Aneta Dybska

Gentrification and Lesbian Subcultures in Sarah Schulman's *Girls, Visions and Everything*

A 2010 press release accompanying the launching of a 40-second film *Discovered* (*Odkryta*), promoting Łódź as a candidate for the European Capital of Culture 2016, draws attention to the city's uniqueness and magical yet unsettling appeal. Directed by Borys Lankosz, "Discovered" incorporates the film noir aesthetic to map the city's cultural potential and creative energies onto Księży Młyn, the city's historical textile industry district. Home to the thriving Polish textile industry since the early nineteenth century, Łódź entered the twenty-first century as a major player in the revitalization of its once vibrant urban spaces, including the conversion of dilapidated factory buildings in Księży Młyn into modern living spaces. As recently as May 2010, an Australian company, Opal Property Developments, put up for sale stylish lofts in a gated community on the former site of the Karol Scheibler factory complex.

Shot against the backdrop of nineteenth-century industrial architecture of workers' homes (*famuły*), *Discovered* stages an urban drama of a man in a trench-coat and a felt hat, possibly a private eye, with a camera and flashlight, pursuing a woman, a femme fatale type, along the dimly-lit alleyways of nighttime Księży Młyn. Playing on the traditional sexual attraction in the film noir classics, Lankosz foregrounds Łódź's urban mystery in line with the city officials' plans to attract artists into the postindustrial, disinvested, city-owned area but, equally, to transform it into an incubator of creativity, thus forging a new economy of cultural production. As Lankosz admits in an interview, his inspirations take root in the experience of the American metropolis:

> [Łódź] reminds me of New York where the artists set the trends in the urban space. They get to some places first, they get the feel of those places, they are inspired by them.… Take for example the Meatpacking District in New York. Until recently this was a butchers' neighborhood, and today it has become a hip place. The artists came first and attracted money to the area through fashion designers, clubs, etc. A similar process has been taking place in Łódź—it seems that the city has already been discovered and taken over by artists, and in a like fashion new investment should follow

> to make Łódź more attractive for the rest of Europe. ("Pięć Pytań do Borysa Lankosza"; trans. A.D.)

Artists play a crucial role in the revitalization of postindustrial urban landscapes. Some, encouraged by a municipal government, have triggered a real estate boom in working-class and poor neighborhoods affected by the post-WWII economic decline and the shrinking pool of manufacturing jobs. Others have launched a new culture based on consumption that subsequently drew in the "creative class"—a term penned by Richard Florida to describe scientists, engineers, bohemians, gay people, designers, architects, university professors, writers, opinion makers, high-tech and financial specialists, and business managers—the urbane middle class characterized by the creative potential to stimulate urban economies under conditions of low entry barriers, social diversity and tolerance that attract a wide array of people (Florida 35-42). Paradoxically, when in full swing, gentrification involves the socio-spatial remapping of old neighborhoods by means of rent increases, appreciated land value, and real estate taxation.

Given that, it is hard to accept Lankosz's enthusiastic and unproblematized rendition of urban revitalization through culture whereby the artistic avant-gardes portend an economic revival in areas affected by deindustrialization and disinvestment as well as their own commodification by the culture industries. While the Meatpacking District today may indeed be the latest addition to the list of Manhattan's gentrified neighborhoods following Soho, Tribeca, and East Village, I distance myself from the otherwise captivating discourse of artists as "pioneers" on the new urban "frontier"[1] that Lankosz seems to be taken by in the context of the American metropolis. Since the early 1980s, urban studies scholars, sociologists, grassroots organizations and fiction writers have pointed to the equivocal nature of what Sharon Zukin called the production of "landscapes of power." For the reinscription of the historically immigrant neighborhoods with symbols of a new culture of consumption (art galleries, nightclubs, upscale restaurants and shops) and a new urban lifestyle (loft living, historic preservation of decaying housing stock) has been shown to displace not only working-class ethnic residents and small businesses but also low-income avant-garde artists, students, social outcasts (drug dealers, poor tenants and the homeless) and sexual minorities. With regard to the latter, Lawrence Knopp points out that "the various sexual codings associated with cities are sites of *multiple* struggles and contradictions, and as such are instrumental in producing, reproducing and transforming both social relations of various kinds (including sexual relations), and space itself" (110).

