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Zoe Wennerholm  
*Vassar College*

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“It’s Your Future, Don’t Miss It”:  
Nostalgia, Utopia, and Desire in the New York Lesbian Bar

Zoe Wennerholm  
April 26, 2019

Senior Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies

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Advisor, Lisa Brawley

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## Introduction

In their often doubly marginalized position at the intersection of being female and not straight, queer women have faced tremendous discrimination and pressure to hide their lesbian identities<sup>1</sup> over the past century. Despite these challenges, lesbian gathering spaces, and especially lesbian bars, have a storied history in American cities: their aesthetics and patronage often reflect greater trends in the social position of queer women in different time periods. They have continuously served an important need for their patrons, as Audre Lorde writes in her biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of my Name*: “You had to have a place. Whether or not it did justice to whatever you felt you were about, there had to be some place to refuel and check your flaps.”<sup>2</sup> From the secretive working-class dives of the 1950s to the clubs of the 1990s and onward, these refuges have evolved to conform to the needs and desires of continuing generations of lesbians, changing according to the styles, political climates, and urban environments in which they are situated. Each manifestation of the lesbian bar contends with complex questions of inclusion, identity, and queer politics. The experiences and memories they have produced are ingrained in the cultures of America’s queer women, creating polyphonic shared imaginaries ripe for scholarly study.

While lesbian life in America may be nearly invisible to the untrained eye, lesbian and queer scholars, writers, and archivists have developed rich and full fields of academic knowledge that includes history, geography, sociology, and anthropology. Writer Joan Nestle

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<sup>1</sup> I follow Browne and Ferreira’s lead in acknowledging the complexities and contestations of the term “lesbian” (2015: 3-6), and rather than attempting to define it will simply leave it as a personal identification choice: one is a lesbian if one considers oneself to be a lesbian. I use the term “queer woman” interchangeably, while recognizing that it also has a disputed history and meaning.

<sup>2</sup> Audre Lorde, *Zami, a New Spelling of My Name* (Trumansburg, N.Y: Crossing Press, 1982), 225.

along with other queer women and men founded the Lesbian Herstory Archive in 1974, dedicated to documenting lesbian lives, culture, and memory. The Archive is full of narratives, media, and ephemera that have touched lesbian lives, providing a richly varied trove of information. A number of powerful lesbian sociological studies, including Kennedy and Davis' groundbreaking ethnography of the lesbian community in Buffalo, New York, have been published in the last few decades. Lesbian literature and nonfiction provides a wealth of understanding of the subjective experiences of all kinds of queer people. In the field of lesbian geography, influential scholars such as Gill Valentine and Catherine Nash analyze the specific relationships between lesbian identities, place, and space. As Catherine Nash writes in her chapter of Browne and Ferreira's lesbian geography collection, "lesbian geographies are concerned with teasing out the intensely intimate connections between identities and places; between the ways we understand ourselves (our subjectivities), our social identities and the places in and through which we experience our everyday lives."<sup>3</sup> All of these disparate sources can inform a fully articulated image of the many joys and sorrows of lesbian lives across time and space. Lesbian bars repeatedly emerge within these narratives and studies as community touchstones, and their successes and losses reflect the realities of the queer women who populate them.

The deep cultural significance of lesbian bar spaces can be contrasted with the long-standing and traumatic oppression lesbians implicitly face in both heteronormative and LGBTQ spaces. As scholar Marta Olasik notes in her chapter of Browne and Ferreira's collection, queer women's "non-male" embodied desire represents a disruption and threat to

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<sup>3</sup> Catherine Nash, "Lesbian Geographies—A Commentary," in *Lesbian Geographies: Gender, Place and Power*, ed. Kath Browne and Eduarda Ferreira (London: Routledge, 2018), 249.

the continued production of heteronormative space and must therefore be oppressed and minimized, often to the point of invisibility.<sup>4</sup> Even in spaces constructed around LGBTQ socialization or organization, queer women are often sidelined, as Jen Jack Geiseking notes in his study of New York lesbian bars.<sup>5</sup> Many scholars have taken an intersectional perspective in positing that due to their layered identities as women and non-straight, lesbians face doubled oppression in the public sphere. Expanding even further on the impossibility of queer comfort in heteronormative space, scholar Judith Butler posits a theory of “gender trouble,” finding that because gender is a “stylized repetition of acts” rather than an inherent category, those who fail to “do gender right” in public face social punishment.<sup>6</sup> Despite this oppression and erasure, lesbians have continuously endured, finding unique strategies for negotiation and survival in potentially hostile public spaces.

In recent years, however, lesbian social spaces have become endangered, as many historic bars have closed and queer socialization seems to have shifted in large part to the physically untethered realm of the Internet. This extended history and uncertain future raises a number of multilayered questions: How have the experiences of lesbian bars changed or stayed the same over the past decades? Why are lesbian bars closing? How have social media and the Internet changed the way queer women gather, communicate, and resist their

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<sup>4</sup> Marta Olsak, “Location, Location: Lesbian Performativities That Matter, or Not,” in *Lesbian Geographies: Gender, Place and Power*, ed. Kath Browne and Eduarda Ferreira (London: Routledge, 2018), 203.

<sup>5</sup> Jen Jack Geiseking, “Dyked NY: The Space between Geographical Imagination and Materialization of Lesbian-Queer Bars and Neighbourhoods,” in *The Routledge Research Companion to Geographies of Sex and Sexualities*, ed. Gavin Brown and Kath Browne (New York: Routledge, Taylor, & Francis Group, 2016), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 140.

marginalization? And finally, what role does the lesbian bar play in the queer imaginary of the past, present, and future?

This thesis will begin in Chapter One with a dive into a history of the lesbian bar in relation to broader trends of lesbian life in America, from the 1940s to the present day. While a full history of lesbianism that is inclusive of every trend and detail would produce enough material for an entire book, this summary will attempt to identify key themes in assembling a broad temporal overview. Woven into this historical narrative are references to specific lesbian bars in New York City, allowing the wider national context to inform a geographically local image.

Chapter Two will examine the loss of lesbian bars in New York over time and what it can mean for those in and around them. I will first explore the numerous potential causes for bar closings with the understanding that these forces are intrinsically linked and overlapping, often functioning to seriously threaten bar survival. Following this will be an analysis of the affective results of this loss on bar patrons across time, especially as it relates to subjective feelings of nostalgia, grief, and personal memory. Grounded on this context of the significance of lesbian bars, Chapter Two will critically engage with lesbian artist Gwen Shockey's work in mapping lesbian bars in New York. This analysis will be developed from an interview I conducted with Shockey in February of 2019, which is provided in full in Appendix 1. Building on her mapping work, I have constructed a timeline of lesbian bars in New York that will deepen temporal understandings of these spaces in relation to Shockey's spatial understanding.

Chapter Three will synthesize the historical, geographical, and personal narratives of the preceding chapters in discussing the affective and theoretical significance of lesbian

nightlife spaces and their shifting existence in the New York urban landscape. Informed by the works of Jose Esteban Muñoz, Sarah Ahmed, and Sally Munt, this analysis will point ultimately towards a theory of utopian desire and futurity, finding lesbian desire within bar spaces to become a vector of hope and optimism that is both nostalgic and utopian, and that remembers the past while moving toward a perpetual queer future that is both spatial and temporal.

## Chapter 1.

### History: A Brief Review of Lesbian Bars in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century

#### American Urban Landscape

Queer history is a fragile and tenuous academic field. Heteronormative narratives have long minimized or erased queerness from mainstream rhetorics of the past to the point where many queer spaces, cultures, and people have been nearly lost from societal memory. Nightlife spaces and bars in particular are especially difficult to document and memorialize because they were so transient and often quite secretive. However, many queer writers have acknowledged and dedicated themselves to the important if complex task of remembering them. Lesbian archivist Joan Nestle describes this difficulty in her book *Restricted Country*: “To live with history is to have a memory not just of our own lives but of the lives of others, people we have never met but whose voices and actions connect us to our collective selves. Having a history may be harder than not having one: this reality of continuity in time carries with it its own burdens.”<sup>7</sup> Remembering and commemorating the past brings to the surface pain and joy, loss and hope.

