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Chapter 4

Dyked New York: The Space between Geographical Imagination and Materialization of Lesbian-Queer Bars and Neighbourhoods

Jen Jack Giesecking

It's funny – I almost never go to Park Slope [in Brooklyn]. I feel like it's not a lesbian neighbourhood ... my girlfriend's aunt lived there in the 1970s and when we moved there in 1989 she was like, 'Oh! It's not a lesbian neighbourhood anymore! All of the Columbus Avenue [implying wealthy, predominantly white elite] people have moved in' ... all of the – I don't know like institutions, like, The Rising [Café and Bar], they've disappeared. [Pauses.] But, I guess it doesn't really matter I suppose because if people feel like something's a lesbian neighbourhood then by dint of their believing it, it is.
-Sarah 1985 (came out in 1985)

Activist and environmental psychologist Maxine Wolfe wrote, 'That more lesbians go to bars than to women's centres, and that the women who use them are more diverse in terms of age, race, and economics emphasizes the major role they still play in lesbian lives' (1997, p. 315). In a similar vein, my research participant Sarah asserts in her quote that most roads to lesbian-queer spaces lead back to the lesbian neighbourhood and the dyke bar. For decades, the geographies of sexuality literature and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) activists alike have often highlighted these key spaces as essential in the work towards LGBTQ justice. Even alongside the sea change in LGBTQ acceptance and/or tolerance, LGBTQ spaces are also marked as untenable or unwelcoming to women often because they work differently for lesbians and queer women (see Valentine 1993b, 1993c; Podmore 2001, 2006; Bain and Nash, 2007). What are we to make of gender in the

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production of lesbian-queer spaces, specifically bars and neighbourhoods, which play such a key role in general LGBTQ life? Reading a dyked New York over time sheds light on how gender helps to produce and limit urban geographies of sexuality, both real and imagined.

As Sarah asserts in her quote, New York's only lesbian neighbourhood seems to be slipping out of the hands of each subsequent generation of women. Gentrification's effects of skyrocketing rental prices increasingly limit the possibility of making a home in Park Slope for most women, especially people of colour, the poor and young people. Given the emphasis on the roles of bars and parties in lesbian-queer lives before the 1990s per Wolfe, it is revealing that while there were over 60 bars for men on a 2008 Pride map of lower Manhattan, and only two bars for women (*Next Magazine*, 2008). There are a myriad other types of places important to lesbians and queer women, but bars retain a prominence in LGBTQ life across generations that requires close examination. The mobility of lesbian bodies within the city and within these spaces especially extends Gill Valentine's (1993b) classic idea that lesbians must enact specific ways of being and dress in specific spaces at specific times throughout their day. Whilst lesbians and queer women in my study tended to adopt specific avoidance behaviours in specific time-spaces, a closer examination of these spaces reveals that these practices are tied as much to the geographical imagination as the materiality of these spaces.

The setting of the urban is also important to consider. Whilst the city affords women freedom in their financial independence and anonymity, it is equally portrayed as a space of fear and danger for women both in the past and present (Pain and Smith, 2008). Building from these spaces and their social contradictions, my research of lesbian-queer life in New York City asks who and what can be learned from the experiences of lesbian-queer life over

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time? These quotes and facts reflect similar sentiments to New York lesbians and queer women whose description and, then, experiences of these spaces point to a disconnect between their material and imagined qualities.

I address my participants' ideas and experiences of lesbian-queer neighbourhoods and bars in order to reveal the overlaps and distinctions in the ways in which these women imagine and experience these spaces. This chapter uses a queer feminist approach alongside the theoretical concept of the geographical imagination to rethink how the experience of contemporary lesbians and queer women in New York City from 1983 to 2008 may differ from more dominant narratives of generalized LGBTQ spaces. I suggest that the historical geographic study of lesbian-queer New Yorkers reveals how the geographical imagination of these women's spaces is as important as their material production. Although the landscape of the city changed drastically during the contemporary period, the way in which these women negotiate their bodies' relationships between the bar and neighbourhood remained consistent. Broadening our understandings of the interplay between the geographical imagination and material manifestations of these spaces offers insights into how lesbians and queer women continue to produce spaces in the face of even more limited economic, social and political power.

