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Abstract

Book review of: Amin Ghaziani *There Goes the Gayborhood?* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014 (280 pp). ISBN 9-78069115-879-2 (hard cover) RRP \$64.00.

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Life in the gayborhood: Safety, difference and change in the urban gay neighbourhood

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Amin Ghaziani *There Goes the Gayborhood?* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014 (280 pp). ISBN 9-78069115-879-2 (hard cover) RRP \$64.00.

In Neville Jackson's 1965 Australian novel, *No End to the Way*, the narrator, Ray, describes looking for a flat in which he and his male lover can establish their first home together. It is a difficult enterprise.

Sometimes the flat itself would be all right, but the district would be no good; ... or windows of another flat would look straight into your own ... You'd only have to slip once, just forget yourselves, and give each other a kiss or something, and you'd give the game away. It'd be like living in a fishbowl; not much good for the kind of life you both want to lead' (Jackson 1965, p. 103).

Ray's fear of the consequences should his homosexuality be discovered was certainly warranted. Loss of home, family, career and even liberty could result. In Australia in the 1950s and 1960s, the extraordinary monitoring of homosexual lives extended not only through the public spaces—hotels, bars, cinemas, parks—in which men of the time found one another, but into neighbourhoods and homes. *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported in 1953, for example, that 'Police are now asking owners and managers of flats and residential in Kings Cross and other districts to report to local police stations any groups of effeminate type men or youths who regularly congregate in their buildings'.

The monitoring and persecution of homosexual people in that era set out to deny any attempt to claim a space of one's own. It seems extraordinary then, that within a few short decades two areas in Sydney were to become known—and even celebrated—as neighbourhoods defined by their inhabitation by large numbers of gay men. Oxford Street and sections of the inner-eastern suburbs through which it runs—Darlinghurst, Paddington and Surry Hills—was the first of what have been described as gay ghettos, gay neighbourhoods and, more recently, 'gayborhoods'. Beginning in the 1980s, areas of Sydney's inner-west, including Newtown, Erskineville and Camperdown, would gradually become the second. In these spaces, new identities were born and newly 'out', politically active and culturally productive communities asserted their right to live openly and freely as gay.

But if these gay spaces seemingly sprang into rapid life, are they now just as quickly disappearing? In *There Goes the Gayborhood?*, American sociologist Amin Ghaziani takes up the question of whether or not the age of the United States gayborhood is over. Ghaziani defines gayborhoods as spaces with four characteristics: first, a geographic focal point such that the neighbourhood can be easily identified on a map; second, 'a unique culture', the tone of which is influenced by lesbian and gay residents; third, a large number of residences containing a statistically significant number of gay inhabitants; and fourth, a number of commercial venues including, for example, gay bars and the offices of gay community groups (p. 2). He identifies such spaces across several American cities and contemplates their potential disappearance.

Ghaziani is responding to a series of American newspaper reports declaring the gayborhood's demise. He begins, for example, with a 2007 *New York Times* headline, 'Gay enclaves face prospect of being passé' (p. 1). In an era some label as 'post-gay', in which gay life is an increasingly accepted part of the mainstream, perhaps the gayborhood is obsolete. The question mark in Ghaziani's title, however, is significant. Rather than finding gayborhoods in decline, what he finds is a process of change: in the meanings of sexuality and in the meanings of urban spaces. He writes:

Every neighborhood will change at some point. Though cities are built of bricks and concrete,

they nonetheless are living, breathing, organic entities that are perpetually shifting, even if those changes are not always evident to us. Gayborhoods certainly are not an exception to this most basic of urban insights (p. 6).

Through examining media sources and interviews with residents—gay and straight—of American gay neighbourhoods, Ghaziani seeks out a more complex explanation than a simple ‘live or die’ future for the gayborhood.

Ghaziani’s perspective as a sociologist brings interesting insights, but the topic itself is not a new one. The urban gay neighbourhood has been studied in a range of academic disciplines since at least the 1980s. Historians including George Chauncey (1994), Matt Houlbrook (2006), Garry Wotherspoon (1991) and Robert Reynolds (2009) have examined the historical importance of the modern city to the development of gay identities. Cultural geographers, including Andrew Gorman-Murray (2006; Gorman-Murray & Nash 2014), Petra Doan (2007); Doan & Higgins (2011), Lawrence Knopp (1998) and Michael P. Brown (2005) have contemplated interactions between minority sexual and gender identities and urban space. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (2002) have written together about similar issues from the perspective of cultural studies. Delving into the literature on this topic reveals the fascinating complexity of the past, present and future of the gay neighbourhood. Ghaziani makes a valuable contribution to this ongoing conversation.

