



**Jen Jack Giesecking**, *A Queer New York: Geographies of Lesbians, Dykes, and Queers*, New York: NYU Press, 2020. ISBN: 9781479835737 (paper); ISBN: 9781479848409 (cloth); ISBN: 9781479803002 (ebook)

American lesbian culture is celebrated with both panache and nostalgia in Jen Jack Giesecking's *A Queer New York: Geographies of Lesbians, Dykes, and Queers*. Giesecking's personality plays across the pages of the book. It is expressed through a centering of his queer/trans self in stories of white, working middle-class lesbian, queer, butch, and trans dyke becoming in New York City. Statements like "I also know this to be true" or "I laughed along too, feeling that in-group sensation" or "I performed my own queer failure by being a very visible butch body on the streets" or "I was one of those dykes who had previously mocked U-hauled relationships" are interwoven with the richly textured narratives of the research participants (p. 48, 58, 178, 225). This monograph is as much a personal account of the urban politics of location and place attachment as it is a reconstruction of historical geographies of contemporary lesbian and queer politics, culture, and economies in this case study of a world gay city. The book is an extended "dyke nod" to LGBTQ+ urban studies, intended to hold the gaze and imaginations of fellow queers (p.167). Across the book's pages, Giesecking extends an impassioned invitation to LGBTQ+ people to recognize and support each other across their manifold differences by re-narrating the stories of their lives, as the research informants have done for him, in ways that can further a collective quest for social change. It is in the embodiment of anti-property tales of lesbian-queer lives that Giesecking locates the geographies of a selection of New York City's lesbians, dykes, and queers.

To counteract media narratives of declining gayborhoods, disappearing queer spaces, and lesbian invisibilities produced by the absence of financial and political capital, Giesecking offers the metaphor and imagery of constellations to ignite a radical queer geographic imagination. Inspired by Dianne Chisholm's book *Queer Constellations: Subcultural Space in the Wake of the City* (2005), Giesecking traces queer lives and queer spaces through a gentrifying cityscape. As in Chisholm's book, here in the fragments of memories – their gaps, silences, and

connections – are found constellations – the very same term that Giesecking has also chosen to translate queer remembrances into the discipline of geography. Chisholm borrows the concept of constellation from the German philosopher Walter Benjamin who famously drew parallels between the relationship of ideas to objects and constellations to stars, arguing that ideas can be interpreted as timeless constellations. For Chisholm, the constellation metaphor permits her to draw connections between divergent queer authors across time and place to understand the (trans)formations of queer culture. Giesecking leverages similar conceptual traction from constellations, appreciating through multigenerational group interviews, mental maps, and archival research how lesbians and queers living in New York City from 1983 to 2008 created networks of recognition and patterns of generational, racialized, and classed affinity from ephemeral experiences in lesbian-queer places. For Giesecking, it is overlapping and embodied paths and stories that queer the fixed, property-driven neighborhood models of LGBTQ+ urban space, connecting his lesbian and queer research subjects over generations and across identities, like lines between the stars in the night sky.

Giesecking argues that constellations are how lesbian and queer women and transgender and gender non-conforming people (tgncp) navigate New York City “in spite of and alongside cis-heteropatriarchal precarity” (p.3). Sharing stars, lines, and networks across individual constellations shaped by race, gender, class, and generation, is how lesbians and queers contingently produce urban space in virtual, physical, and imagined ways. Giesecking asserts the importance of recognizing the ways in which queers produce space in constellations – through the “steady swarm of queer bodies moving between queer and queer-friendly star-like places” in visiting “[a]cts of perpetual [arrival and] return, determined seeking, and adventurous wandering [that] create the queer lines of constellations” (p.95). To read the queer landscape for constellations, for Giesecking, is to reveal “more clearly how lesbians and queers continue to resist and rework oppression, are resilient in the face of injustice, and can even be complicit in practices of injustice as they seek their liberation” (p.92).

Across cultures, stargazers have long-discerned constellations in the night sky, identifying the location and relationship of stars to one another and the meaning of individual

constellations. “When humans see a picture in a specific configuration of stars – the figure of Aquarius, for instance – it becomes very difficult to see anything else in or around that constellation. Saussure describes this (largely unconscious) phenomenon as *linguistic determinism*” (Dinkler 2019: 76). Hindy Najman (cited in Dinkler 2019: 77) explains that “[c]onstellations depend for their legibility on our interests as readers. Still, they are objectively there. Galaxies exist independently of our interests, whereas constellations such as Orion and the Big Dipper are figures that *we trace* because of their similarity to familiar, earthly images. The stars know nothing of them. Yet the constellations are not merely subjective projections... the constellation is objectively available and is not a subjective projection”. A constellation, then, is a snapshot. It is the story behind the stars, rather than the constellation itself, that is the narrative (Dinkler 2019). And the stars that are at the centre of a given constellation are rendered central because humans have agreed to see them as such and not because there is anything intrinsic to the nature of a given star.

