

# 9

## Queering the Meaning of 'Neighbourhood': Reinterpreting the Lesbian-Queer Experience of Park Slope, Brooklyn, 1983–2008

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Still, all of the women I talked to affirmed the spatial significance of the lesbian 'community' of Park Slope.

Rothenberg (1995: 173)

But it's interesting because we [lesbians and queer women] all talk about Park Slope as this sort of Shangri-La of lesbian safety. ... I guess it doesn't really matter, I suppose, because if people feel like something's a lesbian neighbourhood, than by dint of their believing it, it is.

Sarah '85 (age 41)

The lesbian or lesbian-queer neighbourhood is a slippery idea, and for many women throughout the world it is an elusive ideal, even in LGBTQ 'meccas' such as San Francisco, London, Berlin, and New York City. Renowned enclaves such as the Castro district, Soho, Schöneberg, West Village, Lower East Side, and Chelsea developed as cities within cities, where LGBTQ people could safely find one another and build communities together. But practices of territory-making and place-claiming are antithetical to women's economic and social abilities in the urban sphere, and the urban is a historically unwelcoming environment for women. I suggest, then, that lesbian-queer neighbourhoods, then, do not work in ways identical to gay and queer men's neighbourhoods. But, as Tamar Rothenberg's quote reveals, they are still spatialised 'communities'. As Sarah, a participant from my research, describes in the quote above, the Park Slope neighbourhood in Brooklyn is produced as lesbian-queer in the way it affords these women safety and refuge. So what then is a lesbian-queer neighbourhood to lesbians and queer women? What does it afford them in their everyday lives? Dynamics of gender, race, and class have not been fully accounted for in studies of LGBTQ neighbourhoods; however, recent work has begun to confront assumptions

that all LGBTQ people will be granted equal access and can politically and economically maintain such properties over time (Manalansan, 2005; Taylor, 2008; Moore, 2011). This chapter attends to these absences and differences by showing not how these groups have failed to make successful neighbourhoods, but how our imagining and understanding neighbourhoods in new ways affords possibilities for connection, self-understanding, and work towards justice.

Queer theory affords ways of understanding practices, processes, and ways of being that refuse the normative. The work of 'queering' heralds and makes room for difference, questions the powers behind the purported 'normal', and situates pleasure and politics side-by-side. My deployment of queer theory in this chapter is in step with the idea that queering reveals 'inconsistencies of social boundaries and their discourse' (Elder, 1999: 89). In turn, queer theory provides recognition and consideration for alternative perspectives that break from norms. Adding another interpretation, the feminist concept of 'intersectionality' is a core organising principle to confront supposed normativities by describing the complicatedness of everyday life. The examination of intersectionalities helps to illuminate how people (and spaces) are co-produced through our multiple subjectivities of gender and sexuality and race and class and age and generation and so on (Crenshaw, 1996; Taylor, 2007). Together this feminist-queer frame uses the standpoint of experience to unpack not only normative values but limiting and unjust spatial models as well.

Drawing from inter-generational group interviews with 47 lesbians and queer women who came out between 1983 and 2008 with mental mapping and artefact sharing exercises, as well as archival research, I examine and reinterpret the ways these women experience and find meaning in the space of the lesbian-queer neighbourhood. Participants were attached to the idea of neighbourhoods as important lesbian-queer spaces even when their lived experience often did not match the 'typical' idea of neighbourhood. I was curious to understand what spoke to participants in their experiences and ideas of this type of space. As such, I pay special attention to what the lesbian-queer neighbourhood affords participants over time. In this chapter I focus on Park Slope, the LGBTQ 'mecca' of New York City's only lesbian neighbourhood that is the only one in the U.S. I suggest that the meaning and survival of Park Slope is not predicated on retaining physical territory. Rather, I propose it is derived from the mobile, fragmented, fleeting social, cultural, historic, economic, and political elements of a neighbourhood. Lesbians and queer women continually piece together these elements to claim not only a politics of visibility but also a politics of and space for recognition. I argue that the model of the LGBTQ neighbourhood must be queered, that is, rethought against the grain of normative paradigms of property ownership-as-success, in order to address the experiences and concerns of women, working class people, and people of colour. Rather than

refuse these women's experiences and ideas of Park Slope as a failed queer neighbourhood, lesbians and queer women instead queer the meaning of neighbourhood itself. They enact a fleeting and fragmented spatialised community that does not adhere to the concept of a neighbourhood as a fixed, physical, and visible territory. I use the term 'lesbian-queer neighbourhood' to encompass the identities participants used in this project, while the actual analysis is an act of queering.

### **What's in a neighbourhood?**

A neighbourhood is understood as being 'dominated by residential uses,' 'walkable' in scale, and a (physical) territory (Gregory et al., 2009). The concept of the neighbourhood retains a pleasant image in the geographical imagination. Neighbourhoods represent American nineteenth and twentieth century urban life at their best, in that they supposedly mimic small town life. However, it is important to note that producing neighbourhoods depends upon the making of territory and claiming of place, whether by force, coercion, or choice. For example, the production of poor neighbourhoods of colour across the U.S. was a process dependent upon excluding these groups from access to jobs, loans, equal education, and sufficient housing through practices of redlining (see Fine et al., 2004). These idealisations of neighbourhood give a historical background as to why some urban studies scholars are frustrated that the physical territory of a neighbourhood is often conflated with social communities that live within those territories (Colombo, Mosso and De Piccoli, 2001). Still, the concept of the physical-social neighbourhood persists.

While LGBTQ people have always existed in urban areas (Aldrich, 2004), LGBTQ spaces were most clearly articulated in neighbourhoods (Chauncey, 1995; Weston, 1995). LGBTQ people in the 1970s formed spatial concentrations in urban residential areas which, over time, became more visible and fixed as 'gay ghettos'. Those who lived in or used these spaces experienced more segregation, a reprieve from isolation, and a community from which to develop social and political gains (Knopp, 1997; Enke, 2007). By 1983, Manuel Castells argued that gay men in San Francisco's Castro district were living not in a ghetto but in a 'neighbourhood' based on the confluence of their unique production of culture, economy, and physical spaces (see Castells, 1983). Furthermore, the difference between marginalised ghetto space and gay space was one of agency:

While [...] others used the term 'ghetto', gay militants speak of 'liberated zones': and there is indeed a major difference between ghettos and gay areas since the latter are usually deliberately constructed by gay people to create their own city, in the framework of the broader urban society.