[1] For the discussion of the reemergence of the frontier myth in the context of gentrification, see Smith.

This paper sets out to discuss the remapping of the vernacular landscapes of desire in the context of Sarah Schulman's novel *Girls, Visions and Everything* (1986). I look at her fiction as an attempt at archiving the 1980s lesbian artistic subculture in New York's East Village, which, despite its invisibility or quasi-underground character, not only contested the sexual regimes of heteronormativity in its shows and performances, but, more importantly, did so against the backdrop of the neighborhood's socio-spatial transformation effected by the new economies of consumption and gentrification. Recognizing those processes as an inseparable aspect of the growth of American cities for the last few decades, I approach Schulman's fiction as highlighting the instability of sexual identities as well as making a literary claim to the East Village as a space of subcultural subversion.

Historically, sexual minorities have been instrumental in the processes of gentrification, with the Castro District gay community in 1970s San Francisco and the Park Slope lesbian community in 1980s Brooklyn being exemplary cases. The critical role of gay men as agents in the urban renaissance, as Manuel Castells observes in *The City and the Grassroots* (1983), was a corollary of their struggle for political power and assertion of an "out-of-the closet" gay identity, only gradually leading to a large-scale renovation and preservation of the area's historic housing and real estate boom. The emergence of Park Slope in the 1980s, as Tamar Rothenberg notes, was more of a word-of-mouth phenomenon—lesbians, many of them lesbian-feminists, were drawn into the area by affordable housing and the neighborhood's reputation as "artsy-lefty" — "very leftover sixties, very laid back, like the [Greenwich] Village without the [high] rent" (159, 160).

The appearance of early gentrifiers in declining neighborhoods, be it the Castro District or the Park Slope, spearheaded the transformation of those places into trendy consumption venues and attractive real estate for the "creative class." In a broader perspective, such continually gentrifying areas become part and parcel of the cities' symbolic economy, for, as Zukin explains, "building a city depends on how people combine the traditional economic factors of land, labor and capital" as well as "how they manipulate the symbolic languages of exclusion and entitlement. The look and the feel of cities reflect decisions about what—and who—should be visible and what should not, concepts of order and disorder, and on uses of aesthetic power" ("Whose Culture?" 133).

The aesthetics of older ethnic communities transformed by bohemians into spaces of social tolerance and artistic freedom becomes a valued asset for big business brands. From the artists' point of view, those key players in the cities' symbolic economy produce "spaces colonized by commerce or the state"—"sterile, stripped of meaning" and divested of authenticity (Ley 2534-2535). More importantly, though, economic improvement in the gentrified area lowers the affordability of housing—a major factor in the displacement of bohemians from areas they initially revived with their cultural capi-

adybska@wp.pl

tal and creativity. This transient and volatile status of the artists, alongside the original inhabitants and small businesses, prompts questions about "the right to the city." Introduced by Henri Lefebvre and elaborated on by David Harvey, this concept holds that inhabitants of the cities have a right to participate directly in decisions concerning the production of urban space to protect it against commodification, rampant privatization and valorization of land (Purcell 102-103). This is "a collective rather than an individual right... some kind of shaping power over the processes of urbanization, over the ways in which our cities are made and re-made and to do so in a fundamental and radical way" (Harvey). Such was the case with the political struggle over the Lower East Side in the early 1980s, when local community groups successfully challenged the municipal plans to establish The Artist Homeownership Program (AHOP), which set out to allocate millions of public dollars to the rehabilitation of city-owned impoverished tenements into lofts for middle-class artists (Deutsche and Ryan 101). The residents' groups claimed the place for themselves, saying that "the land belongs to the poor, literally in every way, legally, morally. It belongs to the people. Because they were the people who struggled when nobody else wanted the Lower East Side" (Watson qtd. in Deutsche and Ryan 97). In the end, the program was abandoned.

