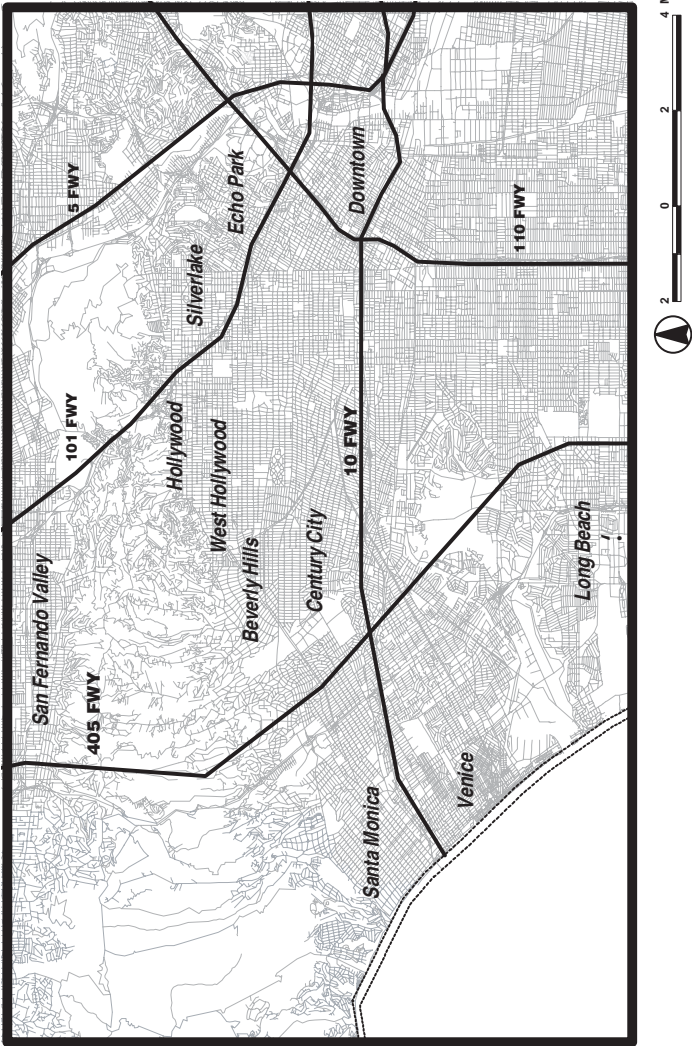


1 Locating the Politics of Difference

The popular narrative of the gay and lesbian movement in the United States tends to be a tale of two cities, centering on New York and San Francisco. Seen as models of freedom and sophistication, these cities are accepted as uniquely enabling gay and lesbian community formation and as models for communities in other cities. Their enclaves—Greenwich Village and the Castro—are celebrated as offering the best of gay and lesbian community life, and these cities as well as their satellite neighborhoods are similarly cosmopolitan. Like most popular narratives, this one ignores complexity. My purpose is not to deny that the promise of these two historical poles has made possible generations of gay and lesbian cultural and political achievements, but only to suggest that it enshrines a permanence of place and a constancy of behavior that is exceptional, even for post-liberation gays and lesbians. Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals living elsewhere more often experience their cities in ways that would be more familiar to their counterparts in Los Angeles than those in New York or San Francisco. Although Greenwich Village or the Castro captures the imagination of gays and lesbians, their movement owes as much to Los Angeles, where the struggle has largely been one of being present and visible within the urban whole, rather than in designated enclaves. For fifty years community building has followed several trajectories in Los Angeles, with moments of public achievement against a backdrop of smaller, more mundane gains. The evidence of these struggles is embedded in the city



Map 1. The Los Angeles Area

map, and its very lack of visibility makes it more representative of the lived reality of gays and lesbians across the United States.

