Alison Mountz and Kira Williams

Let Geography Die: Chasing Derwent's Ghost at Harvard

MIT Press, 2025. 232 pp.

Scholars of LGBTQ+ educational history face varied challenges in tracing the lives of those hovering on the very fringes of historical intelligibility, not only because of the silencing and coding of sexuality in educational archives, but the broader sentiment in history that using contemporary frames to explore gender/sexualities is a fraught enterprise counter to history's cherished approaches.[1] This compelling book, a swirl of biographical and institutional history of the rise and demise of geography education at Harvard University, uses the sociological theory of haunting to trouble the common story of the undergraduate program's ending in 1948 and attribute events to mid-century homophobia and gendered dismissals of the field. At the centre of this retelling is Derwent Whittlesey, a dedicated geographer who in 1928 was coaxed from his position at the University of Chicago to develop Harvard's geography program. He was also gay. Geographers Alison Mountz and Kira Williams trace Whittlesey's "life, death, and (after) life" (17), key figures in his social and professional landscape who were influential for geography's growth and fate, and the convoluted politics of the program's rise and ending. In so doing, they narrate a haunting queer history that foregrounds gender and sexuality as powerful forces shaping decisions at a prestigious university that, in their analysis, had long-lasting reverberations for the field of geography in the US. In chasing Whittlesey's ghost, which continues to haunt geography today, the authors illustrate the power of queer readings to uncover how "gender, masculinity, homophobia, territorial institutional politics, and secrets" can shape historical accounts and erasures (3).

Mountz and Williams weave Whittlesey's (1890–1956) and the Harvard geography program's intersecting histories through a prologue and eight chapters that move narratively back and forth in time to pose and unfold the mystery of the program's closure. When working at Harvard, the authors encountered institutional lore about university leaders' desire to purge the university of "gay commies" running the program at the time and read written accounts, that, in contrast, blamed other institutional politics for its demise. Seeking clarity in recently released archival materials, the authors unearthed a forty-year relationship between Whittlesey and Harold Kemp, and their friendship with a third geographer, Ed Ackerman, who shared the men's flat for decades. The authors tease out these discoveries through six primary "characters"—five men associated with Harvard (including President James Conant

1 See Jackie Blount's influential book that emphasizes the challenges of finding archival resources for LGBTQ+ educational history, *Fit to Teach: Same-Sex Desire, Gender, and School Work in the Twentieth Century* (State University of NY Press, 2005), and her recent book analyzing how gender and sexuality have always shaped schools, *Straighten Up, Girls and Boys: How Schools Have Shaped Sexuality and Gender* (Harvard University Press, 2026). For the complexities of tracing subaltern subjects historically, see Saidiya Hartman, Wayward Lives, *Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (W. W. Norton, 2020).

Bryant), and one female friend. Chapter 2 overviews Whittlesey's career, the first flirtatious letter he received from Kemp in 1913, and their work to build the geography program for years. They describe Bryant's decision to let the program "die" despite widespread external support, Whittlesey's valiant efforts to save it, and his sudden death that stilled geography course offerings in 1956.

Chapter 3 focuses on a rich collection of letters, which the authors aptly call "a queer archive within a queer archive," that Whittlesey preserved from his friend Emeline McSweeney (42). Through insights into their friendship, Whittlesey's relationship with Kemp, and McSweeney's love interests, the letters provide "a beautifully written testament to queer love and queer friendship… sustained across a lifetime" (69). Chapter 4, foreshadowed early in the book, traces geography's earliest appearance at Harvard in 1642, its growth, its declining resources during the 1940s, and its end. Chapter 5, "A Tragedy in Three Acts," focuses primarily on Isaiah Bowman (on Harvard's Board of Overseers), and chapter 6, "Everyone Has Secrets," focuses primarily on Conant and reveals the intricate institutional dynamics involved in geography's fate. Unlike the closeted archive long holding Whittlesey's secrets, the leaders' archives were masculinized testaments to accomplished careers "carefully curated" for public consumption (104). Collectively, they highlight Conant's coded concern about the "character" of the geography faculty, his general dismissal of the field's value, Bowman's contrasting support, and the competition for resources that shaped leaders' decisions. The final chapters underscore the personal, social, and healing contours of haunting that inform the book's valuable "historiographical intervention" and its accountability to past injustices (122).

The authors embrace an overt queer framing, the affective orientation of Gordon's sociological theory of haunting, and a deeply reflexive personal lens to grapple with their archival encounters and the implications of Whittlesey's profound erasure from institutional history.[2] Gordon's theory holds that conventional empirical methods cannot capture the complexity of social and historical life and the enduring implications of the many unresolved historical injustices that affect us in the present. In this sense, figures can pester us to attend to unfinished historical business that necessitates accountability in the present. While the supernatural connotations of ghostly figures seem at odds with social science and historical scholarship, Gordon's theory situates these hauntings in historical material realities, such as racism and heterosexism, which can relentlessly surface in the present through affective disruptions. As Mountz and Williams relay, Whittlesey's ghost demanded such attention. Although their theoretical choices may unsettle readers more comfortable with historical texts that perform apolitical and detached reporting, haunting and reflexivity are effective — and affective — resources to counter the erasure of gay figures historically. The "slow scholarship" that produced this

2 See Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

text is thus a poignant act of accountability to Whittlesey's haunting call.[3]

Scholars have explained how thoroughly archival work can reproduce dominant interpretations through processes deemed "neutral," a pattern that highlights the value of Mountz and Williams' queer reading practices. Researchers adopting default assumptions of heteronormativity in archival readings can overlook contextual details or coded language that others reading with more expansive gendered and sexuality frames can interpret otherwise. Scholars' skeptical question to the authors, "Were Whittlesey and Kemp *really* a couple?" after living, working, and traveling together across four decades, demonstrates the exact heteronormative readings that can suppress such histories. The archive's power to both enable and foreclose LGBTQ+ educational histories is also evidenced in Harvard's only recent release of the sealed archival resources that enabled analysis.[4] The authors' related conceptualizing of the archive as affective, agential, spatial, personal, and political is a strength of the book.

The book's layered and circular style, woven with social theory, photographs, and personal processing, challenges readers to engage slowly to track diverse threads. As a work of epistemic justice and tribute, *Let Geography Die* refuses the charge to do so, narratively sustaining the program's history and rendering visible the lives of geographers who cultivated meaningful queer networks within institutions often ignorant of or outright hostile to their existence. The book intervenes in accounts that blamed Bowman or Whittlesey for insufficient advocacy to keep the program open, which the authors argued prompted closures nationwide because of Harvard's prestige. It exposes consequential institutional politics that shaped fields and faculty lives. It also leaves readers with the haunting awareness of the gendered and sexualized forces affecting all educational institutions, both then and now.

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Jewish Sunday Schools: Teaching Religion in Nineteenth-Century America

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As detailed in Laura Yares' book *Jewish Sunday Schools: Teaching Religion in Nineteenth-Century America,* the first Jewish Sunday school in the United States was

3 For a generative account of the concept of slow scholarship relevant to my reading of this book, see Alison Mountz, Anne Bonds, Becky Mansfield, Jenna Loyd, Jennifer Hyndman, Margaret Walton-Roberts, Ranu Basu, et al., "For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University," *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 14, no. 4 (2015):1235–59. https://doi.org/10.14288/acme.v14i4.1058.

4 Harvard's policy is to seal their faculty archives for fifty years after death, and to seal presidential archives for seventy years after death, making some historical details out of reach for previous scholars.