

there goes the gayborhood?

by amin ghaziani



Image Courtesy RedEye Chicago

Lesbian and gay residential patterns are shifting today. A recent flurry of media reports captures popular anxieties that urban enclaves long considered “gay neighborhoods”—places with a visible clustering of gay residents and tourists; gay and gay-friendly commercial establishments; and gay community symbols such as the rainbow flag—are disappearing as more straights move in and fewer gays express interest in residing in

piece—but the colors were fading and bleeding. The story reported, “With more families moving in and longtime residents moving out, some say Boystown [the informal moniker of Chicago’s gayborhood] is losing its gay flavor... Some residents and activists welcome the gay migration, saying it’s a sign of greater equality, while others say Boystown is losing its identity.”

The social forces contributing to this gay outmigration (and replacement by straights) stretch beyond the Windy City. San Diego’s Hillcrest, Houston’s Montrose, Atlanta’s Midtown, Miami’s South Beach, D.C.’s Dupont Circle, Boston’s South End—each is an example of a traditional American gay neighborhood, and each seems to be on a list of endangered urban species.

It’s quixotic to think that gay neighborhoods have always been around and will never change. Neighborhoods and the cities that surround them are organic, continuously evolving places. But neither should we sing a requiem for the death and life of great gay villages,

Like the cities around them, gay neighborhoods are organic, continuously evolving places.

or relocating to them. The *Chicago Tribune* measured the pulse of these changes in two 2007 features, “Culture Clash: Boystown Shifting as More Families Move In” and “Gay Neighborhoods Worry About Losing Their Distinct Identity.”

And in an eye-catching companion piece, one of Chicago’s free daily papers, the *RedEye*, ran a cover story playfully titled “There Goes the Gayborhood.” A provocative photograph of one of the rainbow-colored pylons that adorn North Halsted Street and designate it as the city’s main gay artery accompanied the

as some media reports presage. Thinking within this binary box isn’t sociologically productive. We might instead ask why gay neighborhoods initially formed, and what factors explain the changes we’re witnessing now. With these questions as our guide, we can use media attention to understand the relationship between sexuality, residential choice, and urban forms.

World War II was pivotal in the formation of gay territories. Many men and women were dishonorably discharged from the military for their homosexual-

ity, and rather than return home disgraced, they remained in port cities such as San Francisco. According to the U.S. Census, from 1950 to 1960 the number of single-person households in San Francisco doubled and accounted for 38 percent of the city’s total residential units. During this time, bars helped create dense gay networks that made gays more visible and, over time, inspired them to assert a right to gather in public places.

A lot has changed since then. Gay life in the U.S. is now so open that it may be moving “beyond the closet,” says sociologist Steven Seidman, despite a persistent privileging of heterosexuality by the state, societal institutions, and popular culture. This mere possibility prompted British journalist Paul Burston to coin the term “post-gay” in 1994 as an observation and critique of gay culture and politics. The term found an American audience four years later when *Out* magazine editor James Collard argued in the *New York Times*, “We should no longer define ourselves solely in terms of our sexuality—even if our opponents do. Post-gay isn’t ‘un-gay.’ It’s about taking a critical look at gay life and no longer thinking solely in terms of struggle.” In a separate *Newsweek* feature, Collard elaborated: “First for protection and later with understandable pride, gays have come to colonize whole neighborhoods, like West Hollywood in L.A. and Chelsea in New York City. It seems to me that the new Jerusalem gay people have been striving for all these years won’t be found in a gay-only ghetto, but in a world where we are free, equal, and safe to live our lives.”