Setting the story of the gay and lesbian urban experience in Los Angeles goes against the grain. The mythic migration of gays leaving their homelands to live in Greenwich Village or the Castro has tended to obscure the importance of the development of both the movement and a broader gay culture elsewhere. What makes it more difficult to compare Los Angeles with New York and San Francisco is the problem of reading Los Angeles itself. Contemporary urban studies also have seen Los Angeles as an exception, strange and often unrecognizable. The differences within Los Angeles's gay and lesbian community, combined with the apparent differences between Los Angeles and other American cities, have contributed to the oversight of its urban history.

Since the 1920s, the possibilities of modern urbanity—freedom, anonymity, and community—have allowed for new expressions of homosexuality. The search for a community, friendship, and love in an environment at once hostile and forgiving has required an often-revolutionary appropriation of public and private places. Now, the collective celebration of gay and lesbian life in the city intertwines with the social, political, and cultural transformations of the urban at a pace and level of complexity not possible in suburban or rural America. At pride parades and protest marches, in residential and commercial neighborhood developments, gays and lesbians have entered public life, not just as community leaders, but more simply as community builders. The social diversity, economic opportunity, and political exchange characteristic of modern American cities support both individual and collective growth, as well as the development of urban subcultures. Thus, the history of homosexuality and the development of the city in the United States are intertwined phenomena.

The multiple formulations of gay and lesbian community—homophile, homosexual, liberationist, feminist, queer—respond

to and emerge from the changing political and social particularities of the urban experience (as has been well described in standard gay and lesbian histories). My interest encompasses both the social and the physical aspects of this interchange, examining the effect of the gay and lesbian movement on place in urban America.

The diversity within gay and lesbian communities and differences between communities across the country reflect the individuality of the movement in disparate urban settings. The story of Los Angeles epitomizes this entanglement of place and community. In many ways, modern Los Angeles is as new as the gay and lesbian movement itself. The early twentieth century saw Los Angeles emerge from its Spanish colonial beginnings and gradually develop an urban character that both fostered a multicultural growth and at the same time secured the power of the dominant Anglo culture. Only in the mid-century, as the homophile movement was emerging, did the city begin to acknowledge and at times encourage the richness of its political and cultural difference. Since the midfifties, the engine of the city's growth evolved from the expansionary dictates of a select group of industrial and commercial leaders to one fed by innumerable communities and cultures. The political organizing in the ethnic communities central to this new expansion have intersected the gay and lesbian experience, drawing from and adding to its particular Angeleno character.

Recent attention to the cultural, political, and social landscapes of Los Angeles has raised the questions of the city's fit within broad analyses of urban phenomena. The debate over Los Angeles's relevance—either as “an exceptional case, a persistently peculiar and irreproducible type of city or as an exemplary, if not paradigmatic, illustration of the essential and generalizable features of late-twentieth-century urbanization”¹—has become, unfortunately, the lens through which Los Angeles is viewed. Thus, studies of Los Angeles have been particularly polarized, showing Los Angeles to be either a par-

adise of the American dream or an unlivable tangle of freeways and smog. However, this history of Los Angeles is best understood apart from any notion of exceptionalism. The major commonality of the Los Angeles experience is the promise it has held for the waves of arrivals, for whom the combination of employment and sunshine outweighs, at least initially, the many complications of life in Los Angeles. Similarly, gays and lesbians continue to migrate to Los Angeles for both the financial and personal opportunity it promises. More than any other city, Los Angeles is seen as an alternative to the rest of country. In this way, gays and lesbians arriving in Los Angeles share certain characteristics with their contemporaries arriving from other places and epitomize one of the central motivations for the growth of this city. Understanding their motivations, aspirations, and achievements may well shed light on the peculiar dynamic of community building in this city.