Site, Method and Theoretical Framing

While LGBTQ studies of sexuality are increasingly expanding to examine rural and suburban spaces, much of urban queer life remains underexplored. Beyond being a global epicentre of financial, political and cultural capital, New York City remains a worldwide hub of LGBTQ activism, arts and culture. The city was the location of the 1969 Stonewall riot, which has been mythologized as inspiring the modern LGBTQ movement in the USA. In the 1970s and

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1980s, LGBTQ people formalized gay “ghettos” in the historically beatnik and always more homosexually-welcoming West Village, as well as other territories throughout New York City and other US, Canadian and European metropolises (see Hanhardt 2013). New York City eventually became more sanitized, neoliberalized, financialized and, eventually, militarized after 9/11, further limiting the ability to get by for women, people of colour, the working and middle classes, and youth (Delany, 1999). Throughout my period of study (1983–2008), the landscape of the city changed drastically, although I will show that the relationship between the bar and the neighbourhood remained consistently interdependent. With only one history of gay New York written to date (Chauncey, 1994) and no historical studies of lesbians or contemporary LGBTQ history in New York City, this metropolis is an advantageous site for the study of LGBTQ life.

This chapter draws from a larger historical geography of contemporary lesbian and queer society, culture and economies in New York City from 1983 to 2008. My research works across the disparate moments of this period, which range from the beginning of the AIDS epidemic to the rise of internationally syndicated television drama *The L Word*. The project included multi-generation group interviews with 47 self-identified lesbians and queer women. Participants came out (understood broadly and in self-defined ways) between 1983 and 2008, and spent the majority of that time in New York City, which afforded cross-generational dialogue. I simultaneously examined archival records from this period at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, New York, the oldest and largest collection of materials by, for and about lesbians in the world. In this chapter, I foremost draw on themes I developed from group interview conversations.

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This study does not use age as a primary marker of generation but rather the year in which participants ‘came out.’ A participant’s coming-out year is denoted after each participant’s name. A total of 10 women were black, Latina or mixed race, and the remainder were white or white Jewish; almost all participants identified as middle class or working–middle class, and had attended some college or received further education. I use ‘lesbians and queer women’ to reference my participants’ own naming of their identities and ‘lesbian–queer’ to describe the experiences of these women as a group while also recognizing that such identity formations may be much more varied (see Browne and Nash, 2009).

I turn to the *geographical imagination* as the analytic tool to address this gap between the material and imagined spaces of everyday lesbian–queer life. David Harvey (1973, 2005) originally theorized the geographical imagination to spatialize and politicize C. Wright Mills’s (1961) ‘sociological imagination’, which is the examination of personal biographies in dynamic relation to the social history in which they are situated. The concept of the geographical imagination has broadened into a tool to describe and analyse both the literal and metaphorical ways people imagine and render space (see Gregory, 1994; Said, 2000). With regard to how the imaginary plays out in LGBTQ communities, scholars have often drawn upon Benedict Anderson’s concept of ‘imagined communities’ (1983), which describes how communities form in image rather than comprehensive knowledge (see Rothenberg, 1995; Valentine, 1995; Weston 1995). For example, Anderson highlights nationalism which presupposes a sense of long-distance communion with other citizens who one may or can never know. Geographer Larry Knopp (2007) has called for a queering of the geographical imagination to afford more multiple LGTBQ spatial ontologies and political

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actions that promote difference. I take a queer feminist approach in using the geographical imagination, which I deploy as a tool to register how these participants negotiate the fissures between material and imagined spaces with their bodies.

Who are the People in your Neighbourhood, Really?

Whilst LGBTQ people have always existed in urban areas (Aldrich, 2004), LGBTQ spaces were most clearly articulated in neighbourhoods (Chauncey, 1995; Weston, 1995). Even today, prominent 'gaybourhoods' such as Greenwich Village, the East Village, Lower East Side, Chelsea and Park Slope are key spaces in US and global LGBTQ geographic imaginaries alike. Of these neighbourhoods, Greenwich Village, aka the Village or West Village, is the most well known. The area also hosts or has hosted many LGBTQ bars, as well as businesses, restaurants, non-profit agencies, cruising grounds and the New York City LGBT Center. Participants in my study felt a great sense of attachment to the Village as a shared destination of all LGBTQ people across racial, class and cultural backgrounds.

Scholars of lesbian and queer spaces have sought to respond to this fixation on neighbourhoods by identifying 'spatial concentrations' of lesbians in various US cities, whether residential, commercial or a combination thereof (Wolf, 1979; Adler and Brenner, 1992; Kennedy and Davis, 1994; Kenney, 1998). Rather than creating long-term, property-owned, residential neighbourhoods, these women do not visibly occupy and control these areas (Giesecking, 2013, 2015). The continuing debate over lesbian neighbourhoods' existence is most often attributed to women having less access to capital (Adler and Brenner, 1992; Rothenberg, 1995). It is unsurprising, then, that, throughout the literature on lesbian and queer spaces, lesbians and queer women are marked and understood as 'invisible'. Reading examples of the Village over time offers insights into how the LGBTQ

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neighbourhood for all – across races and classes, gender and sexual identities – was always both an idea of an ideal space and an actual experience.

