



A Queer New York: Geographies of Lesbians, Dykes, and Queers; The City We Became

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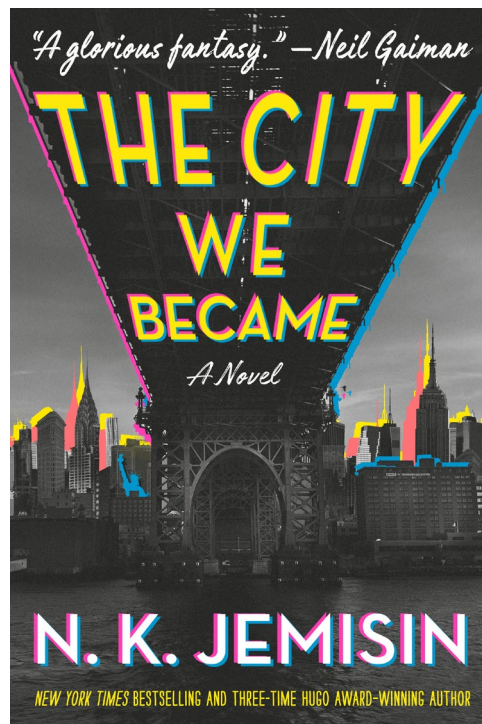
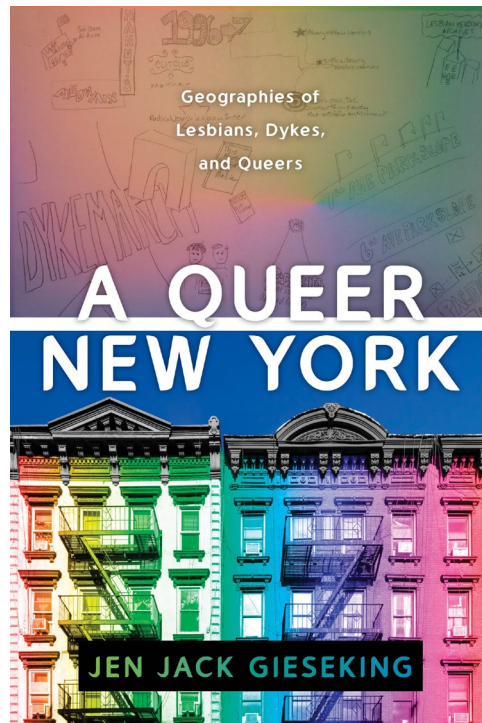
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A Queer New York: Geographies of Lesbians, Dykes, and Queers. Jen Jack Giesecking. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2020. xxv and 307 pp., figures, notes, index. \$30.00 paper (ISBN 9781479835737); \$89.00 cloth (ISBN 9781479848409).

The City We Became. N. K. Jemisin. London: Orbit, 2020. 437 pp., one map. \$28.00 cloth (ISBN 9780316509848).

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People inhabit many temporalities. There is a “somatic time” (Danon 2018) framed by bodily development and by elective surgical and pharmaceutical technologies; we live, we are changed, we die. There are also the social times of shared contexts, often flattened when understood as a singular history. Beyond these, some understand their own biography as containing such a weighty caesura that with hindsight there is the time before, and the different time beyond. Coming out, for example, is a fulcrum of many gay, lesbian, and queer narratives, and people date a new life and identity back to that moment (Gorman-Murray 2008; Lewis 2012; Saxey 2008). Thus, Giesecking is both author of *A Queer New York* and, as Jack ‘91, an



important local expert and character in this tale of some queer times and spaces in New York City.

Cities also incorporate multiple temporalities, and parallel worlds. In Jemisin’s *The City We Became*, Bronca, the avatar of the Bronx explains to the avatars of some of the other New York boroughs that “[a]ll the other worlds that human beings believe in, via group myths or spiritual visitations or even imaginations if they’re vivid enough, they exist. Imagining a world *creates* it, if it isn’t already there” (p. 302). This work of imagination is vital for the survival of cities because without it, cities can die and, as the avatar of São Paulo explains, even New York could “join Pompeii and Atlantis” (p. 6) for, in the voice of the narrator, “This is the lesson: Great cities are like any other living things being born and maturing and wearying and dying in their turn” (p. 7). In *The City We Became*, New York city is under mortal threat and the avatars of its constituent parts must unite in the face of a wily enemy if they are to “come out,” reborn as a new city.