Historian Lillian Faderman’s sweeping survey of lesbian life in America provides a broad historical foundation with which to ground more detailed analysis of lesbian geographies. Synthesizing a diverse range of primary source material, Faderman’s work does not explore specific historical moments in depth, but traces the shifting manifestations of lesbianism as both an identity and a social category across a wide expanse of space and time. Within her work, the lesbian bar continually emerges as a site of freedom: “they represented the one public place where those who had accepted a lesbian sociosexual identity did not

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<sup>7</sup> Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country* (Ithaca, N.Y: Firebrand Books, 1987), 110.

have to hide who they were.”<sup>8</sup> Before World War II, women’s access to the public sphere was limited by societal standards of domesticity, but as gay historian John D’Emilio finds and Faderman confirms,<sup>9</sup> during and after the war women gained enough access to and autonomy in the public realm to begin forging these potentially liberating spaces. As Faderman and others document, however, lesbian bars faced myriad challenges over the decades of their shifting manifestations. The following section traces the history of lesbian bars’ emergence and existence in New York City over the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

### *Baby Dyke Beginnings: Lesbian Bars Pre-Stonewall*

The 1940s and 1950s saw the opening some of the first lesbian bars in American cities, most of which enforced strict role-based behavior constructed along class lines. These bars were often small and dingy, reflecting the resources and social status of their working-class customers. Despite their seediness, they offered identity confirmation and refuge in a time when being out could mean losing a job or risking violent attack. Further, Faderman notes that for many of these working-class young lesbians, even their own homes were not comfortable enough to entertain friends,<sup>10</sup> making the bars their only option for socialization. Bars appeared and disappeared rapidly in the urban landscape: Audre Lorde observes, “The life span of most gay bars was under a year.”<sup>11</sup> A majority of bar owners were not lesbians, but recognized the profit to be had in opening bars for them, as lesbians tended to be regular

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<sup>8</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in 20th Century America* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 162.

<sup>9</sup> John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 22-39.

<sup>10</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 161.

<sup>11</sup> Lorde, *Zami*, 222.

customers.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes lesbians would even approach the owner of an unsuccessful bar in the hope of “turning” it into a lesbian space.<sup>13</sup> Strict role-based divisions governed the majority of these bars—lesbians were either butch or femme, and if one did not conform she was subject to distrust.<sup>14</sup> Throughout this period, these roles were heavily associated with working-class lesbian culture.

Most lesbian bars of the 1940s and 1950s were patronized almost exclusively by working-class lesbians, and provided these women sanctuary as well as occasional conflict. In “In and around the Lighthouse: Working-Class Lesbian Bar Culture in the 1950s and 1960s,” Janet Kahn and Patricia Gozemba write of the “liberation” patrons felt while at their preferred working-class bar in Lynn, Massachusetts, especially after long days of menial factory work.<sup>15</sup> Many of their subjects note the lack of options for lesbian socialization, as one observes, “There was nothing else at that point.”<sup>16</sup> Because contact with lesbian life was restricted to the bar, drinking was a key focus of socialization, resulting in high levels of alcoholism.<sup>17</sup> Lesbian bars often served only beer rather than hard liquor, marking them as working- rather than middle-class.<sup>18</sup> Violence was a common occurrence, both among patrons and between patrons and police, who would regularly raid and antagonize the bars.<sup>19</sup> In *Stone Butch Blues*, Leslie Feinberg relates in horrific detail the brutality of the police

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<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 40.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 183.

<sup>15</sup> Janet Kahn and Patricia A. Gozemba, “In and around the Lighthouse: Working-Class Lesbian Bar Culture in the 1950s and 1960s,” in *Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women's History*, ed. Dorothy Helly and Susan Reverby (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 92.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 93; Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 163.

<sup>18</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 105.

<sup>19</sup> Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2003), 7.

towards lesbians during this time.<sup>20</sup> Many lesbian and gay bars in New York were owned and protected by the Mafia, further complicating their relationships with police: Marie Cartier writes that the Mafia would pay off police to keep the bars open, but would also conspire to schedule raids.<sup>21</sup> However, Kennedy and Davis argue that these early confrontations between police in which lesbians regularly resisted and fought back represent a key contribution to later activism in their “claiming of social space and breaking of silence around lesbians.”<sup>22</sup> Working-class butch lesbians became increasingly open about their identities as the 1950s progressed, for example dressing in masculine clothing throughout the day rather than just while in the bars.<sup>23</sup> This served to distinguish them even further from middle-class and upwardly mobile lesbians, who applied themselves even more vigorously to keeping distance from the bars.

For the most part middle-class women interacted and socialized in secrecy, fearing the consequences of discovery for their careers and social lives, although they could occasionally be found in the bars as well. In “‘We Weren’t Bar People’: Middle-Class Lesbian Identities and Cultural Spaces,” Katie Gilmartin employs subject P.J.’s oral history of her experience as a closeted middle-class lesbian in Colorado Springs as a framework for discussing class in lesbian bars in the 1950s. For middle-class as well as working-class women, gay bars continued to be “symbolic sites for the formation of lesbian identity,”<sup>24</sup> but a middle-class presence complicated their strict working-class social order. Gilmartin notes

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Marie Cartier, *Baby, You Are My Religion: Women, Gay Bars, and Theology before Stonewall* (Durham: Acumen, 2013), 62-3.

<sup>22</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 373.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>24</sup> Katie Gilmartin, “‘We Weren’t Bar People’: Middle-Class Lesbian Identities and Cultural Spaces,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 1 (1996), 2.

P.J.'s emphasis on separating herself and her friends from the other patrons, as she associated the working-class butches and femmes with "trouble" and potential violence.<sup>25</sup> As a middle-class woman with a good job on the line, P.J. took care to maintain "respectability" in distancing herself from these women, even sometimes choosing to socialize at straight bars with her sister and other straight and lesbian friends.<sup>26</sup> Middle-class women often did not see themselves fitting into the strict butch-femme divisions that characterized these spaces. In their marginalized status, lesbian bars of the 1940s and 1950s were thereby fraught with social and class-based tensions, which are further emphasized by the narratives of African American lesbians of the time.

For African American lesbians in the first half of the century, social life diverged widely from that of their white counterparts. In Rochella Thorpe's study of a Detroit lesbian community from the 1940s to the mid-1970s, she deconstructs the assumption among lesbian historians that bars were the center of social life for all lesbian communities,<sup>27</sup> noting that bars were strictly exclusive of African American women. Thorpe's subjects describe incidents of "overt racism," such as being asked to show two or three forms of identification at the door while white women did not, a practice known as "double-carding."<sup>28</sup> Audre Lorde describes this practice as well, noting that the bouncer at the Bagatelle club near Union Square often targeted her rather than her other friends to show ID.<sup>29</sup> Even when she was allowed to enter these spaces, she found herself to be an "outsider" for the sole reason of her

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>27</sup> Rochella Thorpe, "'A house where queers go': African American Lesbian Nightlife in Detroit, 1940-1975," in *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*, ed. Ellen Lewin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 41.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>29</sup> Lorde, *Zami*, 180.

race.<sup>30</sup> While lesbian bars were often secretive and relatively hard to find in the urban landscape, white lesbians had the privilege of being granted access once they found the bars; in contrast, African American lesbians relied more on “making a first contact” with someone within a lesbian network in order to socialize, which usually led to invitations to private house parties.<sup>31</sup> African American lesbians thereby mostly remained outside of the semi-public social scene of the lesbian bar throughout the 1950s and 60s, underscoring the exclusivity of these spaces.

Lesbian bars continued in their tenuous, surreptitious existence throughout the 1960s, but with the growing atmosphere of queer resistance in the latter half of the decade would soon take on new significance. In their study, Janet Kahn and Patricia Gozemba write that 1950s lesbian resistance to police brutality in and around the bar suggests that “the bar became a public forum for shaping a more self-conscious view of oneself as a lesbian, as well as some nascent political sense,”<sup>32</sup> which would continue to foment during the activist uprisings of the 1960s. Inspired by the civil rights and feminist movements, “homophile” organizations began to make themselves known in big cities, and media coverage of queer men and women became more favorable.<sup>33</sup> Popular nationwide discussion of identity-based rights no doubt encouraged this shift, and a new wave of student activist groups became more militant than ever.<sup>34</sup> Lesbian and gay political organizers won lawsuits in order to legally permit lesbians and gay men to gather in places of alcohol consumption.<sup>35</sup> Preexistent lesbian

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>31</sup> Thorpe, “A house where queers go,” 44.

<sup>32</sup> Kahn and Gozemba, “In and around the Lighthouse,” 100.

<sup>33</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 192.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>35</sup> Maxine Wolfe, “Invisible Women in Invisible Places: The Production of Social Space in Lesbian Bars,” in *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, ed.

bars continued to offer the only source of refuge available for white lesbian communities, but many lesbians began to feel dissatisfied with the mafia-owned, butch-femme dives like Kooky's, as lesbian-feminist Karla Jay writes in her memoir *Tales of the Lavender Menace*: "There were few people I could identify with [at Kooky's]...Sure, it was important to have spaces where gays and lesbians could meet, drink, and play, but if we didn't own these venues, we would never really be safe."<sup>36</sup> With the growing political and financial empowerment of African Americans, a need for new bars and spaces for black lesbians began to emerge as well.<sup>37</sup> In this environment of growing resistance and awareness of sexual identity, it would not take much to turn the tide of queer oppression towards resistance. While the Stonewall Riots of 1969 took place in a broader context of opposition to police raids in the Greenwich Village area, many queer men and women took it as a spark for a nationwide movement of activism and pride.

