

SOCIETY SPACE

QUEER SOCIAL REPRODUCTION: CO-OPTED, HOLLOWED OUT, AND RESILIENT

NATHANIEL LEWIS

[HOME](#) [UNCATEGORIZED](#)

This essay is part of the forum on [Social Reproduction](#)



Ottawa Centretown Gay Pub

Introduction

The potential for queer perspectives to influence understanding social reproduction has been raised in human geography subfields as diverse as migration studies (Silvey, 2004), population geography (Bailey, 2009) and economic geography (Pollard et al. 2009). The dynamics of social reproduction practices *within* broader queer (e.g., lesbian, gay, and other sexually non-normative) communities is still relatively under-explored in geography (but see Giesecking, 2013; Gorman-Murray, 2012). Most of my own work during the past decade explores the formation of urban queer communities in North America, population movements into and out of these communities, and patterns of health and wellbeing within them. While I had never set out to examine social reproduction until very recently (Lewis and Mills, 2016), the various queer life events that comprise my research (e.g., coming out, finding work, making friends, and dealing with illness) are also inherently reliant on social reproductive practices. Activism, organizing, and belonging are not just political tools enabling the advancement of legal equalities for queer people, but also everyday practices that allow queer families, neighborhoods, and communities to sustain themselves. In this sense, social reproduction is not just something that can be *queered* but also something that for a portion of the population has always been inherently queer.

Recent work suggests that social reproduction for queer people has become less distinguishable from mainstream practices in the context of new legal equalities and a younger ‘post-mo’ (i.e., post-homosexual) generation whose members do not necessarily see sexuality as central in their personal identities (Weeks, 2007; Nash, 2013). At the same time, the specific landscapes of social reproduction for queer people have always been diverse and contested. The visible political and consumption practices of urban gay enclaves, which have been critiqued as disproportionately privileged and patriarchal (Nast, 2002) have perhaps always eclipsed much more diverse social reproduction practices within queer homes, families, and communities (Gorman-Murray, 2007). In this short piece, I want to think specifically about how the conflicting patterns of mainstream complicity and queer diversity play out in different urban landscapes of social reproduction. The following research vignettes of three different urban landscapes reveal empowerment through new forms of social reproduction in some segments of queer communities, but also a lack of support and growing vulnerabilities in others. I describe here three forms of queer social reproduction—co-opted reproduction, hollowed-out reproduction, and resilient reproduction—that characterize what the current ‘post-AIDS, post-rights’ era for queer communities (Lewis et al. 2015).

Co-Opted Reproduction in the Capital City

The first landscape of reproduction I discuss here is that of the Global North capital city. In Ottawa, Canada, and Washington, D.C., U.S.A., mid-sized cities that are also cores of governmental power, queer social reproduction takes on forms that are at once distinct from those in ‘gay homelands’ such as San Francisco but also representative of the growing entrenchment of neoliberalism in queer lives. On the one hand, places like Ottawa, Canada, and Washington, D.C., U.S.A., evolved similarly to queer communities in other North American cities, with gay men and lesbians moving in from regions like the Midwest and Atlantic Canada to cities with greater opportunities. What is interesting about these two military-government complexes, however, is the long-term emphasis on work and employment within their queer communities. Men and women who moved here between the 1950s and 1990s were not only opting out of overtly sexist and homophobic industrial and corporate work environments in those regions, but to some extent also eschewing more socially open ‘gay ghettos’ in cities like San Francisco, New York, and

Toronto. For those who wanted to be ‘out’ at work, the emerging gay villages in the cities offered precarious job opportunities in sectors such as food service, retail, and entertainment but not necessarily secure, sustainable, professional development and advancement (Lewis and Mills, 2016).

Cities dominated by governmental institutions have also been paradoxical spaces that are at once inclusive and regulatory for queer people. Many gay men and lesbians who came to work in Ottawa and D.C. in the 1950s, 1960s, and even later entered hostile environments where they were told to stay closeted or sometimes forcibly expelled from civil service positions. In some ways, the consequent suppression of queerness among these workers rendered queer social reproduction a set of largely private, home-based practices. These cities also lacked the same tradition of protests, parades, and public meeting places that fostered the growth and development of queer communities in other cities during the 1970s and 1980s.

By the 1990s Ottawa and D.C. were shifting from atmospheres of closeted queerness to ones in which some forms of queerness were increasingly visible. Queer rights movements in other cities and growing social acceptance for queer people had resulted in a new emphasis on gay and lesbian inclusion and the prioritization of broader diversity initiatives within the public service. Now, the privatized culture of queer social reproduction in these ‘dinner party towns’ status of Ottawa and D.C. began to dovetail with institutions working at the interface of queer communities and national governments. Some of these institutions, such as Human Rights Campaign (queer legal equalities) and Whitman Walker Clinic (AIDS advocacy) in D.C., operated in conjunction with the government through lobbying and other processes. Others, such as Public Service Pride in Ottawa, operated within the government itself. These organizations have since tended to circumscribe the social reproduction of the queer community for a wealthy and often gay male professional class, often through the vehicle of expensive fundraisers and events. The Human Rights Campaign in D.C. frequently was singled out by research participants as a particularly exclusive group.