The history of the Lower East Side can serve as a cautionary tale about the volatile nature of spatial reinscription by artists, new cultural economies, local governments and real estate speculation. Reading Christopher Mele's meticulously researched history *The Selling of the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate and Resistance in New York City* (2000), one cannot resist the observation that beginning from the 1930s this part of Manhattan has been a site of continuous struggle, faced with periods of urban renewal, disinvestment and abandonment as well as discovery by subsequent generations of avant-garde artists and underground subcultures. In the 1950s this multi-ethnic, immigrant, working-class neighborhood became a magnet for urban bohemians such as the beatniks and the Tenth Street Movement (artists such as Willem de Kooning, Larry Rivers, and Franz Kline). When the northern sections of the Lower East Side gained nationwide recognition as a trendy destination for the hippies in the 1960s, the area was renamed "East Village." In the 1970s and 1980s the territory between 14th and Houston Streets and 4th Avenue and the East River became the site of underground subcultures of aesthetic rebellion, e.g. the punk scene (Mele 213-7). The symbolic coding of the East Village as a mecca for artists and social outlaws, combined with the place's economic affordability, made it a place of aesthetic, if not political, subversiveness:

> within the New York gay scene of 1980s and early 1990s, non-conformity associated with the East Village served as cultural antipode to the West Village's reputation as

post-Stonewall, white, middle-class and accommodating to the mainstream 'straight' world. Reactions to the onslaught of HIV/AIDS and the mobilization of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender activists against government inaction to the health crisis contributed to the rise of a younger, more radical, inclusive, and vocal queer culture, much of it centered in East Village bars, clubs, coffee shops, and other meeting spaces[.] (Mele 287)

This apt yet passing reference to East Village sexual dissidents in Mele's otherwise well-researched and compelling study can be seen as indicative of the multiple, often invisible, layering of urban spaces as well as the paucity of official historical/cultural records (recent queer studies scholarship has been trying to fill that void) on the existence of non-normative sexualities.[2] It is precisely in this context that I set out to read Sarah Schulman's 1986 novel *Girls, Visions and Everything* as a fictional account of urban transformation depicting the love life and artistic "underground" endeavors of the East Village lesbian bohemia in the 1980s. A well-known author of numerous books of lesbian fiction set in 1980s and 1990s New York, including *The Story of Sophie Horowitz* (1984), *After Delores* (1988), *People in Trouble* (1990), and *Rat Bohemia* (1995), Schulman has consistently dealt with the lives and struggles of the gay-lesbian community (e.g. the AIDS crisis), against the changing geography of the city. If we were to apply Judith Halberstam's recent insights on queer subcultures, we might say that Schulman's characters engage in activities which, unlike adolescent and class-specific subcultures, do not emerge in opposition to the parent culture, nor do they offer a temporary deviation from social norms. With non-normative sexuality as an impulse behind their formation, queer subcultures "form in relation to place as much as in relation to a genre of cultural expression, and ultimately they oppose the hegemony of dominant culture but also the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian culture" (Halberstam 161). When extended onto Schulman's East Village lesbian bohemia, the notion of subculture reveals *Girls'*s preoccupation with the 1980s East Village becoming a site of middle-class "delectation," a term applied by Zukin to the symbolic economy of cities ("Whose Culture?" 134). More importantly, such a perspective unfolds the book's potential as an archive of lesbian subcultural activity. For, as Halberstam cogently explains,

the notion of an archive has to extend beyond the image of a place to collect material or hold documents, and it has to become a floating signifier for the kinds of lives im-

[2] Peter Brooker makes a similar observation with regard to Janet L. Abu-Lughod's *From Urban Village to East Village: The Battle for New York's Lower East Side*. Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994.

adybska@wp.pl

> plied by the paper remnants of shows, clubs, events and meetings. The archive is not simply a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory and a complex record of queer activity. In order for the archive to function it requires users, interpreters, and cultural historians to wade through the material and piece together the jigsaw puzzle of queer history in the making. (169-170)

A record and a creative approximation of the avant-garde lifestyle, Schulman's fiction constructs the collective memory of the East Village as a place central to the forging of collective lesbian identities. The realism of *Girls* is underscored in the 1999 re-issue of the novel, the cover of which features a map of the East Village (Brooker 146). As well as archiving the lesbian community of the past, the novel inspired its readers; they "used it [the book] as a way to imagine their lives, to situate themselves, to model their own cultural aesthetics" (Schulman, "Preface" x).