#### *Out and Proud: Post-Stonewall*

With the militant activism of the 1970s, a new lesbian-feminist spirit emerged in American queer communities and demanded an expansion of separate spaces for women only. Popular consciousness of lesbianism rapidly took shape, fostered by a "new species of homosexual who adamantly refused the burden of guilt and fear that had once been successfully foisted on many older lesbians and gay men."<sup>38</sup> Gay publications and organizations materialized across the country, increasing public awareness of queerness as a

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Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter (Seattle: Bay Press, 1997), 313.

<sup>36</sup> Karla Jay, *Tales of the Lavender Menace: A Memoir of Liberation* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 212.

<sup>37</sup> Thorpe, "A house where queers go," 53.

<sup>38</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 201.

viable identity.<sup>39</sup> In conjunction with a growing and radicalizing feminist movement, many women felt that lesbianism could be a way of resisting heteronormative patriarchy, forging a new “lesbian-feminist” identity that endeavored to separate itself entirely from the world of men.<sup>40</sup> Lesbian-feminist Sally Munt writes, “Lesbian nation was an imagined space, envisioned as the symbolic rupture of women from men.”<sup>41</sup> Rosa Ainley describes the enthusiasm many women felt at this new possibility: “For some lesbians who had been involved in the bar scene, the women’s movement was seen as a saving grace, and as an exciting opportunity to be who they really were, make a new politics and change women’s lives.”<sup>42</sup> Faderman notes that this redefinition of lesbianism as a “categorical imperative” for supporting women’s welfare contributed to a record high number of out lesbians during the 1970s,<sup>43</sup> which translated to a rise in lesbian institutions. Bars were no longer the only option for lesbian gathering and socialization: separatist lesbian-feminists founded bookstores, presses, cafes, halfway houses, food co-ops, and myriad other spaces for the production of lesbian identity and political values.<sup>44</sup> Sue Ellen Case describes her experiences in the 1970s, noting, “if you couldn’t afford to be around drinking, but still wanted to meet dykes, you had another possibility.”<sup>45</sup> The rough and tumble working-class aesthetic of butch-femme bars in the 1950s and 1960s was replaced by a folksy hippie sensibility, in which women were encouraged to take on a “natural” androgynous style meant to foster strength and self-

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>41</sup> Sally Munt, “Sisters in Exile: The Lesbian Nation,” in *New Frontiers of Space Body, and Gender*, ed. Rosa Ainley (New York: Routledge, 1998), 10.

<sup>42</sup> Rosa Ainley, *What Is She like? Lesbian Identities from the 1950s to the 1990s* (London: Cassell, 1995), 47.

<sup>43</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 207.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>45</sup> Sue Ellen Case, “Making Butch: An Historical Memoir of the 1970s,” in *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*, ed. Sally Munt (London: A&C Black, 1998).

sufficiency. As the decade progressed, however, this “freeing” separatist idealism began to show strain under its internal conflicts.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, not all lesbians uniformly appreciated these militant and exclusionary lesbian-feminist institutions. The older generation of butch and femme bar patrons as well as older middle-class lesbians could not relate to their radical politics, perhaps still remembering the persecution and secrecy they lived through in the 1950s.<sup>46</sup> Lesbians of color continued to feel distant from this mainstream lesbian ideology even as lesbian-feminists attempted to welcome them, finding their politics to retain many aspects of racist popular culture.<sup>47</sup> Instead, lesbians of color worked to form their own organizations and social spaces: Rochella Thorpe’s subjects describe a new wave of black lesbian bars in the seventies, that “closed and opened frequently” and “changed locations every few years” but continued to provide space for black lesbians to socialize.<sup>48</sup> The atmosphere of these bars often reflected a shift in popular culture, from the “white lesbian “family-type” bars” of the 1960s to disco bars and clubs that “attracted hordes of young people to the dance floors.”<sup>49</sup> These women used their own spaces to negotiate the intersection of their identities as queer and Black,<sup>50</sup> finding a way to serve their own needs for identification and socialization independent of the white lesbian-separatist movement. Despite its idealistic and high-minded goals, the separatist movement eventually collapsed under its own weight by the end of the decade along with the hippie “free love” attitude, making way for a new wave of political and social conservatism.

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<sup>46</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 209.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>48</sup> Thorpe, “A house where queers go,” 54.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

The conservative shift in American politics and culture of the 1980s provided a stark contrast to the radical 1970s, and saw many older lesbians following in the path of straight Americans in their move away from bars and into stable familial households. The rise of the New Right and slowing of radical liberal and leftist movements significantly tempered the lesbian-feminist fervor, resulting in a newly moderate lesbian community.<sup>51</sup> Homophobic violence and bar raids rose in the wake of changing national politics, especially Anita Bryant's anti-gay 'Save Our Children' campaign.<sup>52</sup> Lesbians did not return to the silence and secrecy of pre-Stonewall life, however, especially as homosexuality gained increased acceptance in the mainstream liberal public sphere.<sup>53</sup> Free from the constraints of lesbian-feminist radicalism, many older, middle class, and career-oriented women began to come out, bolstered by the feeling that they could maintain their own personalities and style without risking scorn from other lesbians.<sup>54</sup> As Faderman notes, they formed their own gathering spaces around middle-class professional and cultural interests, for example "forums on estate planning, buying real estate, (lesbian) parenting, and traveling for business and pleasure."<sup>55</sup> Many middle-class lesbians followed their heterosexual counterparts in settling down and sobering up: Faderman notes that the "clean and sober" movement and rise of Alcoholics Anonymous groups for lesbians allowed for "a whole culture of sobriety" to replace bar culture.<sup>56</sup> The rise of AIDS in the 1980s most likely contributed to this trend, and also limited the popularity of the casual sex that had been often present in bars.<sup>57</sup> This shift towards

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<sup>51</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 272.

<sup>52</sup> Wolfe, "Invisible Women in Invisible Places," 314.

<sup>53</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 280.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 277-8.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

settling down, however, did not include the new generation of young lesbian women who were determined to forge their own party scene.

Like older middle-class lesbians, young lesbians of the 1980s also moved away from the militant, lesbian-feminist style, creating new lesbian party spaces that allowed for a diverse range of lesbian identification and roles. They rejected the “unsexy” hippie aesthetic in favor of a stylish new “lesbian chic,” epitomized by the “glamour dyke” or “lipstick lesbian.”<sup>58</sup> Lesbianism was in fashion, as evidenced by Madonna and Sandra Bernhard’s television debut as a couple at the Greenwich Village bar the Cubbyhole.<sup>59</sup> Lesbian bars sprung up across major cities: in a 1982 edition of the *Philadelphia Gay News*, Karla Jay proclaims, “There are bars, bars everywhere and plenty to drink.”<sup>60</sup> Lisa Kennedy writing for *The Village Voice* in 1989 describes the trendy new bar Deb and Jenny’s: “No more women, womyn, wimmin, this was a girl bar...Naughty, soft-sleazy, and double-edged, this was absolutely not the material of cultural lesbianism or separatism. All of a sudden being a lesbian was publicly sexy and fun.”<sup>61</sup> Deborah Amory analyzes the popular Club Q in San Francisco, which she argues embodies the specific lesbian chic archetype of the decade: “a younger (in her twenties) member of the lesbian community, marked most conspicuously by a celebration of sexuality, style, and attitude, and a relative position of privilege in terms of money and education.”<sup>62</sup> Unlike earlier iterations of lesbian spaces as either secretive, as in the 40s through 60s, or desexed, as in the 70s, the 1980s scene revolved around dance and

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Karla Jay, “Through the (smoky) looking glass,” *Philadelphia Gay News*, January 8-21, 1982.

<sup>61</sup> Lisa Kennedy, “Bar Belles: Sex Tips for Girls,” *Village Voice*, June 27, 1989.

<sup>62</sup> Deborah P. Amory, “Club Q: Dancing with (a) Difference,” in *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*, ed. Ellen Lewin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 148.

cruising as an open expression of lesbian sexuality and cultural cache.<sup>63</sup> Growing diversity in the lesbian nightlife scene both enriched and complicated these spaces.

Amory argues that the choice to play music originating from and popular in African American queer communities drew a larger crowd of lesbians of color,<sup>64</sup> creating a diverse patronage and breaking the racial division of lesbian spaces in past decades. Sarah Schulman's reporting for the *Gay Community News*, however, suggests that racial issues within the New York lesbian community had not disappeared: in a 1985 article she describes a number of popular lesbian bars double-carding African American lesbians or instituting racial quotas at the entrance.<sup>65</sup> While interracial socializing became more prominent in the 1980s than in past decades, the differences latent in the lesbian community continued to stimulate diversification in lesbian nightlife throughout the 1990s, even as some bars faced trouble.