The way Americans understand sexuality affects people’s location patterns (why they choose to live where they do) and urban forms (why neighborhoods look and feel the way they do). The

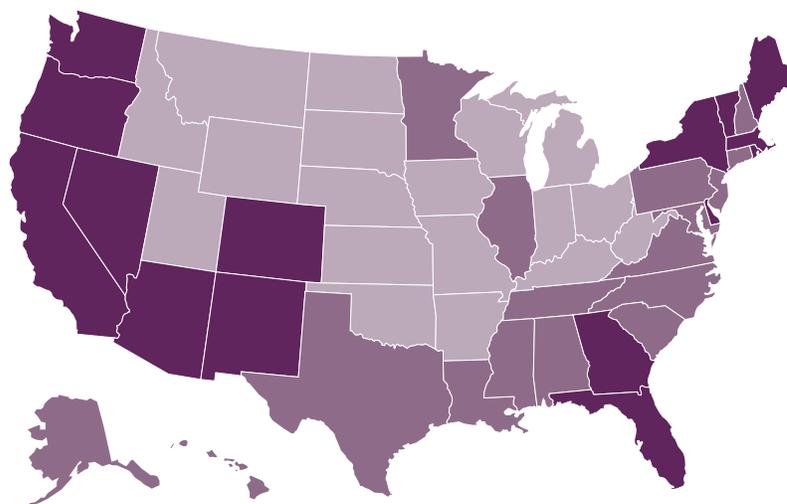
closet era (think pre-World War II) gave rise to discrete locales where individuals with same-sex desires could find each other. The coming out era (World War II to 1997, but especially after the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York), in contrast, witnessed the development of formal urban gay enclaves like the Castro. And finally, the post-gay era (1998 to today) impacts these gay neighborhoods by potentially unraveling them and rendering them “passé,” as the *New York Times* characterized them in October 2007. The *Advocate* remarked that same year, “As the country opens its arms to openly gay and lesbian people, the places we call home have grown beyond urban gay ghettos. The *Advocate* welcomes you to this new American landscape.” When the magazine polled its readers, asking if they’d “prefer to live in an integrated neighborhood rather than a distinct gay ghetto,” 69 percent said yes.

One year later in an *Advocate* article titled “Where the Gays Are,” UCLA demographer Gary J. Gates reported that, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, “Same-sex couples live virtually everywhere in the country,” and their numbers are “increasing in some of the most conservative parts of the country.” Gates’s research shows that “same-sex unmarried partners”—the only category the Census included in 2000 to count lesbians and gay men and one that clearly ignores single people—were present in 99.3 percent of all U.S. counties. Why do post-gay gays tend to think outside the gayborhood box?

We have to look at the factors driving the transition to today’s putatively post-gay era, notably the role of assimilation, or the social process of absorbing people (in this case, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people) into mainstream society. The assimilation of American gays has generated feelings of acceptance, integration, and safety, which is reversing an earlier propensity of lesbians and gay men to concentrate in discrete urban enclaves. This new socio-

Gay and lesbian couples in the U.S.

■ 1.02-5.15% of all coupled households ■ 0.77-1.02% ■ 0.47-0.77%



Source: 2000 U.S. Census data analyzed by Gary Gates.

psychological profile works in two ways. First, assimilation contributes to an overextension of the gay residential imagination. As Don Romesburg, co-chairman of the GLBT Historical Society of Northern California, told the *Washington Post* in 2007, “What I’ve heard from some people is, ‘We don’t need the Castro anymore because essentially San Francisco is our Castro.’” The pattern persists in smaller cities, too. Consider Northampton, Massachusetts: “There

a contradiction: if an entire city is a gay village, then no particular neighborhood is uniquely so. San Francisco-as-our-Castro looks and feels different from the Castro as a discrete gay urban entity. Thus, assimilation may expand a gay person’s horizon of residential possibilities, but it also shrinks the situating of homosexuality in urban space.

Second, assimilation motivates some gays to think of their sexuality as indistinguishable from straights, and this com-

There’s no reason to believe the uneven and incomplete post-gay trend signals the end of American gayborhoods.

are gay enclaves, but there’s no place I know where the gay population is so integrated into the community,” said Julie Pokela, a local business owner and former head of the Chamber of Commerce. Some people have dubbed her entire city “Lesbianville, USA.”

