco's Castro neighborhood eclipses other gay and lesbian enclaves that grew and fostered queer communities at the same time, including South of Market, which celebrated the sexual aspects of queer life and fostered the queer leather subculture, and Pacific Heights, which housed a collection of middle- and upper-class gay men who favored a homonormative approach toward legal and social acceptance in a "system that was otherwise highly favorable to their sex, class, and race" (Castells 1983: 156). Washington, DC's Dupont Circle never existed as the city's sole gayborhood; Georgetown, Capitol Hill, and Downtown DC were well-established gay enclaves as Dupont began to flourish in the 1970s and 1980s (Beemyn 1997, Lapadula 1985, Roundy 1999, Wheeler 1983). As those neighborhoods declined, new gay settlements in Logan Circle and around Shaw/U Street rivaled Dupont's iconic status. In New Orleans, gay white men flocked Marigny-Farbourg in the 1960s and 1970s to access the flourishing gay community in the nearby French Quarter (Archer 2018, Knopp 1990, 1995, 1997). The success of the Stonewall Riots in June 1969 depended on the activation of gay and queer people living far beyond the boundaries of Christopher Street and Greenwich Village, suggesting the extent to which LGBT communities have always been clustered (and variably visible) throughout New York City (Carter 2004, Duberman 1993, Truscott 1969).

This is not to mention the queer settlements fostered in racial and ethnic enclaves, which, due to a legacy of racial and economic segregation, necessitated the production of a different spatial imagination. Ghaziani's (2014, 2019) "surprising" finding of

*Correspondence should be addressed to Theodore Greene, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Bowdoin College, 7000 College Station, Brunswick, ME 04101-8470, USA; tgreene@bowdoin.edu.

“emerging” clusters of queer communities of color in black neighborhoods and ethnic enclaves arises out of the application of demographic and analytic tools that render these communities legible to urban scholars. However, the very political, socioeconomic, and cultural factors that produced racially-stratified cities limited the participation of queer minorities in LGBT spaces outside their own residential communities. While popular perceptions of black homophobia within the “iconic ghetto” (Anderson 2012) often render them invisible, black sexual minorities have developed vibrant and variably visible communities throughout the 20th century, where many lived out their sexual lives within proximity of their families and friends (Beemyn 2015, Cabello 2008, 2011, Drexel 1997, Heap 2009). Private house parties, nightclubs, cookouts, and drag balls have always represented integral spaces for developing and maintaining queer black communities. Various spaces enabled mixing between black queer residents and their straight counterparts. Same-sex couples canoodled alongside straight couples in jazz clubs (Beemyn 2015, Cabello 2008, 2011), and in a time where the formation of the “closet” forced much of gay life underground, drag balls like “Finnie’s Ball” on Chicago’s South Side proved so popular within the local public that they received extensive coverage in mainstream black publications like *Jet*, *Ebony*, and *The Chicago Defender* (Drexel 1997).

Economic and political disinvestment of inner-city black neighborhoods, propelled by rioting and the out-migration of the black middle-class, did not eliminate the black queer spatial imagination. While many black queer residents endured racial and sexual discrimination in iconic gay neighborhoods (Boykin 1996, Greene 2018a, 2018b), black queer culture in predominantly black areas persisted as black gays and lesbians navigated a terrain where their sexuality may be known, but never discussed. They sat in church pews and sang in the choir while listening to sermons demonizing homosexuality (Bennett and Battle 2001, Boykin 1996, Monroe 1999). Many developed distinct relational orders where their sexuality was performed in private or in spaces outside of their neighborhoods. The spaces which foster these communities often prove ephemeral. Gay nightlife may constitute a single night in a straight club venue; festivals in local parks might create a safe “queer space” for an afternoon or weekend. Nevertheless, these communities marshal their available resources to carve out spaces where they are not only visible to one another, but also where they can leverage economic opportunities that mitigate the effects of social and economic isolation (Hunter 2010).