In the 1980s, the Duchess bar was a prominent target for liquor license-related persecution and was eventually forced to close. Fran Greenfield reported in the October 1982 edition of the feminist newspaper *WomaNews* that the Greenwich Village women's bar had its liquor license revoked after selling alcohol to undercover policewomen that September.<sup>66</sup> This was preceded by an investigation by the State Liquor Authority (SLA) into complaints filed against the bar for "discriminatory practices against men," in their view substantiated by male undercover inspectors who testified to being "either asked to leave after being told it was a women's bar, denied service, or made to wait an exorbitant amount of time prior to

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>65</sup> Sarah Schulman, *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life during the Reagan/Bush Years* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 83-4.

<sup>66</sup> Fran Greenfield, "The End of an Era?: Duchess Faces Grim Future After Police Raid," *WomaNews*, October 1982.

being served, or charged twice the usual price per drink.”<sup>67</sup> The revocation of the Duchess’ liquor license served as a death sentence for the bar, as it was forced to serve only soft drinks as well as raise the door fee in order to attempt to pay rent, severely curbing its patronage.<sup>68</sup> In her article Greenfield contextualizes the incident within a larger trend of gay and lesbian bar license revocations in the area, and questions the motives of the SLA: “Why after ten years of being in business with no pretense of being anything other than a lesbian bar was the Duchess selected for prosecution by SLA? Could this be part of a larger crackdown on gays?” She concludes in describing the significance of the bar’s closing for its former patrons: “Intuitively people are acknowledging that if the Duchess can be forced to either close or serve men, then no women-only place is sacred.”<sup>69</sup> The legal troubles that forced the Duchess to close would continue to plague lesbian bars in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The 1990s saw a continuation and variegation of the “lesbian chic” bar scene in American cities, especially with the growth of mainstream cultural awareness of queerness and continued queer organizing against AIDS. Bars similar to San Francisco’s Club Q sprung up in other big cities, including the popular Clit Club in the Manhattan meatpacking district. Lesbian geographer Jen Jack Geiseking discussed its sexualized atmosphere with *Broadly* journalist Nicole Pasulka: “The sexy time was Clit Club, for sure. It was very similar to the ideal kind of gay male space, and women really enjoyed it.”<sup>70</sup> Pasulka also interviewed Clit Club’s founder, Julie Tolentino, who described it as “a very mixed space—class, age, race and ‘tone.’ It was sex positive...the hyper butch-femme could be undone and queer forces re-

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> “Keep the Duchess Open!” Flyer, Lesbian Herstory Archives, Bar Subject File, 1984.

<sup>69</sup> Greenfield, “The End of an Era?”

<sup>70</sup> Nicole Pasulka, “The History of Lesbian Bars,” *Broadly*, August 17, 2015.

opened.”<sup>71</sup> In an interview with artist Gwen Shockey, musician Elizabeth Ziff discusses both the Clit Club and another popular regular event, Sundays at Café Tabac: “Café Tabac was about flirting and seeing and being seen and drinking and smoking pot and laughing. But Clit Club was all about fucking.”<sup>72</sup> Traditional butch-femme dynamics were exploded, allowing for a new terrain of sexual self-expression.

These challenges to the norms of gender and identity expression implicit in lesbian socializing of earlier decades hint at an increased gender exploration and nonconformity, which would complicate queer and lesbian space in coming years. Geiseking’s 2015 study “Dyked NY,” an analysis of the social production and experience of lesbian bars in New York from 1983 to 2008, also finds a more inclusive club scene in the 1990s: “Political work around the hardest-hitting issues like the AIDS epidemic often brought LGBTQ people together. The number of lesbian–queer bars and parties expanded in the 1990s...they were likely to all wind up in the same places with gay men and trans people.”<sup>73</sup> In this shifting and globalizing atmosphere of open queerness, many lesbians were even finding their own spaces in the new realm of the Internet, as Celeste Wincapaw examines: “they had found electronic friends with whom they could discuss politics, sports, sex, and a host of other subjects.”<sup>74</sup> Lesbians could now find other lesbians with any number of common interests, and lesbian and queer spaces grew to reflect this continued diversification in the 2000s.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Gwen Shockey, *Addresses Project*, Gwen Shockey Squarespace, <https://gwen-shockey-rqqr.squarespace.com/addresses-project> (accessed March 7 2019).

<sup>73</sup> Geiseking, “Dyked NY,” 11.

<sup>74</sup> Celeste Wincapaw, “The Virtual Spaces of Lesbian and Bisexual Women’s Electronic Mailing Lists,” in *From Nowhere to Everywhere: Lesbian Geographies*, ed. Gill Valentine (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2000), 57.

*Decentering the Mainstream in the New Millennium*

The lesbian bar scene of the 2000s was characterized by fragmentation, as lesbian and queer identities became more complex and citywide economic shifts began to threaten bar survival. The 2000s saw a great deal of organizing around legalizing gay marriage, which emphasized a rhetoric of sameness with the heterosexual majority and a push for equality. At the same time, social dynamics within the queer community were complicated by a growing awareness of transgender and nonbinary identities. Many individuals who had formerly performed their identities as butch lesbians came out as transgender men, challenging the “women-only” nature of lesbian spaces, as Nicole Pasulka writes: “Because they were transitioning from within the lesbian community, men had become an inextricable part of lesbian culture and lesbian bars.”<sup>75</sup> Some lesbian spaces kept their doors open to trans men, while others did not, resulting in a shift towards “queer” bars and parties rather than trans-exclusionary “lesbian” bars. A 2000 edition of *The Village Voice* described the popular bar Meow Mix as the perfect “glamfest” to find “dolloed-up femmes, boydykes, and androgynous wonders” and “feel the sexual tension in the air.”<sup>76</sup> Lesbians of color continued to create spaces of their own, for example the Bum Bum Bar in Queens, which Corina Zappia for *The Village Voice* described in 2007 as featuring “a dance floor throng of mostly young Colombian, Dominican, and Puerto Rican girls.”<sup>77</sup> Sharyn Jackson wrote for *The Village Voice* in 2008, “in the lesbian scene's micro-worlds, everyone—from the goth poet and non-shaving organic gardener to the high-femme bleached blonde and the suburban mom can find

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<sup>75</sup> Pasulka, “The History of Lesbian Bars.”

<sup>76</sup> Tristan Taormino et. al, “Best of NYC: Sex,” *Village Voice*, October 3, 2000.

<sup>77</sup> Corina Zappia, “Good Old G-Spots,” *Village Voice*, March 7, 2007.

a place to call home.”<sup>78</sup> Lesbians seem to have had more choices than ever, but at the same time, lesbian-specific spaces began to rapidly disappear.

Like the Duchess, the legendary Meow Mix also fell victim to code violations in addition to a changing urban landscape. Robin Rothman investigated a number of troubling bar closings for *The Village Voice* in 1999, identifying skyrocketing rents and the unfair Cabaret Law (discussed further in Chapter Two) as the cause for these losses.<sup>79</sup> She notes the intimidating nature of Cabaret Law-related raids, in which numerous police officers would swarm a bar and force patrons to leave even if no crime or violation had been proven. At the time of her writing, Rothman notes that the popular lesbian “hot spot” Meow Mix had “at least temporarily lost use of its basement due to fire code violations”<sup>80</sup>; this would foreshadow its closing five years later. The Vasmay Lounge replaced the bar in the following year, as Rebecca Raber wrote for *The Village Voice*. She describes it as “a dive bar geared toward the dudes,” and cynically writes, “In a deal worthy of the building’s old occupants—Wednesday is ladies’ night.”<sup>81</sup> Keisha Franklin expressed her frustration at this loss in *The Village Voice* in 2005: “Finding more than one or two lesbian-owned-and-run bars in this city is like searching for dental dams in Kmart—you’re plumb out of luck.”<sup>82</sup> Rising rents in the Village undoubtedly contributed to Meow Mix’s end, a challenge bars in the area would continue to face in the later 2000s.

In 2008, the Rubyfruit Grill finally closed after a prolonged financial struggle intensified by Greenwich Village gentrification. Opened in 1994, the same year as Meow

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<sup>78</sup> Sharyn Jackson, “Parties With a Girl Flavor,” *Village Voice*, June 18, 2008.

<sup>79</sup> Robin Rothman, “Sites Unscene,” *Village Voice*, September 28, 1999.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Rebecca Raber, “Vasmay Lounge,” *Village Voice*, February 16, 2005.

<sup>82</sup> Keisha Franklin, “Cattyshack,” *Village Voice*, June 22, 2005.

Mix, the bar served as an institution for many years before its troubles began to catch up with it. In an interview with Gregory Beyer of the *New York Times*, owner Debra C. Fierro cites a number of potential causes, including the increasing age of her patrons and the decreased need for centralized lesbian spaces due to fragmentation and queer dispersion into the cultural mainstream. Beyer describes the extent of her troubles: “Until two years ago, she began each day with \$300 in the cash register. Now, she started with \$30. If someone paid with a large bill and needed change, an employee had to run to an A.T.M., an embarrassing display.”<sup>83</sup> Even more concerning was the dramatically high rent Fierro struggled to pay, rising from \$6,500 in 1994 to \$11,330 in 2008.<sup>84</sup> After a number of failed attempts to revitalize the bar, including a proposed bailout and renovation by a wealthy lesbian benefactor from Guyana, the Rubyfruit Bar and Grill finally closed in late 2008. Rubyfruit thereby joined the tide of New York’s extinct lesbian bars while living on in the memories and imaginaries of its former patrons.

