

Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence

CHRISTINA B. HANHARDT, 2013

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Christina B. Hanhardt writes in *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* that one cannot “fully understand changing spatial development patterns apart from LGBT politics” (9). Geographers everywhere should take heed and would do well to read this book. Drawing upon Hanhardt’s insightful text will prove an exciting way to incorporate geographies of sexuality into research and teaching, particularly through the lens of neighborhood change.

Well written and thoroughly researched, *Safe Space* focuses on the landscapes of San Francisco and New York City from the 1960s to the present—strikingly little work has been done to put these well known queer hubs in dialogue until now. The 2014 Lambda Book of the Year is both a resource to scholars and instructors of urban studies, American studies, studies of violence and oppression (particularly in regards to issues of police brutality), and geographies of gender, sexuality, race, and class. Hanhardt draws on archival research in institutional and individual archives across the US; interviews with organizers; municipal documents; journalistic coverage; and attended rallies and direct actions. Trained as a historian in American Studies with attention to “thick description,” she has produced a vital and vibrant geographical history of urban marginalized lives in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Hanhardt writes that she has knowingly embraced a difficult and complicated topic of study: “*Safety*, and by extension *safe space*, are even trickier concepts. James Baldwin often spoke about safety and its status as an ‘illusion’ on which the dominant society depends” (30). Her findings reveal the special role discourses of “safety” play in constructing lesbian and gay neighborhoods, and the gains they afford white middle and upper class bodies within these territories, gay men’s bodies especially among them. Any claims to safety therefore reassert structural oppressions that sustain traction under liberalist politics and neoliberal economies. The reification of safety for certain bodies reinforces racial and class stratifications, all of which is based on “mooring a dominant understanding of sexual identity to place” (9). Hanhardt contends that the construction of the supposedly “liberating” gay neighborhoods of these two cities have been built upon and reproduced the inequalities they sought to fight against. The core contribution of the text reveals how the management of bodily risk and safety have been deployed by a certain model of liberalism in order to control continuous patterns of urban disinvestment alongside selective reinvestment.

Safe Space is composed of an introduction, five chapters that focus on case studies of organizing around LGBT safety from the 1960s through the 2000s, and a brief conclusion and epilogue. Even as the author sets up her case studies comparing social movements and radical, leftist, and liberal organizations in the two most well-known hubs of LGBT America, Hanhardt is careful to not reproduce a metronormative project by relating the city as critical nexus rather than presumed site. The introduction lays out her key arguments regarding how anticrime and LGBT rights legislation came to be entangled in the neighborhood over the

past 50 years and why it matters. Defining the “function of violence” as the heart of LGBT politics has played a key role in influencing the life and practices of U.S. cities which then become linked to “risk management” (11).

The first chapter examines the years 1965 to 1969, just before Stonewall Riot, within liberal frameworks of the time. Examining the shifts in the ‘white ghetto’ of the Tenderloin District of San Francisco, Hanhardt shows ‘how homosexuality increasingly became constituted as a respectable form of sexual nonnormativity – one disassociated from the criminalized and disorderly of the city – insofar as it was associated with whiteness’ (49, 50). She thoughtfully links this purported liberation to popular psychology’s pathologization of people of color and youth—an insight often overlooked in urban research.

I most deeply enjoyed the second chapter “Butterflies, whistles, and fists,” which pays special interest to 1970s’ safe streets patrols as an example of what Hanhardt calls *militant gay liberalism*. She argues that the LGBT fixation on safety “merged with the goal of visibility” that “increasingly fit liberal gay politics into the broader forces of a city whose land market was ripe for new investment opportunities” (82). In Chapter Three, “Challenges to gay gentrification at the start of the Reagan era,” Hanhardt brings to light much overlooked activist organizations that sought to bridge rather than divorce “the place of race, gender, and sexual identity in public contestations over antigay violence and gay participation in gentrification” (22). This chapter is of special attention to researchers of gentrification, housing, urban development, and financialization.

In the fourth chapter, Hanhardt examines the place of “hate crime laws and the geography of punishment” in the 1980s and 1990s. She argues that “gay visibility was cast as a goal and a risk of neighborhood growth, and how this dual set of assumptions helped to define the essence of antigay violence as a crime” (24-25). She skillfully suggests that “the special character of gay neighborhoods had become just as defined by anticrime measures as it was by those who made it gay” (184). In the final full chapter, Hanhardt brings us up to the 2000s by examining the unequal access and definition of safety

Much to the reader’s delight, the book is generally lacking in weaknesses. While more consideration could be given to work in geographies of sexualities, critical geography, and urban studies, Hanhardt does speak to some key work from the field (Knopp, Munt, Nast, and Rothenberg, and Harvey and Jacobs, respectively). More importantly, her critical lens and well researched text speaks to and extends this body of work rather than producing arguments that work against it. The geography community may also find fault with the author’s method of case studies in two cities that, while taking account of place specificities, is less refined from a comparative urbanism perspective (even as Hanhardt asserts this is not her goal). Perhaps the text’s only significant fault is that wide-ranging study period and focus on two cities treats the different decades and cities unequally, and is at risk for a narrative form of uneven development. Lastly, the addition of only two small maps at the book’s end seems like an afterthought; for those less familiar with these cities or the American urban context, this text may prove more difficult to follow.

For those who have been seeking a strong contemporary text to add to or to sit beside the core readings in gender, sexuality, and space, or urban studies more generally, look no

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further. The writing may prove difficult for introductory level undergraduate courses but certainly will be a huge boon to graduate and advanced undergraduate courses because of its intricate, smart arguments, and its applicability to everyday lgbtq life. Her findings, Hanhardt suggests, are not limited merely to the urban or the US, and I concur.

I have always been enamored of monographs of lgbtq geographical history with thick sections of rigorously researched footnotes that support innovative arguments while grappling with the multi-faceted layers of lgbt history. Hanhardt's *Safe Space* is another of these beautiful texts that and a contribution to the geographical history of the oppressed.

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