

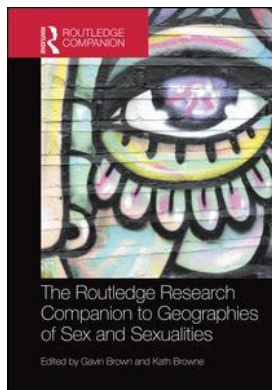
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Chapter 3

Disaggregating Sexual Metronormativities: Looking Back at 'Lesbian' Urbanisms

Julie A. Podmore

Introduction

In 1995 Kath Weston published 'Get Thee to the Big City', in which she critically examined the construction of the 'great lesbian and gay migration' to big cities and its role in shaping narratives of gay and lesbian liberation in North America. While this publication drew attention to the metronormativity of gay and lesbian studies, it was Halberstam's (2005) queer critique that coined and critically advanced the term. At that point, geographers had been empirically critical of the lack of attention to sexualities beyond the metropolis for some time (Bell and Valentine, 1995b; Binnie and Valentine, 1999; Phillips, Watt and Shuttleton, 2000). Since then, many have taken up the project of studying LGBTQ lives beyond metropolitan centres by focusing on rural areas (Gorman-Murray, Pini and Bryant, 2013; Gorman-Murray, Waitt and Gibson, 2008; Smith and Holt, 2005) and, more recently, smaller or 'ordinary' cities (G. Brown, 2008; Browne, 2008; Muller Myrdahl, 2013). In tandem, metronormativity has become a central queer critique of lesbian and gay studies, exemplified by works such as Herring's (2010) examination of the history of American queer anti-urban movements or Tongson's (2011) relocations of queer life to the landscapes of new suburbia, both of which demonstrate the limitations and erasures involved in constructing the urban as the authentic space of LGBTQ lives and liberations.

While the metronormativity critique has drawn our attention to the power relations involved in where we look for geographies of sexualities, the spatial binary it draws between the normative urban and the non-normative elsewhere requires some disaggregation and contextualization. This chapter, therefore, is an attempt to reconsider where and how lesbian (including dyke and queer-identified 'women') urbanisms in the West have been implicated in this dualism. Viewing this debate from the perspective of lesbian geographies, I argue that some metronormativities might be less straightforward than others. Moreover, I suggest that the metronormativity critique relies on the reduction of the queer metropolitan in ways that may reinforce the very homonormativities that they seek to undermine. The chapter begins by asking where lesbians are (epistemologically, spatially and temporally) in relation to the metronormativities critique. Concluding that lesbian metronormativity is at best incomplete, I then turn to the geography of sexualities literature to disaggregate lesbian urbanisms from metronormativity. Finding conceptual ambivalence and under-theorization here, I review the geographical literature on urbanism, considering its potential as a framework for disaggregating metronormativity through the example of lesbian urbanism.

I hope that such a project can be useful for thinking through the spatialities and experiences of other LGBTQ populations.

Lesbian Metronormativities?

Is it possible for lesbian urban spatialities, usually described as ephemeral and invisible, to be associated with the metronormative? Metronormativity is a neologism proposed by Halberstam (2005) to describe the historically specific spatial and temporal narrative that equates gay and lesbian liberation with rural to urban migration. Prevalent in US gay and lesbian histories, this trajectory is intertwined with the culturally specific ideal of 'coming out' and the joining of 'visible' urban communities as a means by which to constitute sexual subjectivity. As Halberstam (2005, p. 37) argues:

The metronormative narrative maps a story of migration onto the coming-out narrative. While the story of the coming-out narrative tends to function as a temporal trajectory within which a period of disclosure follows a long period of repression, the metronormative story of migration from 'country' to 'town' is a spatial narrative within which the subject moves to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy. Since each narrative bears the same structure, it is easy to equate the physical journey from small town to big city with the psychological journey from the closet case to the out and proud.