Giesecking is the reader’s guide to *A Queer New York*, the interpreter of this city’s queer celestial bodies. Giesecking has decided which stories and “stars” to make central and how. Throughout the book, for example, it is the coming out year of participants that Giesecking has used as a primary interviewee identifier – yet the very practice of “coming out” is culturally specific and is anything but “normal, routine, and unremarkable” (Orne 2011: 688), particularly for suburban youth of color (Bain and Podmore 2020a). An emphasis on “coming out” queer origin stories and being visible in public space – tenets used to mobilize the collective capacity of the early American gay liberation movement (Kissack 1995) – does not neatly overlay onto urban peripheries where civic space is more limited, the public-private dichotomy more porous, and public anonymity less viable (Bain and Podmore 2020b). To require and foreground the date of “coming out” as a necessary part of the research contributes to the negation of other queer constellations of fragmented spaces where this process of publicly revealing one’s sexual and gender identity remains decentred and ongoing, not a fixed point in time. Instead, in contexts where fear of rejection and the potential loss of emotional and economic support may run high, it is “strategic outness” that is operationalized as part of social identity management (Orne 2011:

685). To return to Saussure's notion of linguistic determinism, Giesecking's imagery of constellations as a metaphorical entrée into the geographies of lesbians, dykes, and queers at times feels forced and linguistically over-determined. As when Giesecking asserts as "fact" that "lesbians and queers often reference astrology if not assert their downright dependence on it" (p.228) as partial justification for a conceptual reliance on constellations.

These constellations are visually captured in the mental maps Giesecking has collected, interpreted, and interspersed throughout the book, recording the specific places, people, and experiences that, in many ways, *are* the research subjects. These maps are visual prompts upon which to locate iterations and interpretations of queer place-making. They are powerful storytelling tools that create and build queer worlds as much as they describe them (Corner 2011). As such, they capture a cartography of queer social practices (Sandoval 2018), revealing what people know, feel, and/or perceive about a place. Such sketch maps are necessarily mediated by the research subjects' reflexivity – they are representations of lived and embodied space. Such maps depict only the elements that the research participants want to share, allowing them to retain ownership of their stories. While some of these mental map figures are small and the text hard to read, they are nevertheless central to the book. They are a mode of creative practice and agency that not only highlight queer lived experiences and stories rendered invisible in other, official cartographies, but they also contribute to deconstructing the myth of neighbourhood liberation. For as Giesecking's research reveals by putting subjective counter-maps in visual-textual dialogue with GIS maps of longitudinal census data on changing median housing values, median annual earnings, median gross rent, and white/Black/Hispanic/foreign-born percentages of population, "lesbians and queers cannot secure the community or recognition they seek through capitalist means and instead become both the gentrifiers and the gentrified" (p.21). As gentrifier and gentrified, oppressor and oppressed, the "dyke politics" that Giesecking identifies as underlying lesbian-queer productions of urban space create complex and contradictory mental maps with numerous erasures, as they are but moments frozen in time. As a reader, I wanted to know more about some of the limitations of the maps and the mapping activities with respect to the placelessness formed by acts of racism – the lines between the stars

that were unmapped rather than “the literal and figurative white space in between, an interstellar medium of surging flows of gentrification” (p.125). The maps and the stories that described some of what was unmapped sometimes left little room for capturing in significant detail the embodied practices of queering the public transit infrastructure of subway trains and stations through commuting, for example, or the intricate sociality of rent parties and dollar parties in private spaces.

For Giesecking, underlying lesbian-queer productions of urban space are what he identifies as “dyke politics” – a synthesis of “production and social reproduction through this group’s paid, underpaid, and unpaid labor” that also “manifests in its commitment to the production of community, culture, knowledge, and shared identities in place” (p.25). In light of some of the tensions and silences that Giesecking highlights as emergent within group interviews when personal experiences do not align (“at times, awkward, discordant, confusing, and unclear, at other times, openly transphobic, racist, classist, imperialist, and almost always marked by some evidence of internalized homophobia, sexism, racism, and transphobia” [p.229-230]), the reader is left to question whether a dyke politics of anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and solidarity-building politics that eschews propertied territorialization is as coherent as presented here in the book or whether it too has its limitations. For as Giesecking writes, “[m]any of my white participants ignored or were unaware of the role and reproduction of white privilege”, while multigenerational women and tgnpc of color “talked about the disconnection, frustration, anguish, and anger they often felt when listening to some white lesbians and queers, both in our conversations and in everyday life” (p.102, 105). It is the third chapter, then, with its prioritization of lesbian and queer of color resistance in the predominantly African, Caribbean, West Indian, Black, and working class neighborhoods of Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights in Brooklyn, that is perhaps the most compelling, actively confronting some of the white norms and “white noise” that structure many lesbian-queer spaces. The “racist dyke-chotomy” that Giesecking (p.143) describes as undergirding gentrification in this “you vs. us” chapter about the disidentifications and belongingness experienced by Black and Latinx research participants is an important collaborative starting point for future research. For as Sandoval (2018) and Cisneros