The enigma of Los Angeles begins with the geographic. Manhattan and San Francisco together cover less area than central Los Angeles. The size and sprawl of the city necessitates a mobility of daily life that scatters ethnic, racial, religious, and other culturally defined communities, reducing the possibilities of the kind of geographic concentrations of community landmarks that characterize enclaves like Greenwich Village or the Castro. Across the Los Angeles region, gay and lesbian communities exist at all scales and levels of visibility. Most obviously, West Hollywood in the center of the city and Silverlake northwest of downtown support the most recognizable markers of gay public life—bars and community organizations. Lesbians, however, have gravitated toward a number of smaller neighborhoods in Long Beach and the San Fernando Valley where they remain less visible. Reflecting the affluence of the gay community, resort destinations such as Laguna Beach (to the south) and Palm Springs (to the east) also have become major centers for both residents and the weekend getaway crowd. This multicentered geography results from the region's own character—the

combined populations of Manhattan and San Francisco roughly equal that of Los Angeles. The sheer numbers and density of the gay and lesbian communities in these other cities are primary engines of their community's peculiar visibility; simply put, the complexity of Los Angeles's social and physical geography is the basis for a different narrative.

The same idyllic dream that propelled the settlement of the city (primarily but not exclusively by Anglos)—from the oranges in the street promised by city boosters in the early 1900s to the suburban solidity of the post–World War II boom and the entrepreneurial expansion of recent years—has inspired the gay and lesbian community as well. Although a celebration of the city's physical charms—beaches, weather, artificially green suburbs—is often mocked by those chronicling the city, these do play a significant role in the making of the city and explain much of its character. Gays and lesbians may be drawn to New York or San Francisco by images of political triumphs, such as the election of Harvey Milk in San Francisco or the inspiring images of ACT UP protests in New York, but such signal events rarely occur in Los Angeles. The drive for political visibility and separatist culture that typifies enclave development in other cities runs directly counter to the desire, in Los Angeles, to find individual fulfillment within the safety and support of the community.

Two questions emerge when we look at the geography of Los Angeles as it relates to the strategy of gay and lesbian community building: First, how can the city as used and understood by the gay and lesbian communities of Los Angeles be mapped; and second, how do activists reshape the city through their actions and associations? These emphatically spatial concerns require that we look at the physical constitution of communities as well as the techniques used to map physical, social, and political places in the city. Physical manifestations of abstract ideas such as community, safety, legality, and pride can be located, as can the particular actions through which gays

and lesbians make these abstract ideas into concrete reality. Together, these approaches constitute and create a new consciousness about place and activism.

Los Angeles is the greatest hidden chapter in American gay and lesbian history. Despite the acceptance within the community of the characterization of their attitudes as apolitical, Los Angeles has provided the setting for many important chapters in the struggle for gay and lesbian community, visibility, and civil rights. Despite the relatively low level of activism of Angelenos in creating the city through other traditional urban movements, gay and lesbian Angelenos have both benefited from and been at the forefront of the national struggle since the early 1950s.

The landmark achievements of Los Angeles's early gay and lesbian community and activists are impressive. The first long-running national gay organization, the Mattachine Society, was founded by a group of leftist men (some members of the Communist Party) in a small house in the Silverlake district. There, Harry Hay and others, including Bob Hill, Chuck Rowland, and Dale Jennings, conceptualized the "modern homosexual," freeing the term from both criminal and degenerate connotations through their actions and manifestoes. The ONE Institute and *ONE* magazine developed out of the early Mattachine group and evolved into a national institution that fostered early gay scholarship. Lisa Ben (her anagrammatic pseudonym) stole time from her secretarial job in Hollywood to write and publish *Vice-Versa*, the first lesbian publication circulated in the United States, on the office typewriter and mimeograph machine. Reverend Troy Perry founded the Metropolitan Community Church, the first gay and lesbian religious organization and the first gay and lesbian organization to publicly own property in the United States. All of these events predate the riots at Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York City's West Village, in June 1969.²