Although very different, San Francisco and Northampton both show how assimilation has broadened the spatial positioning of homosexuality from the specific streets of a gay enclave to an entire city itself. But here we encounter

pels them to select residences outside of traditional gay villages. As an example, a 2004 *New York Times* story interviewed a lesbian couple that had relocated to a New Jersey suburb. Neither woman considered herself “any sort of activist,” and both wanted “a suburban family life that is almost boringly normal.” But why not relocate to a place like Asbury Park with its visible concentration of gay residents? “We’re specifically not moving into gay neighborhoods here. Within the state of New Jersey, we feel comfortable living

anywhere,” said one woman. Her partner added, “Here, we’re just part of a neighborhood. We weren’t the gay girls next door; we were just neighbors. We were able to blend in, which is what you want to do, rather than have the scarlet letter on our heads.” It seems that post-gay residential choice comes with a desire to deemphasize the differences between gay and straight. “There is a portion of our community that wants to be separatist, to have a queer culture, but most of us want to be treated like everyone is,” Dick Dadey, executive director of Empire State Pride Agenda told the *Times* in 1994. “We want to be the neighbors next door, not the lesbian or gay couple next door.”

Straights are on board, too. A 2010 Gallup poll found that, for the first time in history, the percentage of Americans who find gay and lesbian relations morally acceptable crossed the symbolic fifty-percent threshold. In fact, many straight women who live in gayborhoods

say they feel safer in them. But why would straight men move there? Sociologist Michael Kimmel told *New York Times* columnist Charles M. Blow that “men have gotten increasingly comfortable with the presence of, and relative equality of, ‘the other.’” If they respond to gay identity disclosure today with “Gay? Whatever, Dude” (as Blow titled his piece), then a gay neighborhood is hardly out-of-bounds. Crossing the symbolic moral threshold, along with the preference structure of many single straight women, has resulted in a ratio of single heterosexual women to men that makes gayborhoods especially attractive to the latter—minus all the baggage that comes with homophobia.

So, what should we make of media cries like “There goes the gayborhood”? The transition to a post-gay era is generating a particular attitude and corresponding behavior: gays are deselection traditional gay neighborhoods and straights are selecting them as a place of

residence. Assimilation is expanding the gay urban imagination and residential repertoire at the same time that it’s erasing the identifiable location of gays in place. This post-gay effect manifests in big cities and small towns alike. Gays in both places seek neighborhoods that are demographically diverse and where their sexual orientation adds to an already lively mix. But recall that 31 percent of *Advocate* readers still preferred to live in “a distinct gay ghetto.” The post-gay trend, in other words, is uneven and incomplete—and there is no compelling reason to believe that it signals the definitive end of American gayborhoods, as some media reports predict. A sociological approach shows that it’s not a zero-sum game.

Amin Ghaziani is in the Society of Fellows at Princeton University and the sociology department at the University of British Columbia. He is author of *The Dividends of Dissent: How Conflict and Culture Work in Lesbian and Gay Marches on Washington*.

cache me if you can

by jeremy freese and eszter hargittai

From where we sit, the closest one is disguised as a switch plate on the back of a utility box. Next is a fake stone in some bushes in front of the headquarters of an international humanitarian organization. After that is one disguised as a piece of a planter next to a park bench; then a small magnet stuck to a sprinkler; then a jar hidden among the rocks on the lake. Nearby also is one at the train station that you can only find if you answer questions about the mosaic there, as well as one that requires you to calculate where the lake shore would have been 11,000 years ago.

These hidden treasures are called *geocaches*, and there are now over a

million of them worldwide. You are just as likely to find one—we have—in a small rural Iowa town as you are in New York’s Central Park, on the Strip in Vegas, or overlooking the Danube in Budapest. If you find one, it will have a paper log inside for you to sign. Perhaps it will also contain some trinkets: stickers, key chains, toys, a mini compass, or whatever else those who found it before felt like leaving. You are welcome to take one of these as a trophy of your success, but you are expected to leave something of your own in return.

Other kinds of collective treasure hunts predate geocaching, but nothing with so many participants and so many

objects to find. Geocaching began when the US government allowed civilian access to accurate GPS signals in 2000. Ever since, people have been hiding caches and making their locations public by specifying their GPS coordinates. The largest of the various websites that moderate and catalog these treasures is *geocaching.com*. Each cache has a separate webpage with GPS coordinates, a map of its location, a description left by the person who hid it, and notes from other “cachers” who have hunted it. You can either print out this information or use a smartphone or GPS device to bring the information with you on the trail.

Coordinates will get you within a