### *The Lesbian Bar Scene Today*

With the rise of the Internet and instant communication, a new trend of temporary or pop-up lesbian and queer events has emerged in venues across major cities. They materialize semi-regularly in otherwise non-lesbian spaces, often at off hours or off nights at larger clubs. This trend conforms to Gill Valentine’s theory of lesbian time-space strategies, under which lesbians forge their own lesbian spaces and times in order to feel safe in an often-

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<sup>83</sup> Gregory Beyer, “Bailout at the Local Bar,” *New York Times*, October 10, 2008.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

unwelcoming environment.<sup>85</sup> Many promoters and event creators find temporary events to be a successful strategy for hosting parties, as the overhead costs are much lower than opening a permanent bar or club space; Elizabeth Ziff notes that promoters can be more “creative” with their events.<sup>86</sup> Evidencing the diversified world of urban lesbian and queer communities, these parties often draw highly specific groups of patrons, for example the Banaat party begun in 2012 for Arab lesbians.<sup>87</sup> A diversity of gender identity has also led to all-inclusive parties, including Candice Rowe and Laura Fraud’s monthly X&X event begun in 2016 and intended to welcome “everyone.”<sup>88</sup> Nikki Lane analyzes the African American lesbian scene in Washington, D. C., finding that the majority of African American lesbian socializing happens in parties “thrown by lesbian event promoters who rent out space in venues across the city... they frequently change nights, venues, times, and sometimes end all together without warning.”<sup>89</sup> In order to find and attend these events, queer women must follow the event promoters through various social media outlets,<sup>90</sup> creating an ungrounded, ephemeral virtual network.

Social media has of course become a key aspect of the promotion and success of these parties, which some lesbians find to be convenient while others dislike. One New York queer woman described to reporter Heather Dockray her wish for “more physical meeting

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<sup>85</sup> Gill Valentine, “(Hetero)Sexing Space: Lesbian Perceptions and Experiences of Everyday Spaces,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 11, no. 4 (August 1993).

<sup>86</sup> Shockey, *Addresses Project*.

<sup>87</sup> Michael T Luongo, “For Arab Lesbians, a Place to Dance Freely,” *New York Times*, May 18, 2012.

<sup>88</sup> Jeremy Allen, “Defiant on the Dance Floor: L.G.B.T.Q. Night Life in New York, 2017,” *New York Times* June 20, 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Nikki Lane, “All the Lesbians are White, All the Villages are Gay, but Some of Us are Brave: Intersectionality, Belonging, and Black Queer Women’s Scene Space in Washington DC,” in *Lesbian Geographies: Gender, Place and Power*, ed. Kath Browne and Eduarda Ferreira (London: Routledge, 2018), 220.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

spaces” for queer people rather than constantly having to check online where and when the next event will occur.<sup>91</sup> Elizabeth Ziff told Gwen Shockey that social media “killed” much of the lesbian bar scene.<sup>92</sup> The rise of dating apps, including those designed specifically for queer women, are also credited with dramatically changing the lesbian social scene. While some lesbians may find current modes of nightlife to be disappointing, others deeply enjoy it, as D.J. Robi D Light expressed to reporter Jeremy Allen in 2017: “Everyone thought that particularly lesbian night life was dead, but that is just not true at all... night life is strong.”<sup>93</sup> The traditional lesbian bar may be dying out, but many feel that lesbian nightlife, in its new and uniquely modern forms, continues to thrive.

While lesbian and queer parties may continue, the current lesbian bar scene in New York is now remarkably minimal. By 2010 only four permanent lesbian bars remained in operation: Henrietta Hudson, the Cubbyhole, Ginger’s, and Bum Bum Bar. Their owners were forced to change strategies in attempts to draw in customers: Henrietta Hudson owner Lisa Cannistraci described the necessity of catering to “the 23- to 37-year-old crowd” rather than to older regulars.<sup>94</sup> Ginger’s owner Sheila Frayne operates the bar as “both a lesbian bar and a neighborhood pub,” permitting entry to queer as well as straight patrons.<sup>95</sup> Despite bar owners’ best efforts, the forces against lesbian bar survival are often too much to face: Bum Bum Bar finally closed down its doors in early 2019, leaving only three bars remaining. It thereby joins the ranks of the many lesbian nightlife spaces that have disappeared over the last decades.

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<sup>91</sup> Heather Dockray, “New York’s Lesbian Bars Are Disappearing: Here’s Why Their Survival Matters,” *Brooklyn Based*, April 10, 2015.

<sup>92</sup> Shockey, *Addresses Project*.

<sup>93</sup> Allen, “Defiant on the Dance Floor.”

<sup>94</sup> Dockray, “New York’s Lesbian Bars Are Disappearing.”

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

The history of lesbian bars covers a long span of time and touches upon many changing aspects of lesbian urban life in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. As queerness evolved from a hidden secret to an influential strain of mainstream culture, lesbian bars emerged in the public consciousness, transforming from working-class dive bars to chic clubs to one-night-only queer-inclusive events. Their changes reflect shifting trends and styles in lesbian communities, as patrons variously took on butch-femme, androgynous lesbian-feminist, and lipstick lesbian identities. Lesbian bars in major cities including New York have opened, closed, moved, reopened, and otherwise metamorphosed from the 1940s through the 2010s, part of an amorphous and constantly shifting urban nightlife scene. Lesbian bar closings, however, often linger in the memories of their patrons as distinct points of sorrow and nostalgia, and indicate deeper affective and emotional forces at play within lesbian social space.

## Chapter 2.

### **Loss: Lesbian Bar Closings and Their Affective Reverberations**

The history of lesbian bars in New York City is punctuated by loss. Over time bars have frequently closed their doors, due to causes that vary from economic to sociopolitical. Some bars existed for the span of less than a year, barely registering in the landscape of queer nightlife, while others remained open for decades before succumbing to forces outside of their owners' and patrons' control. Spaces like these often fostered tightly knit and loyal communities of queer women that felt the effects of their bars closing intensely. Because queer spaces of the past were often secretive, there remains little documentation of their existence, and the specific histories of New York's most iconic lesbian bars is often retained only in the fading memories of their patrons. Through her personal connection to lesbian bars, New York-based artist Gwen Shockey has developed an oeuvre of artistic work that explores communal memories of this loss. This chapter will first explore the numerous and often overlapping causes of lesbian bar closings over time, and will then illuminate the distinct affective results of these trends within lesbian narratives. Following this will be a discussion of Shockey's work and an interview held with her in February of 2019. The chapter will conclude with a timeline of lesbian bars in New York, building and expanding on Shockey's *Addresses Project* in visually representing the temporality of queer space.

#### *Last Call: Causes for Lesbian Bar Closings*

From the 1930s until quite recently, the State Liquor Authority (SLA) of New York City has employed archaic licensing laws to limit or shut down popular lesbian and gay bars. Gay historian George Chauncey notes the SLA's specific targeting of gay men and lesbians:

“SLA licensing restrictions prohibited lesbians and gay men from working in most restaurants, bars, and other businesses where liquor was served, and prohibited lesbians and gay men from gathering openly in such establishments.”<sup>96</sup> The SLA’s most contested legislation was the Cabaret Law, originally enacted in 1926, that bans any form of dancing in public venues selling food or beverages unless the venues obtain a cabaret license, a task often made prohibitively difficult due to entrenched bureaucracy. The measure was enforced selectively and often targeted venues frequented by marginalized groups, including gay and lesbian bars.<sup>97</sup> It thereby served as a thinly veiled excuse for a multitude of often-violent raids of gay bars over the decades since its enactment, especially during former mayor Rudy Giuliani’s term.<sup>98</sup> Bar owners and activists have long attempted to overturn the law,<sup>99</sup> and only finally succeeded in 2017. Despite this success the Cabaret Law lasted over ninety years on the books, limiting the potential for gay and lesbian venues to succeed for decades. While less concretely visible in its effects on the nightlife landscape, financial inequalities on the basis of gender had similarly dramatic effects on New York’s lesbian bars.

The realities of the gender pay gap result in less disposable income for women, limiting lesbians’ ability to regularly patronize bars. Geographers Sy Brenner and Johanna Adler have found that while lesbians can be found in spatially concentrated areas within cities, their lack of access to capital reduces their ability to claim ownership of urban

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<sup>96</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890 - 1940* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994), 347.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 347.

<sup>98</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 66.