The public education and community outreach of the Mat-

tachine and other successor organizations attracted a critical mass of gays and lesbians committed to civil rights in Los Angeles beginning in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Following a model for assimilationist organizing established in the Mattachine, gay men (and some lesbians) worked to challenge the harassment enshrined in city code and ruthlessly carried out by the Los Angeles Police Department. One milestone, in early 1952, was the trial of Dale Jennings, charged with soliciting a police officer. Although Jennings denied the charge, he took the unusual step of publicly admitting his sexuality and defending the rights of homosexuals, writing in the first issue of *ONE* that “even if I had done all the things which the prosecution claimed . . . I would have been guilty of no unusual act, only an illegal one in this society.”³ Represented by a Mattachine lawyer, Jennings was acquitted by eleven members of the jury, and the city dismissed the charges.

As the movement grew, it diversified, spurring breakaway factions and the intracommunity tensions that have persisted over time. Friction among activists, however, did not dampen the growth of the community, and outreach efforts and publications created a culture of understanding within the larger gay and lesbian community that drew others into the movement. Even those whose participation in the community was limited to frequenting the bars knew of these activities and had, perhaps, seen some of the early literature put out by the homophile movement. Equally important was that these efforts made city officials aware of the concerns of the emerging homosexual consciousness, laying the groundwork for the negotiations to follow.

Although these early efforts created the foundation for gay and lesbian activism and politics, only with the liberation movement of the 1970s did the city truly engage with the struggles of gays and lesbians as a recognizable group. It would be decades before either the city or the mainstream movement recognized the diversity within this group. During the 1970s,

gay liberation and the women's movement changed the political language of the gay movement, transforming it first into a movement for liberation, one challenging the assumptions and norms of American culture, rather than seeking acceptance within these norms. Soon after, the women's movement provided the vocabulary for separate (and separatist) lesbian theories and strategies. These liberationist agendas led to the creation of the first social services for gays and lesbians in the city—in some cases in the United States—and of alternative spaces, including coffeehouses, art galleries, performance spaces, and separatist communes.

In the 1980s, a new intensity of organizing in Los Angeles and across the country emerged out of the depths of the AIDS epidemic, creating new pressures on existing community organizations that necessitated a reevaluation of the meaning of community and the differences within the movement. As in other cities across the country, the community responded by establishing new organizations to combat AIDS. In Los Angeles, however, the AIDS battle was peculiarly shaped by the emergence of a new open relationship between the Hollywood movie industry elite and the gay and lesbian movement, which substantially increased the funds available for community projects. Overlapping with the city's redevelopment schemes, the movement emerged as a player in city politics, enabling the development of landmark social services for the gay and lesbian community (both general and AIDS related) with city support. With AIDS in the foreground, the City of West Hollywood emerged as a pioneer of civic empowerment and responsibility. The city, incorporated in 1984, supported a rapid expansion of gay commerce but this commitment at times threatened to divide the community along class and race lines. All of this transformed the community as gays and lesbians struggled with the issues of diversity and multiculturalism central to contemporary Los Angeles politics.

As the meaning and dimensions of the AIDS epidemic

changed in the 1990s, new issues and agendas appeared, returning in large part to the broader call for civil rights. In Los Angeles, the movement turned to the state and federal governments for action, with local issues giving way to the pursuit of agendas (job protection, equal access to housing, and gay marriage) within mainstream politics.

The continued transformation of the movement and the increasing diversification of its political and social agendas have demanded changes in the way gays, lesbians, and bisexuals in Los Angeles interact with the city. The decentralized community living within an even more decentralized city has continually had to develop different strategies to deal with the unique, changing character. Understanding the nature of the movement in Los Angeles means understanding the city itself.