White, working-class and butch-identified Clancy 1986 moved to the Village in the 1980s, desperate to find a safe haven for her butch body. She also sought a community of visibly different others. However, as soon as she began to feel settled in a community, the depths of the AIDS crisis uprooted that comforting sense of place as her newly found community died:

In the 80s when all the gay men died who lived in the Village, there was a huge influx of breeders [heterosexuals] because the apartments came on the market, and that's when the West Village changed. By the end of the 80s, early 90s, the West Village was barely even a gay space anymore ... my flower guy and my dry cleaner and the mom and pop stores went out, everyone you used to wave to at night on your way out of work: gone. So it was the end of that neighbourhood-y feeling ... for a while there, it didn't even feel safe in the West Village to hold hands. I think we've bounced that back a bit now, but uh, yeah, that, that was a *bit* of a shock.

Clancy reveals how the imagined ideal of the neighbourhood afforded her and other LGBTQ people a space to navigate through and against the multiple ways in which homophobia, heteronormativity, sexism, racism and classism permeate. At the same time, the material reality was actually a perilous and tragic environment that made obvious the homophobia and the LGBTQ lack of power and capital in this period. Clancy later relayed that in the decades she had lived in the Village, the ever-increasing waves of gentrification, mostly via 'breeders', had produced a space that she felt was mostly inhospitable to LGBTQ people and especially to her working-class, butch body.

In the early 1990s geographer Valentine (1993b, 1993c) wrote that spaces in which lesbians could feel safe, let alone comfortable, were severely limited. She paid special

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attention to the home in terms of the family of origin, workplace and mixed LGBTQ bars in smaller towns often dominated by gay men. Some of my participants found that these experiences had not changed by 2008 (see also Hanhardt, 2013). White, working-class and femme-identified Maral 2002 still lived at home and had not yet come out to her Orthodox Jewish parents. She explained the stress of being out in public, even in a LGBTQ neighbourhood like the West Village. A group of women of various races and classes expressed shock at her position in this territory:

Maral: I still don't feel safe, even in New York City. I remember when I was first coming out I didn't even safe walking down Gay Street [in the Village] holding my girlfriend's hand ... my dad is a cab driver so every time a cab would pass by, I'd be like, 'Fuck! Is that my Dad?! *Is that my Dad?!*'

Tre 2002, Magdalene 2004 and Quinn 1995: Whoa. That is so stressful! God.

Although the gay neighbourhood is often portrayed as the space of a safe elsewhere (see Hanhardt 2013), each passing bright yellow cab produces a panopticon effect. Maral's body senses that it is always under surveillance while she needs to continually monitor her actions and self as well. The material affordances of the supposed international gaybourhood of the Village are lost on Maral and, instead, she has merely the idea of Gay Street in which to act as herself. The other women in this interview were older or younger, wealthier or less moneyed, and black or white, yet they *all* connected to her experience with shock, indicating how these women also imagine the Village to be a welcoming place. Still, in many women's stories of their experiences in the Village, other versions of the not-so-safe and much less welcoming neighbourhood leaked out: hate crimes, being followed, being screamed at and harassed, and so on. Even while the Village offers an increased sense of

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community to many, the reality of the space is also punctured by limitations, whether specific to one person's family situation or to larger structural inequalities.

'I Could Hardly Wait to Get Back to That Bar' Except 'It's Closed Now'

Conversations with participants often began with participants naming bars and parties as the epitome of a lesbian-queer place. Valarie 1985's quote attests to the 'cool' of such 'gay places':

That was it: Garbo's! That was the first [lesbian] bar I ever went to. Me and a friend went there. And we just walked in and we like, 'Oh my God, oh my God! We're in a gay place. Oh my God, oh my God. Okay. Be cool, be cool!'

While a wide variety of places remains important to lesbians and queer women (see Nash, 2005), bars have a historical import to lesbians and queer women that changes over time from being a hub of all social activity – imagined or real – to a space that is constantly lost.

