

Introduction

“Gay Enclaves Face Prospect of Being Passé.”

This was the front-page headline of the October 30, 2007, edition of the *New York Times*, and the article predicted the demise of San Francisco’s iconic Castro district. The most famous gay neighborhood in the United States, like so many others across the country, was (and still is) changing rapidly. The causes are numerous: a dramatic increase in societal acceptance of homosexuality, ramped-up urban revitalization efforts, an influx of straight people, and casual disclosures by gays and lesbians that they feel safe living pretty much anywhere in the city. “These are wrenching times for San Francisco’s historic gay village,” the writer of the article, Patricia Leigh Brown, sighed, “with population shifts, booming development, and a waning sense of belonging that is also being felt in gay enclaves across the nation.”¹

Such laments, indeed, are not restricted to San Francisco. Kyra Kyles published a front-page story in a Chicago paper the same year entitled “There Goes the Gayborhood,” in which she similarly predicted the fall of Boystown, an affectionate term that locals use to talk about their gay neighborhood: “With more [straight] families moving in and longtime [gay and lesbian] residents moving out, some say Boystown is losing its gay flavor.”² The people that Kyles interviewed were deeply conflicted about this “culture clash,” as she calls it. “Some residents and activists welcome the gay migration, saying it’s a sign of greater equality, while others say Boystown is losing its identity.” A photograph of one of the rainbow-colored pylons that adorn North Halsted Street and mark it as the city’s main gay artery accompanied her article—but the colors in this haunting image were fading, or perhaps even bleeding away.

Are gay neighborhoods really disappearing? There is quite a buzz about this question. Demographers who analyze the US Census confirm that zip codes associated with traditional gay neighborhoods

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are “deconcentrating” and becoming less “segregated,” to use their words, across the entire country.³ Fewer same-sex households lived in these zip codes in 2010 than they did in 2000 or in 1990—and the number of straight residents is increasing. Whatever the answer to the question may be, it is clear that these urban areas are in flux.⁴

We can identify a gay neighborhood—or gayborhood, as many people playfully call it—by several qualities. It is a place that has a distinct geographic focal point: locals can point it out on a map, usually by singling out one or two specific streets. It has a unique culture: gays and lesbians set the tone of the neighborhood, which is why symbols like the rainbow flag are visible as you walk along the streets, and ritual events like the pride parade take place in the area. It has a concentration of residences: everyone who lives in a gayborhood does not self-identify as gay or lesbian, of course, but many people certainly do. Finally, it has a cluster of commercial spaces: gay-owned and gay-friendly businesses, nonprofit organizations, and community centers that appeal to residents and non-residents alike are based there. Midtown in Atlanta, Boston’s South End, Oak Lawn in Dallas, Houston’s Montrose, Miami’s South Beach, the Gay Village in Montreal along Saint Catherine Street, New York’s Greenwich Village, Chelsea, and, most recently, Hell’s Kitchen, Philadelphia’s officially dubbed Gayborhood in Washington Square West, San Diego’s Hillcrest, Seattle’s Capitol Hill, Toronto’s Church-Wellesley Gay Village, Vancouver’s Davie Village, Dupont Circle in DC, and the entire city of West Hollywood: each is an example of a gayborhood—and depending on who you ask, each might appear on a list of endangered urban species.⁵

And yet there are numerous benefits that gayborhoods, and perhaps only gayborhoods, provide. They allow gays and lesbians—who, unlike racial minorities, are often not physically identifiable—to find one another for friendship and fellowship, sex, dating, and love. Such individuals can create unique cultures, political perspectives, organizations and businesses, families, rituals, and styles of socialization in and around their neighborhoods. These urban areas thus stand on guard against an entrenched problem of history and ancestry—they help to answer the question, who are my people?—and they offer a renewed sense of roots. At the end of a

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long day, gayborhoods promise an incomparable sense of safety, a place where gays and lesbians can seek refuge from ongoing heterosexual hostilities, hate crimes, discrimination, bigotry, and bias.

Gayborhoods are more than just a protective shield. They also provide a platform from which gays and lesbians can organize themselves as a voting bloc, if they seek to work within the system, or as a social movement, if they wish instead to rally against it. The personal is political, as we know, and in this regard, gayborhoods represent a space of freedom in which gays and lesbians can discover the authenticity of who they are and celebrate it without being burdened by the tyranny of the closet or the culturally crushing weight of heteronormativity. The more we look, the more we see that gayborhoods have a hand in nearly every aspect of modern life: from the municipal promotion of urban spaces to city planning and the shaping of real estate values; from the institutional development of gay and lesbian communities to their civic engagement; and from pride parades to protests to electoral influence. They promote policy discussions around sexuality, a topic that many politicians would rather ignore; they enable social service and public health organizations to distribute life-saving resources; and they assist corporations with their efforts to reach a potentially lucrative niche market. The presence of a gayborhood signals a city's commitment to diversity, tolerance, inclusion, and openness, and research shows that officials can boost their local economy when they invest in them. These are just some of the many stakes involved in the deceptively simple question about if indeed the gayborhood is going somewhere.⁶

If you ask the people who live in these areas if they think their home is changing and what we should do about it, you will hear no shortage of opinions—and several explosive ones, at that. Consider a standing-room only roundtable session that the GLBT Historical Society of Northern California hosted on November 28, 2006. Under the urgent title “Are Gay Neighborhoods Worth Saving?,” panelists debated what it means to save a gay village (rescue it from what real or perceived threat?) and whether these urban areas are worth fighting for (why are they still meaningful today in an era of gay cultural visibility and acceptance?). According to a press release for the event, the session reflected “an upsurge of dialogue about the

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potentially imperiled future of the Castro district as a GLBT neighborhood.” Board member Don Romesburg disarmed the dubious assumptions of some audience members about the stability of queer spaces: “We tend to assume that once created, queer neighborhoods will be self-sustaining. That’s not true. Our neighborhoods get built within particular economic, political, and cultural circumstances. When those change, so do our neighborhoods.”⁷

Now take a quick excursion with me to Toronto. In 2007, the *Globe and Mail* published a story with a title that had a familiar refrain: “There Goes the Gaybourhood: A New, Straight Crowd Is Discovering Church and Wellesley.” The writer, Micah Toub, observed, “These days, the area’s character is changing as straight couples and families move in and Toronto’s gay community disperses across the city.” Six years later in 2013, urban planners, activists, residents, and businesses initiated a community-wide study that asked the same kinds of questions that we heard in San Francisco: “What is the role of an LGBTQ village in a modern, progressive city?” and “What must be done to support the Church-Wellesley Village to solidify its role as a major cultural and community hub?” This is a restlessness that appears in cities across North America. To wonder where gayborhoods are going, debate whether they are worth saving, or question their cultural resonance—all of this announces to us that they are in danger.⁸

I myself lived in Chicago’s Boystown district for nearly a decade, starting in 1999. I remember feeling uneasy in those years as I read one headline after another about the alleged demise of my home and other gayborhoods across the country. The sight of more straight bodies on the streets became a daily topic of conversation among my friends—an obsession, to be honest. We writhed over stroller congestion on the sidewalks (though gays and lesbians also have kids, the stroller was, and still is, a politically charged symbol of heterosexual invasion into queer spaces). We denounced bachelorette parties at gay bars (we could not legally marry at the time, so why were they insensitively flaunting their nuptials in our face?). And we cheered the decision by a local gay bar to admit gays and lesbians for free yet charge a steep cover for straights (“You have ladies’ nights,” we would retort). We accosted straight couples who locked

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lips in our bars (“We risk physical violence if we do that in your bars; you should be more respectful in our spaces”). We sighed when a sex shop would close and, say, a nail salon would open in its place (much like the strollers, these salons were also symbols of change). We fumed when straight residents complained that the Center on Halsted, our queer community center, excluded them in their programming (“Are you really accusing us of reverse discrimination?”). And we deployed a stealth micropolitics of street-level resistance by staring at straight men with all the carnal lust we could muster (“How does it feel to be sexually objectified?” we tried to say with our probing eyes).