Mapping, Activism, and Place Claiming

Gays and lesbians live in cities they have mapped for their own purposes: neighborhoods discreetly appropriated in forgotten zones, street corners where kisses can be exchanged proudly, and community centers to provide safe space for coming-out or mobilizing activists. And then there are the places where none of these things can happen, where gay bashing and subtler forms of heterosexism are expected and feared. The experience of being part of, and subject to, the life of the city, combined with the search for specific spaces that permit and affirm one's own way of being, are the key elements in such maps. Although maps are easily understood as concrete translations of the city with practical value, mapping is a process that marks the specific ways individuals navigate their urban environment. Mapping begins with the physical geography and adds intangible and conceptual evaluations of specific places within the city. Physical spaces become imbued with value based on personal need and desire and the experience of inclusion or exclusion from chosen places. These interpretations of

the city's physicality begin with the individual but occur as well at the collective levels, as groups create and dismantle the segregation inherent in city form and structure.

As a tool for understanding people's actions in relation to specific environments, mapping brings together strands of geography, planning, and environmental psychology that allow for the reading of the city both as space and as text. Mapping—the daily and unconscious practice of negotiating the city—produces what geographers have termed the mental (or cognitive) map, an individual's own image of the city.

Cognitive mapping is a process composed of a series of psychological transformations by which an individual acquires, codes, stores, recalls and decodes information about the relative locations and attributes of phenomena in his everyday spatial environment.⁴

Mental maps spatially organize the pictures we carry around in our heads of the environment we inhabit, incorporating the world as experienced and the world as desired. Together, experience and desire are reflected in the unconscious cartography of our daily lives. Beginning with an individual's practical spatial knowledge—including key locations and landmarks (as well as boundaries of safety and danger) the mental map connects the exploration of the individual experience in relation to a larger spatial collective. The resulting map reflects one's understanding of the city not simply as a physical place but also as a social construction that sustains certain social, cultural, and economic boundaries. These mental maps are in one sense highly personal, selective, and abstract. Although each person carries around his or her own mental map, these maps reflect as well shared knowledge, experiences, and boundaries. The idea of a map that reflects all our actions is powerful, suggesting a key to our behavior and our preferences for certain environments. By drawing attention to and arising from the details of our lives, a cognitive map is more than a theoretical construct; it becomes a real part of our spatial negotiation. Thus,

mapping is a narrative process that incorporates both autobiography and cultural history.

Although most attention has been paid to the way observers can use maps to understand others and to plan in response to community needs, it is the daily construction of one's own map that helps to explain the development of communities and movements, including those built by gays and lesbians. The often overemphasized individual nature of these maps—assuming that each of us operates from a unique image of the city—belies the more powerful collective meaning of these maps as shared among groups and neighbors. Traditionally, geographers have used mental maps primarily to construct an individualist picture of the city that turns away from the commonalities of experience that underlie life in the city. Collecting these individual depictions of the city into a whole reveals the nature of community, the meaning of otherness in the city, and the context for place claiming by marginalized groups. The experiential knowledge collected and circulated through communication and codes forms a collective unconscious about the connection between the physical space of the city and the possibility of gay and lesbian empowerment. This knowledge, written on streets and in neighborhoods, constitutes a map that is used practically and strategically. Each encounter with the city leaves its impression, marking the city with clues for future generations.

Attention to the collective is also necessary for marginalized people in forming their identity. Identity, as lived on the margins, is neither static nor independent, but the result of a complex interplay between place, community, and politics. To understand identity, then, is to take account of this interplay, and the means by which specific groups, marked by race, class, gender, religion, or sexuality, claim and are denied places to live, work, and make their own. Notions of biological determinism aside, our attempts to understand lesbian and gay identities have been helping to answer questions about the meaning

of community, the opportunity for politics, and the specificity of these definitions in spatial contexts.

A systematic charting of the spaces of gay and lesbian communities in use at a specific time and in a specific context can therefore become the basis for a deeper understanding of sexual identity at that same time and place. In addition, these maps may help to explain the city as a whole, the way it is accessed by groups, transformed over time, and negotiated at the street level.