Both these books are about the threat of gentrification and follow strikingly similar journeys into the urban imaginary to recover myths and metaphors we might live by. It might seem strange to put a novel alongside a research monograph, but speculative fiction gives some geographers a weird way back to the real (Martin and Sneegas 2020) and Jemisin’s fiction has attracted the attention of geographers seeking novel standpoints from which to contemplate current racial and

related ecological injustice (Iles 2019; Ingwersen 2019). Jemisin's latest book will reward their attention with its interrogation of New York places and spaces known intimately by Jack '91 and fellow characters from *A Queer New York*. The common challenge in both *A Queer New York* and *The City We Became* is to project a city in which diverse humans can thrive in the face of rampant gentrification. This projection is a work of imagination for both the scholar and the novelist.

Recruited in response to Gieseeking's invitation to "lesbian and/or queer" (p. 254) folk who had spent in New York City most of the time since they came out, forty-seven people, from Yasmin '83 to Tara '06, met during 2008 for group discussions with Jack '91 in groups clustered by decade of coming out or of deliberately mixed cohorts for intergenerational conversation. They were asked to bring a map that showed the parts of the city important to them at the time of their coming out and any artifacts that they associated with that time. They joined bilateral and group conversations discussing the developing themes and findings of the research. Proceeding from their own Year Zero, they told of their queer and lesbian experience of a changing city. Gieseeking also researched the social and material settings of these lives through the archives of lesbian and queer periodicals and institutions, as well as by mapping evolving geographies of race, poverty, and real estate. Finally, Gieseeking lets Jack '91 tell stories, seasoning the text with wry, resigned, and amusing reflections from the barricades of the struggle to let queer lives flourish in New York City.

The social time that is history is told as three decades with profound transitions. With the end of the 1980s, the political alliance of gay men and lesbians around AIDS activism faded, along with the energy of that movement. The 2000s in turn began with a challenge to lesbian feminism from a flourishing trans community animated by what Gieseeking describes as the "FtM trans-surge" (p. 31) that had been facilitated by access to cheaper hormones and surgery. These dissolutions allowed new political and cultural vim around lesbian and queer and dyke and trans identities in the 1990s and 2000s, respectively. These insurgencies redefined identities and the terms used to talk about them, as Gieseeking explains in a valuable appendix on identity terms.

These decades are differentiated in distinctive ways for each of the three urban districts that emerged as most significant from the maps and interviews. The high water of AIDS activism floated the bars, bookstores, theaters, coffee shops, and community centers of Greenwich Village in the 1980s. The lesbian separatism of the 1990s seeded a blossoming of lesbian

bookstores and bars in the Village during the 1990s. Yet, by the 2000s even while lesbian and queer visibility contributed to a touristic commodification of the Village, few could afford its rents, and a turn to homonormativity (Duggan 2003) was seen in the narrowing of Village-based activism to issues such as marriage equality and the right to serve in the military. In the magical inferno *The Angel of History*, Alamaddine (2016) derided this retreat as the heroes of gay liberation accepting new roles as "supporting actors in the middlebrow drama series of hetero culture" (167).

Through Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights, Gieseeking tells a story about the relations between race and gentrification. White lesbians were able to move into gentrifying areas. This not only displaced people of color, but the new visibility of lesbianism might even have intensified homophobia within communities of color. The development of families by and for trans people of color gave refuge to a few among those who fled violence at home. House parties were important to lesbians and queers of color and were an alternative to the commercial spaces of gay bars and clubs. Gieseeking works hard to articulate the urban experience of queers of color despite their sparse presence in the sample of forty-seven.