As the years went by, my friends and I bemoaned, perhaps most of all, feeling a little less safe holding hands with our partners, dates, or hookups—even as we walked down what were supposed to be our sheltered streets. I had been called a “fag” on more instances than I still care to remember, and I was shocked at the disapproving looks that I would receive when walking hand in hand with another man. I knew I could not escape this menacing straight gaze altogether, but I was so angry that I had to deal with it in Boystown. This was supposed to be a safe space.

Stroll down the streets of any gayborhood, eavesdrop on passersby, and I bet that you will hear a vast range of views about what is happening on those streets. You will quickly notice that not everyone defends the sanctity of gayborhoods like my friends and I did. Veteran activist Urvashi Vaid, for example, blasted them back in 1995, calling them “a more spacious closet.” Sexual orientation is losing primacy for how we define ourselves, other people will tell you, and it is no longer the wedge that it once was, dividing gays and straights. Sophia, a Cuban-born transsexual immigrant who moved to New York in 2005, berated them for their ghetto-like qualities: “Chelsea is still a gay ghetto. I’m against ghettos, whether they’re youth ghettos or black ghettos or minority ghettos or gay ghettos. I don’t think there’s any need to separate yourself from the rest of society.” Frank, a West Hollywood resident, brought this attack to a climax in a 2013 interview with *LA Weekly*. “The gay ghetto is dead,” he boldly declared. A “new gay paradigm” has ascended in its place, and it is rendering the gayborhood “obsolete.” The idea (or hope,

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maybe) is that sexual orientation can be one aspect of our identity without being the defining aspect: we are your neighbors, not your gay neighbors.⁹

Everyday life in gay neighborhoods moves in multiple directions; the perspectives of one person will contradict what someone else says. We will never be able to learn anything from this social noise if we simply ask *whether* gay neighborhoods are changing. Of course they are. Every neighborhood will change at some point. Though cities are built of bricks and concrete, they nonetheless are living, breathing, organic entities that are perpetually shifting, even if those changes are not always evident to us. Gayborhoods certainly are not an exception to this most basic of urban insights. We therefore need to ask more penetrating questions. Who wants to live in a gayborhood? And who rejects them? What can their diverging preferences teach us about sexuality, especially its unique relationship with an otherwise common process of urban change? If gayborhoods first formed through a politics of liberation, how will they morph in our modern era—one that some people call “post-gay”—a time that is defined by unprecedented societal acceptance of homosexuality? If these areas once promised safe spaces for sexual minorities, what will happen to them as the world itself becomes safer and as being gay or lesbian becomes more normal? Will gayborhoods die, a victim of their own success, or can they still survive as vibrant cultural enclaves? Does this rise-and-fall narrative even apply to gay neighborhoods? Or can we unearth a more subtle and nuanced reality to explain what is happening today and to predict what might become of them in the future?

These are tailored versions of a general set of questions about residential choice (how do we decide where to live?) and urban forms (why do neighborhoods look and feel the way they do?). Such inquiries have inspired the imagination of anthropologists, architects, city planners, economists, demographers, geographers, migration scholars, policy experts, and sociologists since the earliest days of each respective discipline. We know much about these matters of urban choice and change—and from an interdisciplinary perspective—but we know so little about gay neighborhoods, specifically. This is a heterosexist oversight. It paints a biased picture of

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cities, one that erases, both intentionally and accidentally, the lives of gay people.¹⁰

Sociology is my intellectual home, and it struggles with its own problems related to this topic. Under the rare occasion that my colleagues pay attention to gayborhoods on their own terms, rather than merely as comparative foils or footnotes against racial and ethnic enclaves, they overplay gentrification as an explanation both for why they first formed and why they now are changing. Or, like Richard Florida, they exploit gay neighborhoods as urban amenities that local officials can use as markers of “tolerance” to lure a creative class of workers who allegedly will shape the future of our cities.¹¹ Sociologists like to think about gayborhoods through the lens of economic rationalities—what we can afford to rent or buy; what natural amenities, like the weather, or built conveniences, such as public transportation, are available; the quality and value of the housing stock; the investment potential of real estate; market forces, like interest rates and private lending options; and future prospects for development.

These and other kinds of economic factors are invaluable, no doubt, but I think that we rely on them too much when we talk about gay neighborhoods. They do not account for all the reasons behind gay flight out from the gayborhood. Nor does money by itself answer why straights are systematically moving into them. Gays and straights must pay the same price for their housing, after all, and rising costs are uniformly prohibitive.¹² And besides, why now, at this particular moment in time, are we witnessing all these urban changes?

A common conclusion that many members of the media, activists, some scholars, and everyday people alike make today is that gayborhoods are “potentially imperiled” and “passé” for gays, as we just heard, yet suddenly desirable for straights. To me, this implies that the resonance of their streets is changing, and that they now mean different things for different groups of people. Therefore, the heart of the matter—what these places mean, for whom, and why so many of us are troubled, or not, by all these crisscrossing developments—transcends dollars and cents. Economic arguments ignore what I think is a crucial fact about the relationship between

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sexuality and the city: gayborhoods, to echo the elegant words of geographers Mickey Lauria and Lawrence Knopp, are “a spatial response to a historically specific form of oppression.” They are transforming in unique ways as the long arc of the moral universe bends toward justice.¹³

In this book, we will journey together to understand why gay neighborhoods are changing in the so-called post-gay era. Our goal is to better understand how shifting conceptions of sexuality—especially allegations that it is declining in its significance for how we define ourselves and how we structure our everyday lives—affect where we choose to live. We will identify the conditions under which gayborhoods can retain their resonance for certain people, despite ongoing gay flight and a steady stream of straight newcomers into them. We will also consider the possibility that new gay and lesbian settlements are emerging, if we just know how and where to look for them. In the course of our travels, we will explore the multiple, seemingly contradictory meanings that gayborhoods have for gays and straights alike, think deeply about why those meanings matter, and consider how they inform the many material stakes that are involved for those who live in and visit these places.

This is an ambitious task, I know. To make heads or tails of it, we first need to know what happened in the past. Gay and lesbian spaces in American cities have fluctuated across three periods of sexual history—what I call the closet, coming out, and post-gay eras. The heyday of the closet, which began prior to World War II, was characterized by concealment (you cloaked who you were from your family and friends), isolation (you felt disconnected from networks of other gays and lesbians), feelings of shame, guilt, and fear (which you endured because you internalized negative societal views about homosexuality), and duplicity (you lived a double life). Gayborhoods, as we think of them today, did not exist at this time. People who desired others of their own sex found each other in places that were scattered across the city: a bar here or there, a cabaret, a public park, a restroom. The coming out era, in contrast, was a radical reversal of the closet: you were now open and out about your sexual orientation, you had almost exclusively gay and lesbian friends, and you believed that “gay is good,” to quote the popular

phrase coined by the late activist Franklin Kameny.¹⁴ Gay neighborhoods formed and flourished during this sexual era, which dates from World War II to about 1997.