It is a conversation in which I feel both a professional and personal interest. I’m an historian with a research background in the histories and geographies of sexuality. I’ve made my own small contributions to the literature on this topic in the past (McKinnon 2010; McKinnon 2012). I’m also a gay man who lives in a gayborhood. My partner and I have lived in Sydney’s Erskineville for seven years and it is a place that I love. The neighbourhood is not entirely gay, of course—lesbians and gays are a very small minority of the Australian population after all. The majority of residents in any gay neighbourhood are straight. Indeed, Erskineville is home to multiple identities—‘hipster’ being the latest to appear; young women and men with a devotion to retro fashions, tattoos and anything artisanal. But there are enough lesbians and gays to be visible, to play a role in defining the meaning of the space, to gain political traction and to make demands through our presence. Erskineville is home to many cafes, restaurants and pubs and the staff and patrons are as likely to be gay as straight. There are other same-sex couples at the gym, at the Thai takeaway, having dinner at our local. We are, paradoxically, both visible and ignored—our presence is enough to make claims to the space, and through that claim we become both marked and unremarkable. Reading *There Goes the Gayborhood?* I was forced, not for the first time, to think about why I prefer to live in a space like this—and how I would feel if the gayborhood were to disappear.

Reading Ghaziani’s book and thinking through these issues, three inter-linked themes struck me as particularly significant: safety, difference and change. Although queer spaces can be critical in the emergence of modern gay identities, they have not been without their continuing contradictions and complexities. They might be defined as ‘safe’ spaces for homosexual people, yet they have often been places in which lesbians and gay men have been the targets of homophobic abuse and violence. They may be spaces in which difference is celebrated, but they may also be rejected by gay people who don’t see themselves as different at all. And they may be seen as spaces over which gays and lesbians can claim some ongoing ownership, and yet that ownership is always under challenge and the meanings of these spaces are themselves always changing. In the rest of this essay, I explore these themes in the context of Ghaziani’s book, other research on the topic and my own experiences of life as a gay man in a gayborhood.

SAFETY IN SPACES OF RISK

Ghaziani frequently describes gay neighbourhoods as safe spaces, and there is a certain truth to that description. I’m not sure, however, that he captures the complexity of what ‘safety’ in gayborhoods may mean. He writes:

A basic, intimate act like holding your partner’s hand or sharing a sweet kiss on the street without fear is profoundly political, if for no other reason than because doing so is not always possible beyond the sacred streets of the gayborhood (p. 19).

This is absolutely true, yet it is also, paradoxically, true to say that sharing a public kiss with a same-sex partner in a gayborhood may also lead to abuse and even violence. Safety for gay men and lesbians is both found and lost in these spaces. As Christina B. Hanhardt argues, 'In the 1970s, the prevailing story may have held that the so-called gay ghetto provided salvation from an inhospitable small town and alienating suburb, but to many this also made it a clear target' (2013, p. 10). The gayborhood offers safety in numbers and the political, social and personal benefits of visibility. Yet with that visibility comes risk.

Each of the occasions on which I've been subject to homophobic abuse has occurred in the gay neighbourhoods of Sydney. The first was in the mid-1990s. Holding hands with my first boyfriend and walking along Oxford Street, both of us happy in the glow of first love and at having found our people in this space, we were suddenly surrounded by a group of young, straight men. They spat at us, called us sick and disgusting, swore and stabbed angry gestures toward us before, thankfully, moving on. We walked a little further, turned a corner, and received more abuse from a mini-bus full of more young, straight men. It was a reminder that, although we may have thought of that street as our space, there will always be others who travel through the city insisting that every space is theirs. Even as we make a claim on a space, that claim is being disputed and resisted, at times violently so.

Ghaziani does note his own experiences of homophobic abuse in gay neighbourhoods. He nonetheless applies the label of 'safe space' (p. 19) to gayborhoods without exploring in great depth how these spaces have, simultaneously, been both safe and filled with risk. Adding further complexity is the fact that, within the coalition of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex identities now covered through the often-changing, seemingly ever-increasing LGBTIQI acronym, differing experiences of safety and tolerance may operate within gayborhoods. Petra Doan (2007), for example, has noted that transgender people are not always met with acceptance by gay men in these spaces. Berlant and Warner (2002) describe the lack of tolerance for young, queer people of colour in the increasingly gentrified gay spaces of New York. Intersections of class, gender, race and age all have the capacity to shift and complicate what may be labelled 'safe' or 'tolerant'. Ghaziani acknowledges these issues, certainly, but their complexity is ultimately not the focus of his study.