For Halberstam (2005), the concept is useful as it demonstrates the 'devaluation' of the rural in US spatial discourses about sexual subjectivities and can be extrapolated to the global scale to understand the neocolonial dynamic surrounding the construction of non-metropolitan sexualities beyond the urban West. However, like all dualisms, it is an argument that requires some unpacking, especially with regard to what it suggests for the urban. As the hegemonic centre in this asymmetrical relationship, the metropolitan West, with its long history of queer place-making and diversity of queer experiences, is reduced to nothing more than a metaphorical space that represents a hegemonic cultural ideal.

The reduction of the urban in the metronormativities critique is especially apparent when it is contextualized and disaggregated by considering where lesbian urbanisms, both historic and contemporary, might be situated. We might consider the epistemological and temporal underpinnings of the metronormativity critique. It is specifically a post-millennial queer cultural studies critique of US gay and lesbian studies in 1980s and 1990s that seeks to call into question the assumptions of works like D'Emilio's (1983) *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, texts that equate the creation of a gay and lesbian rights movement with the formation of urban gay communities. Certainly, the arguments in many works of this period did somewhat uncritically depend on classic ecological ideas about urbanism for their arguments: cities offered sexual liberation from the family economy, the 'critical mass' needed to form subcultures and political movements, and the anonymity necessary for the appropriation of public and semi-public spaces (Wirth, 1938). However, such works were primarily concerned with understanding post-Stonewall gay community formation, and, by association, the development of the American gay and lesbian rights movement. Lesbian experiences, patterns of community formation and liberation movements were not necessarily structurally central to the 'one-way' linear spatial narratives that such studies constructed. As Taylor and Whittier (1992) have shown, the American lesbian liberation movement in the 1970s and 1980s circulated through a set of submerged communications

networks that were not necessarily linked to large urban centres. At least one part of the US lesbian community formation and liberation story revolved around the creation of rural lesbian lands and the rejection of 'the patriarchal city' (Browne, 2011; Valentine, 1997b). Beyond the collective experience, iconic lesbian texts of the temporal journey towards the sexual self from this period did not necessarily involve a spatial movement towards the big city. For example, Audre Lorde's *Zami* (1982) tells a reverse story: growing up in New York City, the main character dreams of queer freedom anywhere in Mexico, migrates to smaller cities in search of herself, stops briefly in the West Village lesbian community, but ultimately leaves the city to settle in Connecticut. Whilst this is not a story of a return to the rural, it suggests that inter-urban mobility, dropping down in the urban hierarchy and even exile from the metropolis have been at least part of the story of finding the lesbian self. Indeed, the historical record is full of queer sexual liberation stories that contradict the metronormative narrative.

Beyond these epistemological and temporal implications, the spatial components of the metronormativity critique are more clearly gendered in ways that obscure lesbian spatialities. Herring's (2010) discussion of metronormativities is instructive here. He begins by presenting the reader with a phallic image of the Empire State Building that was published on a 1982 cover of the New York City gay magazine *Honcho*. He argues that this image suggests a shift towards metronormativity in that it represents the urban as the end-point in a sexual liberation trajectory, the terminus in a one-way movement towards the metropolis: 'Alongside countless other queer productions, it codifies the metropolitan as the terminus of queer world making as many have come to know it' (Herring, 2010, p. 4). A crude critique of this choice to represent lesbian and gay metronormativity via the desires of metropolitan gay men would clearly highlight the gendered aspect of this equation. But the arguments about the narrative terminus and its cultural production are just as compelling. First, Herring is elaborating on the ways in which the metropolitan serves as an end-point in the narrative of sexual liberation. Suggesting that the metronormative narrative ends in visible gay enclaves, he clearly links this trajectory to actual spaces inside New York City with a discussion of the Chelsea addresses listed on the cover of *Honcho*. In other words, the trajectory from rural private domestic obscurity to the metropolitan ends in the gay village, a place of ambivalence and exclusion for lesbians. Second, Herring argues that the metronormative is reproduced through six axes, one of which is the queer aestheticization of the metropolitan. Noting that gay men have long been considered sophisticates of taste in the urban scene, he argues that post-Stonewall queer worlding has revolved around the construction of a stylized cosmopolitan urban norm. Moreover, the cultural production of this version of urbanism, he argues, 'facilitates the ongoing commodification, corporatization, and depoliticization of US-based queer cultures in many locales' (Herring, 2010, p. 16). While positioning lesbians completely outside this version of urbanism and its production would be reductionist, it is certainly possible to question how central lesbian aesthetics have been to such broad world-making processes.