These histories matter. Studies of gay neighborhoods emerged as scholars were challenging the prevailing assumptions of homosexuality as “deviant.” Highlighting similarities between gay neighborhoods and other established ecological frameworks like Jewish ghettos (Levine 1979) and ethnic enclaves (Castells 1983, Castells and Murphy 1982, Murray 1979), scholars sought to legitimate the gayborhood as sociologically valid. The hallmarks they established — residential concentration, institutional completeness, and a visible gay culture all circumscribed in a bounded area — ultimately became a trap as subsequent studies privileged certain socio-spatial tropes over others. Queer placemaking became narrowly defined as a phenomenon driven by cisgender, white, middle-class gay men who transform economically depressed urban spaces into fashionable neighborhoods for hip, trendy, urban cosmopolitans interested in consuming diversity. Iconic gay neighborhoods not only persisted and perished on their residential and leisure patterns, but also their politics. Increased visibility and acceptance of white queer culture meant that LGBT residents no longer depended on the “gay ghetto” for security and a sense of community. The histories of queer spatial communities only mattered as it pertained

to white gay men. During an interview on the closure of popular nightclub Town in Washington, DC, a reporter asked me whether Shaw, a historically black neighborhood recently experiencing white gentrification (Hyra 2017), was “emerging” as the new gayborhood. “It seems that gay men have begun to move into and gentrify Shaw,” he began. I interrupted him. “Shaw has always represented a gay neighborhood for many black queer people who created and sustained communities. It doesn’t become a gayborhood simply because white gay men colonized it; a gay community has always existed there.”

CULTURAL ARCHIPELAGOS IN ICONIC GAY NEIGHBORHOODS

Indeed, queer spatial communities are multiplying and diversifying. Demographic data draw attention to how these new settlements reflect a private relational order, which privileges the domestication of sexuality. In residential communities, LGBT residents engage in practices consistent with the production of place, relegating any performances of sex and sexuality behind closed doors. As Viet (28, Asian, queer) describes his local community in Washington, DC’s Shaw neighborhood, “These are spaces where a bitch may not sashay down the block in heels, but they will invite friends over to watch *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.” Nicholas (38, white, gay) lives in Shaw with his husband of nine years, William (38, Latino, gay). During their time in the neighborhood, they have witnessed the neighborhood transition from African American “elders” to gay white men. “We now have gay white men living on either side of us. The couple to our left are [sic] what I would consider the ‘A-gays.’ Everything they do is perfect. They dress impeccably; their door is painted the perfect color . . . they even had a perfectly decorated Christmas tree.” He continues describing how this “perfect” gay couple “perfectly” played out the private relational order after a snow storm. “[William] and I were sitting on our couches, drinking hot cocoa and enjoying the snow day when we began hearing shoveling outside our house. We looked out, and there were the ‘A-gays’ shoveling our sidewalk and walkway. We were so surprised by that . . . it inspired us to go out there and be part of that — we brought them hot cocoa.” The above vignette describes how queer residents participate in the production of queer space in a private relational order. The “A-gays” are visible as a gay couple; their neighbors know their story and their “front stage” presentations (Goffman 1959) are marked by their ability to maintain an impeccably tasteful home. However, their practices of neighboring, demonstrated by generously shoveling their neighbors’ walkways, are congruent with the production of space within a residential community. They are likely not to hold hands in public spaces or discuss their sexual practices outside the privacy of their homes.

Iconic gay neighborhoods retain their reputation as spaces where many LGBT people perform a public relational order. These are safe spaces where they can freely display public affection with their partner, or where they can feel comfortable walking down the street in heels next to a straight couple enjoying their bunch. “You’re surrounded by gayness in Dupont Circle,” William explains. “The Gay Pride parade goes through there every year. The gay restaurants are still there . . . it’s got a lot of gay history. When you go there, there are straight people there, but they are clearly the visitors. I can kiss my husband on the streets without fear, because that space is ours.” The symbolic ownership William claims over Dupont Circle despite living in Shaw reflects a practice I call vicarious citizenship — the exercise of rights and entitlements by nonresidential actors who

identify politically, economically, and/or socio-culturally with a neighborhood or locality (Greene 2014). Vicarious citizens may have a passing or fleeting relationship with their communities of interest; nevertheless, they combine a shared sense of identity with their participation in the life of the community to situate themselves as local stakeholders, at times challenging the visions of community held by those with more material ties.