(p. 272)

Castells went on to claim men's 'territorial aspirations' as the galvanising inspiration for these new spaces. He wrote that while women's more ethereal worlds were unspatialised in 'relationships and [...] networks [...] of solidarity and affection' (140), so that only men possessed agency to produce such physical spaces. Such a viewpoint extols the privileged patriarchal arguments of elite capitalist society, wherein property ownership indicates maturity of both individuals and groups.

In my reading, the majority of research on LGBTQ spaces continues to expand on Castells's understanding of cultural and economic territorialisation in the form of physical, geographical neighbourhoods. Popular media representations of gay male neighbourhoods depict a world in which 'gay male sexuality becomes mature through spatial claiming and territorialization' (Skeggs et al., 2004: 1846). In actuality, gay and queer working class men and men of colour have found their neighbourhoods to be more cyclical as their bars and cruising areas are often dissolved and reconstituted through intermittent practices of cruising and instances of homophobia (Manalansan, 2005). The (supposed) LGBTQ neighbourhood is still the most often referenced LGBTQ space in both academic and popular literature. Through its popularity, idealisation, and role in producing a 'safe space' for LGBTQ people (see Elwood, 2000), the LGBTQ neighbourhood has been read a space of liberation, community, and possibility, particularly through the lens of American ideals of ethnic success via territorialisation. Richard Florida's (2012) marketing of 'creative class' that brings and adds wealth, innovation, and cosmopolitanism to the city via processes identical to gentrification has extended this idealisation of LGBTQ neighbourhoods into the heterosexual public sphere, and perhaps led to their demise (see Ghaziani, 2010).

Scholars of lesbian and queer spaces have sought to respond to this fixation on neighbourhoods, including Castells's arguments that infused them by identifying 'spatial concentrations' of lesbians in various U.S. cities, residential, commercial, or a combination thereof (Wolf, 1979; Adler and Brenner, 1992; Kennedy and Davis, 1994; Kenney, 1998). Yet each of these studies, in the end, relays a concept of 'concentrations' rather than neighbourhoods in that these women do not visibly occupy and control these areas.<sup>1</sup> Unlike gay men's neighbourhoods or cruising grounds, lesbians and queer women are rarely known to possess and retain actual territories within urban areas via mass property ownership (Rothenberg, 1995; Podmore, 2006). Lesbian commercial spaces such as travel agencies, sex toy stores, hair salons, and are sometimes not as present or commercially successful as gay men's commercial spaces, and therefore make these areas less visible (Podmore, 2001). Many early waves of gentrifiers who possess less wealth – namely women – are eventually economically displaced by later waves of gentrification (Doan, 2010). Studies in the 1990s found middle-class lesbians to be more educated but make less money than their straight female counterparts (Baker, 1997; Kenney, 2001). Still the continuing

debate over lesbian neighbourhoods' existence is most often attributed to women having less access to capital (Adler and Brenner, 1992; Rothenberg, 1995). Yet as Rachel Pain (2001) has suggested, public space continues to evoke feelings of fear in women rather than security, even as such public urban spaces are usually envisioned as the locations of diversity and difference (see Young, 1990). It is unsurprising then that throughout the literature on lesbian and queer spaces, lesbians and queer women are marked and understood as 'invisible'. This invisibility derives from in comparison to the patriarchal and heteronormative social, political, and economic landscape, as well as to heterosexuals; gay, bisexual, and queer men; trans persons; and even among lesbians, bisexuals, and queer women (Wolfe, 1997; Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz, 2005).

Overall these historic dynamics and overarching structural oppressions make it difficult for lesbians and queer women to produce, let alone sustain, a physical neighbourhood with economic, social, historic, and political ties among its residents and users. The only 'lesbian neighbourhood' mentioned as such in the literature is Brooklyn, New York's Park Slope and is most likely the only lesbian urban neighbourhood in the U.S. Historian Robert Aldrich has suggested that 'New York offered a prototype for American gay cultures' (2004: 1727). Home not only to the beginning of the LGBTQ movement in the 1969 Stonewall riot, the city spawned the three most prominent radical LGBTQ activist groups in recent history including ACT-UP, Lesbian Avengers, and Queer Nation. Also, its prominent 'gaybourhoods' such as the West Village, Chelsea, and Park Slope inform and propagate U.S. and global LGBTQ geographic imaginaries. While LGBTQ studies have begun to extend to prioritising the rural and other non-urban environments (Knopp and Brown, 2003; Halberstam, 2005; Gray, 2009), studies of the urban are still necessary, especially as only one study of lesbian experience in Park Slope exists. Tamar Rothenberg's (1995) interviews with lesbians about their experiences of Park Slope in the early 1990s found that a 'spatial concentration' of lesbians developed. The concentration grew into a spatialised community of social networks and word-of-mouth, as well as the lesbian-queer and lesbian-queer friendly places that put down roots in Park Slope. The neighbourhood's loose spatial community was 'related to the timing of early gentrification and the particular politically-oriented population who moved in' (175). But is Park Slope or was it ever a lesbian or lesbian-queer neighbourhood? This chapter reconnoitres the literature on lesbian-queer neighbourhoods, women's urban spaces, and general LGBTQ neighbourhoods. Drawing upon inter-generational group interviews with lesbians and queer women, and other mixed methods, I reply to Rothenberg's work from a cross-generational, -race, and -class perspective. I suggest that a queering of the concept of neighbourhoods is in order to reveal the fleeting and fragmented qualities of these spaces.