Herring's (2010) own work on queer anti-urbanisms disrupts the metronormativity narrative by providing an array of examples of stylistic and spatial resistances including lesbian anti-urbanisms. Tongson's (2011) *Relocations*, however, takes this critique in directions that are especially useful for disaggregating lesbian urbanisms from metronormativities. The spatial emphasis in *Relocations* is not on making alternative places but on mobility (see the chapters in Section IV of this volume). Focusing on suburban dyke and queer of colour cultural productions and imaginings, this work disrupts metronormativity by speaking from the margins of the metropolis itself, disrupting the territorial and visible with other metropolitan stylings and imaginings. In so doing, Tongson positions dyke urban geographies alongside a host of alternative and peripheral locations in relation to metronormativity. To

make this point, she specifically draws on Gates and Ost's (2004) *The Gay and Lesbian Atlas*, a collection that mapped partnered gay and lesbian households in the 2000 US Census. Although sceptical of such evidence, Tongson highlights the locational differences between these households as a means by which to detach a diversity of queer subjectivities from the more metronormative queer worldings of bourgeois white gay men. By pointing to the finding that lesbian urban households are more decentred and are often more strongly concentrated in outer boroughs, Tongson opens the door to resituating lesbians in relation to metronormativities. She argues that such findings confirm '[w]hat has been common lore about the spatial circumstances of gays and lesbians – that gays live in hip neighborhoods in world cities, while lesbians generally have to traverse some bridge, tunnel, or undesirable stretch of freeway to participate in urban life ...' (Tongson, 2011, p. 52).

Ambivalent Geographies of Lesbian Urbanism

Geographers of sexualities can certainly be accused of reinforcing a metronormative narrative in terms of the 'object' of our research. While our projects have rarely examined rural-to-urban migrations (see Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2011a), we have devoted an exceptional amount of attention to the terminus of the metronormative trajectory, the gay village in the urban West (see G. Brown, 2008, 2012; M. Brown, 2013; Visser, 2013). Even as we currently debate the possible de-gaying of such spaces (G. Brown, 2006; Ghaziani, 2014), investigate the development of other 'queer-friendly' urban neighbourhoods (G. Brown, 2006; Gorman-Murray and Waitt, 2009; Nash, 2013b) or examine the place-making practices of LGBTQ populations in smaller cities (G. Brown, 2008; Muller Myrdahl, 2013; Lewis, 2013a), the gay village remains relationally central as a point of reference for the analysis of queer place-making elsewhere. Moreover, attention to homonormativities has refocused our analysis on gay villages as sites of exclusions for young people, people of colour, lesbians and trans people (see, for example, Casey, 2004, Doan, 2007; Nash, 2011; Tucker, 2009b; Valentine and Skelton, 2003), reinforcing the centrality of this most 'visible' form of LGBTQ urbanism. As a result, the more recent research into lesbian urbanisms has been located here, focusing on their exclusions from gay villages and scene spaces (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004; Podmore, 2006, 2013b; Pritchard, Morgan and Sedgley, 2002; Ray, 2004), and, in some cases, how gendered exclusions intersect with normative whiteness and classism (Held, 2015; Kawale, 2004; Taylor, 2007a, 2008).