But gay life in the Western world today is remarkably different. It is now so open that it is moving “beyond the closet,” to borrow a visual image from sociologist Steve Seidman, despite a persistent privileging of heterosexuality by the state, societal institutions, and popular culture. Our new post-gay era, as we will see in more detail later, began around 1998 when the term arrived in the United States. The “new gay paradigm,” as Frank from West Hollywood called it, is characterized by a dramatic acceptance of homosexuality and a corresponding assimilation of gays and lesbians into the mainstream. Assimilation then affects how we all think about sexual orientation. Take Nate Silver as an example. Silver rose to fame for predicting the outcome of the 2008 presidential election with stunning precision. In 2009, *Time* magazine named him as among “The World’s 100 Most Influential People,” while *Out* magazine selected him as their Person of the Year in 2012. During his interview with the editor of *Out*, Silver said something that stuck: “I’m kind of sexually gay, but ethnically straight.”¹⁵

Sexuality has always been an important part of human life—and our ideas about it are constantly evolving, of course—but the recent post-gay shift has been nothing short of startling. Those who consider themselves post-gay profess that their sexual orientation does not form the core of how they define themselves, and they prefer to hang out with their straight friends as much as with those who are gay. Actually, they generally do not even distinguish their friends by their sexual orientation. This is not to say that people no longer claim a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity for themselves—they do—because sexual orientation is still a part of who we are after all, because heterosexuality is still culturally compulsory, and because sexual inequalities persist. Post-gays do not pretend that the world is a perfect place. But with public acceptance of homosexuality and same-sex relationships at an all-time high, it is much easier for some sexual minorities to move into the mainstream, to participate in its most foundational institutions, like marriage or the military, and to blend into the prized, multicultural mosaic in a way that renders

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them no different from heterosexuals. “No one gives a good goddamn if you are gay or straight,” we will hear them say in this book.

I have been thinking about gay neighborhoods, and living in them, for more than a decade, first when I lived in Chicago’s Boyston district as a graduate student at Northwestern, then in Lambertville, New Jersey, during my postdoctoral years at the Princeton Society of Fellows, and now through my assistant and associate professor years at the University of British Columbia in the Olympic city of Vancouver. To help us figure out how and why they are changing, I have collected an immense amount of information, including census data, numerous opinion polls, hundreds of newspaper articles, and more than one hundred interviews with actual gayborhood residents.

Let me say a little more about this data set. I gathered 617 newspaper articles from seventeen presses that represent all regions of the United States. This public conversation reports on twenty-seven different urban, suburban, and rural areas (since, as we will see, we have to broaden our view beyond just cities), it spans forty years of coverage (from 1970 to 2010), and it enables us to hear from gays and straights across the country. The media is an important source of information because it directs and delimits, reflects and arbitrates our public conversations, even if journalists sometimes select quotes that are evocative rather than representative. There is no superior source that can produce a national and qualitative portrait of the perceptions that residents assign to the places they live. While we will always remain aware of potential biases, I am less interested in analyzing the coverage itself than I am in using these articles to help us explain why gayborhoods are changing across the country. To do this, we will read all these articles first to clarify the persistent claims of demise. But just as every coin has two sides, so too will we reread these articles against their own grain, so to speak, pushing past the dramatic headlines in search of more subtle, challenging themes. We will stare contradictions and inconsistencies in the eye, not turn our backs to them. This will allow us to appreciate the complexity of what is happening on the ground. Such a dual reading will also afford us some distance from potentially sensational and simplistic cries of doom.

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As a means of both broadening and deepening our perspective, we will also look at demographic trends from the 2000 and 2010 US Censuses. We will use this statistical evidence to determine whether “same-sex partner households”—the only category of sexual orientation that the census includes on its form—follow patterns in where they locate and migrate. Unfortunately, the census underestimates the size of the nonheterosexual population by only counting coupled households. Excluded are those who are single (about a quarter of gay men and two-fifths of lesbians are in relationships at any given time), those who may not live with their partner, those who are not willing to self-identify as gay or lesbian, those who self-identify as bisexual or queer, and those who self-identify as transgender or two-spirited. Like the newspaper accounts, however, we will use the census not because it is perfect but because it is an optimal way to zoom out and see a bigger picture of what is happening across the country.

Finally, to dig deeper into the marrow of what it is like to live in a gayborhood—to see, hear, feel, and breathe what life is like from up close—we will meet 125 gay and straight residents of Chicago, including business owners, government officials, representatives of nonprofit community organizations, realtors, developers, and other public figures. The Windy City is the third most populous in the United States, and it has captivated the curiosity of sociologists like me since the earliest days of our discipline. Chicago is a vibrant sexual laboratory, and among the most studied cities in the world, but its gay and lesbian history pales in comparison to what we know about places like New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. I returned to Chicago during the summer of 2010 (from Lambertville, where I was living at the time) and chatted with newcomers and old-timers from two different neighborhoods: Boystown, which we know is the informal moniker of the city’s official gay district, nestled in the East Lakeview neighborhood, and Andersonville, a historically Swedish section of the Edgewater neighborhood to the north of Boystown. Some residents playfully refer to Andersonville as Girlstown, to contrast it from the gender composition of Boystown, or Mandersonville, to emphasize its older demographic (think “boy” versus “man”). Both areas are “so strongly gay and lesbian

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identified that even the straight denizens of these 'hoods admit that they live in a gay neighborhood," notes one tourism guide.¹⁶ I hung out with people at their homes, in my summer sublet, at their places of work, in coffee shops, grocery stores, restaurants, and in the local community center. These residents came from all walks of life: they were students and waiters, attorneys and physicians, copy editors and professional grant writers, massage therapists, interior designers, hairstylists, social workers, flight attendants, models, stay-at-home moms and dads, part-time bartenders and professional mixologists, graphic and web designers, cat sitters and dog walkers.

Gays and lesbians may no longer need gayborhoods to come out or to celebrate their pride. They may not look there to find friends and lovers or to network for jobs. They may not seek them out as countercultural havens or to feel sheltered, secure, and safe. But this does not mean that existing districts are culturally insignificant; nor can we conclude that gayborhoods will eventually go extinct and that new ones will never again form. Reality, as we know from our own personal experiences, is never quite so black or white. Simple binaries like persist-or-perish and durability-or-dissolution make for catchy headlines and stoke the fires of some people, but a life that is lived is far richer than any such contrasts can possibly capture. In the pages to come, we will discover a breathtaking variety of present-day gayborhoods, and we will consider surprising possibilities for the future of urban America. But first, let us take a crash course in gayborhood history so that we can more fully appreciate the streets on which we walk today.