## Participatory methods for a participatory understanding of self and space

In order to find a way to talk through and at times against the framework of invisibility, my research made use of participatory qualitative methodologies that connect individual and collective experiences, and bridge the shifts of history with everyday memories. This chapter draws from a larger historical geography of contemporary lesbian and queer society, culture, and economies in New York City. The overall study addresses the shifts in lesbians' and queer women's spaces in New York City from 1983 to 2008 – that is, from the AIDS epidemic to the rise of internationally syndicated television drama 'The L Word'. My research seeks to understand the shifts in these women's experiences of justice and oppression over time. I chose a 25 year period in order to address multiple generations of these women's experiences, including the under-examined experiences of lesbians and queer women in the 1980s whose history is often eclipsed by the tragic loss of a generation of mostly gay men dying in the HIV/AIDS epidemic.<sup>2</sup>

Queer theorist Ann Pellegrini's (2004) feminist-queer theorisation of the terminology for gay women's identities implies that 'lesbian' is used by older women more closely identified with second-wave feminism, while 'queer' would apply to younger, third-wave individuals. However, this is not always the case as these identities may be complicated by personal and/or political factors (see also Browne, 2006). I use 'lesbians and queer women' to reference my participants' own naming of their identities, and 'lesbian-queer' as an adjective throughout to describe the experiences of this group of women. I refer to each participant population with the identity and/or term used by that author.

While I highlight many the intersectional identities of participants throughout this chapter, it is also important to situate them as a group for the general arguments of this work. Participants came out (broadly and self-defined) between 1983 and 2008; spent the majority of that time in New York City; and primarily identified as middle or working-middle class, White, and had attended some college.<sup>3</sup> In order to queer notions of community and connection, this study does not use age alone as a marker of generation but foregrounds the year in which participants 'came out'. I theorised that the coming out moment/period often provides a profound shift in consciousness in the years that follow, and my participants agreed. All participants were between the age of 12 and 29 when they came out to follow similar trends in the life course.

The project included within and across generation group interviews with 47 self-identified lesbians and queer women, including mental mapping and artefact-sharing components. Participants took part in three kinds of group interviews: those comprising women within a generational cohort spanning five year periods (1983–1987, 1988–1992, etc.); across generational cohorts

from women of different generational cohorts; and a follow-up, private online participatory group interview.<sup>4</sup> A total of 22 group interviews were accompanied by mental mapping exercises whereby participants drew individual maps of places in the city important to them around the time of their coming out, and combined these maps across generations to see trends over time (see Figures 9.2 and 9.3). Participants also took part in artefact sharing exercises which involved presenting an object or memento important to the participant at her time of coming out and explaining its meaning. These conversations and exercises addressed the women's disparate and overlapping experiences while keeping them focused on the spatial qualities of their experiences during and since their coming out. I presented the first draft of summary findings to participants via a private, online blog so that my arguments could be critiqued and formed in a participatory manner, and these responses were incorporated into final arguments.

As this data collection with participants was on-going, I examined records from the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, New York, the largest collection of materials by, for, and about lesbians in the world. This two-pronged approach of collecting primary and secondary research provides a more vivid political and socioeconomic backdrop for the group conversations, maps, and artefacts than previously afforded (cf. e.g. Faderman, 1992; Chauncey, 1995; Nash, 2005; Podmore, 2006). I foremost draw on themes I developed from group interview conversations in this chapter, using archival materials as a lens through which to read the changing geographies of these women's everyday lives.

### **So what's a lesbian-queer neighbourhood? The special case of Park Slope, Brooklyn**

When I asked participants what type of lesbian and/or queer space was most important to their everyday lives in NYC, they consistently chose neighbourhoods, even over more oft-mentioned bars, parties, and the city itself. New York City, like most global cities, operates as a series of characteristic neighbourhoods that afford distinct identities, economies, and politics. Therefore it makes sense that the word 'neighbourhood' was used 186 times in participants' conversations, and 34 neighbourhoods were mentioned by name a total of 695 times. Naming each of these neighbourhoods relayed a sense of what these spaces afforded lesbians and queers. The dramatically large number of neighbourhoods mentioned by name indicates that the concept and experience of the neighbourhood is perhaps less important than the lived experience of these neighbourhoods as residential zones.

The neighbourhood of Park Slope, Brooklyn, was the most often referenced neighbourhood with 201 mentions and therefore the topic of nearly one-quarter of all neighbourhood conversations. As a striking indication of Park Slope's importance to lesbian-queer everyday life in the city, the

internationally renowned LGBTQ neighbourhoods of NYC trailed far behind: Greenwich Village, aka West Village (84 mentions); Chelsea (41); East Village (37); and hipster Williamsburg (39) in Brooklyn (see Figure 9.1). While not every participant had interest in or could afford to live there,



Figure 9.1 Map of Brooklyn and lower Manhattan indicating neighbourhoods; Grand Army Plaza is marked with an arrow. ©OpenStreetMap contributors, CC BY-SA

every participant had been to Park Slope and everyone knew another lesbian and/or queer who lives there or who had lived there.

In order to understand what a lesbian-queer neighbourhood is to participants, I focus on Park Slope, one of if not *the* most well-known, lesbian spatial concentrations in the U.S. (see Figure 9.1). Situated next to prominent Prospect Park in north-central Brooklyn, the boundary of Park Slope has grown in recent years due to ever-present gentrification in New York City. In the 1970s and 1980s, the neighbourhood was predominantly home to working class Blacks and Puerto Ricans, as well as a small population of working class and middle class Whites, many of whom were lesbian. By the 1990s, Park Slope was and continues to be referenced in LGBTQ movies, publications, and websites as a sort of lesbian mecca. Brooklyn Pride, founded in 1996, marches only in Park Slope since its inception. Yet since the early 2000s, Park Slope has been portrayed as a bastion for upper-middle class New York City parenting, namely among the large population of Whites who now reside there, whereby sexualities go unnoticed or unrecognised. As such, over time, the ways in which lesbians fit and feel at home in any space based on class and race has shifted dramatically (Taylor, 2007, 2009), even while the idea of the space as the only lesbian-queer NYC neighbourhood persists. The idea of the lesbian-ness of Park Slope is predicated on few materialities afforded these women, which are far greater in number than the general absence to which they are accustomed. For example, at most, there have been two or three bars at any given time, a women-only gym, a lesbian/women's bookstore, and, most importantly, the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Comparatively, there are now two lesbian bars in all of Manhattan.