To understand the strategies and tactics of contemporary activists, we must examine their maps. The new cultural politics of identity creates a framework for looking at communities and difference and uses the vocabulary of place metaphorically in discussions on positioning, location, and situated knowledge. Charting the sites of community building uncovers the day-to-day, street-level decisions that activists make. The narratives of Los Angeles's gay and lesbian activists challenge traditional notions of the boundaries, dimensions, and uses of the urban landscape.

Because the experiences of gays and lesbians reflect the specific social and political conditions of their time, their maps are not static. Combating homophobia, oppression, and violence while demanding respect for difference leads gays and lesbians into a dynamic relationship with the city. As they confront the city, they seek to change it, to make it reflect their experience, desires, and needs. These strategies define the gay and lesbian experience in the city—one characterized by the shared desires and demands of a marginalized people. These individual efforts acknowledge and reveal the truth of sexual otherness; in the aggregate they become collective responses to discrimination and isolation. Personal risks make possible the activist interventions of the whole. Mapping, then, activates the city.

Politically, gays and lesbians struggle for visibility on the streets and in other public places, representation at city halls and in Washington, and recognition in the courts. Economi-

cally, entrepreneurs establish new strongholds—in the form of cooperatives, businesses, or bars to “recycle dollars” within the community and claim economic self-sufficiency. Socially, groups and individuals appropriate and establish churches, schools, or community centers, using space in both customary and transgressive ways. All of these practices constitute activist strategies that can be examined in the context of both political goals and cultural expression.

Lacking in theoretical explorations of recent social movements is reference to the grounds on which these battles for rights and visibility are fought. What does the map (in Los Angeles or elsewhere) of gay and lesbian activism look like? What distances must activists travel to meet and act? Are the places of residence the place of struggle? What public places are available for gathering and protest? Mapping these places and tracing the processes of mapping deepens our understanding of social activism. Looking at the physical and social dimensions of a social movement thus leads to a more visceral level of understanding than allowed by attention to movement ideology alone. Current literature that emphasizes identity as an organizing principle for social movements fails to capture the experience of social activism or the central role of strategy in movement building. The focus on identity and difference that has been proposed by both social movement theorists and, more generally, within cultural studies is only the first step in understanding contemporary activism, a foundation upon which I want to build.

Activism, the political and social efforts to win civil rights, access to social goods, acceptance, and equal opportunity, constitutes the crucial link between the individual and the community, and politics and place. For gays and lesbians, activism begins with the very personal act of coming out and continues with the unending efforts to assert both presence and rights in the city. Routine choices—whether to live in a gay-identified neighborhood, where to go with friends and lovers, how to per-

form (or make public) one's sexuality—define the boundaries of the urban gay and lesbian experience. These routine, even pedestrian, aspects of gay and lesbian experience fuel the generation of a more organized and recognizable activist practice.

The very nature of gay and lesbian life in the city begins with activism. In response to the isolation of the closet, the individual becomes collectivized. As individuals, gays and lesbians have the choice to be out or not, and the spatial decisions—where to live, work, or socialize—may result from many factors, some perhaps distinct from the implications of one's sexuality. However, when the city—rather than personal space—becomes the backdrop for the validation of one's self, identity, rights, and responsibilities, then visibility and risk are inevitable. Visibility, in the context of gay and lesbian activism, has been at the center of collective attempts to confront the risk. Gay and lesbian activists working together, sharing knowledge to create common agendas and strategies make visible the daily strategic decisions of individuals living in the city.