Park Slope in Brooklyn is the closest to a lesbian utopia in this Queer New York. Beginning in the 1980s with an expansion of women's institutions and a growth in lesbian parenting, particularly "after IVF clinics began opening in 1979" (p. 185), the visibility of lesbian gentrifiers in Park Slope fostered lesbian culture in the 1990s and not only in support of domesticity, for it was only the "anti-sex zoning policies" (p. 207) of Mayor Giuliani in the late 1990s that squashed a nascent scene of anonymous lesbian sex parties. As wealthier gentrifiers chased up rents in the 2000s, it was time, once again, for the lesbian and queer scene to move on.

Gentrification dominates many geographical readings of queer urban space. Zukin (1982) identified gay men as among the pioneers of loft living in New York, and Florida (2002) heralded them as markers of the tolerance that attracted to lucky cities the truly creative classes that replace the failures of urban decay. In contrast, Delany (1999) mourned the erasure of queer space for the safe gentrification of Times Square, and Schulman (2012) conflated gentrification and homonormativity as a purposive attack on the insurgent creativity of queer association. Gieseeking is worried about the way that White lesbian and queer gentrifiers displaced poorer people of color in Bedford-Stuyvesant and Park Slope, but the book develops its own novel perspectives on gentrification. For Gieseeking, gentrification is a particular urban imaginary

of an aspirant gay community seeking urban salvation in a neighborhood that is a nostalgic echo of ethnic claims on the inner city.

This is very suggestive. It identifies a geographical imaginary of propertied success that is consonant with a “settler colonial fantasy” (p. 190), one version of the American dream as the ejection of weaker denizens by vigorous pioneers. Neighborhoods claimed by lesbians and queers in this manner of “propertied territorialization” (p. 192), however, will not likely endure and the ensuing “spatialized queer failure” (p. 149) holds lessons and promises solidarities of its own. In this respect, Giesecking endorses Halberstam’s (2011) arguments in *The Queer Art of Failure*, that failing might be better. With *Queer Constellations*, Chisholm (2005) had already read gentrification as failure for queer folk, with gay spaces figured as ruin or fossil, but also available as fetish or utopia. Giesecking goes beyond this in distinguishing a gay male vision of liberation as neighborhood capture from the more limited possibilities open to female, and therefore lower income, households such as lesbians. Hitching your wagon to the star of gentrification is wrong not just because it fails, not just because it asks one to be an agent of displacement, but also because, as Schulman (2012) pointed out, the values that make places attractive to richer gentrifiers are inimical to the roiling and heterodox spaces that sustain lesbian and queer lives.

There are similar treatments of gentrification in Jemisin’s *The City We Became*. The avatar of the Bronx speaks of “gentrifier logic. Settler logic. They want a city without the ‘gritty’ people who made it what it is” (p. 240). In a world built on the values of gentrification, explains the avatar of Manhattan, the residents “don’t have enough cash to buy their own lives” (p. 72). The neoliberal order is an interloper city, “featureless, undifferentiated ur-matter” (p. 426) dropping “a Foot Locker, a Sbarro, all the sorts of stores one normally finds at a low-end suburban mall” into downtown Manhattan where their presence is “irritating” (p. 34). Jemisin can imply in this work of fiction that the five boroughs of New York city might, with the seeming exception of Staten Island and the unexpected assistance of Jersey, find a commitment to hybridity sustaining thereby the “tear in the fabric of reality” (p. 7) that is the urban difference beloved of urbanists in New York from Jacobs (1961) to Sennett (1991).

The avatars fighting to rescue New York City share one or more attributes of marginality as queer, immigrant, or Black. Their enemy variously manifests as the White Woman or as white feathered things. The enemy quotes Yeats’s (1920 [1994]) patrician anxiety at modernity: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold | Mere anarchy

is loosed upon the world” (235). Other anxieties are disclosed by the enemy’s name, revealed late in the story as R’lyeh, in ironic commentary on Lovecraft’s (1928 [1971]) racist fictions where it is a drowned and “accursed city” (p. 34), home to an evil monster that has on earth an expectant “secret cult” (p. 17), “more diabolic than even the blackest of the African voodoo circles” (p. 10) and waiting in regions “unknown and untraversed by white men” (p. 14). Jemisin insists that in Lovecraft’s fiction, the “monsters came from his own fear of brown people, of immigrants, of Jewish people, of whatever” and confides that this was “what I decided to write against” (Khatchadourian 2020). Jemisin explicitly relates these racist attitudes to the current ideology of gentrification: “In an allegorical form, Lovecraft was trying to gentrify every city he lived in” (Shapiro 2018).