### **Producing a territory called Park Slope, generation by generation**

Participants shared similar experiences of the neighbourhood, which many referred affectionately to as 'Dyke Slope'. Across races and classes, women who came out in the 1980s and 1990s had more attachments and experiences in living there than those who came out in the 2000s, that is, before the housing values had doubled in the area. Birtha '84 (age 50) who identified as White and her class as 'cultural worker' had lived in Park Slope in the 1980s. She remembered how crack dens dotted the area since the financial crisis in the late 1970s and worsened as a result of the crack epidemic of the 1980s. During this period, participants remembered taking cabs home to Park Slope from workplaces in Manhattan because of the discomfort of being a woman in an urban public sphere, particularly a lesbian who was the target of homophobic attacks. Even in such a seemingly unsafe environment for Birtha, Park Slope offered the promise of a lesbian community she could not find elsewhere. In retrospect, the lesbian spaces and events held there and places that developed there were unaffordable to produce

and support over such a long period and on such a large scale in other neighbourhoods.

Gentrifiers – middle class and often White, with many lesbians along them – remodelled crack dens into their former ‘brownstone’ (a colloquial term for elegant Brooklyn town homes) glory throughout the 1990s. Black, middle class Desi ‘89 (age 35) was 15 when, following her weekly youth group at The LGBT Community Center of New York, she would eagerly make the 30 minute train ride to Park Slope. Once there, she would sit at a coffee shop, do her homework, and, as she described it, see what she was supposed to look like when she ‘grew up’. Radical and stand out lesbian-queer styles of the 1980s (such as the power dyke or activist aesthetic) and 1990s (that blended both looks into even more radical styles with mohawks, piercings, and tattoos) dominated the streets and denoted a lesbian-queer presence (see Valentine, 1996). The burgeoning LGBTQ market stood out in the Pride flags that dotted the region and the rainbow bracelets and activist shirts that were sold more and more widely then denoted a sign of resistance. These better futures were not only recognised in the lesbian-queer public bodies, but also felt in the territory that supported such embodiments during periods of heightened homophobia.

Even in 2008, White, working-middle class Lisa ‘97 (age 39) shared how she and her partner travel from their more affordable apartment in a less tolerant, White-ethnic neighbourhood deeper into in Brooklyn back to Park Slope every couple of weeks: ‘We get out of the subway, and suddenly you can breathe and hold hands.’ Safety and comfort became more certain as time progressed due to waves of gentrification into Park Slope through the 1990s. However, participants made clear that this sense of justice was almost exclusively for White women and for middle and upper class women of colour. These trends made spaces popular while still affordable, and, subsequently, a highly social atmosphere. The ability for lesbians and queer women to outright claim Park Slope as a lesbian-queer neighbourhood evolved in these interdependent processes and practices. And, as soon as some headway was made for some, that sense of community and connectivity, both social and spatial, became less palpable.

By the turn of the century, Park Slope was more and more composed of now elegant, renovated brownstones, tree-lined streets, and throngs of small, welcoming shops that erased and priced out much of the lesbian-queer presence. Through the eyes of those women who came out in the 2000s, one may not be sure what is ‘so gay’ about Park Slope. Participants were unlikely to live in or spend the majority of their time in Park Slope unless they had purchased their apartment in the 1990s, so much so that no one who had come out in the 2000s mentioning residing there. However, all participants frequented Park Slope’s bars, restaurants, events, or merely to walk around in a LGBTQ space for women, especially when coming out. The neighbourhood housed one lesbian bar as of 2008 (which still stands in

2013), and parties are thrown in lesbian-queer friendly spaces. At the same time, more wild styles, looks, and appearances have been absorbed by hipster chic while Pride flags have become passé. What is LGBTQ is now often illegible in the White, middle class rhetoric of politically correct liberalism. Participants described how lesbians and queer women are less recognisable to one another on the streets of NYC, and became less visible as a population to heteronormative, mainstream society.

Still, the spatial evidence of 'Dyke Slope' remains. While Rothenberg (1995) argued that Park Slope lacked 'distinct' lesbian places in the early 1990s, participants in this study felt much more comfortable in the 2000s marking spaces as their own based on their safety and comfort in, and access to such spaces, even if they could not claim them outright. A number of places such as the Brooklyn Women's Martial Arts Center and the Park Slope Food Co-op read more so as lesbian-queer-friendly spaces than actual spaces of their own. These places persist and their continued importance to lesbians and queer women continues. In so doing, Park Slope retains its place in the lesbian-queer geographical imagination as a lesbian-queer neighbourhood even though it does not offer all lesbians and queer women equal refuge or promise.

### **Race and class: Claiming space and/or gentrification**

White, upper middle class Sarah '85 (age 41) recalled how safety as a claim to the neighbourhood had to always be reproduced in the act of claiming and being there:

But, you know, there's been a number of times I've walked down the street holding hands with my girlfriend in Park Slope in the '80s and we'd get yelled at. Some old, Irish guys shouted at us, 'Go back to San Francisco!' ... Like, 'I live on St Mark's Place [a street in the heart of Park Slope]! I don't know what to tell you.' That was pretty hilarious.

Sarah's residence on St. Mark's Place, a core artery of Park Slope, refigures the neighbourhood as lesbian-queer against the 'old, Irish guy'. It is a space where Sarah's White, upper-middle class body belongs. But his body, presumably working class, aged, and White, fits alongside her in a way, which indicates that he can catch on to modernity or move on (Binnie & Skeggs 2004). She uses her St. Mark's Place address in the heart of Park Slope to both laugh off a verbal assault and to legitimate and claim a place for her body and identity in the heart of the neighbourhood and its meaning. Mixed-race, working-middle class Bailey '95 (age 29) described how that Fifth Avenue in Park Slope 'used to be largely Puerto Rican and so I'm sure that there were Puerto Rican lesbians there who didn't get fucked with' but gentrification had forced almost all of these women out by 2008. It is at the intersection of

Sarah's laughter and Bailey's anger that how *unsafe* the economic land grab of gentrification is. Not only does it produce negative images of mostly White and mostly middle class LGBTQ people in the midst of poor neighbourhoods of colour which then inflicts more homophobia with those communities. Rather, gentrification is clearly an unsustainable tactic of these women's resistance to homophobia, heteronormativity, and sexism as it ultimately pushes later generations of these women out of the locales they gentrified. Castells (1983) painted this shift towards the neighbourhood as a path to better tomorrows for gay men, but this trend continues to leave women, people of colour, and the poor forced to out further environs from the city centre.