But the study of lesbian urbanisms has a much longer history within the discipline. Explorations of lesbian community formation and territorial neighbourhood patterns in the urban West began primarily in response to arguments made by Castells (1983) in his study of gay neighbourhood territoriality and urban social movements in San Francisco (Valentine, 2000). Contrasting the territorial organization of gay men in the Castro District with the more dispersed and network-based community formation process of lesbians, Castells argued that gender was a central factor in shaping these differences. Key studies then sought to test these claims: critical of the gendered assumptions of Castells's argument, Adler and Brenner (1992) specifically sought to study lesbian urban and political patterns by replicating his methods and sources; Valentine (1995) used this argument as a starting-point for her investigation of the distinct ways in which lesbians create neighbourhoods and institutional spaces; Peake (1993) responded with a more explicitly feminist and intersectional analysis of urban change; and Rothenberg (1995) examined the factors shaping lesbian neighbourhood choices and community formation. Later works built on these findings, further comparing lesbian and gay neighbourhood formation (Anacker and Morrow-Jones,

2005; Bouthillette, 1997; Cattan and Clerval, 2011; Compton and Baumle, 2012; Kenney, 2001; Lo and Healy, 2000), examining how lesbians negotiate and make use of urban public spaces (Ferreira and Salvador, 2015; Giesecking, 2013, 2015; Podmore, 2001; Rodó-de-Zárate, 2015; Valentine, 1997b) and providing historical studies of lesbian neighbourhood formation processes over time (Podmore, 2006; Geisecking, 2013). Some of this research even suggested that dense lesbian networks may develop in specific small urban centres (Brown-Saracino, 2011; Forsyth, 1997a, 1997b) and that, in these contexts, lesbian communities may be more organized and visible than those of gay men (Nash, 2001).

These findings suggest that lesbian urbanisms might be considered metronormativity's urban other, an ontology that has been reinforced by research frameworks that also construct lesbian spatialities as 'not necessarily' or ambivalently urban in a number of key ways. First, although there are some exceptions, until more recently, most case studies of lesbian urban patterns did not focus on metropolitan centres such as San Francisco, New York, London or Paris. Instead, they primarily represent an incidental collection of medium and small cities and boroughs in the USA, Canada and the UK. Second, in the early years, researchers often had to sacrifice urban context in the interest of the safety of their participants: as Lockard (1986) had done for her study of a large south-western city, Adler and Brenner (1992) were required to withhold the name of the US city they studied to avoid directing readers to the lesbian ghetto; Valentine (1995) adopted the pseudonym 'Melchester' for similar reasons; and Nash (2001) describes how ardent her subjects were about withholding the name of their location to ensure their anonymity. As Adler and Brenner (1992) pointed out, hiding the city meant that they had to sacrifice urban context and comparability. Third, the widespread exploration of the Castells hypothesis served to reinforce the idea that the urban was somewhat incidental to lesbian patterns of congregation and place-making. Most studies refuted the essentialism of Castells's claims by demonstrating that lesbians engaged with the city by congregating in particular neighbourhoods and circulating through their private and semi-private spaces. However, the analysis was still informed by a gender dualism that reinforced the idea that gay men were engaged with public urban processes whereas lesbians could create their networked and more private form of communality wherever that they congregated. Finally, and perhaps as a result, beyond comparison to gay men, this body of literature rarely engages with urban theory. This contrasts significantly with urban studies of gay men and of LGBTQ populations more broadly. For example, the earliest works on gay men situate their community formation processes within the gentrification of the inner city (Knopp, 1990; Lauria and Knopp, 1985). Lesbian geographies, on the other hand – from Valentine's (1993a, 1993b, 1993c, 1995) early case studies to the more contemporary discussions of lesbian exclusions from queer scene spaces – have been more social than urban, with little to say about the dynamics surrounding urban context in which they are set.