Next to punks and underground music followers who had a well-established club scene (Mele 217), the lesbian community in the East Village frequented their own clubs and performance spaces. Yet with the onslaught of gentrification and real estate speculation, those spaces of lesbian networking and oppositional art/politics were faced with co-option by the new culture industries or, worse, a struggle for survival on territory that was marked by tension, conflict, and violent change. Highlighting the malleability of artistic and sexual contestation, Schulman takes up the question of the collective right to the city. The passage below suggests how the East Village residents perceive the intrusions made by the arts industry onto the territory that they identify as their own:

> 'The arty types were all over America sucking its blood,' said Jack Kerouac to Carlo Marx in Denver. From Lila's East Village vantage point, she could see that he was right. At least as pertained to the ART SCENE which was oozing its slime all over Second Avenue. The upscale New Yorkers who cabbed it down to the fancy spaces to see performers on tour from Europe, ate afterwards in restaurants where Lila couldn't even get a job. It was an invading homogenous monster composed of a lot of boring people thinking they were leading wacky lives. (*Girls* 43)

This explicit "monstrosity" of the emerging landscape of "reflexive" consumption,[3] leads us to consider *Girls* as an archive of the East Village lesbian artistic life and struggle against urban growth. As a member of the subculture she is recording, Schulman

[3] Sharon Zukin defines "reflexive" consumption as "based on higher education and a related expansion of consumers of both high culture and trendy style" (*Landscapes of Power* 188).

occupies a complex position Halberstam might define as "marked by this lack of distinction between the archivist and the cultural worker" (162).

As Schulman argued in 1999, East Village lesbian artists, although supported and appreciated by engaged audiences, were pushed to the margins of the new cultural discourse and their existence was largely passed over. As sexual dissidents, they received scant critical attention or institutional recognition from the culture industry and the dominant culture (*Stage Struck* 69-70). When situated in this context, Schulman's fiction may be read as a direct response to such oblivion, stemming from a need to assert "agency as cultural subversives" —a subjectivity that "is mediated and performed by the fictions by which they [lesbian artists] image themselves and /or are imaged" (Chisholm 201). Schulman's *Girls* opens such a creative space of subversion where lesbian identities and desires are forged in the highly competitive sexual geography of the East Village.

Girls's characters are a group of aspiring lesbian writers, performers, stage designers and dancers bound as much by common art projects as by bonds of friendship and intimacy. They support themselves with meager income from part-time office, factory or restaurant jobs which allow them to pursue the bohemian low-cost lifestyle. Their economic status is similar to that of lower-class Eastern Europeans, Puerto Ricans, and African Americans, who traditionally settled on the Lower East Side. They are predominantly racially white: some are ethnically marked as Jewish or Italian and have always lived in the neighborhood; others are racially transparent and have recently moved in. The intersecting realms of romance and flirtation, economic survival and artistic production foreground the geography of 1980s East Village as the locus of collective (white) lesbian identity. This identity plays itself out spatially at dyke clubs, bars, and performance venues, many of which were real places, such as The Pyramid Club (known as The Kitsch-Inn), PS 122, or 8BC. These are sites of both artistic experimentation and socialization, where the avant-garde producers meet with their lesbian audiences. The women put on new shows every weekend that run for a few nights only; using garbage collected in the streets, they prepare their own stage designs and costumes; they stage twenty-four-hour performances involving experimental dancing, improvization, absurd scripts, as well as the aesthetics of kitsch, all of which are calculated to frustrate audience expectations. They stage a lesbian version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and organize The Worst Performance Festival, with its intentionally disquieting breach of theatrical conventions. Rather than appease their audiences, they produce, in the words of Isabel, "something absolutely no one could ever identify with" (66); mostly, however, the lesbian women constitute their own audience.