White participants of varying classes sometimes felt unsafe in Park Slope, like Birtha, but often felt free to occupy the neighbourhood's venues and streets, even during the 1980s and 1990s when the neighbourhood was less moneyed and still home to a large Black and Puerto Rican population. Black-Caribbean, working class Tre '03 (age 21) had grown up in the nearby working class, Caribbean neighbourhood of Crown Heights, northeast of Park Slope (see Figure 9.1). She described how her patterns of access to neighbourhoods were regulated by her skin colour and class, as well as the homophobia that surrounded her:

But spaces in between there was – access? It was just, like, you don't go there. We did not go to Park Slope. Park Slope felt – you – you knew you weren't – it was just like – mmmm. You shouldn't belong here. Shouldn't belong here. ... And that's not sexuality, that's blackness. ... I don't fuck around in my neighbourhood. Like I don't hold my girlfriend's hand, like if you see that – I'm whatever – I don't play. I do after the Grand Army Plaza stop. Then I'm fucking with it. So Park Slope. [Sarcastically] Yay. ... Um, and then skip over to Manhattan.

Many women of colour referenced the Grand Army Plaza as drawn in Tre's map (see Figure 9.2; also see Figure 9.1, Grand Army Plaza is the arrow at the northeast point of Park Slope) as a fixed borderland. The Civil War landmark was part of African-Caribbean-American, working class Crown Heights and Flatbush neighbourhoods. By both the subway underground and the memorial statue above, Park Slope was cleaved from the likes of Crown Heights. It makes sense that many participants of colour marked a shared boundary at Grand Army Plaza about where they could express their lesbian-ness and/or queerness regardless of race and class more easily within Park Slope, but still did not feel they belonged. Above or below, there is no escaping the literal and figurative intersection of these oppressions. At the same time, while Tre does not feel welcome in Park Slope because of her Blackness, she uses Park Slope as the borderland of where she *can* be publicly gay, citing the its renowned White liberalism as a form of protection. Participants of colour discussed the struggles they experienced about finding a neighbourhood

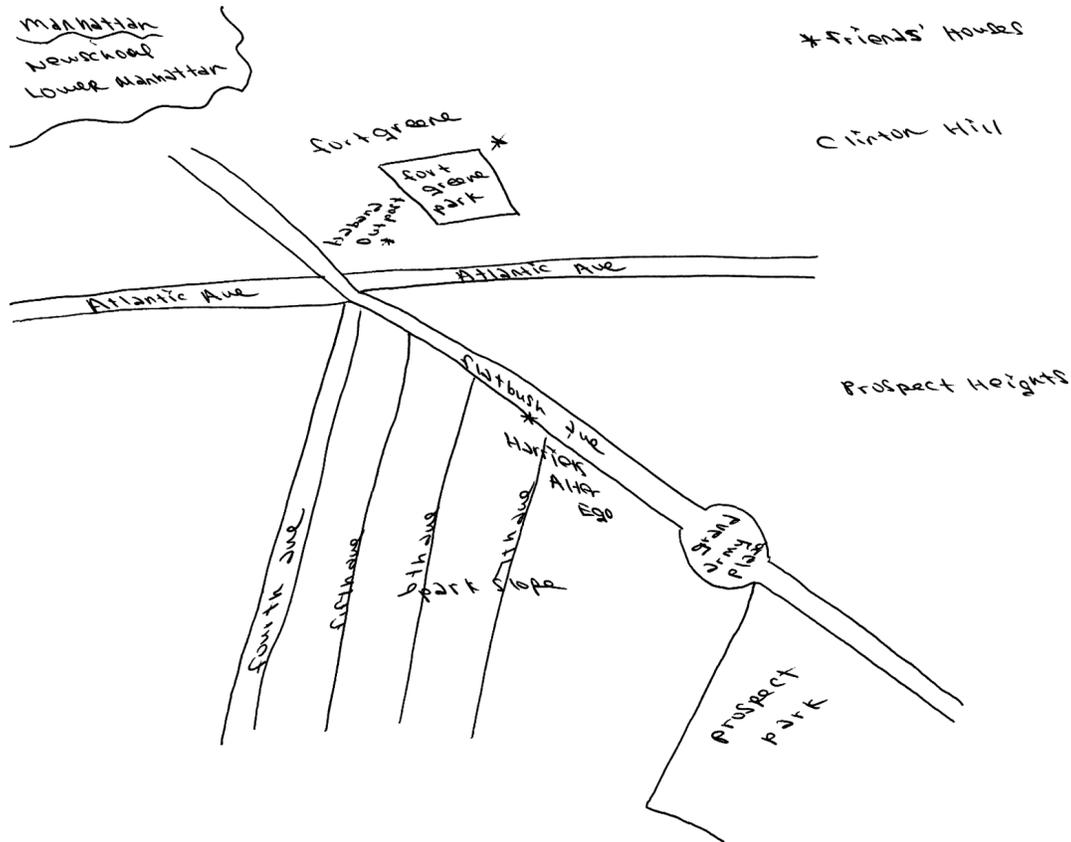


Figure 9.2 Tre '03's mental map of important lesbian-queer spaces in NYC

where they felt understood about their race as well as their sexuality, especially Black participants. Latina participants found that Latina/o neighbourhoods varied in levels of acceptance of lesbians. The history of the pricing out of poor lesbians of colour is always overlooked for the sake of claiming an LGBTQ haven. This denial allows lesbians and queer women to live in the projection of the imagined Park Slope while recognition, representation, and redistribution are so vastly lacking.