Looking for Lesbian Urbanisms

The 'cultural turn' in human geography in the early 1990s is said to have opened the discipline to the expansion of geographies of sexualities and eventually to queer geographies (Oswin, 2013). It also brought a reworking of the conceptualization of urbanism. The traditional ecological interpretation urbanism, described by Louis Wirth (1938) as 'a way of life', was critically reassessed by researchers interested in examining urban diversity and difference (Jacobs and Fincher, 1998). This 'cosmopolitan' interpretation came from a number of different strains, but especially from feminist geographers who were interested in the intersections of difference in shaping the experience of cities. They were also contextualizing

the power relations surrounding cities in light of feminist scholarship that suggested that the social breakdown embodied by urbanism had created greater possibilities for women's autonomy than rural life ever had (Wilson, 1991). Another related reworking came from poststructural reinterpretations of neo-Marxist arguments. In *Social Justice and the City* (1973) Harvey had used 'urbanism' to advance his arguments about the production of urban space. Here, urbanism was both a vantage-point from which to view capitalist processes at work in shaping spatial relations and a part of the mode of production – a process that favoured the concentration of capital accumulation in urban centres. Such a concentration made the city the ultimate terrain of class struggle, a place where its contradictions would fuel new social movements (Castells, 1977; Lefebvre, 1968). With renewed interest in Lefebvre's (1991) arguments about the production of space, urbanism was now explored in discursive terms, understood as a set of competing and overlapping representations. Cosmopolitan urbanism, for example, was interpreted as the productive ideal of neoliberal urban governance (Binnie et al., 2006). 'Revanchist urbanism' was used by Neil Smith (1998) to refer to a new set of productive representations by middle-class normative interests seeking revenge on other social groups by taking the city back after leaving it behind.

Such arguments perhaps offer important potential for disaggregating lesbian urbanism from the metronormative narrative, but the study of lesbian urbanism has rarely been attempted within these frameworks (see Chisholm, 2005) for a number of reasons. While poststructuralist feminist reinterpretations did offer new directions by reconsidering the possibilities of urbanism for sexual subjects – with Munt (1998) even exploring the possibility of the lesbian *flâneur* – more material attempts to investigate urbanism interpret it in ways that make lesbian urbanisms difficult to see. When examining competing representations of urbanism, poststructuralists focused on hegemonic structural processes to which lesbians, activists and subcultures would rarely have access. For example, as the only works in this vein to consider the sexualities involved in the production of urbanism, investigations into cosmopolitan urbanism have primarily examined the ways in which homonormativity has been reproduced via the promotion of gay village spaces (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004). Smith's (1998) revanchist urbanism briefly mentions queer sexualities, but largely in terms of their displacement by neoliberal urban policies. As he argued, revanchist urbanism was grounded in 'a vendetta against the most oppressed –workers and "welfare mothers", immigrants and gays, people of color and homeless people, squatters, anyone who demonstrates in public' (N. Smith, 1998, p. 1). Whilst cosmopolitan urbanism seems to involve the integration of 'gays' into the processes of neoliberal governance, revanchist urbanism is responsible for their displacement with no mention of lesbian subjectivities.

As the review of lesbian geographies has suggested, lesbian urbanism has been considered primarily within the more ecological framework of forming gendered subcultures initiated via the Castells hypothesis with little consideration of how lesbian subcultures have been implicated in the production of urbanism. However, around the same time that Castells was conducting research on gay men in San Francisco, Elizabeth M. Ettorre (1978) published the results of her research on a residential lesbian community that formed in the London Borough of Lambeth in the 1970s. She described how a group of politicized lesbian feminists created an alternative community by squatting in a vacating row of council flats that would soon undergo demolition. However, the objective of the article was to situate 'the women's movement' of the period within urban sociological theory, illustrating these arguments through a case study of the 'lesbian ghetto'. Critiquing both the urban ecology and the neo-Marxist interpretations of urbanism (specifically Castells's arguments regarding social formations), Ettorre called for greater attention to women's issues, politics and social organization as part of urban processes by recognizing that patriarchy – in addition to capitalism – is a structural force that results in struggle. Specifically, she frames the women's

movement as an urban social movement that needs to be understood in this context. The lesbian-separatist movement is then presented as one faction that refused the spatial separation of women and their assignment to the private sphere. The case study is then used to illustrate how the ideals of lesbian separatism informed the feminist urban practice of creating the collective lesbian ghetto in Lambeth.