Having been called a faggot and a poofter and having feared, more than once, that verbal abuse would become physical, I nonetheless feel a continued sense of affection for and attraction to gay spaces. My anger at being abused is, in part, anger that the abusers were bringing their bigotry into that particular space, which contains the promise of acceptance, tolerance, even celebration of difference. There is resilience to be found in a sense of identity that is firmly located or sited. Robert Reynolds has described as a kind of 'existential angst' expressed by gay men around changes to (or the potential death of) Sydney's gay neighbourhoods (2009, p. 85). Perhaps that angst is anchored in a fear that, if the neighbourhood goes, what happens to the resilience that it supported? Yet my comfort in the gayborhood is never complete. Memories of past abuse mean that I will probably never hold hands with my partner or show affection to him in public without some degree of caution. Perhaps my greater comfort within a gay neighbourhood comes not from the fact that we are safe there, but from the fact that we are expected. We are part of the fabric of the area, not intruders into it.

BEING DIFFERENT

There is, of course, something tribal about all of this—it reflects a desire to be around people whose values, experiences and expectations reflect my own, who are my tribe. Yet in that lies an acknowledgement of difference—I want to find people similar to me, because I see myself as different from the majority and seek to have that difference validated.

For those who declare the death of the gayborhood, a major point of argument lies in a process of assimilation and the perceived end of difference. As gay and lesbian lives are gradually integrated into the social and cultural mainstream, much of what has distinguished homosexual from heterosexual lifestyles seem to fade away. In interviews and media reports, Ghaziani finds people—gay and straight—declaring the obsolescence of gay culture in a post-gay world. Ghaziani argues, 'Many urban lesbians and gay men ... *embrace* assimilation. They say that they are culturally similar to straights and imagine that they can live pretty

much anywhere in the city they want' (p. 128; emphasis in the original). With no cultural difference, and no threat of discrimination, why would a separate space be necessary?

I admit to being somewhat frustrated by this idea, which Ghaziani himself also rejects but which is frequently found in current discourses surrounding gay identities and neighbourhoods. When Ghaziani asks, 'How do we reconcile the need that some queer people express for gayborhoods against the mindset of cultural sameness that others advocate?' (p. 128), I place myself firmly among the former. I'm confused by the idea of claiming cultural sameness, with its implicit rejection of difference. What is so bad about being different? As an historian, I am fascinated by the extensive interviews Ghaziani has undertaken and the diverse views he gathers. I acknowledge that there is much to be celebrated in the freedom to live wherever one chooses. Yet I feel a personal resistance to the process of assimilation. My fear is that queerness, with all its attendant radical and fabulous possibilities, will be swamped by conformity.

CHANGING SPACES

Am I just resisting change? A middle-age man stuck in an outdated identity? Or is all this talk of assimilation somewhat overstated? Is it possible that, even while we celebrate new levels of acceptance and tolerance, the benefits and pleasures of the gayborhood remain clear to many? A great strength in Ghaziani's book is his handling of questions of change in gay life and urban space. For him, these changes are not some defining end-point to previous identities so much as they are ongoing shifts in always fluid entities. Media reports may be declaring the end of gayborhoods as gay businesses close, community groups move away and the percentage of gay to straight residents shifts further in favour of straight. But what Ghaziani finds is that many of the gay people moving away from areas formerly defined as gayborhoods are not dispersing into the suburbs, but are moving to new areas together. He writes 'When gays and lesbians leave an existing gayborhood, many of them collectively relocate to another area of the city. Their movement is purposeful, systematic and it eventually contributes to the development of a new gay district' (p. 210).

This can be seen at work in Sydney. In their recent study of Sydney's LGBTQ neighbourhoods, cultural geographers Andrew Gorman-Murray and Catherine Nash argue, 'Queer places are always "on the move" socially and materially' (2014, p. 638). They note that the area in which I live, once seen as the 'alternative' gay space of Sydney, is increasingly described as the new gay 'centre' of the city (Gorman-Murray & Nash 2014 p. 634). New alternative spaces may well now be emerging in areas further west of the centre. The gayborhood isn't dead, it is just on the move and, perhaps, it always has been.

Ghaziani concludes on an optimistic note. He finds new gay enclaves springing to life throughout the larger cities of the United States and he clearly takes some pleasure in this. So, I must say, do I. I like the idea of living in a city in which new queer spaces continue to appear, in which young queer people—bored with the spaces and lives of middle-aged gay men like me—are developing their own forms of identity and celebrating their difference in novel ways. It is possible that these small urban moments—art shows, performance spaces, dance parties—both influence and reflect decisions about where to live for a new generation of queers. Yet I am also nostalgic for the sites and spaces of the past, where so many moments and events created the community in which I feel a sense of belonging. In this lies the continuing tensions for LGBTQI communities and their inhabitation of urban space: between change and continuity, risk and safety, difference and assimilation.

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