In her research on the neighbourhood, Rothenberg (1995) discussed how the Park Slope boundary remained unfixed and continued to spill into – that is, claim space from – other neighbourhoods in the early 1990s. By 2008 when I conducted my research, that spillage had stopped. Later waves of gentrification more forcefully demarcated different neighbourhoods from one another, and producing a hard boundary of Park Slope, for now. Mixed race, working-middle class Bailey '95 identified participants remarked that she knew how to 'talk' White and 'wear Whiteness' in order to camouflage herself into belong, a practice reminiscent of José Esteban Muñoz's (2005) performative disidentifications. It is unsurprising then that many women of colour participants marked a shared boundary at Grand Army Plaza about

where they could express their lesbian-ness and/or queerness more easily within Park Slope regardless of race and class, but still did not feel they truly belonged. Participants recalled how affective needs for safety and comfort shifted over time in response to varying levels and types of homophobia, sexism, racism, and classism. I suggest then that a neighbourhood was more often a territory to navigate those oppressions rather than an absolute, material refuge for these women. These findings illuminate how the concept of the lesbian-queer neighbourhood not only legitimates lesbian-queer presences but points out their absences in and refusals to these spaces.

### **Fleeting and fragmented, that is, the queered notion of neighbourhood**

Participants clearly demonstrated a need for and an idea of a territory, but the patterns of gentrification show that their place in it is unsteady and not wholly welcoming. Regardless, across generations, all participants agreed Park Slope was a core, if not *the* core, anchor of the lesbian-queer world in NYC. Quoted again, White, upper-middle class Sarah '85 (age 41) who moved there soon after coming out in its 1990s lesbian-queer heyday shared:

I almost never go to Park Slope. I feel like it's not a lesbian neighbourhood [now]. ... [M]y girlfriend's aunt lived there in the '70s and when we moved there in 1989 she was like, 'Oh! It's not a lesbian neighbourhood anymore! All of the Columbus Avenue [wealthy, predominantly White elites] people have moved in.' ... like all of the ... institutions, like, The Rising [Café and Bar].

In fact, almost all participants noted there was often something missing about their experience of Park Slope, as if they had just missed it, or were at the apex or tail end of it. Rothenberg's participants in her 1995 study of Park Slope also recognised their spaces bore a 'loose configuration'. What is most important about this looseness is recognising how the sense of the lesbian-queer neighbourhood assumes an eternally fleeting or devolving dynamic. Even as New York City itself is constantly changing, participants reiterated how the loss of the few places they had to call their own was profound. Together with oppressions of homophobia and patriarchy, as well as racism and classism, the precarity of everyday lesbian-queer life results in few places and territories these women can lay claim to and sustain.

As the boundaries of Park Slope have grown over time due to gentrification, these places grow less and less clustered, which leaves a sense of increasing fragmentation in participants' experiences of the neighbourhood. Lesbian-queer spaces and places in the city are often fragmented as, for example, in Brenda '95's (age 40) map (Figure 9.3). Brenda's spaces and places dot the landscape spanning multiple boroughs (i.e. NYC counties) and even draw in