"SCATTERED GAY PLACES"

Sex between men and sex between women is timeless. It has no history. But "the homosexual as a species" most certainly does. Men and women of this distinct social sort were not born, if you will, until 1870, notes French philosopher Michel Foucault with poetry and precision. This happened when medical professionals transposed sodomy from a mere sex act—*forbidden, perhaps, but disconnected from a deeper self-concept and any cultural meaning*—onto the very "soul" of the person who committed it. Prior to then, people

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with gay or lesbian identities simply did not exist. They, unlike sex, are “a product of history,” John D’Emilio argues. A free wage labor system also developed around this same time, and it released our ideas about sex away from a Victorian “imperative to procreate.” This allowed the social world to become erotically charged for the very first time. Some men and women celebrated the “experience of a heterolust,” to borrow a titillating phrase from Jonathan Ned Katz, while others found the freedom to structure a life around their same-sex desires. Many of these men and women would eventually call themselves gay over the next several decades, and they saw themselves as members of a community with a collective life as rich and varied as any other, even if society condemned their sexual behavior as perverse, pathological, sinful, and illegal.¹⁷

A remarkably complex gay male world, in particular, emerged in New York and other major urban areas during “the closet era,” a period of time that lasted from the late nineteenth century through the start of the Second World War. The city at this time consisted of what historian George Chauncey describes as a “topography of gay meeting places”—or “scattered gay places,” to borrow a tactile image from urban planner Ann Forsyth. These bars, cabarets, speakeasies, theaters, public parks, restrooms, and other cruising areas were generally located in bohemian parts of the city, like Greenwich Village for white gay men or Harlem for blacks. Such areas had “a reputation for flouting bourgeois convention,” Chauncey tells us. Men exploited the anonymity of urban life as they navigated these places and explored their same-sex desires. But they did not “set the tone” of the neighborhood; hence, it would be a mistake to say that the scattered gay places of the closet era were based in a gayborhood. Nevertheless, a vibrant urban gay world existed at this time, even if straights were not always aware of it, and even if that world did not cohere into a formal gay district. For example, a restaurant that two men, Paul and Joe, owned in the Village in 1924 was known by one account as “the ‘headquarters for every well-known Lesbian and Queen in town,’ who felt no need to hide their homosexuality there.” African American gay men were denied access to many of these places, and so they crafted dynamic communities of their own several miles north.¹⁸

Urban histories of romantic “female friendships,” as they were often called, are harder to find. Literacy rates for women, especially those who were working class, lagged behind men’s, and so there are fewer written records for us to study. There is evidence, however, that lesbians formed their own spaces. Historians Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis document a working-class and racially diverse lesbian community that thrived in Buffalo, New York, during the early twentieth century. Women with same-sex desires cultivated social networks with others who were like them, often in the bars (or in speakeasies during Prohibition) and especially in private house parties. These places were hotbeds of lesbian identity and community in Buffalo. Many women used them to craft “cultures of resistance” and to find some relief from the well of loneliness that burdened so many of their lives at the time. And they were transformed by hanging out together. “I wasn’t concentrating on my school work, ’cause I was so enthused and so happy,” one woman reflected. Another added, “We wound up at this bar. Now previous to this I had never been to a gay bar. I didn’t even know they existed. It was a Friday night and that was the big night . . . And we walked in and I thought, my God, this is really something. I couldn’t believe it . . . [I] don’t think there were any straight people in that bar that night.”¹⁹

The visual metaphor of the closet can mistakenly suggest sweeping isolation and vulnerability for gays and lesbians. We, like Chauncey, will use the designation of the closet era in a different way: to think about a particular moment in time between 1870 and World War II when sexual minorities surreptitiously appropriated public spaces to “construct a gay city in the midst of (and often invisible to) the normative city.” They socialized with each other under the radar of a punitive “straight state,” to borrow an appealing alliterative phrase from Margot Canaday, and they fabricated their own urban cultures, despite the odds stacked against them. A more public (read: straight) awareness of these clusters emerged toward the end of the period. New York politicians, in one example, denounced the Village in the 1920s as “the nation’s Sodom and Gomorrah.” There is nothing subtle or placeless about this characterization. In 1934, the movie *Call Her Savage* featured Greenwich’s gay scene and,

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by doing so, it circulated among national audiences the same idea: gays often hang out in distinct parts of the city. A medical journal published the “Degenerates of Greenwich Village” two years later and announced to the authorities that the Village had become “the Mecca for perverts.” Amid these and other sensational exposés, a world-altering event began that, in its wake, would stamp an indelible queer imprint across urban America.²⁰

GAYBORHOODS FORM AND FLOURISH

World War II was “a nationwide ‘coming out’ experience,” John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman tell us, and it thus hastened a new “coming out era.” Military officials discharged thousands of gays and lesbians from the armed forces on the grounds of their real or presumed homosexuality. Although these young men and women hailed from across the country, the war deposited them into certain military bases. Places like Chicago, Seattle, San Francisco, San Diego, Philadelphia, New York, Miami, and New Orleans swelled with dishonorably discharged service members who created “refugee camps,” in the stirring words of activist Carl Wittman, or “ghetto[s], out of self-protection.” The population of San Francisco, for example, had declined during the 1930s, but it grew by more than 125,000 between 1940 and 1950. In addition, census data from 1950 to 1960 show that the number of single-person households in the city doubled following the war and accounted for 38 percent of the total residential units. The perceptible presence of gays and lesbians in these urban centers encouraged more bars to open that catered specifically to them. These bars, in turn, cemented dense social networks and inspired gays and lesbians to assert a right to gather in public places.²¹

Before the war, laws in several states prohibited gays from congregating in public places, even in the bars. But a landmark California Supreme Court decision in 1951 ruled that it was illegal to shut down a venue just because homosexuals were the primary customers. The ruling inspired a national movement to safeguard gay spaces, and it politicized the bars. Activists founded the Tavern Guild in 1962 to protect themselves from arbitrary law enforcement,

and they soon realized that gay bars were ideal venues to organize voter registration drives. The Guild, which mostly attracted men, stabilized gay districts as distinct urban forms. Thus, the origins of early American gayborhoods, in the words of sociologist Manuel Castells, were “inseparable from the development of the gay community as a social movement.”²²

Winning the legal right to gather in public places and forming the Tavern Guild did not make gays immune from police harassment. The straight state flexed its muscles again on June 28, 1969, when New York City police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar located at 53 Christopher Street in Greenwich Village. Compliance during these raids was often as routine as the raids themselves, but this time the bar goers and a growing crowd outside fought back. The result was five days of violent rioting that forever changed gay life in America. Bar owners and patrons had defended themselves at other raids in New York and elsewhere, but activists and academics, like Barry Adam, remember Stonewall as “a symbol of a new era of gay politics.”²³

Stonewall motivated gays and lesbians to come out of the closet en masse and to move to big cities where they knew they could find others like themselves.²⁴ And so began the “great gay migration” of the 1970s and 1980s, to borrow a wonderful phrase from anthropologist Kath Weston. Large port cities, especially San Francisco,²⁵ were the strongest magnets in this demographic movement of gay people to major urban centers, but their visibility also surfaced in unexpected areas like Cherry Grove, a small resort town on Fire Island; Worcester, Massachusetts; Columbia, South Carolina; and Des Moines, Iowa, among others. The migration and gayborhoods were mutually reinforcing: gays and lesbians fled to specific areas of the city, and their emerging concentrations reaffirmed a “gay imaginary,” again from Weston—or a perception that they comprised a people who were culturally distinct from heterosexuals. In one sense, we can think about the war and Stonewall as “historical accidents,” as British economist Alan Collins argues, that triggered the formation and flourishing of gay neighborhoods, respectively.²⁶

This discussion should prompt us to ask some follow-up questions: Why did so many gays and lesbians move to a relatively small number

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of cities during the great gay migration? And once they arrived in each of these cities, why did many choose to live in the same neighborhood? To figure this out, let us momentarily pause our historical account and try to identify different factors for why people move to a gayborhood. By exploring these, we will deepen our understanding not just of the building blocks of gayborhoods in the coming out era but also why they are still around in our present day.