Both Jemisin and Giesecking, then, understand gentrification as a racist, colonial, and settler ideology and practice. Both project an alliance of queers and people of color as a resistance. In one sense, *The City We Became* is an allegory of that possibility. Jemisin is very clear about the elements of modern U.S. society that draw her ire. The struggles within the speculative (or science) fiction community to create and defend space for the celebration of writers of color are mirrored in the book by an alt-right infiltration of the art world using equal opportunity claims to get their homophobic and racist works onto the walls of public galleries. There are few explicit representations of what might appear as the diverse city of New York born again from the struggle against settler gentrification. At one point, the avatar of the Bronx describes the five boroughs as “stars” (p. 422) conflating looking down with looking up; the sky mirrored on earth in a way that recalled me to Wilde’s formulation. Bequeathing, as usual, his most romantic lines to the seemingly wickedest of characters, Wilde in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, has Lord Darlington reject the claim that women find men basically good: “No, we are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars” (Wilde [1892] 1921, 130). In Jemisin’s novel, Brooklyn’s avatar urges her daughter to not “let anything stand between you and what you want” for “[y]ou can see the stars a little but you gotta work for them” (p. 217). Heaven on earth takes effort.

Stars, and constellations, play a similar, and similarly metaphorical, role in *A Queer New York*. This owes something to the currency of Benjamin’s treatment of constellations. Seeking to explain the nature of concepts, Benjamin (1928 [1985]) wrote that “[i]deas are not among the given elements of the world of phenomena,” but rather that “Ideas are to objects as constellations are to

stars” (34–35). The constellation is a mnemonic that works from our earthly perspective to help us find our way in the sparkling dust of the night sky and as this contingent arrangement the notion of constellation has been important to urban theorists such as Chisholm (2005) and Gandy (2012). Gieseeking wants it to do something a bit more. As bright spots in the night sky, the stars twinkle and attract. With the shapes we suggest as constellations, they can help us orient ourselves for navigation. Perhaps queers who surrender the ambition of exclusive neighborhoods might instead claim a purchase on the city in the brilliant if evanescent association allowed in some localities. Perhaps they might retain attachments to brilliance that they visit rather than dwell alongside, rather like the Italian-Americans of Chicago who continued to shop and socialize in Little Italy long after they had moved out to places like Melrose Park (Nelli 1970).

The constellation is an idea that Gieseeking tested with their local experts. It emerges in the pattern made by the highlights on their mental maps. It is expressed in the stars tattooed on their wrists. It underlines the fragility of all, and discontinuity of most, lesbian and queer spaces, with light from these stars still reaching us long after their extinction. It registers an alternative to the neighborhood as a way to belong in the city. Under pressure of neoliberal urban policy, lesbians and queer folk need to find new forms for living in the city. Hence, Gieseeking’s references to the new families and houses for queer and trans people of color. Hence also, an explanation of U-Hauling, whereby people cohabit shortly after getting together and in sharing costs prolong the period during which they can afford to live in the city. Gieseeking offers this as an alternative to the place-making of gay cruising.

Plaiting personal testimony, with group interviews and with archival research, *A Queer New York* is an exemplary study. May its emulators come soon. Yet, although this multimethod approach might prove a paradigm, the clarity and wit of Gieseeking’s prose will be more difficult to match. *A Queer New York* is not only a lodestar for queer geographies but radiates for urban geography more broadly as a brilliant excursus on the lived realities of neoliberal urbanization. As Jemisin shows her readers, queers are not the only people unable to buy their own lives in this city.

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