As residents select into communities outside of iconic gay neighborhoods, vicarious communities enable urban denizens to share their loyalties with both their residential community and the communities they create in gay neighborhoods as they satisfy their needs. Although Nicholas and William feel great comfort being out in their own neighborhood, they also find themselves attached to community in Dupont Circle, where they can plug into the public gay culture. “While I feel my neighborhood changing,” Nicholas argues, “and I feel more comfortable than I did when I first formally moved in 2006, I still find my urban compass squared directly at Dupont Circle, especially 17th Street.” Increasingly, residents have begun to distinguish gay neighborhoods along these distinct relational orders. When Jordan (24, white, gay) moved to Washington, DC, he moved to Shaw because he was told that it was “where the gay boys lived.” However, he soon realized that he also “lived” in Dupont Circle, where he spent most of his time with friends. When asked to define gayborhoods today, he makes an important distinction: “We are beginning to see a difference in what gay neighborhoods are. There are the gay neighborhoods that are residential and the gay neighborhoods that are commercial.”

The participation of vicarious citizens in iconic gay neighborhoods gestures to how neighborhoods contain multiple, sometimes competing visions of place and community. Many still rely on iconic gay neighborhoods as spaces where they can live a public relational order, even when local queer residents aspire to live a more private one. Placemaking practices condemned by one community may function as a creative force for another. In my research on “queer street families” (Greene 2018b), I consider how queer youth of color create and foster communities in Chicago’s Boystown by reproducing “street corner” culture indigenous to their own communities. As the overwhelmingly commercial focus of gay institutional anchors render spaces in the gayborhood inaccessible to them, these youth develop a public relational order that mirrors the “codes of the street” governing street families in inner cities (Anderson 1994, 1999), at times using violence to mediate internal conflicts and external threats. As local residents criticize the presence of black and Latinx youth as threats to public safety, queer youths of color use these practices to make the gay neighborhood socio-culturally relevant to them, and in so doing, reinforce the role of gay neighborhoods as spaces where gender and sexual identities are affirmed and supported. Subsequently, Orne’s (2017) study of “sexy communities” in Chicago’s Boystown neighborhood demonstrates how vicarious citizens deploy sex to reclaim the gayborhood as a site of sexual exploration and experimentation from straight newcomers and homonormative residents who minimize elements of queer sexuality in favor of diversity consumption (Ghaziani 2014). These, too, represent queer cultural archipelagos — multiple spatial communities nestled within the gayborhood, supporting diverse communities within the same space. Paradoxically, these conflicting cultural archipelagos reflect a creative force within iconic gay neighborhoods, highlighting their symbolic value as their material culture diminishes.

Queer cultural archipelagos may also be temporally variant. Communities may activate queer spaces as they need them to foster community ties or advance their interests. We often see this in bars and clubs, where the production of place shifts depending on the

community occupying that particular space. As the number of bars decreased significantly over the last two decades, one often finds a greater effort on the part of the remaining bars to promote diverse events over the course of the week to attract a wider cross-section of patrons, including heterosexual cosmopolitans. Theme nights like “Retro Night,” “Jai-Ho,” “Latino Night,” and “Ladies Night” constitute time-contingent, segmented social orders (Suttles 1968), where culture and community flourish and ebb in the moment, only to regenerate when the time comes around for the event to happen again. Following the tragic shooting at Pulse Nightclub in 2016, LGBT communities around the world reactivated spaces in iconic gay neighborhoods as sites of collective mourning. In Washington, DC, local residents transformed the fountain at Dupont Circle into a makeshift memorial, where community members held vigil, giving passionate speeches about the need to preserve queer safe spaces. Within a week, the fountain returned to “normal” as the community began to move on from the tragedy.

The complexity and vibrancy of queer communities have never been contained to one area of the city. Queer cultural archipelagos have long existed in various forms, created and fostered by a diversity of social actors, responding to the ecological, political, and economic conditions of their residential communities. They represent the legacy of place-making practices that once defined the “gay worlds” of the early twentieth century as well as those that mark the homonormativity of today’s gay neighborhoods. They defy the bounds of space, place, and time. Embracing the framework of sexual spatial diversity opens new opportunities to explore the complexities of the queer experience in cities. But we are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past if we apply this framework only to residential communities, or if we divert our attention away from the diverse representations of queer life flourishing in iconic gay neighborhoods. While it is helpful to think about gay neighborhoods as a chain on an island of diverse spatial expressions, we must also remember the queer cultural archipelagos within iconic gay neighborhoods, where vicarious citizens strategically enact their visions of community through the appropriation of space and activation of the gayborhood’s symbolic reputation. Exploring queer cultural archipelagos as expressions of contemporary urban citizenship expands our spatial imagination to the innovative and surprising ways queer communities live in cities. Only then can we truly understand and reclaim the important contributions of sexual minorities to our dynamic urban landscape.

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