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Making 'The Ghetto' in

The Terminal City:

Some queer language of resistance &
community formation in mid to late 20th
Century Vancouver

abstract

The re-invention of the term ‘ghetto’ to refer to neighbourhoods with sexual minorities, most commonly used as ‘the gay ghetto’, roughly parallels in much of the Western World the last years of criminalization of homosexuality, struggles for decriminalization, gay and women’s liberation, the formation of neighbourhoods marked as gay and lesbian and ‘friendly’, inner city gentrification, and gains in human rights protections increasingly extending to same-sex partnerships and marriage.

Today, the term, 'gay ghetto', is an anachronism associated with the period from the nineteen-sixties through the eighties. This paper explores the multiple meanings and allusions imbedded in uses of 'the gay ghetto' in Vancouver, Canada which had two areas of neighbourhood formation in the 1970s and 1980s with one area, the West End identified with men, and the other, Commercial Drive, identified with women.

The activism centred in those areas was highly influential in Canadian sexual politics contributing significantly to victories around human rights, domestic partners, public sex, censorship, and marriage. But neither of these locales ever has been particularly similar to historic or more recent ethnic ghettos – or well-defined gay ghettos in the large cities in the United States. So the uses of ‘the ghetto’ had some particular cultural and political utilities – for a time.

This discussion focuses on the following question related to homophobia and language. How much was the use of the term part of aggressive strategies of political organizing, defence of social spaces, community-building, and the claiming of public space? And how much of use of 'the gay ghetto' was in response to levels of current (for those times) and recent homophobia so daunting as to make certain kinds of activism seem futile and accommodations in various 'private' sectors seem prudent?

And how did the dimensions of culture and ethnicity play out in a city that had significant racial segregation until two decades before Gay Liberation. This work on language and culture is not centred in literature but rather in civic discourses related to neighbourhood planning and their interface with the popular and alternative journalism of the time. Notions of homophobia in this discussion are grounded in imperial and homophobic discourses in British Columbia.

These neo-colonial narratives are grafted on to more North American vernaculars of resistance associated with labour activism, most notably from homosocial IWW culture in British Columbia, and Carl Wittman's 1969 essay on San Francisco as a 'ghetto', "A Gay Manifesto." And while this particular language of 'the ghetto' is now 'history', the ambiguous uses of these terms in Vancouver have left marks in the contemporary cultural environments of neighbourhoods and unfolding civic discourses and politics.



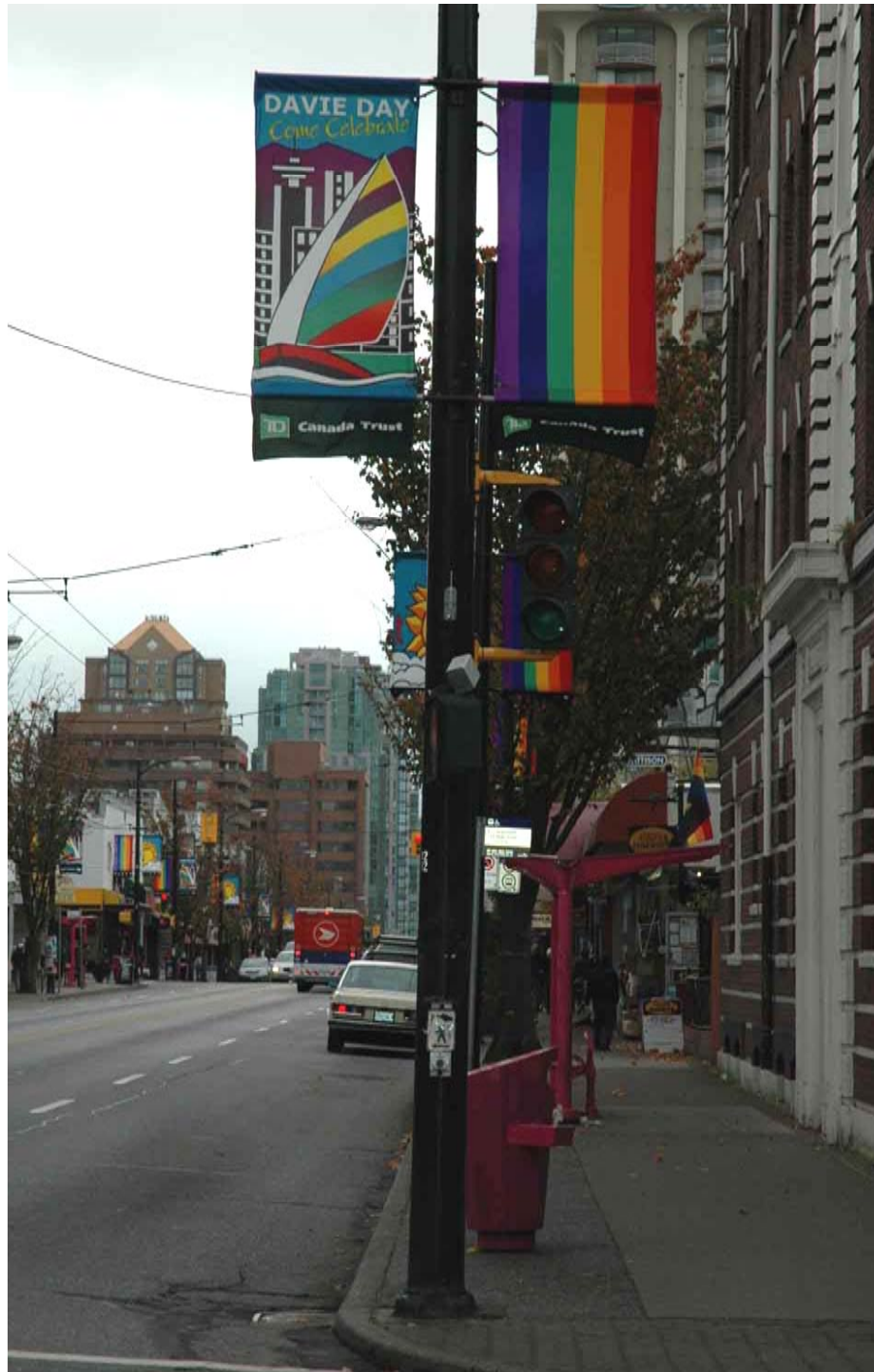














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