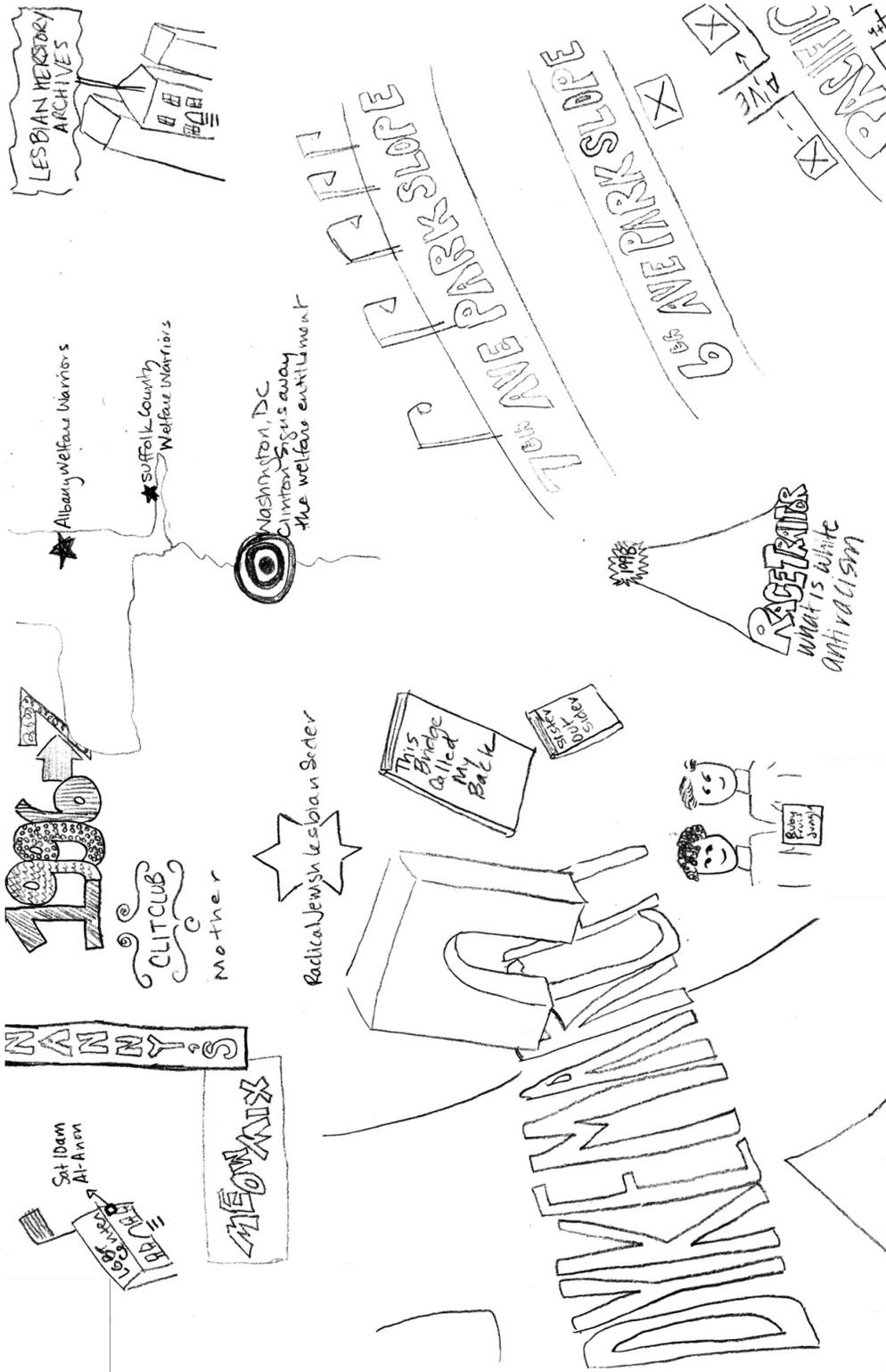


Figure 9.3 Brenda '95's mental map of important lesbian-queer spaces in NYC

connections to experiences in other cities, towns, and the State of New York which is drawn in the top centre of the map. On the right-hand side of the map a series of streets and the Lesbian Herstory Archives congeal the space of Park Slope in the late 1990s, while the bars in the top left corner (Crazy Nanny's, Meow Mix, Clit Club), the LGBT Center of New York, and Dyke March were/are scattered through a number of neighbourhoods.

In many of our conversations, participants debated whether practices of claiming and sustenance supported lesbian feminist and/or queer politics. A core characteristic of neighbourhoods is their physical territoriality, but this is less evident for lesbians and queer women in both Rothenberg's and my own research. While Rothenberg illuminated the importance of spatial clustering of lesbians queer women, and their places and events around similar social, cultural, economic, and political values, my participants described less interest or ability in such outright, permanent spatial clustering. Rather, participants suggested that although they desired places and spaces to call their own, the very nature of territory-making and -claiming was politically and economically questionable to many. When I asked participants about the possibility of lesbian-queer territories to which White, middle class Sally '96 (age 30) responded:

I think there's something a little insidious about colonising a patch of land and calling it your own and taking out everything else and owning everything. It's just not – it doesn't quite appeal to me, but on the other hand sometimes it does because you see what men have and ... yeah [sighs].

The likening of territorialisation to a practice of physical, patriarchal colonisation repeated many participants' desires to not produce the kind of exclusive spaces from which they themselves had been rejected. In so doing, participants expressed how they saw themselves defying processes of oppression that served to deny their equality. In another expression of this tendency, I suggest that gay and queer men's practices of cruising for anonymous sex in areas of public parks or pornographic theaters are often erroneously labelled as a timeless, radical use of public space for all LGBTQ people without taking account of gender (see Chisholm, 2005). Such publics are not accessible in everyday life or even in the geographical imaginations of most lesbian-queer participants. While Harvey (1973) once sought to articulate an idea of 'territorial justice,' the uneven development under capitalism necessarily makes territories unequal. Seeking to territorialise then is no solution or politic to support the recognition and safety lesbians and queer women seek.

Podmore suggests lesbian urban territorialities in Toronto are 'invisible' since their communities are constituted through social networks rather than commercial sites' (Podmore, 2006: 595). However, my participants felt little allegiance to the notion of 'territory' at all, and did feel that place

and space and social networks served a role in formulating a sense of connection and community. Physical territories were seen as somewhat distinct from lesbian-queer neighbourhoods more as a practice of long-term place claiming and property ownership and play less of a role in the lesbian-queer production of neighbourhoods. The meaning and survival of Park Slope and its existence as a LGBTQ mecca of New York City and its role as its only lesbian-queer neighbourhood is not determined by claiming and defending a physical territory. This way of identifying became clear since the take-off of the LGBTQ marker became more a tool to commodify, sexualise, and fetishise LGBTQ people and their interests rather than support social change for LGBTQ people. Many participants were distressed that most LGBTQ social interactions seemed to involve costly cover fees, especially when younger and/or first coming out. For example, the rise of Starbucks in urban landscapes erased the small, specific LGBTQ-friendly coffee shops so popular in the 1990s that felt more safe and welcoming than generic coffee places. As small increases in acceptance towards lesbians and gay were notable during my period of study (1983–2008) (see Yang, 1997), the desire for a place of their own to buffer against the vast levels of non-acceptance still remains. This sentiment expounded especially by women who came out in the 1980s and 1990s, working class women, and women of colour.

### **Discussion: So what's a lesbian-queer neighbourhood?**

The very concentration of lesbians [in Park Slope] has created a recognisable social space – recognisable most importantly to each other.

Rothenberg (1995: 180)

Park Slope is a paradox. Since the 1970s, lesbians and queer women constituted a neighbourhood in Park Slope, but processes of sexism, homophobia, racism, and classism, as well as the gentrification that binds them all, show the 'neighborhood's' instability. In recent years, LGBTQ identity has become increasingly bound to these 'neighbourhoods and territories in which material and symbolic expressions of homosexuality are clearly visible and, increasingly, the status of these cities as destinations in the global gay and lesbian travel marketplace' (Markwell, 2002: 87). From my participants' conversations and maps, it is clear that lesbians and queer women do not produce neighbourhoods like gay men or in any traditional sense of the neighbourhood. The precarious political and economic position of women, LGBTQ people, and the double jeopardy of being lesbians and queer women make these women's spaces fleeting and fragmented. Participants who had come out in the 2000s often felt they could not 'find' or 'see' Park Slope when they visited, especially that same generation of women who wore less lesbian- and/or queer-specific styles with which to produce recognisably lesbian-queer streets. The lesbian-queer market was once a social, political,

and economic form of solidarity (Chasin, 2001), but some LGBTQ people repurposed the LGBTQ market as a way to homonormalise and absent their difference, and others had the market commodified out from under them. Lisa Duggan's useful concept of homonormativity is defined here as 'a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption' (2002: 197). Quite differently, my participants sought not to homonormalise through their attachment to the space of the LGBTQ neighbourhood, but rather they sought to find one another, and hold on to the idea if not the experience of a place for themselves. While fragmented spaces are a common phenomenon of lesbians-queer spaces (Podmore, 2001), I want to emphasise its import and role. *All* 47 women with such disparate backgrounds consistently framed the Park Slope neighbourhood as affording them with historic, social, and political recognition and connection in the form of a neighbourhood they were unable to produce elsewhere.