There are high concentrations of same-sex households in coastal cities with mild climates, places like Fort Lauderdale, Los Angeles, Oakland, San Diego, San Francisco, and Seattle. Certain non-coastal cities also have sizable populations of gays and lesbians, including Atlanta, Austin, New York, and Washington, DC. And then there are the declining industrial, midwestern, and eastern cities like Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, and St. Louis, which have lower concentrations. If we assume that some of these cities emerged as gay magnets during the great migration (which we must in order to approximate the past; there is no comparable data from the 1970s to the 1990s), then one lesson that we can draw is that amenities matter in gay and lesbian location decisions. Consider the counterfactual: cities with the lowest concentrations of gays today are Birmingham, Charlotte, Greensboro, and Louisville. For these Southern cities, economists like Dan Black and his colleagues “wonder” if other factors, like an area’s “general political and social acceptance of gay individuals,” make them less appealing. We will revisit this important point a bit later.²⁷

Within a given city, there are correlations between the number of same-sex residences in a neighborhood and an older and higher-value housing stock. And there is a lot of anecdotal evidence that gays settle in places with more cultural offerings. Why? According to Dan Black, Gary Gates, Seth Sanders, and Lowell Taylor, this happens because gay households have fewer kids, which frees up resources that individual gay people can use to move to an area with a beautiful natural environment, better housing stock, an array of restaurants, and a vibrant local arts and entertainment scene.²⁸

Let us look more closely at this assertion about families so that we can verify this economic argument about how amenities affect where gay people choose to live. Nationally, according to the 2010

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US Census, 17 percent of male same-sex partner households and 28 percent of female same-sex partner households had their own children under the age of eighteen (children by birth, adopted children, or stepchildren). We have no reason to believe that these numbers were higher during the great gay migration of the 1970s and 1980s. If anything, they were probably lower, given greater societal animosities toward same-sex couples. Now compare the numbers with those for married heterosexual couples: 42 percent of husband-wife and 39 percent of male-female unmarried partners had children under the age of eighteen present in their household.²⁹ There are clear differences between same-sex and opposite-sex couples in their likelihood of having kids. The greater access to financial resources that gay people have as a result enables them to move to cities with more desirable amenities.

Gentrification is another and perhaps more common economic explanation for why gayborhoods formed. In the United States, federal interventions fueled a first wave of urban renewal efforts, which were a response to the inner-city decline that white flight caused in the 1960s. This wave involved isolated investments in what geographers Elvin Wyly and Daniel Hammel call “islands of renewal in seas of decay.” Participants, many of whom were gay, imagined themselves as pioneers who were “taming the urban wilderness,” adds anthropologist Neil Smith, as they searched for affordable places to live. These arguments have much popular appeal. For example, writing for the *Advocate*, Justin Ocean defined “gays and gentrification” as a “marriage” with a long history that spans the coming out and post-gay eras: “From San Francisco’s SoMa in the ’60s to Manhattan’s West Village in the ’70s to Los Angeles’s Echo Park in the [20]00s, the cycle of queer pioneers turning the dilapidated into destinations seems to be an intrinsic fact of urban life.” Realtors have also caught on to the insight that gays revitalize the neighborhoods in which they settle. “There’s an old saying among realtors that if you want to improve a neighborhood, rent to a gay man,” said Michael Lamm, president of the Greater San Diego Business Association. “Before gays started moving in [to Boystown], this place was a dump,” Mary Morten, Mayor Daley’s advisor on LGBT matters, conceded about Chicago as well.³⁰

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Economics and gayborhoods are familiar bedfellows. If we think exclusively along these lines, however, then we will see gays and lesbians merely as rational, economic actors—and thus overlook that they also respond to political and social forces, like discrimination and legislative inequalities, and cultural concerns like building a community and promoting their own visibility. The research that we just reviewed is still valuable, of course, and we can benefit from it even if we do not limit ourselves to it. Economics matter, in other words, but in concert with other factors. Where gays and lesbians choose to live is also driven by an area’s “reputation for tolerating non-conformity,” Chauncey asserts.³¹ Historically, they have invested in areas “at a financial and social cost that only ‘moral refugees’ are ready to pay,” Castells adds. In the coming out era, gays and lesbians perceived gayborhoods as a beacon of tolerance, a liberated zone that promised reprieve from antigay violence, a place from which they could resist all things heteronormative, and a self-controlled territory in which they could incubate an oppositional consciousness. Gayborhoods flourished following the Stonewall riots in the 1970s and 1980s precisely because sexual minorities from across the United States romanticized the endless possibilities for freedom that they dreamed about in these areas. They migrated to them as an “exodus out of bondage into the promised land,” to echo sociologist Laud Humphrey’s aspirational words from 1979.³²

A promised land promises freedom and safety. This is why I prefer to think about gayborhoods as a type of “free space” or “safe space.” Such areas allow minority groups to independently examine their lives. For example, telling stories about shared experiences and struggles inspired the famous slogan “the personal is political,” a notion that affirmed women’s collective reality in a safe space that was not occupied by men. Gayborhoods do something similar. A basic, intimate act like holding your partner’s hand or sharing a sweet kiss on the street without fear is profoundly political, if for no other reason than because doing so is not always possible beyond the sacred streets of the gayborhood. Consider the language that John Gallagher used in a 1997 article for the *Advocate*. In his survey of American cities, he “uncover[ed] 20 safe and supportive havens for gay men and lesbians” that are “oases to which they have

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fled.” But “not all cities are equally friendly,” Gallagher cautioned. He then offered some important advice: “Where you live makes a difference in how you live.” A 2007 *New York Times* story provided a more close-up perspective. The journalist interviewed a gay man named Brian, who reminisced about his life during the years of the coming out era: “I remember growing up in the city being gay in the ’70s and ’80s, and it was scary. So I’m not going to go and move into a neighborhood where I am scared. I want to be near Chelsea and the West Village, where there are safe, gay people.”³³

As gays and lesbians fled to gayborhoods across the country, they discovered a treasure trove of other possibilities. Sex and love were perhaps the most immediate. Gayborhoods cultivated sexual subcultures, encouraged the pursuit of libidinal pleasures, and fostered a sense of sexual freedom. Consider a walk down memory lane that Denny Lee took in a *New York Times* story after he interviewed gay people who had lived in Greenwich Village for many years: “Older residents recall another era when the street was paved not with gold, but with gays. That was what put Christopher Street on the cultural map, the old-timers say wistfully.” The residents with whom Lee spoke painted an arousing picture of their earlier years: “‘It was one big cruising street,’ said Bob Kohler, a retired talent agent with a full head of platinum hair who has lived on nearby Charles Street since the ’60s and is something of a father figure to the pier kids. ‘There was just a bohemian quality to it.’” Later in the article, Lee shared in his own words what he learned: “Gay men (the area never attracted a large lesbian population) carried the sidewalks as late as 1990, turning the street into a genuine carnival day and night. The waterfront, once a desolate truck yard, was a 24-hour playground of sexual trysts and flamboyant acts. By day, nude sunbathers staked out an urban beach on disfigured docks.” Gay men have often depended on gayborhoods for such carnal pleasures—absent moralizing straight surveillance. “Straight people avoided Christopher Street,” Kohler mused with a knowing grin on his face.³⁴