Schulman's protagonists, Lila Futuransky and her girlfriend Emily Harrison also engage in "*subversive spatial acts*" (Bell and Valentine 17; original italics) by mapping

adybska@wp.pl

lesbian desire onto the grid of the city at the street level: walking the streets at night, conversing on tenement stoops and in the back alleys, experiencing intimacy on the roof-tops, and holding hands in the streets or kissing goodbye, and infrequently facing queer bashing by "the weekend throng" from the recent up-scale establishments (*Girls* 93).

The changing uses of public space as well as the protagonists' relation to the space portend a new landscape of consumption. Unlike the lesbian theatre that is produced and consumed by a small group of subcultural participants living in the East Village, an off-Broadway show offers a stereotyped version of the East Village "exotica." Staged by transient cultural outsiders, both actors and playwrights, the pricey performances sell voyeuristic pleasure and entertainment for the New Jersey audiences:

> All were pretending that they were dramatically interpreting the reality of New York street life.... [T]he lesbian characters kissed each other and hit each other. The gay male characters made jokes about the sizes of each other's penises. The Black characters ran around with afropicks in their pockets... saying 'motha-fucka' a lot and grabbing their own crotches. All of this provided an appropriately colorful background for the white heterosexual characters to expose their deeply complex emotional lives. (18)

The show's condescending depictions of racial and sexual diversity, this "fake social realism" of off-Broadway theatre, as one of characters, the aspiring artist Isabel Schwartz, mockingly calls it, are a far cry from the lived experience of Schulman's character. The show's mixture of homophobia and racism, ridiculing New York's urban vernacular, stands in contrast to the "authenticity" of lesbian theatre and its impermeability to commodification. Herself a "drama dyke," Isabel was "slinging burgers and saving her quarters until she had enough to put on a show. Her tales of average lesbians and the little things they knew and cared about. Then it was back to the burgers" (17). Likewise, Lila, Emily, and other lesbian performance artists gain control over their own uncompromising "fictions," a fact that allows them to address their collective experience as social and sexual outcasts:

> whenever she was in a roomful of lesbians, Lila fluctuated between two points of view. First, she would have a sentimental rush of feeling, overwhelmed by the beauty and the courage of all these women who had gone through fire and ice just to find each other. Every meeting place, tradition or ritual was built with nothing but their own determination, which kept everything vaguely together. But, a split second later, Lila looked more distantly and the scene would be transformed into a room full of victims. This one had her child taken away, that one got locked up by her parents, that one's girlfriend got queerbashed in front of her and there wasn't a thing she could do

> about it.... [A]fter almost fifteen years of hard core propaganda and heavy publicity, nobody, outside of lesbians, had bought the line that they were strong, determined survivors. To everyone else they were invisible or pitiful and most straight people were plain glad they weren't queer. (59)

United by the impulse to resist sexual oppression and survive by sharing the hardship of social abjects, Schulman's "determined survivors" reproduce daily their subcultural identities in the safe spaces of club, bars, performance—spaces that until recently hardly anyone has claimed or competed for.

If the new cultural economy spearheads reinvestment in aging and dilapidated housing stock, it also carries an imminent threat of the lesbian community's erasure and displacement from "powerful institutions [that] have a preeminent capacity to impose their view on the landscape—weakening, reshaping, and displacing the view from the vernacular" (Zukin, *Landscapes of Power* 16). Such forces affect the lesbian subculture's precariousness, weakening its claim to the right to the city—that is, in line with Lefebvre and Harvey, the decision-making power in the production of urban space. The fear of displacement that accompanies Schulman's characters is grounded in the gradual changes they register at the street level: the Puerto Rican tenants helplessly watch their buildings collapse, the Italian grocer who has been in the neighborhood for decades faces a close-down due to soaring rents that "only an art gallery could afford" (30), and streets and parks begin to double as performance spaces for dancers and musicians. All these are symptoms of the neighborhood's liminality, that is its economic and social restructuring and the disappearance of the vernacular landmarks. The passage below is a powerful fictional illustration of the transition:

