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# Urban Margins on the Move: Rethinking LGBTQ Inclusion by Queering the Place of the Gayborhood [pre-print]

Jen Jack Giesecking

*Trinity College, jack.giesecking@trincoll.edu*

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## **Urban Margins on the Move: Rethinking LGBTQ Inclusion by Queering the Place of the Gayborhood**

We could enter that world but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracks to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town. ...these statements identify marginality as much more than a site of deprivation; in fact I was saying just the opposite, that it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. - bell hooks (1984, xvi)

In her quote above, bell hooks describes how her contribution of feminist and critical race theories, to choose »the margin as a space for radical openness,« was inspired by the physical geographic margins of the town in which she grew up. hooks' *margin* is a key theorization tool for black female experience, a group that played a key role in the production of the urban landscape. The connection between identity and space at the periphery and core is key to my own study of lesbians and queer women's spaces, economies, and culture in New York City from 1983 to 2008. For decades, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, and queer (LGBTQ) people have played key roles in these urban gentrification processes, as peripheral »gay ghettos« became gay neighborhoods and eventually »gayborhood« tourist hubs. I lay bare the interdependencies of the margin-center by showing the history of urban queer sexualities. In applying queer theories to read the placement of queer urban bodies, I suggest that the margin and the center are examples of binary mores that, rather than only be seen as at odds, require and reproduce each other.

Work from the Chicago School in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century depicted a con- centric zone model moving from center to periphery in rings of central business district, industrial, transition, working class, middle class, and commuters (Burgess, Park, and McKenzie 1925). Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century US suburbanization merely shifted around the haves and have nots, leaving primarily poor working class people, mostly people of color, in the city bounds. LGBTQ people's need for refuge, safety, and community led to their formation of visible, fixed urban spatial concentrations in the 1970s. These *gay ghettos* began to evolve to describe the limited agency and lack of re- sources of gays and lesbians living on cities' margins.

Marking a significant shift in the early 1980s, Manuel Castells (1983) declared to the academy what was already the word in the streets: gay men in San Francisco's Castro district were not living in a ghetto but in a *neighbor- hood*. The LGBTQ neighborhood continued to be read as a space of liberation, community, and possibility, even as suburbs were still the ideal residential hubs. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, cities took on a profound popularity as places to both work and live.

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Simultaneously, it seemed acceptance had arrived as LGBTQ neighborhoods became billed as *gayborhoods*, revealing both their playful side and the mainstream tourist hubs they had become (Boyd 2008). LGBTQ people are now beginning to leave these neighborhoods in greater numbers, with scholars and LGBTQ people debating if this migration indicated a loss of community and/or evidence of success through assimilation (Ghaziani 2014).

Throughout all of these classifications, LGBTQ have played a profound role in urban gentrification. Artists and LGBTQ people devoted labor into neighborhoods that redrafted the landscape of cities. Yet because of women, people of color, and the poor possess less economic and political power, many LGBTQ people stick to the edges of safe neighborhoods and, in so doing, move the margins farther and farther from the traditional city center. Even as the dominant narrative of LGBTQ spaces portrays a margin included in the center and then dissolved or abandoned, most LGBTQ people were never included or truly lived beyond the margins to begin with.

Can the peripheral queer ever truly become the center? I coined the term *useful in/stability* in a recent article about my research in the Lesbian Herstory Archives to invoke the tension that binaries like the margin and center represent (see Giesecking 2015). While queer theory is often obsessed with that which is fluid and in flux, such as the unstable and margins of everyday life, I suggest that the core queer project is to hold binaries in tension in order to make a call for justice in a world of complexity and difference. In other words, we must lay claim to and grapple with stability and instability rather than fall prey to maintaining a position of refusal by claiming one side of a binary as truth. To seek out the margin as a place to maintain difference is impossible in these ever-intensifying neoliberal times. hooks also told us so long ago, »To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body« (1984, xvi). As the center needs the margin to remain just outside the reach of inclusion, we must begin to imagine other sociospatial metaphors in order to confront the injustices perpetrated by the uneven development of capitalist accumulation.

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