The concept of place, as a physical reality, metaphoric goal, and political right, reflects these challenges and offers a new and more dynamic way of reading the strategies of contemporary activists. Place encompasses both the physical landmarks of a community within which social relations are constructed, the political legitimacy of territories, and the metaphorical and strategic uses of community. Place works both as a physical and social site of resistance and as a manifestation of shared meaning in specific contexts and communities. In this way, place carries the emotional resonance created through the continued interplay between people and their surroundings and provides tangible evidence of a community's history and experiences.⁵

Certain sites become imbued with symbolic value that reflects the pride of collective struggle and the pain of oppression. The geography of gay and lesbian protests, like the geography of social and political protest in general, has not been well researched. Although it is clear that protests add to the

meaning of the places they occupy, geographers and planners have not specifically looked at the varied locations where protests occur or the connections between the choice of places and the activist agenda. In the case of gay activism, however, there is a very direct link between the types of protests used by activists, the places where these protests occur, and the overall strategy of the movement at a particular time. The earliest gay rights demonstrations in Los Angeles were a series of small marches outside the few prominent gay bars to protest police activities. Later, during the gay liberation movement, protests were much more diffuse, taking place across the city, often at sites with no particular gay resonance. Since the late 1980s, however, and the development of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and other direct-action movements, gay and lesbian protests have become highly specialized, focused, and symbolic. Specific sites with lasting or temporal significance become the scenes of targeted campaigns, and the locations become part of the demonstration.

As the gay movement agenda has shifted from assimilation to confrontation, so has the geography of protest, with gay visibility across the city exploited and challenged. Demonstrations across the city at malls (Century City), local hospitals (County-USC Medical Center), and government offices (the County Administration Building) are used strategically, with tactics and messages tailored to specific audiences and for specific demands. This intersection of the map of gay protest with zones of safety and legality marks the movement's evolution.

But gays and lesbians have not taken to the streets only in protest. A hallmark of gay liberation in the 1970s, which has become an institution in cities around the world, is the gay pride parade, typically held in the end of June to commemorate the Stonewall Riots of 1969.⁶ This celebration is important not only because it aims to challenge mainstream conceptions of community and sexuality but also because it confronts the idea of public space as off-limits to gays and lesbians.

Pride parades have been sanctioned officially since the early 1980s in many cities (including Los Angeles where the first pride parade was held in 1970). Because the pride parade magnifies the community's visibility, it provides not only an opportunity to show the "arrival" of the gay community but also serves as a platform for articulating civil rights struggles. One of the recurrent debates within the movement, however, is the extent to which these events have been co-opted, diluted by the passage of time and the increasing assimilation of gay cultural mores into straight norms. During the height of gay liberation, marches often were held without permits and followed a route out of the gay enclaves, down major avenues, and into public parks for rallies. In contrast, by the mid-1980s, many parades had been rerouted to stay within the confines of gay neighborhoods, thus losing much of their disruptive character. Douglas Crimp describes the reversal of the route in New York City: "We walked downtown, into the confines of the gay ghetto, where instead of attending a rally, we could drink, eat, dance, and spend money to enrich Mafia-owned, gay-run businesses."⁷

In describing the shift from protest to a celebration, Crimp emphasizes the loss felt by more radical activists. In Los Angeles, by contrast, these moments of celebration, of being activists simply by being visible, hold greater importance, and are, in fact, central to what the map of the movement looks like. In Los Angeles, the movement started in a living room, not outside a bar in a crowded street—not simply because Angelenos are less confrontational, but also because in Los Angeles crowds are rarely spontaneous and are not easily assembled. To read this map is to understand that the living room can be a public place, and that visibility is more subtly obtained.

Place Claiming

How can we explain the strategies of a movement as diverse and contradictory as that sustained by contemporary gays and lesbians? With activists simultaneously calling for civil rights,

equality, the transformation of society, and the right to establish distinct and separate societies, is there a way to draw some meaningful and perhaps unifying conclusions about their strategies and goals?

To understand the role of activism, in its broadest sense, in the making of the gay and lesbian city, the relationship between place and political strategy must be foregrounded. Place claiming—the appropriation of physical, social, and mental spaces by marginalized groups—defines this link and is the central strategic mechanism of social movements.