I just think they’re excruciating! ... They just seem to be going to parties all the time and they’re raising money for AIDS research. Great, but what about like sex education, sexual health, what about the gay

elderly, what about gay teens who are getting harassed in high schools, that kind of thing? (David, 20s).

David believes that the lobbying and fundraising culture embraced in organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign overshadows more inclusive and grassroots forms of queer social reproduction. The queer professional organizations that have developed within government workplaces play a somewhat different role in co-opting queer social reproduction. Groups such as Public Service Pride in Ottawa and the Gays and Lesbians in Foreign Affairs Association (GLIFAA) in D.C. tend to voice equality or enable equal treatment but do not always promote real inclusion. A quote from one of my research participants shows that these groups often do the work of social inclusion *for* the government. They consequently help to anchor queer people in government-military environments while eschewing potentially more meaningful opportunities for change.

Basically, the way it works is we all recognize life is not easy. Therefore, the gay Foreign Service officers have an informal network to help each other out. They identify the jobs that have gay-friendly bosses or even try to help people get positions in nicer locales. If you take a position in a hardship post the members form a small community—I mean how could you not, lots of repression from soldiers who get annoyed at you if you even look at them funny, so it becomes natural for a lot of gay men to hang out together for solace, companionship, and sanity (Roger, 30s).

Two things about this quotation are important. First, Roger describes the most problematic part of a hardship post as homophobia from U.S. military personnel posted in these as homophobia among U.S. military personnel rather than homophobia in the countries where military and civil service personnel are posted together. Second, he suggests that GLIFAA and its members, rather than the government itself, do the work of making government posts workable and bearable. While government agencies often promote their inclusivity based on the existence of these organizations, queer government workers in cities are left to jerry-rig their workplaces to account for the lack of actual reform in policies and practices.

This rapid shift from private to professionalized queer social reproduction with seemingly few radical or community-based opportunities is not necessarily an anomaly or anachronism of capital cities. Both Ottawa and D.C. have long had the types of tertiary economies that are now typical in most North American cities. As

smaller cities with a great deal of international traffic, both Ottawa and D.C. have been long pursuing ‘world-class’ status through the types of development projects (e.g., museums, convention centres, and monuments) now seen in most metropolitan ‘creative cities’ (see Lewis, 2016). Consequently, they may be early warning case studies of how queer social reproduction is increasingly co-opted into sanitized and professionalized models of urban ‘diversity’ rather than grassroots and community-based social change.



Hollowed-Out Reproduction in the Small City

My shift to researching HIV was simultaneous with a shift to working in smaller Canadian cities such as Halifax, Nova Scotia and London, Ontario. In these smaller cities surrounded by rural hinterlands, different generational groups of men not only conceived gay community differently but were impacted differently by rapid changes in the gay community infrastructure. In the 1980s and 1990s, smaller Canadian cities had all-purpose community hubs such as Gays of Ottawa (GO), Nova Scotia Gay and Lesbian Association (NS GALA) and Homophile Association of London, Ontario (HALO). Each of these organizations housed activist spaces, HIV/AIDS related services, and a bar or club within their walls. It was from these sites that queer community reproduction was launched and maintained for several

decades. For older generations of gay men, activism had often been part of the coming-out process and this was perhaps particularly so in small cities with tight-knit gay communities. One of my research participants who had a hand in creating GO in Ottawa during the 1980s described the connectedness of early gay communities: ‘to some extent, the things that we were seeking out were also the things we were creating.’ (Adrian, 50s).

Between 1995 and 2005, these organizations closed due to financial difficulties, internal disagreements, or lack of leadership. Unlike Montreal and Toronto, where gay men and lesbians gained unprecedented visibility in terms of commercial venues in the 1990s (Podmore, 2006; Nash, 2013) smaller cities in Canada have passed directly from a community hub model of queer reproduction to virtually no model at all. While the closures were at least partially attributable to known trappings of urban gentrification (e.g., rising rents), they perhaps also reflected the perception of queer community reproduction as value-less in lives that are increasingly dependent on hypermobility and broad professional contacts (rather than identity-based networks) to facilitate livelihoods in precarious economies (Lewis 2016a). This shift away from reproduction is thus advanced by a younger generation who has eschewed queer community, not necessarily because they want to assert themselves as ‘post-mo’ (Nash, 2013) but because they do not perceive community investment as something that enhances their success or even survival in a post-AIDS, post-rights era (Lewis et al. 2015).