and Bracho (2019a, 2019b) have shown in their research with Latinx undocuqueer immigrants in the United States, experiences of fear, anxiety, shame, and rejection within LGBTQ spaces diminishes any sense of well-being or belonging, shattering any illusions of security and inclusivity. It is crucial, then, to extend the project that Giesecking has begun by continuing to disrupt established queer geographies of world gay cities like New York City.

In the fourth chapter, Giesecking's analytical gaze turns to Park Slope in Brooklyn, what was in the 1980s and 1990s the only "lesbian neighborhood" in New York City which is presented as a "fantasy homeland" and the "lesbian land version of the American Dream" (p. 193, 178). This chapter is an especially important contribution to the scholarly literature on lesbian geographies. A persuasive argument is made about the work of predominantly white, middle-class, and/or college educated lesbians and queers who through a mix of consumerism, place-making, and volunteerism created, but also undermined through gentrification, spatial community here. Ultimately, then, Park Slope is rendered a lesbian-queer "disappeared" place. The "mainstream subject of the urban lesbian became white", framed as "place missionaries" under settler colonialism and racial capitalism moving into poor, increasingly nonwhite Brooklyn to renovate the disinvested brownstone properties that gave the neighborhood its distinctive architectural aesthetic (p. 156, 158). Participant stories narrate how the large lesbian-queer residential and visitor populations made Park Slope a hub of activism centred around the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), one of the only buildings owned by a lesbian organization in the New York City metropolitan area. Other lesbian hangouts – bars, coffee shops, brunch restaurants, bookstores, co-ops, yoga studios, health justice centres, and community gardens – have long-since gone, with white participants articulating a sense of "isolation, unease, despair, doubt, and anger" at the dispossession, financial burdens, and displacement of these "failings" to own property and make a visible, physical neighbourhood over the long-term (p.155).

Much can be intellectually gleaned from Giesecking's careful scrutiny of the public expression of failure within lesbian urban geographies. Failure is both motivation and point of departure for political change. Drawing on Halberstam's provocation in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) to reimagine failure and its political outcomes, this fourth chapter and

Giesecking's book more generally is an important consideration of "what happens when failure is productively linked to racial awareness, anticolonial struggle, gender variance, and different formulations of the temporality of success" (Halberstam 2011: 92). Towards the close of the chapter, Giesecking returns to the notion of a "FtM trans-surge" (identified at the start of the book as a noticeable increase in the number of masculine trans-identified and/or transitioning female-to-male [FtM] people in the US in the early- to mid-2000s because of greater access to hormones and surgeries). He cautions that while identity redefinitions made frequenting lesbian spaces politically fraught due to confrontations with women-born-women policies derived from 1970s lesbian feminist politics, the burden of blame for the loss of lesbian-specific spaces within neighborhoods should not be placed on visibly butch dykes who became trans. Such admonishments underscore the complex socio-spatial dynamics not only of gentrification but also of the differential embodied burdens it places upon lesbian and queer women and tgnpc of colour. Thus, Giesecking concludes by framing the chapter as "a long apology to and call to action with lesbian and queers of color and working-class and poor lesbians and queers in order to produce new lesbian-queer geographical imaginations and spaces" (p.195).

To conclude, I wish Giesecking had begun *A Queer New York* where it ended, with a robust justification for the use of constellation as metaphorical and theoretical tool. Given that Giesecking spends much of the book dwelling on the spatial scale of the neighborhood, even though it is concomitantly disregarded as "not the meaningful scale of relationality (dare I say community?) for many women and tgnpc", one is left wondering by the concluding fifth chapter how Giesecking fantasizes the "tgnpc neighborhood" that he dreams of (p.190, 194). Beyond the stardust of socio-spatial constellations, what would such a neighborhood look like in terms of material form and social features? Beyond spatial propinquity and reciprocity, how can this shared fragment of geography be reworked to better support tgnpc, undocuqueer, and BIPOC lives in the face of the continued racialization of neighborhoods in US cities? Revisiting the utopic dreaming of socialist feminists and reworking the lesbian feminist ideals that led to the creation of lesbian neighborhoods in the first place could provoke a rethinking of what lesbian-queer urban justice that foregrounds tgnpc and BIPOC rights looks like at the scale of the

neighborhood. Such re-imaginings of cities and the networks in which they reside would begin the important work of sketching the contours of what is intellectually and experientially possible for QTBIPOC in urban planning, policy, and practice.

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