<sup>99</sup> Tricia Romano, “The Safety Dance (You Can’t Dance if You Want To),” *Village Voice*, November 27, 2002.

space.<sup>100</sup> Lesbian patrons often are not able to purchase expensive drinks, requiring bars to work harder to make profits. Bar owners often do not own the building in which their bar is situated, leaving them powerless to the decisions of their landlord. Lesbian writer Maxine Wolfe describes a common sequence of events: a lesbian bar becomes popular, the building owner observes this increased traffic and raises the rent, the bar must raise drink prices in response, the patronage drops as its former customers are no longer able to afford it, and the bar is eventually forced to close.<sup>101</sup> This cycle fits into and is exacerbated by the larger urban force of gentrification in gay neighborhoods.

Perhaps since as early as the 1960s, gentrification has played a major role in diminishing the lesbian bar scene in New York City. Geographer Tamar Rothenberg notes that lesbian bars and residences tend to be found in low-rent districts, and lesbian migration to these neighborhoods often represents an early wave of gentrification, for example in 1960s Park Slope.<sup>102</sup> The ever-growing wave of gentrification has overcome lesbian and gay communities since this time, as wealthier straight populations displace queer ones, a process that scholars Nikki Usher and Eleanor Morrison refer to as “straightening.”<sup>103</sup> Catherine Nash and Andrew Gorman-Murray also find that former gay villages are “degaying” as young generations of queer people, having benefited from national steps towards legal and social equality, are “more able (and willing) to circulate across a broad range of urban spaces

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<sup>100</sup> Sy Adler and Johanna Brenner, “Gender and Space: Lesbians and Gay Men in the City,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 16, no. 1 (1992), 32.

<sup>101</sup> Wolfe, “Invisible Women in Invisible Places,” 316.

<sup>102</sup> Tamar Rothenburg, “‘And She Told Two Friends’: Lesbians Creating Urban Social Space,” in *From Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine (New York: Routledge, 1995), 175.

<sup>103</sup> Nikki Usher and Eleanor Morrison, “The Demise of the Gay Enclave, Communication Infrastructure Theory and the Transformation of Gay Space,” in *LGBT Identity and Online New Media*, ed. Christopher Pullen and Margaret Cooper (London: Routledge, 2010), 276.

with relative ease.”<sup>104</sup> Property taxes and rents have soared in areas like Greenwich Village and Park Slope, making way for increasing corporate commercialization and leaving small neighborhood or working-class lesbian bars struggling to keep their doors open.<sup>105</sup> This process is not without a political motive, as Usher and Morrison note that former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani undertook extensive effort to encourage gentrification under the name of “tidying.”<sup>106</sup> Stephanie DeBiase finds that the remaining lesbian and gay venues in these spaces must find new ways to survive, often catering to tourists and straight patrons and thereby renewing the cycle of gentrification.<sup>107</sup> As prices increase, many queer women lack the disposable income to attend parties, as musician Elizabeth Ziff bemoaned in her interview with artist Gwen Shockey: “Everything costs so much money in New York now... If you’re really going to go out you spend a couple hundred bucks easily.”<sup>108</sup> Concomitant with the increasing waves of gentrification over the past decades, shifting lesbian identities have also resulted in major changes in queer nightlife space.

As lesbian identities and communities changed over time, the lesbian bar landscape in American cities shifted to conform to their needs and lifestyles, sometimes resulting in the decline of nightlife venues. It is often in the nature of bars and nightlife venues to come and go with changing times and fashions, especially as older generations outgrow them and younger generations come of age. Davis and Kennedy observe this in the Buffalo, New York lesbian community, noting that many lesbians settle into committed partnerships and stay at

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<sup>104</sup> Catherine Nash and Andrew Gorman-Murray, “Lesbians in the City: Mobilities and Relational Geographies,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 19, no. 2 (April 3, 2015), 175.

<sup>105</sup> Geiseking, “Dyked NY,” 13.

<sup>106</sup> Usher and Morrison, “The Demise of the Gay Enclave,” 277-8.

<sup>107</sup> Stephanie DeBiase, “Queer Repurposed Artifacts: The State of New York City’s Contemporary West Village Bars” (NY: CUNY Academic Works, 2018), 30.

<sup>108</sup> Shockey, *Addresses Project*.

home more often as they age.<sup>109</sup> More recently, the growing diversification of lesbian and queer existence has resulted in a fragmentation of nightlife venues based on unique interests, rather than singular locations serving as the only option for an entire city's lesbian community to gather and socialize. While this growth and diversity is promising for the continuance of urban lesbian life, it also means that older and smaller bars must struggle to survive. The owner of Amelia's, a San Francisco lesbian bar that closed in 1991, remarked, "There is an absence of a lesbian community in the presence of a million lesbians."<sup>110</sup> Additionally, changing conceptions of queer identity have led some to find the term "lesbian" obsolete: journalist Heather Dockray finds the term to be "outdated, even unwelcoming,"<sup>111</sup> and for many queer urbanites it is too reminiscent of the transphobia and racism of 1970s lesbian separatism. Even physical aspects of nightlife venues can turn potential customers away: Gabriel Storm, former staff member of the now-closed bar Sisters in Philadelphia, told Nicole Pasulka that "a combination of less disposable income in the lesbian community and the outdated décor contributed to the club's demise."<sup>112</sup> The change in lesbian need for nightlife space is closely linked to the increased presence and acceptance of gay men and lesbians in mainstream American culture.

Both a growing mainstream acceptance of queerness and the rise of the Internet have led many lesbians to feel that lesbian bars are no longer necessary for gathering and socialization. Usher and Morrison write that as queer identity has been introduced into the dominant culture, gay men and lesbians "have more and more freedom to choose where they

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<sup>109</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 279.

<sup>110</sup> Arlene Stein, *Sex and Sensibility: Stories of a Lesbian Generation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 185.

<sup>111</sup> Dockray, "New York's Lesbian Bars Are Disappearing."

<sup>112</sup> Pasulka, "The History of Lesbian Bars."

want to live and socialize,” and therefore “the need to be all gay all the time simply does not have the same urgency.”<sup>113</sup> Lesbians can now feel comfortable patronizing their favorite non-lesbian local bar without fear of violence or discrimination. Usher and Morrison also point to the growth of social media and the Internet, which as Wincapaw’s work anticipated allows lesbians and queer people to connect and socialize without the need for sharing physical space.<sup>114</sup> They observe that since the early years of the internet gay men and lesbians have had a significant online presence,<sup>115</sup> and as it has grown to become a key element of today’s social life, many feel that their needs for queer socialization can be fulfilled without going to specific lesbian or gay venues in the urban landscape. This mainstreaming of queerness in conjunction with licensing legislation, changing lesbian communities, lesbians’ limited economic power, and gentrification all can be seen as causes for New York City lesbian bar closings across history, often layered in complex and insidious ways. The loss of these spaces conveys high emotional stakes due to their significance in the minds and memories of their long-time patrons.

*“We Can Be Undone”: Affective Results of Bar Closings*

As lesbian bars rapidly disappear from American cities, lesbians often look back at their history with fond memories. One of Kennedy and Davis’ subjects recounts the communal spirit of her favorite bar: “At Bingo’s people would sit around and sing, harmonize. It was like family; there was a camaraderie you don’t find today.”<sup>116</sup> Joan Nestle muses on the importance of personal experience in constructing memories of lesbian bars:

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<sup>113</sup> Usher and Morrison, “The Demise of the Gay Enclave,” 278.

<sup>114</sup> Nash and Murray, “Lesbians in the City,” 175.

<sup>115</sup> Usher and Morrison, “The Demise of the Gay Enclave,” 279.

<sup>116</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 106.

“Perhaps it will always be the site of our first kiss, of the first entry, of the first battle for erotic life that will call for commemoration... We created moments, afternoons, nights of liberation out of the mortar of surveillance. Now they live in my memory, the final site of reclamation.”<sup>117</sup> In their narratives of lesbian bars of the past, women often discuss a feeling of relief and self-recognition upon entering a bar and realizing for the first time that they were not alone. Catherine Nash describes what is at risk with the loss of this self-legibility: “If we are not recognized in certain places for what we believe we are or if we are recognized by others for what we are not, we can be undone.”<sup>118</sup> Fond reminiscences are often paired with bittersweet feelings of grief and loss in the memories of former lesbian bar patrons.

As the lesbian bar scene has changed and popular spaces have closed, lesbians mourn their favorite bars, illuminating their significance for both individual women and their communities. One of Kennedy and Davis’ subjects who had frequented bars in the 1950s describes feeling uncomfortable with the breaking of butch-femme roles in the bars of the 1990s, and mourns the way of lesbian life with which she was familiar.<sup>119</sup> Feelings of loss are even more intense as lesbian bars disappear entirely: Krista Burton sorrowfully writes, “I want my lesbian bars back. I want clear, dedicated spaces where queers hang out...our bars are closing or gone. How do we find community now?”<sup>120</sup> Jen Jack Geiseking also finds in his participants’ stories a sentiment that bar closings are “rendering lesbian–queers invisible,” and notes that without the bars “there was no place to physically locate their body that

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<sup>117</sup> Joan Nestle, “Restriction and Reclamation: Lesbian Bars and Beaches of the 1950s,” in *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, ed. Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter (Seattle: Bay Press, 1997), 67.