The loss of queer institutions in these small cities is arguably felt most acutely in the generation of queer people who built them. In London, Ontario, a Western University research team and I found that middle-aged gay men in the region viewed almost all segments of the LGBT community (e.g., gay men, bisexual men, trans men) as less accepted in both gay and mainstream society than did their younger and older counterparts (Lewis et al. 2015). For small cities like London, Halifax, and Ottawa, social reproduction has not simply reached a post-gay or ‘post-mo’ status; there is real anxiety about how, where, and for whom to reproduce queer communities. In my research on HIV prevention in Nova Scotia, one participant who directed an AIDS service organization (ASO) explained the tensions inherent in running a community hub that was often rejected by men who wanted to distance themselves socially from the ongoing crisis of HIV.

If I go down to the bar, a lot of people would choose not to communicate with me, which is totally okay, because they'd have to explain why do you know her, right? If there has to be a reason why they would know me, then that makes complete sense (Diana, 50s).

Local ASOs like the one run by Diana now represent the only established queer advocacy spaces in Halifax and London. For older men who have a historical connection to these spaces and may feel excluded from dwindling bar scenes, they also represent safe spaces in cities where queer social reproduction has become hollowed out. The pessimistic viewpoints of older generations are therefore not just a matter of not 'fitting in' at remaining bars and clubs that comprise the 'visible' queer community. Since they came of age at a time when their sexual identities were stigmatized, they often lack the capital, professional development, and home ownership to insulate themselves from a need for substantive non-private social reproduction—the things that were once described as making life worth living (Katz, 1993). Hollowed-out reproduction is therefore not just a loss of institutions, but also the perception of meaningful engagement with queer community as tangential, peripheral, or even incriminating. Even if queer social reproduction has not been actively rejected in these cities, it seems that its perceived value has decreased. Unlike Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, where a proliferation of commercial gay venues has provided the option of casual and convenient 'engagement,' the hollowing out of queer social reproduction may be felt most acutely in small cities.

A Hopeful Conclusion: Resilient Reproduction in the Immigrant City

I want to end on a more hopeful note by staying in the realm of HIV prevention work but shifting cities. Toronto, where over 40 percent of the population is foreign-born, offers a unique counterpoint to cities such as Ottawa, London, and Halifax. As the largest metropolitan area in Canada, Toronto has transitioned from a provincial government and financial center to Canada's largest metropolitan area and chief destination for new immigrants. For queer immigrants to Canada, Toronto is special because of its ethno-specific ASOs that serve queer of color communities such as Afro-Caribbean and South Asian. Unlike early gay clinics that grew from a combination of medical emergency and governmental interests in the regulation of public health (Brown and Knopp, 2014), Toronto's ethno-specific ASOs also emerged from a realization that queer men of colour were not being reached through mainstream ASOs that were managed and utilized largely by white men (Catungal,

2013). These ASOs are not just sex education and clinical sites, but places that have created programs and social groups that give queer people of color a foothold in both the gay community and Toronto more generally. They offer opportunities to learn English, to prepare for and overcome experiences of racism, and to learn the geography of the gay community in Toronto. In fact, facilitating social reproduction among these men is key to the success of the HIV prevention interventions delivered at these ASOs. When comparing interventions among queer immigrants in Toronto compared to those in the USA that focus only on HIV knowledge and behavioral change, one sees that the Toronto programs—which seek to build confidence and facilitate social opportunities—have also among the most successful at reducing HIV risk behaviors (Adam et al. 2011; Lewis, 2016b).

Social reproduction has often been framed as something that occurs in the home and then diffuses outward to communities in terms of norms, values, and the maintenance of economic productivity. In the case of Toronto's ethno-specific ASOs, however, one can see that new social norms and relations formed 'in the community' also diffuse into new immigrants' families and homes. The counsellors at one of these organizations explained how their programming had not only created resiliency against HIV, but also the resiliency of immigrant communities more broadly by improving familial relationships. By offering programming in culturally appropriate ways (e.g., in Spanish, Bengali, or Chinese, using familiar tropes and scenarios), the ethno-specific ASOs both get across the necessary public health messaging and make queerness visible among different ethnic groups.

I was promoting ChicosNet for people who live in [Toronto suburb] Pickering, and a mother called and she said, 'hey would you please have my son in your group because I want him to be educated. And if he is going to be gay he needs to meet other gay people and get educated formally in a program. That's a very nice story I want to be told about at a conference (Fernando, 30s).

Social reproduction in queer communities is thus always in flux. While the stories in the first half of this entry could be read as disinvestment and despair in a neoliberal age where social reproduction is abused and devalued, this last story shows its transformative potential.