> Lila turned down Sixth Street to Avenue B. Once she got past all those stupid art galleries, it was still a nice block. With the creepy, crawling invasion of gentrification into the neighborhood, it was becoming harder and harder to find a quiet street. Things were so bad that even Avenue A was unlivable. The Good Humor man had been replaced by tofutti-selling teenaged boys in teased Mohawks. Polish and Puerto Rican mom and pop soda fountains featuring Breyer's ice cream, vanilla or chocolate, bowed to the pressure of imported ices. Tanned Europeans in skimpy t-shirts sold one dollar and fifty cent scoops-du-jour. But, over by Avenue B there was still life on Sixth Street. Lila passed an old Irish bar with a pool table, a few bodegas and the combination Jesse Jackson for President campaign headquarters and thrift shop, until she got to the former vacant lot on the corner. For years it was full of garbage and served as a shooting gallery for junkies[.] (19)

adybska@wp.pl

Interspersed with what remains of the old neighborhood, Schulman's East Village inevitably undergoes a spatial reinscription by real estate speculation, a theme that is brought up in exchanges between the residents. The market appreciation of the tenement where Lila rents an apartment, from $60,000 to $700,000 over a span of two years, shows the irrationality of the speculation, when compared with the decrepit living conditions: "there is mice, roaches, a leaky roof, the windows don't fit the frame so the wind blows through" (99). Importantly, the private property boom is also created by developers who "tear out six apartments filled with kids and put in one luxury duplex for some kind of rich artist" (31). Lila and her lesbian friends can only manifest their disapproval for the invasion of weekend tourists by "staring down motorists with Jersey plates" (61). They cannot intervene in any relevant way in the symbolic economy of gentrification along with its oppressive (hetero)normativity.

> After the changes started getting really dramatic, this new organization suddenly made itself known. The Concerned Neighbors for a Cleaner Block. Usually block associations were good, helping everyone get to know each other, planting trees, getting a new street light. But this one had a bad feeling about it. First they put up posters of a young white couple walking fearfully down a city street filled with menacing jungle animals, like baboons**.** The caption read 'Clean Up Our Street.' It had not taken Lila a very long time to realize that any group of people who wanted to 'clean up' another group of people were usually bad news. Long time tenants were getting evicted left and right, all these people cared about was the drug dealers selling nickel bags. (30-31)

The gentrifiers in Schulman's novel inevitably bring about the remapping of the East Village geography. Their concern with cleanliness, beauty and safety has a corollary in increased police surveillance and leads to inter-group tension. For while the creative class that follows the early gentrifiers engages in the historic preservation and aestheticisation of old working- and lower-class tenements, it drives the new real estate economy and eradicates the East Village vernacular culture. Prohibitive rents and housing costs change the neighborhood's socio-spatial relations: racial and sexual minorities, artists, drug addicts, the working class community and the small businesses they patronize are replaced by the new cultural consumers. The lesbian subculture is unlikely to survive unless it gives up on its oppositional art/politics or relocates its practices to another territory affected by economic decline. Its avant-garde aesthetics and bohemian lifestyle, contesting the sexual norms of 1980s mainstream culture, preclude absorption "back into dominant culture because [lesbians] were never offered membership in the dominant

groups in the first place" (Halberstam 160) and thus make it all the more bound to be swept away from the East Village.

Despite relative control over their subcultural production and lifestyle, Schulman's characters experience the onslaught of violence that portends an era of exclusionary urban policies. In other words, Schulman's construction of East Village liminality bears traces of the fledgling "revanchist city," defined by Neil Smith as:

> antiurbanism [that] represents a reaction against the supposed "theft" of the city, a desperate defense of a challenged phalanx of privileges, cloaked in the populist language of civic morality, family values and neighborhood security. More than anything the revanchist city expresses a race/class/gender terror felt by middle- and ruling-class whites... a vicious reaction against minorities, the working class, homeless people, the unemployed, women, gays and lesbians, immigrants. (207)

The new cultural economies and private real estate investment, propped up by the municipal governments, lead to the residents' uneasiness about the newcomers' gradual encroachment upon the vernacular spaces. This feeling is symptomatic of a new urban order that brings about the radical social and cultural rescripting of public space. From today's perspective, Schulman's archiving of the Reagan-era East Village lesbian subculture holds important lessons, for Lankosz among others, about the equivocal nature of class, race, and sexual struggles waged in the postmodern metropolis.

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adybska@wp.pl

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