<sup>118</sup> Nash, “Lesbian Geographies,” 249.

<sup>119</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 237.

<sup>120</sup> Krista Burton, “I Want My Lesbian Bars Back,” *New York Times*, April 14, 2017.

echoed the difference and attraction of the bars they had once known.”<sup>121</sup> Gayle Salamon also mourns the loss of the Lex, one San Francisco’s most popular lesbian bars, writing with nostalgia, “Raise a glass to the making of memories false and true, the birth and joys and struggles and metamorphoses of a queer community.”<sup>122</sup> Grief over the loss of a favorite lesbian bar can sometimes produce a nostalgia so intense that it blurs reality and softens the edges of the past.

As with many spaces of cultural significance, patrons tend to over-idealize lesbian bars after they close. Geiseking finds that his subjects remember the bars as “*the* places for galvanizing and enacting LGBTQ liberation”<sup>123</sup> while forgetting the social and political tensions that plagued them throughout their existence. Kelly Hankin finds this tendency in her study of film as well: “Visions of safe, racially harmonious, and durable spaces offered in the lesbian bar documentary function as a fantasy.”<sup>124</sup> Nostalgia becomes selective, glorifying the past as a form of escapism from a present moment that is perceived to be subpar. In her interview with Rosa Ainley, Val Wilmer muses on the source of this memory distortion: “Nostalgia is pointless. But why should we have this nostalgia for that kind of closety existence? I suppose it’s like why men have sex with strangers in public toilets, it’s because it’s a secret. It’s a perverse side of human nature.”<sup>125</sup> Some lesbians even idealize bar trends which they were not alive to experience, for example young lesbians of the 1980s reengaging with butch-femme dynamics and style, as Marie Cartier observes in her

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<sup>121</sup> Geiseking, “Dyked NY,” 10.

<sup>122</sup> Gayle Salamon, “Last Look at the Lex,” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (April 3, 2015), 147-8.

<sup>123</sup> Geiseking, “Dyked NY,” 10.

<sup>124</sup> Kelly Hankin, *The Girls in the Back Room: Looking at the Lesbian Bar* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 117.

<sup>125</sup> Ainley, *What Is She Like?*, 59.

interviews with lesbians.<sup>126</sup> These overly rosy retrospective nostalgias reflect a feeling that the present is inadequate and dissatisfying. As theorist Svetlana Boym explores, however, nostalgia can also be a powerful influence on the vectors of the future: “The fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future...nostalgia itself has a utopian dimension.”<sup>127</sup> While memories and feelings of nostalgia, loss, and over-idealization can be painful, they are also a reminder of the importance of remembering and documenting lesbian and queer history for future generations, as Gwen Shockey does in her work.

*Artistic Remembrance: The Work of Gwen Shockey*

Gwen Shockey is a New York-based visual artist whose work centers on the materialities of life for queer women. Much of her work has engaged with lesbian nightlife, including two mixed-media installations that mourn the loss of New York’s lesbian bars of the past. In “No Man’s Land” (2017), Shockey layers sculpture, drawing, sound, performance, and projection to evoke the heady experience of entering the bathrooms in each of the four remaining lesbian bars in New York at the time. In *Addresses* (2017), she tracks the history of individual bars over time, gathering over one hundred names and addresses and pairing them with modern-day images of the buildings in which the bars were located. In tandem with the exhibition, she created an interactive map<sup>128</sup> that allows the viewer to visualize the actual landscape of lesbian nightlife in New York City. Shockey’s works

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<sup>126</sup> Cartier, *Baby, You Are My Religion*, 140.

<sup>127</sup> Svetlana Boym, “Nostalgia and Its Discontents,” in *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Olick et. al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 452.

<sup>128</sup> Shockey, *Addresses Project*, <https://gwen-shockey-rqqr.squarespace.com/addresses-project>.

commemorate, document, and eulogize queer nightlife in a unified way that seems unprecedented; while historians and scholars have written about aspects of these spaces, a concerted effort to view them all together is unique and valuable. In February of 2019, I interviewed Gwen about her art practice, her experiences in lesbian bars, and her feelings about shifting trends within them.

My interview with Gwen Shockey touched on many of the latent themes and discourses around New York lesbian bars, and her comments about their loss and the future of queer space begin to illuminate broader and deeper vectors of queer feeling. Her discussion of the Pulse nightclub shooting in 2017 and feelings about the closing of the Bum Bum Bar tap into intense emotions of loss, sorrow, and frustration. Her personal stories of experiences in lesbian bars, like many narratives written by women in previous decades, reflect nostalgia, idealization, and homecoming. She is knowledgeable about lesbian nightlife history and attuned to shifts in the landscape, especially in her observations of the growing trend of semi-regular events and parties. In her artwork as well as in her conversation with me, Shockey grapples with the complexities and significances of these changes, but always finds a hope for the future.

In her artistic work as well as in our interview, Shockey's personal connection to and deep affection towards lesbian bars is deeply apparent. She described to me her personal realization upon entering her first lesbian bar in Paris: "I will never forget that feeling of walking in and just feeling like oh, my god, I could have a really beautiful life as a queer woman. And there are so many other people like this, I didn't realize." This moment of sudden epiphany is not uncommon in narratives by queer women across time, and informed Shockey's continued connection to lesbian bars after she moved to New York City. She

described her changing relationship to the nightlife scene over time: “For me, for a while I really needed that kind of Cubbyhole-like space with tons of different types of women, lots of drunkenness, and kind of dive-y. And then I really needed dance parties, and now as I’m going into my 30s I’m craving more intimate, more low-key gatherings and community. And I’m seeing that happen now.” Shockey emphasized the necessity for these spaces especially in moments of tragedy: “When things like Pulse happen and when trauma and tragedy strike the community, it just becomes so clear how important it is to have a space like Cubbyhole, that’s open all the time and not just one night a month, that you can know the bartender and it’s a safe, safe home.” Her deep interest and involvement in lesbian nightlife has made her attuned to shifts in the culture within these constantly evolving spaces, informing her artistic work.

Much of Shockey’s art references the lived experience of lesbianism, specifically New York’s lesbian nightlife space. I was surprised to hear her emphasis of the tragedy that brought her to some of this work: “The Pulse massacre happened while I was in graduate school, and I went to a vigil at Stonewall, and then Cubbyhole, and I decided to just totally refocus my master’s work around the idea of queer community and safe space. It was a little bit out of fear, a little bit out of sadness, but also just curiosity. So I started interviewing people who I knew about how they found community and space to meet other lesbians and queer women, and it led to just finding all these addresses that people kept mentioning.” This led to the creation of *Addresses Project*, an interactive map that documents lesbian bars and parties across New York from the 1910s to the present. Shockey noted the challenges she has faced in this work: “Prior to the early 1970s, everything was mafia-owned, and it was illegal to serve a gay person alcohol in public, and it was illegal for gay people to dance...So there’s

no documentation about any of these places. I used police records from bar raids, or tax photos at the Business Bureau, which is just images of storefronts.” The difficulties in collecting information about bars of the past were contrasted for Shockey in the joy of accessing the collective memory of New York’s lesbian population, however: “A lot of [interviewees] were really vague, like “I got off the F train and walked three blocks, and there was this place” (laughs). So it became this amazing memory thing where people were telling me their memories, and it was so nonspecific and fuzzy, and drunk, and just amazing.” Her experience documenting bars closing and opening over the past century has made her attuned to more recent changes and closings in today’s bar landscape.

While Shockey is aware of the perception of lesbian bars as dying out and disappearing, she emphasized that what may seem like death may actually just be change. When I told her about the very recent closing of one of the few remaining full-time lesbian bars in New York, the Bum Bum Bar in Queens, she was at first shocked and saddened, but acknowledged that it had been unsuccessful before it closed. Through her research she is familiar with the many trends seen in lesbian bar culture over the past decades, commenting, “as we advance, or try to advance, as a society, I think spaces become what we as minorities or Othered people need them to be.” She expressed a feeling of personal conflict over the nature of some of these changes, including the shift in popular language from “lesbian” to “queer”: “It means something really amazing, it means inclusivity, and it means more freedom for people to express themselves in a grander category.... But I fucking pray that the word lesbian and everything associated with it won’t ever disappear or die, because it carries with it a history of so much.” While she recognizes that these shifts in terminology carry significance, she ultimately feels that the fundamental element of lesbian bars—their

centering of queer women, and trans and nonbinary people—will continue: “I don't think the idea of a bar like Cubbyhole will ever go away, but I don't know if it will be called a lesbian bar anymore...I feel I really need spaces where I know there's a queer precedent. Where it won't be a bunch of straight and cis men, and where I will walk in and it'll be a space controlled and owned and facilitated by women or nonbinary or trans people. I think somehow that needs to be more pushed to the front, and is being more pushed to the front. I kind of hate to say it but kind of love to say it; it really is the exclusion of straight men versus the inclusion of lesbians (laughs). It is such a different feeling to be in a space that's run by women and owned by men, in my opinion.” Shockey thereby acknowledges remarkable change in the nightlife scene while still expressing confidence in their continuation rather than their death. One of the major changes she observed is shift from permanent locations to semi-regular parties.