Gayborhoods also promised love. In an *Advocate* editorial, John Morgan Wilson reflected on this idea when he celebrated West Hollywood’s twentieth anniversary as “America’s first gay city” (it was officially incorporated on November 29, 1984):

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I'm not arguing that West Hollywood is a perfect city, or even a gay mecca. But it is a special place . . . A passage in my latest mystery novel . . . sums up why I still live here. It refers to two young men who've just met during gay pride weekend and might be falling in love: "They deserved a chance to find each other, to test the connection, to have the same shot at intimacy and happiness as anyone else. In West Hollywood, for all its silliness and superficiality, all its self-conscious glitz and glamour, all its attention to image and gratification, they were given that chance. Whatever its flaws, it was a city that let people be themselves and make their own choices about whom they loved and how, without judgment or condemnation or shame."

Across the country, Michael Lavers, writing for the *Village Voice*, interviewed a professor in New York in 2009 who invoked similar promises of sex and love to explain the appeal of the gayborhood: "Like any identity group, gay men and lesbians want to be with their own kind. It's also easier to hook up—for a night or a lifetime."³⁵

The density of gays and lesbians in specific parts of the city helps them find each other as they pursue matters of the heart and libido, but it also satisfies their social needs for friendship. In one study of fifty gay white men between the ages of twenty-three and forty-eight who lived in Dupont Circle in Washington, DC, more than 80 percent expressed "a desire to be among other gay men" as their major reason for neighborhood selection. "This is the only place to be ourselves, to be with people who are like ourselves and not be looked down on," explained one resident. Like other minorities, gays and lesbians want to be with their own kind, which is why British geographer Paul Hindle sees gayborhoods as "the physical manifestation of a gay community."³⁶

The presence of particular institutions is the most prominent aspect of a community. In fact, sociologist Stephen Murray suggests that "the existence of distinctive institutions is more salient to the identification of a community—for both insiders and outsiders—than residential segregation or concentration." Gayborhoods are home to gay-owned and gay-friendly bookstores, hair salons, churches, travel agencies, realtors, medical facilities, retail stores, periodicals, and political groups. Imagine that you are an urban

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planner, and that you are interested in building a gay district as a way to boost your city's local economy and tourism base. Will you encourage landlords to rent to gay men and lesbians as a way to increase the area's residential density? Or will you open a gay bar? Murray would advise you to see gayborhoods as the "institutional elaboration of a quasi-ethnic community" and thus opt for the latter.³⁷

Communities are not just a collection of institutions; they also have cultures. Gayborhoods highlight the symbolic and expressive aspects of a distinctively gay and lesbian way of life. Regina Quatrochi, the former director of the New York City AIDS Resource Center, said, "Even as recently as the early and mid-1980s, I think the Village was symbolic of a sort of celebration of gay culture." Tim Nolan, former president of the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors and candidate for Congress in 1992, merged culture and community with a sense of freedom: "[I]n the 1960s and '70s . . . gay men and lesbians from across America rushed to the coastal cities seeking fellowship and freedom." Consider finally Elizabeth Kastor's invocation of imagery from the *Wizard of Oz*: "For decades, the gay neighborhoods of San Francisco, New York, and Washington embodied the promise of change, freedom, friendship, and acceptance. Greeting cards and T-shirts were emblazoned with the slogan 'I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore.' To come out of the closet, to move to those gay utopias, was to be swept up by a tornado and dropped into Oz. The black-and-white landscape dissolved into color."³⁸

Many gays and lesbians in the coming out era used the language of "mecca" when they expressed their feelings about gay neighborhoods. This is a religious reference to the capital city of Saudi Arabia, the holiest site of the Islamic faith. In a *San Francisco Chronicle* article, Dan Levy borrowed this religious emblem to write, "The Castro . . . drew thousands of gays from all over the country because they believed it was their own mecca-in-the-making." In commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Stonewall riots, Paula Span, writing for the *Washington Post*, blended the Islamic motif of mecca with the American symbol of Ellis Island: "There will be a constant stream of pilgrims coming to gaze at the brick-and-stucco facade of the Stonewall over the next few days . . . The neighborhood surrounding the old saloon, a hangout-turned-landmark, will become

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an international mecca, a symbol of gay liberation. But that's what Greenwich Village has always been. A kind of Ellis Island for generations of gay men and lesbians, a crucible of gay history since before the Jazz Age, it is America's most celebrated gay enclave."³⁹

Invoking religious imagery is ironic, given entrenched taboos against homosexuality, especially in the closet and coming out eras, but it is not entirely surprising. At the heart of such spiritual iconography and religious experience is a communal affirmation. Joseph Coates said sublimely in a 1991 Chicago editorial, "Our eroticism is the closest thing we have to what in the past was called a spiritual life, and no one wants to be excommunicated from that church altogether. This is probably why people who are seen or see themselves as primarily homosexual have acceded to their own subculturalization in gay ghettos." That gays and lesbians "acceded" to the "ghetto"—but that the ghetto grants them certain possibilities in return—is an interesting idea that suggests the less desirable parts are worth it precisely because of the many better ones. Perhaps gayborhoods in the coming out era were like the totems erected by the primitive tribes that French sociologist Emile Durkheim studied. In these very different social worlds, there is a common motivation to seek the sacred. And in both cases, there is an apotheosis of the community.⁴⁰

These different perspectives make it clear that we need to bring existing economic wisdom into dialogue with a more complex understanding of how our sexuality affects where we choose to live, especially the ways in which it arouses our search for sex and love, and why it does (or does not) compel us to seek safety, community, friendship, freedom, spirituality, and a political voice. If we pay attention to the overlaps and intersections of these many factors, we will be able to offer a multicausal explanation not just for why gay neighborhoods formed and flourished in the coming out era, but also why they are changing as we embark into a new post-gay world.

WHITHER THE GAYBORHOOD?

British journalist Paul Burston coined the phrase "post-gay" in 1994. It found an American audience four years later in 1998, a year that heuristically marks the beginning of our current era, when

Out magazine editor James Collard used it in the *New York Times* to argue, “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. It’s going to a gay bar and wishing there were girls there to talk to.” He clarified the urban implications of this still-murky term two months later in a separate *Newsweek* feature: “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.”⁴¹

Gayborhoods long provided sexual minorities with a safe space in an often unsafe world. But now the world itself is becoming much safer. This is an important part of the story about why gayborhoods are de-gayng (and straightening) across the United States, and in many other parts of the world, during a post-gay era. This is not to say that we today are totally post-gay—on the contrary, the idea is riddled with vexing problems, as we will see throughout this book. Yet it is still a useful pivot point for us, a way to think critically about the dramatic changes we are witnessing in the relationship between sexuality and the city.