Discussion

To understand the divergent trajectories of social reproduction in queer communities we must also understand the ways in which geographies of queerness are mediated by different economic and institutional configurations. Amidst growing political equalities for queer people in the United States and Canada, different locales and queer groups within those locales may have drastically different experiences of social reproduction. Aging queer populations in smaller cities find their reproductive capacities hampered by disinvestment in once-established community spaces. Similarly, younger queer people in growing metropolitan areas encounter professional competition and a rising cost of living that leaves less room for engagement with distinctly queer forms of socializing or organizing. These shifts are therefore temporally as well as geographically variable. Both the ‘government towns’ discussed here and more recently self-styled ‘creative cities’ may both serve as examples of how shifts toward economic competition and professionalized identities among urban dwellers can hinder the reproduction of queer communities despite the advent of legal equalities.

This is not to say that all changes in the character of North American cities have affected queer social reproduction adversely. In Toronto, queer social reproduction

within ethnic communities and even within families has been enabled by the innovative ways in which the AIDS service sector has mobilized to reach out to growing queer immigrant populations in Toronto. Fully queering social reproduction is not just contesting or disrupting hegemonic and heteronormative frameworks of social reproduction, but also understanding the interactions between sexualities, economies and institutions in different locales. From this standpoint, we can examine the uneven evolution of queer social reproduction in an era that is at once novel and uncertain for queer groups at society's margins.

References

- Adam BD, Betancourt G, and Serrano-Sanchez A (2011) Development of an HIV prevention and life skills program for Spanish-speaking gay and bisexual newcomers to Canada. *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 20: 11–17.
- Bailey A (2009) Population geography: lifecourse matters. *Progress in Human Geography* 33: 407–418.
- Brown M & Knopp L (2014) The Birth of the (Gay) Clinic. *Health & Place* 28: 99–108.
- Catungal JP (2013) Ethno-specific safe houses in the liberal contact zone: Race politics, place-making and the genealogies of the AIDS sector in global-multicultural Toronto. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 12(2): 250–278.
- Giesecking JJ (2013) Queering the Meaning of 'Neighbourhood': Reinterpreting the Lesbian-Queer Experience of Park Slope, Brooklyn, 1983-2008. In: Taylor Y and Addison M (eds) *Queer Presences and Absences*, pp. 178–200. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gorman-Murray A (2007) Reconfiguring Domestic Values: Meanings of Home for Gay Men and Lesbians. *Housing, Theory and Society* 24 (3): 229–246.
- Gorman-Murray A (2012) Queer politics at home: Gay men's management of the public/private boundary. *New Zealand Geographer* 68: 111–120.
- Katz C (2001) Vagabond Capitalism and the Necessity of Social Reproduction. *Antipode* 33: 709–728.
- Lewis NM and Mills S (2016) Seeking Security: Gay Labour Migration and Uneven Landscapes of Work. *Environment and Planning A* 48 (12): 2484–2503.

Lewis NM (2016a) Canaries in the Mine? Gay Community, Consumption, and Aspiration in Neoliberal Washington, D.C. *Urban Studies* 54 (3): 695–712.

Lewis NM (2016b) Relocation and Negotiation: Integrating Mobilities into Gay Men's Sexual Health. In: Brown G and Browne K (eds) *Routledge Companion to Geographies of Sex and Sexualities*. London: Routledge, 283–294.

Lewis NM (2015) Placing HIV beyond the metropolis: risks, mobilities, and health promotion among gay men in the Halifax, Nova Scotia region. *The Canadian Geographer* 59(2): 126–135.

Lewis NM, Bauer GR, Coleman TA, Blot S, Pugh D, Fraser M, and Powell L (2015) Community cleavages: gay and bisexual men's perceptions of gay and mainstream community acceptance in the post-AIDS, post-rights era. *Journal of Homosexuality* 62 (9): 1201–1227.

Nash CJ (2013) The age of the 'post-mo'? Toronto's gay village and a new generation. *Geoforum* 49: 243–252.

Nast, H.J. (2002) Queer patriarchies, queer racisms, international. *Antipode* 34 (5): 874–909.

Podmore J (2006) Gone 'underground'? Lesbian visibility and the consolidation of queer space in Montréal. *Social and Cultural Geography* 7(4): 595–625.

Silvey R (2004) Power, difference, and mobility: Feminist advances in migration studies. *Progress in Human Geography* 28(4): 490–506.

Weeks J (2007) *The World We Have Won: The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life*. London: Routledge.



Nathaniel M Lewis is a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in Human Geography at the University of Southampton. His longstanding research interest is in health and migration among queer people but has recently turned his attention to the ways in which work life shapes queer livelihoods. He is currently working on a project with colleagues in Canada on queer work lives within Ontario's northern and southwestern regions. His work can be found in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, *Health & Place*, *Social Science & Medicine*, and other outlets.