In their ground-breaking history of mid-twentieth-century lesbian life in Buffalo, New York, Kennedy and Davis (1994) describe how the bar – lesbian-only or mixed lesbian and gay men – was the only public space available for working-class lesbian socializing from the 1930s to the 1960s; their first full chapter is entitled 'I Could Hardly Wait to Get Back to That Bar'. This sentiment of the bar as the ideal gathering space is reaffirmed by lesbian-queer writers and activists, as noted in the Wolfe quote in the introduction (see also D'Emilio, 1983; Nestle, 1997). However, participants in my project dwell more on the loss and absences of such places, marking their closures as important as anything else in the phrase 'it's closed now'. The sense of nostalgia was pervasive in that there were always so few dedicated lesbian bars and similarly only handfuls of lesbian-queer parties, as the numbers of lesbian and gay male bars in the introduction highlights. The closing of any of

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these places is therefore considered a deep loss, and these spaces are remembered with significant emotion. At the same time, the limited, shared geographical imagination and materiality of lesbian bars links these women across races, classes and generations.

With a greater number of venues for white women, particularly those that are well advertised and in central locations, lesbians and queer women of colour relayed an even more profound sense of loss when the last lesbian bar for that group closed in the early 2000s. Mixed race, working/middle-class Bailey 1995 spoke out about how she saw this phenomenon affecting lesbians and queer women across races:

Well, I was 21. I was working there [at Crazy Nannie's Bar] and everyone there was in their 30s, 40s, 50s. So it wasn't my age group but it was a bar that was primarily African-American lesbian ... a lot of Latin women, working-class white women ... And downstairs it just had that pool table/Megatouch [video game] bar feeling ... upstairs it was a big dance club and bar. It was like Cheers for me ... I remember sitting in there writing a paper on Lil' Kim. [All: Laugh.] Because when I was in there I was like ... home. You know what I mean? [All: Nod.] So when it closed ... now people don't know where to go.

Rather than realizing the multitude of places and the meanings they can support or how the meaning and function of bars could change over time, participants harkened back to that idealized space of the bar, its closing and their reading of the closure as rendering lesbian-queers invisible. In their stories there was no place to physically locate their body that echoed the difference and attraction of the bars they had once known. The bars most often referenced included the Duchess and Cubbyhole in the 1980s; Meow Mix, Henrietta Hudson's, Crazy Nannie's, Rubyfruit's and Cubbyhole in the 1990s; and Cattysack, Ginger's and Cubbyhole in the 2000s. All but three of these bars are closed now. This loss reiterates the fixation on such places as *the* places for galvanizing and enacting LGBTQ liberation.

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Generational changes in NYC lesbian bars also express the political and social shifts of the times. Those who came out in the 1980s said they were likely to all wind up in the same places with gay men and trans people because there were fewer bars or parties. Particularly for that generation, political work around the hardest-hitting issues like the AIDS epidemic often brought LGBTQ people together. The number of lesbian-queer bars and parties expanded in the 1990s, as white, working-class Sudie 1999 recalled:

Monday night was Doc Holliday's, Tuesday night was Lux, Wednesday night was ... eventually Metropolitan, and then Thursday night sometimes was Meow Mix and then it eventually became something else, Friday night was a party, Saturday night we had off. Maybe something happened on Sunday nights, too. [Laughs.] We all went out five nights a week. I scheduled my classes around it – that's especially when I was young, you know? We were all broke. It was a lot cheaper to just party at someone's house though ... I was like 18.

During the era of “lesbian chic,” activist wins, and lower property values, lesbian-queer bars and parties multiplied to their highest numbers in NYC history.

By the 2000s all of this changed again. White, working/middle-class Kathy 2005 shared that her recent connection to activism in the late 2000s recreated the bars as political spaces: ‘It's been really great for me ... to know more people, and actually ... hang out with queers! And really angry queers. Instead of just getting drunk and picking the flavor of the evening [at a bar].’ As of 2008, only four lesbian-queer bars existed in New York City; there were only three at the time of publication.

In the end, then, my research suggests that lesbian bars continue to afford the possibility for always slightly more diverse socializing across race, age and class than other social venues, particularly during young adulthood and most especially when coming out. In

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a landscape of changing attitudes and values toward LGBTQ people, participants noted that bars fall increasingly short of their almost mythical mandate to ‘validate the reality of their [lesbian] worlds and their lives as social and sexual beings’ (Wolfe, 1997, p. 315). Regardless, operationalizing their geographical imaginations reveals the qualities of the ideal place that generations of urban lesbian and queer bodies, of different races and classes, believe they require in order to sustain their everyday lives and resist injustice.