In 2010, the census revealed that 93 percent of all counties in the United States contain same-sex partner households. Gays, in other words, really are everywhere. Over the years, their presence has been “increasing in some of the most conservative parts of the country,” in areas far beyond urban gay districts. Why do so many gays and lesbians now think outside the gayborhood box? And why are straights so much more comfortable within it? As with the question of origins, economic wisdom can again help us with this related yet distinct concern with contemporary change. We know that federal intervention fueled a first wave of urban revitalization efforts in the 1970s and 1980s. Gentrification resurged in the late 1990s in a second wave that corresponded with rising home prices. Adjustments in the financing system, increased privatization, and the demolition of public housing incited this second surge. Ironically, while gays

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and lesbians used the first wave to build their neighborhoods, the “super-gentrifiers” of the second wave are mostly straight people who are transforming gay districts into “visible niche markets for retail commerce and realty speculation,” observes American studies scholar Christina Hanhardt.⁴²

Second-wave financiers and straight newcomers often prefer chain stores, which threaten the cultural icons of gayborhoods—the bars, bookstores, bathhouses, and boutiques targeted to nonheterosexual consumers. Many gays and lesbians perceive the resulting changes as the pillaging of their cultures and communities. This makes sense, though sadly so, especially when a prominent scholar like Richard Florida appears on *The Colbert Report* and declares, “If you live in a city or neighborhood that has a large concentration of gay and lesbian people, . . . then you’re going to get a premium for your house.” After he heard this, Colbert asked, “Should I be following gay people around to see where they’re living?” Florida replied with force, “Absolutely. Absolutely, if you want to get more return on that 12-bedroom Tudor. Absolutely”—and he indicated that he himself does so. Given that 3.5 percent of adults in the United States identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual—and that straights will always outnumber them—the incentivizing of gayborhoods risks inevitable and potentially irreversible change.⁴³

Another clue for the questions that concern us comes from municipal promotion and tourism campaigns, which position gayborhoods in what Dereka Rushbrook calls a “geography of cool.” In the late 1990s, a group of demographers created a “Gay Index” that ranks regions based on their concentration of same-sex households. Florida has publicly championed this index, including the time in 2007 when he went on *The Colbert Report*, and city officials often use it because it can predict economic competitiveness in a globalizing world. In fact, to compete with a small number of powerful global cities, especially as manufacturing has declined, secondary cities like Chicago, Miami, Manchester, Philadelphia, Seattle, Sydney, and Vancouver have reimagined and rebranded themselves as “places of culture and consumption,” to borrow again from Rushbrook, by showing off their stock of ethnic spaces. City officials now use gayborhoods in the same way that they have used ethnic

enclaves: as “a marker of cosmopolitanism, tolerance, and diversity for the urban tourist.” The resulting Disneyfication of gayborhoods as moneymaking entertainment districts signals an underlying shift in how the state perceives these areas: from a regulatory problem that required repression and containment in the coming out era to a marketing asset more recently. To include them alongside ethnic enclaves at a cosmopolitan buffet for hungry tourists is a profound but problematic shift. The marketing ploy ignores their history, and it opens up their boundaries indiscriminately to straight newcomers. According to Collins, they have become “the chic social and cultural centres of the city—the place to be seen, . . . regardless of one’s sexual preferences.”⁴⁴

Neighborhoods form and change for reasons beyond gentrification. Consider the advice of Australian geographer Brad Ruting, whose concern I share: “Gentrification and changing preferences can only provide partial explanations; in addition, reduced discrimination against homosexuals is likely to have eroded the premium that many gay men and lesbians were once willing to pay” to live in a gayborhood. From the point of view of straights, “the consumption of queer space and spectacles cannot be assumed to denote acceptance, or even tolerance,” Rushbrook adds. Economic perspectives, while helpful, say nothing about how political gains, cultural motivations, and societal attitudes also affect the choices we make about where to live. Even the idea that gayborhoods have changed in the minds of government officials, from a problem of regulation to an opportunity for marketing, implies a more fundamental shift in how Americans think about the diversity of human sexuality.⁴⁵

Social support for gay and lesbian issues and the perceived moral acceptability of their relationships have dramatically increased in recent years, and this is hastening their assimilation into the mainstream. We see this in several ways. A straight allies movement of “politically gay” heterosexuals, as sociologist Daniel Meyers calls them, has emerged in recent years. This testifies to increased interactions between gay and straight people, and we can use that to make inferences about assimilation.⁴⁶

Changes in public opinion provide additional evidence. Several independent surveys of Americans show a shift in their attitudes

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toward sexual minorities. According to a 2010 Gallup Poll, “Americans’ support for the moral acceptability of gay and lesbian relations crossed the symbolic 50% threshold in 2010. At the same time, the percentage calling these relations ‘morally wrong’ dropped to 43%, the lowest in Gallup’s decade-long trend,” which, incidentally, has continued to the present day. A 2012 poll from the Pew Research Center found evidence for acceptance in all regions of the country, urban and rural. Finally, a 2013 *Washington Post*-ABC News poll found that “public support for gay marriage has hit a new high.” Fifty-eight percent of Americans believe that it should be legal for lesbians and gay men to marry, while only 36 percent say it should be illegal. In a striking reversal, “public attitudes toward gay marriage are a mirror image of what they were a decade ago: in 2003, 37 percent favored gay nuptials, and 55 percent opposed them.”⁴⁷

Legislation is finally catching up with public opinion as well. On June 26, 2013, the US Supreme Court, in the landmark case *United States v. Windsor*, ruled that Section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was unconstitutional under the Due Process Clause of the Fifth Amendment. This portion of DOMA defined “marriage” for all purposes under federal law as “only a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife.” Writing for the 5–4 majority, Justice Anthony Kennedy declared, “DOMA writes inequality into the entire United States code.” Its “principal effect,” he continued, “is to identify a subset of state-sanctioned marriages and make them unequal.” Therefore, “the federal statute is invalid, for no legitimate purpose overcomes the purpose and effect to disparage and injure those whom the State, by its marriage laws, sought to protect in personhood and dignity.” Although the court did not issue a sweeping ruling, it found that the federal government cannot discriminate against gays and lesbians who are legally married in their home state.⁴⁸

These recent and radical shifts are the latest development in the United States’ long history of absorbing successive waves of immigrants into its mainstream melting pot. Sexual minorities are finally experiencing this as well—and at an accelerating rate. “Assimilation” is the word that we generally use to talk about this process of cultural absorption, and it is the primary feature of the

post-gay era. For a group like sexual minorities to assimilate means that its members are adopting the perspectives and attitudes of heterosexuals, the dominant group, who, in turn, are incorporating gay people into their existing social structures, like marriage laws. This is by no means the first time in history that the question of whether to assimilate has taken center stage in gay politics, but the post-gay iteration “*is very different*,” Seidman emphasizes, because gay people have many more options for how to structure their lives, and because those lives now “look more like those of conventional heterosexuals than those of the closeted homosexuals of the recent past.” In prior historical periods, “individuals confronted stark choices: stay in or step out of the closet.” Identity choices were also oppositional: “to deny or champion being gay as a core identity.” But things are much less stark today. “As individuals live outside the closet, they have more latitude in defining themselves and the place of homosexuality in their lives.”⁴⁹ Gays and lesbians in the coming out era were generally open and out about their sexuality—“We’re here! We’re queer! Get used to it!” went a popular refrain that defined a generation. Post-gay life, however, allows a greater range of ways to express yourself in an increasingly multicultural society. Being gay or lesbian is just one among many other identities—and one that is receding in its centrality. The new motto might be: “We’re here and there and everywhere. We happen to be queer. But who really cares?”