Not only are these place-claiming strategies an important and unexplored way of understanding activism in the urban context, they also define aspects of gay and lesbian activism.⁸ The city is not a clean slate upon which to build something new, but a thing constructed, upon which activists and communities layer new meanings. A theory of place claiming provides a framework for understanding, at the macrolevel, the relationship between place and politics in gay and lesbian activism. This framework considers the following: the brokering of contradictory claims to place by marginalized communities, the city bureaucracy, the media, and others; the social production of space; the disjunction and connections between place and community; and, given these changing notions of place and identity, the appropriation of place by gays and lesbians.

Looking at gay and lesbian activism as a process of place claiming leads to a deeper understanding of the particularities of the movement as it has changed over time, in different geographies, and under different notions of politics. These strategies draw not from a sourcebook shared across movements, but emerge from the particular histories of oppression, attempts at assimilation, and practices of resistance developed within marginalized societies. They mix cultural practices, individual innovations, and immediate responses to particular needs. This does not deny the possibility for and experience of learning from other movements. In fact, as the experience of

the gay and lesbian movement suggests, social movements are continually borrowing from other sources, in part because most members of the gay and lesbian community are simultaneously members of other oppressed groups. Activists and social theorists alike cite these links between radical discourses as an important aspect of the contemporary struggle.

Highlighting place-claiming strategies introduces the discussion of the physical, social, and symbolic construction of the city into the analysis of social movements. Although the theories discussed above are useful for understanding ideology, collective identities, and the connection between strategy and action at the macrolevel, the specifics of social movements—in particular the geography of these movements—are generally ignored. In contrast, a mapping of the places used by activists and the subsequent adoption of these places for use by the wider gay and lesbian communities deepens our understanding of activism. This theory provides the opportunity for a critical discussion of the relationship between the gay and lesbian movement and the places marked as specifically occupied by gays and lesbians.

Contemporary gay and lesbian place claiming reflects a specific set of opportunities and obstacles that like gay and lesbian life both reflects and counters contemporary notions of community. Proscriptions against homosexuality have restricted gays and lesbians from developing community identity within the family. Similarly, gays and lesbians often encounter resistance at other typical places for identity formation—school, religious center, and workplace. Thus, for people whose first contact with community has been limited to social outlets (such as bars or clubs), the very notion of community building can seem foreign. The histories of gay and lesbian culture in the United States attest to the fear of discrimination and prosecution that limited the development of community within the context of traditional social institutions. Community centers serving people living with HIV and AIDS, teenagers on the

streets, gay and lesbian parents, and activists of all agendas constitute a parallel social network for gays and lesbians who have no use for, or have been shut out of, mainstream social institutions. For gays and lesbians, the notion of community remains problematic, as gays and lesbians attempt to restructure socially ingrained notions of community (and its connections to home and family) in light of these barriers. Given the tension between the desire for community and the claim of individual nonconformity, challenging the ideal community characterizes much of gay and lesbian movement building since the emergence of gay liberation.

Only a mapping that makes central these collectivized struggles for personal freedom and safety can describe the particulars of the gay and lesbian movement in Los Angeles, a city whose long-overlooked place in the history of gay and lesbian struggles exemplifies the inadequacy of previous analyses. Just as the city itself defies common understandings of the urban, so does the experience of its diverse communities. The primarily decentralized geography of the city, the relative absence of distinct gentrified neighborhoods, the disconnections between progressive politics across the city, and the rapid pace of demographic change all contribute to the specificity of the Los Angeles experience as one based in the daily enactment of the personal.

To understand the complexity of gay and lesbian place claiming as distinct from more general notions of the gay and lesbian “experience,” we must look beyond simple notions of community. Even when we pay careful attention to the diversity within community, the term still evokes a certain social construct that erases the very real limitations of place and difference. A conceptual shift from the “ideal of community” (which strives for unity and suppresses difference) to the “real life of the city” lies at the heart of a politics of difference. Community, as an ideal or goal, carries complicated associations and confinements, not only for those on the margin but also for society at large. Iris Marion Young writes,