Discussion and Conclusion: Dyked New York

LGBTQ individuals and groups have historically formed and been formed in urban areas, so much so that Julie Abraham has argued that homosexuals have become ‘models of the city itself’ (2009, p. xix). For LGBTQ people, the types of urban spaces and places most often represented in the literature range from the scale of the place, namely bars, to the neighbourhood to the city itself. At the same time, women’s explicit erasure from the city, in narratives of this group’s fear of city spaces, and weaker economic and political power contradict the neighbourhood/bar typology of LGBTQ spaces as being equally safe, useful and/or liberating for all genders, as well as races and classes. Yet, the examination of urban lesbians’ and queer women’s experiences in this chapter reveals that the intimate scales of LGBTQ bars and neighbourhoods are complicated by gender; this gendered queering of the city unveils the dream and the reality of dyked New York.

Beyond the sheer physicality of these spaces and the imagined community socially sustaining lesbian-queer spaces long theorized, these women also imagine the geographical qualities of these material spaces. The meanings and uses of these spaces are also imbricated, where the site of the bar serves as a presumably welcoming space for lesbian-queer bodies, while the neighbourhood is the location for these hangouts and

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community spaces. Limited in social, economic and political power, these women overcome the limits to produce physical space by a shared geographical imagination of how these spaces should operate. While LGBTQ neighbourhoods operate as a beacon of community, safety, and welcome in the geographical imagination for all of my participants, their materiality is limited through difference and is specific to women's genders, races and classes. With a small number of bars and a limited ability to keep them open, these women express a deep sense of nostalgia for that ideal socially inclusive, politically astute and economically accessible space that always seems to be lost.

The spaces of the bars and neighbourhoods mutually form one another as these women's bodies wind their way between and through these spaces, often finding the bars they seek out are lost to LGBTQ neighbourhoods. Sarah mentions in her opening quote about the Park Slope neighbourhood seeming like it is 'not a lesbian neighbourhood anymore' because 'institutions, like, The Rising [Café and Bar], they've disappeared'. This sentiment shows how much of a role bars play in evidencing and sustaining LGBTQ neighbourhoods for these women. Ignored in their imagined portrayals of these spaces but essential to their actual experiences, it is these women's bodies that help to produce and sustain spaces of both resilience and resistance. This finding elaborates on Valentine's (1993b) idea that lesbians adopt specific avoidance behaviours in specific time-spaces by revealing that these practices are tied both to the materiality and the geographical imagination of these spaces. Further, these women's abilities to navigate the city on the basis of their race, gender and class shape their social lives and spaces, as Bailey's stories of the much more limited spaces available to black women illustrate. An idea of dyked New York, then, reveals the queer flux of these spaces and the multiple affordances to lesbians

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and queer women, imagined and physical, which still remains specific to experiences and subjectivities of race, class, gender, generation, age, and so on.

As my research with lesbians and queer women who came out between 1983 and 2008 in New York City demonstrates, the aspect of change over time reveals changes and consistencies of the urban that need to be addressed more broadly within the literature. My findings reveal that a dyked New York is not constant but always in process and becoming, and thereby part of ‘the landscape of contemporary gay life’ that incorporates both hegemony and difference (G. Brown, 2009, p. 3). The hegemony of dyked New York is the totalizing social imaginary of the LGBTQ bar and neighbourhood. At the same time, the gap between the imagined and material experiences of LGBTQ neighbourhoods like Greenwich Village reveals this state of becoming. Equally essential is the shifting import and affordances of lesbian-queer bar culture in the city. Such a queering to hold the tension in dialectic rather than succumb to one side of the binary is the way in which practices of LGBTQ resilience and resistance more fully account for difference. The experiences of my lesbian-queer participants demonstrate how a dyked New York affords a way of reading urban sexualities to account for the imagined and material qualities and contradictions of these spaces.

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Bio

Jen Jack Gieseeking ([@jgieseking](#)) is engaged in research on co-productions of space and identity in digital and material environments, with a focus on sexual and gender identities. Jack's work pays special attention to how such productions support or inhibit social, spatial, and economic justice. S/he is presently writing her second book, *Queer New York: Geographies of Lesbians, Dykes, and Queer Women, 1983-2008*. Jack's first book is [The People, Place, and Space Reader](#), co-edited with William Mangold, Cindi Katz, Setha Low, and Susan Saegert. S/he has published work on the topic of lesbian and queer spaces in *Area*, *Radical History Review*, and *Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy*, and published on related topics in the *Qualitative Inquiry* and *Journal of Urban Affairs*. Assistant Professor of Public Humanities in American Studies at Trinity College, s/he also blogs and creates data visualizations about urban queer history on her website, [jgieseking.org](#).

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