We can use the term “post-gay” to think about many different aspects of our lives. It can be a mode of self-identification, a way to describe the vibe of a particular place or an entire neighborhood, and it can capture the zeitgeist of a historical moment. Individuals who identify as post-gay, for example, define themselves by more than their sexuality, and they disentangle it from a sense of militancy and struggle. Post-gays feel free from persecution, even while they acknowledge that inequalities persist, and they prefer sexually mixed company—hence Collard’s lament for more girls in gay bars. Many post-gays are urban twenty-somethings that are part of “a new generation of young gay people,” notes Paul Aguirre-Livingston in a 2011 article for a lifestyle magazine in Toronto. They are skeptical about whether their New Jerusalem can exist in gay-only ghettos,

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and they reject them as a result. Younger gays and lesbians feel that their sexual orientation is merely secondary to their place in life—a life that “in most ways, is not about being gay at all,” Aguirre-Livingston adds. But if life is not at all about being gay, then it is only a matter of time before gayborhoods begin to disintegrate as they lose their cultural currency from one generation to the next.⁵⁰

We can also use the term post-gay to think about specific spaces like a bar, where “the need to clearly define and delineate our sexualities is largely deemed unnecessary,” says British geographer Gavin Brown, or entire neighborhoods where there is no pressure to assert “one identity or another. Most times they contain a majority of heterosexuals.” This is possible in ways that it was not before because “‘gay’ identities have outlived their usefulness,” he concludes.⁵¹ During the coming out era, gayborhoods were “akin to what Rome is for Catholics,” D’Emilio argues in his provocative analogy. “A lot of us live there and many more make the pilgrimage.” But in the post-gay era, they are “more akin to what Jerusalem is for Jews,” counters geographer Wayne Myslik. “Most of us live somewhere else, fewer of us make the pilgrimage than in the past, [and] our political power has moved elsewhere.”⁵²

As gay identity recedes, so too will distinctly gay institutions. Consider that there were sixteen gay bars in Boston and Cambridge between 1993 and 1994, but by 2007 less than half remained. This has a domino effect. “As gay bars vanish, so go bookstores, diners, and all kinds of [other] spaces,” notes Robert David Sullivan in a report for the *Boston Globe*. When gay businesses leave the gayborhood, or if new ones open in other parts of the city, they sever the ties that bind residents and visitors to a once symbolically important place. This happened in New York when a beloved coffee shop called Big Cup closed in 2005. Writing for the *New York Times*, Steven Kurutz recounts the effects on the gayborhood:

Patrons learned this week that the coffeehouse, which employees nicknamed Gay Grand Central, a place where many men found a welcome introduction to gay life, was closing. . . . [Big Cup] offered a casual place for gay men to socialize. Women and straight men were welcome too, but as a review once put it, “They just seem sort of irrelevant.” . . . “I’m

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disappointed for the neighborhood,” said Scott Silver, an owner of the business since it opened in 1994 . . . The written memorials of the customers testify to the legacy of the coffeehouse. One note read: “Every community needs its focus place—this has been that for [us].”⁵³

Amid these decades-long shifts in economic, cultural, and social factors, we must also recognize the very recent, and very dramatic, entry of a new factor: technology. Some say that the Internet is displacing the neighborhood’s traditional role as a broker of sex, dating, love, and romance. Sullivan, who we met earlier from Boston, explained, “When Internet access became widespread in the mid-1990s, . . . [they] usurped gay bars’ most important function: a place for men to meet each other . . . As a result of these changes, there are stories of gay bars closing all over the country.” The Internet enables gay people to find electronically mediated friendships, sex partners, and dates, either “for virtual pleasure” or “for real-world fun.” One study of seventeen cities across the globe found that in every single one of them, “the virtual gay community was larger than the offline physical community.” Sandy, a West Hollywood gay nightclub owner, told Lisa Leff of the *Washington Post* that she “has started promoting special dance nights for straight[s] . . . because her gay clientele has fallen off. [She] said that many gay men and lesbians now prefer to meet potential partners on the Internet.” If gay bars are straightening as a result of hosting such “straight nights,” is it any wonder that gayborhoods are becoming residentially integrated as well? William, an employee at a Boston gay bar, echoed Sandy when he said to a reporter from the *Boston Herald*: “Gay people don’t come out as much as they used to because the Internet has made it easier to meet people.”⁵⁴

Gayborhoods today are an elective, not exclusive, place where some gays and lesbians come to socialize and maybe even to live. While fewer of them need gayborhoods as safe spaces, they increasingly provide such sanctuary for straight women who, according to British sociologist Mark Casey, retreat to them to “escape the heterosexual male gaze that sexualizes their bodies” everywhere else in the city. Even straight men have gotten more comfortable with gay people, especially gay men. Charles Blow captured this

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post-gay nonchalance perfectly in the title of his 2010 essay in the *New York Times*: “Gay? Whatever, Dude.” Although straight men and women have always lived in gay neighborhoods, they have become “a common sight on the street” in recent years, as Dan Levy notes in a story for the *San Francisco Chronicle*:

Straights have always lived and shopped in the midst of the homosexual colony, of course, but their numbers are increasing . . . Two decades of struggle for equal rights have translated into real economic and emotional progress for homosexuals—and many heterosexuals . . . If the need to carve out a gay oasis made heterosexuals feel unwelcome 10 or 15 years ago, today straight couples are a common sight on the street . . . If lesbians and gays no longer feel confined to a homosexual safe zone, straights are increasingly less likely to be threatened by same-sex attention. Relaxed attitudes about sexual identity have led to a greater permeability.⁵⁵

The meanings of sexuality are changing in complicated, subtle, and striking ways in a post-gay era; it is our task to figure out how all of this will affect the future of gay neighborhoods.

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

All neighborhoods change. This is a simple fact of city life. And while gayborhoods are no exception, such changes do not indicate that they are doomed to disappear. The evolution of a place does not signal its demise and death. This is why the shuffling demographic and institutional composition of gayborhoods is the point from which we will begin our investigation, not where we will end it. We will discover numerous expressions of urban change throughout this book: the ways in which gays and lesbians are assimilating into the mainstream—and how the straight mainstream is also assimilating into gay culture—and the greater array of possibilities that result for both groups.

To take the road less traveled, we need to ask harder questions: Why do some gays and lesbians imagine a life beyond gayborhoods while others continue to flock to them? And why are more straight people these days moving into them and socializing there? How can

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current residents, community activists, business owners, nonprofit organizations, realtors, city planners, and politicians preserve the cultural and institutional relevance of gayborhoods without denying either the inevitability of urban change or the realities of sexual integration? In what ways, and for whom, can gayborhoods remain resonant and meaningful in a post-gay era, a time that is defined by the declining significance of sexual orientation? Is it possible for new gayborhoods to emerge? Will they remind us of gayborhoods that formed in the coming out era, or will they look and feel different? Where should we look for them? And who is pioneering their development? Armed with these more piercing questions, let us turn the page, acquaint ourselves with those people who walk the streets of gayborhoods across the United States, and begin to find some answers.