Those spaces and experiences that were specifically lesbian-queer were often piecemeal and vanishing, but congealed into a space with boundaries, institutions, and thoroughfares. This thickening into a neighbourhood keeps its hold through these women's reiterated experiences of recognition and expectations of safety, access, and comfort. While Park Slope is experienced as a neighbourhood for lesbians and queer women, particularly compared to other LGBTQ spaces often dominated by gay and queer men, Park Slope also exists as this bastion of possibility and security because so many other neighbourhoods limit and threaten lesbians' and queer women's everyday lives. For working class women and women of colour, Park Slope increasingly feels like a foreign, rich, White, gentrified environment for normative models of families – both homo and hetero. Yet it continues to provide a form of cover if not recognition for them in findings acceptance for their sexuality if not their skin colour, income, and education level.

The supposition that lesbian-queer neighbourhoods do not exist because they do not support the model of physical and commercial territoriality core to traditional models of neighbourhoods is faulty. I take a different route, following the possibilities of resistance afforded by queer theory to reveal it is a faulty binary to make these women fit a traditional model of neighborhood or else fail in proving their queerness. Such thinking reproduces the limited spatial models of queer subjectivities and weakens the power of queer agency. Lesbians and queer women experience and produce the neighbourhood of Park Slope, in many ways, as their own. The necessary course of action is to queer the meaning and definition of neighbourhood itself.

Reading the lesbian-queer neighbourhood against the solid, fixed, visible Castro district examined by Castells, a new way of thinking and understanding space emerges. It is not lesbians and queer women who need to change their practices or understandings of their space to 'claim' it, but that the definition of neighbourhoods must be queered to account for these women's experiences. The lesbian-queer neighbourhood is produced

in the specific, temporal, fragmented, fleeting, and unstable elements of a comparatively invisible neighbourhood. Lesbians and queer women fit together these social, cultural, historic, economic, and political dynamics to claim not only a politic of visibility but a space and politics of recognition in contemporary New York City. It is this recognition that Rothenberg's previous quote attests to, that is the driving force of the Park Slope as a persistent lesbian-queer neighbourhood, and a space that queers the meaning of neighbourhood. Like Deborah Martin's approach to neighbourhoods, the 'enacted neighbourhood' of Park Slope as it is produced by lesbians and queer women is produced by the practices of everyday life rather than mere structural forces and, as such, is a territory of 'intangible and imagined product of action rather than a fixed space' (2003: 377). From its embedded position in New York City history, women's history, and LGBTQ history, Park Slope affords lesbians and queer women support for political action to continually improve their lives.

What the lesbian-queer neighbourhood, then, affords not only lesbians, and queer women is the spatial malleability of their sense of self and community, imagined and otherwise. This opening promotes social and spatial justice. The colonising physical territory can be redrawn for those who get by or prefer other more fleeting and fragmented spaces. Such a queering of the meaning and affordances of neighbourhoods also makes way for more types of 'scenes' (see Taylor, 2008), producing spaces of difference and for difference, in terms of race and class especially. More recent scholarship has pointed out how notions of neighbourhood and community are not synonymous, nor are they ever homogenous (Colombo, Mosso and De Piccoli, 2001). This type of fixed thinking between the meaning of space and society must be queered and altered too in order to afford these women the right to the city on their own terms.

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## Notes

1. This focus on urban environments does not take up lesbian-identified towns such as Northampton, Massachusetts (Forsyth, 1997) or Asheville, North Carolina (Doan,

- 2007). Similarly, UK gay villages such as Brighton and Manchester have become increasingly LGBTQ identified during the study period so that, today, most if not all of the towns are assumed to be LGBTQ-welcoming if not LGBTQ-friendly.
2. Rather than begin this study based upon an important moment for gay and queer men's experiences or a dominant narrative of LGBTQ people in general, 1983 was selected to queer the focus of passing time on the everyday lives of lesbian-queer participants and to locate their knowledge in their own time and space (see Inckle, 2010). Furthermore, the year 1983 was also chosen as the starting point because three influential texts on LGBTQ spaces and their associated economies appeared (Anderson, 1983; Castells, 1983; D'Emilio, 1983). Selecting 2008 as the endpoint afforded participants the opportunity to compare their past to the present, in the year the study was conducted, which in retrospect stops as the credit and foreclosure crisis and recession began in the U.S. and became clear and rooted at an international level. This project seeks to confront and queer the spatial and temporal invisibilisation of lesbian-queer spaces, bodies, and experiences of injustice through the choice of site and period.
  3. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 57, with a median age of 32. Extra efforts were made to recruit women of colour and working class and upper class women by attending bars, parties, and events that these women frequent; however, a large number of self-identified women of colour dropped out due to time constraints. It is of note that the histories of upper class lesbians are notoriously absent from the bar- and neighbourhood-based studies to date, as these women often socialise in private parties in their homes or elite locales (see Moore, 2011 ). No one identified as upper class, which may be linked to lesbian-feminist politics in the 1970s to seek downward mobility (Enke, 2007). Like many American study groups, participants were likely to not identify their social class or identify as middle class (27 total), but 13 women identified as working or working-middle class, and 10 as upper-middle class, often claiming multiple class identities which they linked to their education levels and these high levels of education are common among middle class U.S. lesbians and queer women. I had hoped that frequenting venues and events in working class neighbourhoods or popular among this social class would secure the participation of those who had not finished college or high school but this was unsuccessful. Only one participant had not yet finish high school and the remaining had some college. A total of 37 participants identified as White or White-Jewish, six women identified as mixed race, and two women, each, identified as Black and Latina. One participant chose not to identify her gender, and all others identified their gender as female, woman, femme, or butch.
  4. Mannheim's (1972) concept of 'political generations' became useful when grouping lesbians' and queer women's shared and unique geographies into eras specific to their political experience and range of action. With an eye to determining lesbian-queer 'political generations' in this study, I broke participants into what I call 'generational cohorts' of five-year blocks (1983–7, 1988–92, etc.) (see Giesecking, 2007). I also use this idea to theorise the generational breakdowns further.

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