In retelling this story, I am not suggesting a return to the study of lesbian-feminist urbanism or refocusing on lesbians as a social movement. Rather, I want to suggest that our focus on Castells's gendered gay and lesbian urbanisms to the neglect of Ettore's arguments about urban processes and movements could use some reassessment. First, one of the most important aspects of this work is that it focuses on how a lesbian community formed within an urban framework (see also Peake, 1993). According to Ettore's interpretation, this is not incidental: this group sought to disrupt the patriarchal ordering of urban space by living the city otherwise. This engagement with the city presents an important contrast with the more accepted gender dualism advanced by Castells and explored by others. It is a political act that seeks to disrupt the power relations through the performance of *inhabitation* (Lefebvre, 1974). Second, rather than focusing on their exclusions, Ettore seeks to reposition both ecological and neo-Marxist interpretations of urbanism in ways that make seeing lesbians as agents of the city possible. The focus is not on normativity and hegemony of a capitalist, patriarchal or heterosexist urbanism that erases and excludes them, but rather on an alternate representation of urbanism that a group of lesbians sought to live. Finally, the urban context in which this alternative community was formed is an important component of the story itself. The community was temporary, created out of government disinvestment in a neighbourhood about to undergo redevelopment, part of the process of industrial restructuring. Whilst the creation of a lesbian commune through squatting in the 1970s is perhaps an atypical lesbian urbanism, this story should draw our attention to the important role of urban processes in shaping how and where lesbians situate themselves within the city.

Conclusion

The objective of this chapter has been to disaggregate lesbian urbanisms from the reductionist rural/urban dualism proposed by the metronormativity critique. Uncomfortable with queer critiques that depict gay and lesbians as normatively anti-rural and ideally cosmopolitan, I have sought to turn this argument on its head by carefully considering the engagement between lesbians and urbanism in the urban West. I began by demonstrating that, spatially speaking, the narrative that metronormativity constructs is quite misplaced and incomplete when considering lesbian urban geographies, especially in terms of their relationship to the queer worlding taking place in this narrative's terminus, the commodified and cosmopolitan gay village, a place that has not necessarily been representative of lesbian subjectivities and subcultures. Given the incomplete character of lesbian metronormativities and the lack of attention to their urbanisms, I turned to the geography and urban studies literature only to find that, among the many case studies of lesbian community and neighbourhood formation patterns, our understandings of lesbian urbanism have been limited by an advancing ambivalence about the urban context in which they are set. While the invisibility of lesbian neighbourhood patterns and the exclusions of lesbians from gay villages detailed in this literature do offer important rebuttals for those who would depict their geographies as metronormative, the discipline's vision of lesbian urbanism is limited by a lack of theorization of the urban – a requirement for situating lesbians within the

metronormativities debate. Viewing this literature as incomplete, I turned to poststructural interpretations of urbanism in the geography literature in order to consider their potential for the interpretation of lesbian urbanisms. Here, I have argued that an ecological focus on the gendered comparison between lesbian and gay subcultural neighbourhood formation patterns has been at the expense of an earlier and more critical understanding of lesbian urbanism that involved the politics of living, interpreting, and contesting the urban in context, a disruption of metronormativity itself that requires greater investigation.

Given the multiplicity of lesbian and queer women's identities and the contestation of gender as part of contemporary queer worldings, I hope that my attempt to disaggregate lesbians from a broader LGBTQ framework will not appear anachronistic or essentialist. I would contend that gender, no matter how it is defined or experienced, continues to play an important role in shaping urban geographies and that this needs to be considered when describing LGBTQ spatial narratives as metronormative. I make this argument for many reasons, but most importantly in response to the sense of erasure involved in the reduction of the queer urban to a normative experience in relation to a more unexplored rural. Since few queers find themselves represented by the fiction of the normative, I suspect that many have similarly responded to the metronormativity critique by viewing it as proscriptively premature. Whilst we have been studying LGBTQ urbanism for decades, the emphasis on the particular spatialities that represent this urbanism to the neglect of so very many others should not close the city to our continued investigation.