In our conversation, Shockey discussed a number of forces that influence nightlife and have resulted in the recent trend of non-permanent spaces. She noted that in some ways these events and one-night bar takeovers offer greater opportunities for inclusivity: “I think there's a bigger push and bigger sensibility right now of laying down framework for safe space, not having to do with who we're going to exclude but making very clear the terms of inclusion and safety...[Parties] are just queer, and anyone can come. And there are some nights that are super lezzie, some that are a lot of guys, some with an amazing mix of people—it just seems open.” Shockey was also careful to note the downsides of this trend, especially for gender-nonconforming people: “There's still loneliness, especially in the trans and nonbinary community. They feel like they don't know where they belong, and still feel like the language is oppressive.” She echoed a significant complaint among queer urbanites

about the difficulties of social media: “I think that’s actually what makes it hard, is so much of this information is disseminated on social media now, like Instagram mostly, and I think people often don’t know. Especially if you’re new to the city, you really have to meet people and talk to people and network and make a huge effort to find out what’s going on.” As we discussed potential causes for these changes, Shockey noted with a more somber tone the limited economic situation in the city, especially for marginalized groups: “A lot of this has to do with the economics of New York right now. New York is a really spectacularly hard place to create anything anymore. Whether its art or opening a business, it’s totally overpopulated and expensive and there’s no wiggle room anymore, it’s really sad. I think spaces that opened years and years ago opened because there was a lot of opportunity. There were tons of vacant buildings and rent was literally nothing. Now its just really hard, you need a huge amount of income generation and I think that makes it impossible to even conceive of a bar only for women, or only for trans people, because there’s just not enough money in the community. I don’t know many lesbians who have the capital to start something.” Despite all of these challenges, she remains confident in the futurity of lesbian nightlife space, and the community, celebration, and joy that can come with it: “People want different fun things to do, and I don’t think there’s any lack of creative talented DJs and musicians and artists who are creating nightlife. Nightlife will never go away, people will always finds ways to celebrate and dance and have fun together. Even in the most expensive places in the world.” All of these facets of New York’s nightlife scene fit into Shockey’s personal experience and in turn inform her imaginings.

One of the last questions I posed to Shockey in our interview was to describe her ideal queer nightlife space. She gave a few answers that together seem representative of the

differing wants and needs of the larger New York queer community. She first mentioned the current scene, appreciating its “shifting of needs to accommodate crisis, and space availability, and music tastes.” However, she dislikes the current reliance on phones and social media, which she sees as creating insecurity and coldness. Instead, she described attending a few parties thrown by party promoter Wanda Acosta. Acosta was highly active in the nightlife scene in the 1990s, opening multiple chic bars and hosting a number of recurring parties. I was under the impression that she had retired from this work by the early 2000s, but Shockey told me about her experience at a few of Acosta’s recent events: “These parties Wanda throws, they’re just so warm and sexy. And super diverse, like anyone can come. There are women in their 60s and 70s, 20s, 30s, 40s—a huge age range. Also really good music and performers: one time she had a belly dancer; one time she had a bondage rope performer. So it’s sexy and there is a lot of attention to space, she has them in really classy spaces. So for me that’s ideal, having age diversity, race diversity, class diversity, and having it be warm and not about Instagram.” The fact that Shockey’s ideal space is one that builds on and references the success of previous nightlife incarnations indicates a continued desire among the community for the continuity of lesbian nightlife space. In her artistic work Shockey illustrates this desire and compiles the concurrent feelings of loss and nostalgia that came up in our conversation into a spatialized image of the New York lesbian nightlife scene.

Shockey’s *Addresses Project* is a monumental work of mapping, documenting, and research that I hoped to build on in my own work. Geographer Gordon Brent Ingram’s model of the “queerscape” is useful in contextualizing the significance of the project: he describes it as “an aspect of the landscape, a social overlay, where the interplays between assertion and

marginalization of sexualities are in constant flux.”<sup>129</sup> This imagined geography is “highly individualized,”<sup>130</sup> and Ingram writes that each person’s subjective “map” contains “a current of imagination, of only partially recognized and territorialized desire.”<sup>131</sup> In its use of the New York City map *Addresses Project* emphasizes the bars’ spatiality in the landscape, serving the geographical purpose Ingram describes, but only by clicking on each individual dot can the reader get a sense of their temporality. Shockey has done a remarkable job in finding the dates that these spaces opened and closed, but many are vague estimations or are lacking this information entirely. Queer theorists and geographers have often acknowledged the unique relationship between space and time within a queer frame, and I hoped to apply these theories in building on Shockey’s research.

### *Expanding the Archive*

My expansion on Gwen Shockey’s work engages with queer theories about space and time in visualizing the existence of specific lesbian bars within the span of the past. Nightlife spaces, both queer and straight, are products of and governed by their time: their survival often hinges on passing fads and changes in the urban, social, and political landscape. In her studies of queer women in the UK, geographer Gill Valentine finds that lesbians “express a lesbian identity only in formal gay spaces,”<sup>132</sup> which Valentine conceptualizes as exhibiting “time-space strategies.” Muñoz expands on her theory, discussing the ways that queer

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<sup>129</sup> Gordon Brent Ingram, “Marginality and the Landscapes of Erotic Alien(n)ations,” in *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, ed. Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter (Seattle: Bay Press, 1997), 40.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>132</sup> Gill Valentine, “Negotiating and Managing Multiple Sexual Identities: Lesbian Time-Space Strategies,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 18, no. 2 (1993), 243.

existence fundamentally produces an experience of time that diverges from straight time: “Queerness’s time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time.”<sup>133</sup> In his discussion of queer temporality Muñoz borrows significantly from queer philosopher Jack Halberstam, who theorizes that queerness “squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand”<sup>134</sup> by virtue of the challenges of queer life and the threat of AIDS. Halberstam emphasizes further the potentialities for futurity within queer space: “Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.”<sup>135</sup> Linking lesbian nightlife spaces to temporality as well as spatiality thereby expands understandings of experiences within them, helping to acknowledge the impetus for nostalgia.

Like Shockey’s attempt to map lesbian bars in space, the following timeline (Appendix 2) is an attempt to map bars in time, creating a visual representation of when each bar space opened and closed. This attempt to quantify these experiences in a measurable format perhaps opposes concepts of queer time as “interrupting” straight temporality,<sup>136</sup> but also serves as a crucial—and even radical—act of documentation as these spaces and the people that remember them gradually disappear. As Gwen Shockey noted in our conversation, queer history is fragile and often destroyed, and the act of remembering can therefore be a political statement. The timeline also reflects the ambiguity of queer temporality and memory, as many of the dates listed for bar openings and closings are uncertain and unconfirmed, or even

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<sup>133</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 25.

<sup>134</sup> Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press), 2.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 155.

pure guesses. Each space is represented as a bar on the timeline, and those that are lacking data are blurred around the edges, much like the memories of their patrons after a few drinks. The dates that are known have been gathered from a number of sources, including *Addresses Project*, the Lost Womyn's Space blog, the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, and material from the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn. It represents many hours of digging in boxes of pamphlets and bar advertisements as well as forgotten gay forums of the early Internet. It is my hope that this timeline can contribute to a preservation of queer history and serve as a tribute to the many patrons of these spaces over the past century. I have also included a table with every bar name, address, and their dates of opening and closing, as far as I have been able to gather. These two accompanying compilations of data, while incomplete, can add to a communal queer archive, serving as a potential resource for those who may later revisit this history. In looking towards the past, perhaps hope can be found for a utopic queer future; as a flyer for the Planet Girl party at Industria in 1995 optimistically charges, "It's your future, don't miss it!"

### Chapter 3.

#### Desire: The Lesbian Bar in the Queer Imaginary

Across time, lesbians have created imaginaries of idealized lesbian space that are often utopic, and are constructed in opposition to the struggles and tensions latent in existent spaces of a given time. While much of lesbian theory has posited the lesbian as a “third gender,” situated outside of patriarchal societal structures due to her refusal to participate in heteronormative practices, lesbian theorist Annamarie Jagose finds this exteriority to be an “impossible dream” due to the ubiquity of power structures first theorized by Foucault.<sup>137</sup> As evidenced by the yearnings of women throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, the imagination can still serve as a powerful space for constructing utopia without marginalizing power structures. A queer woman in 1954 wrote of her desire for space for lesbians “who wish for more from life than the nightmare of whiskey and sex, brutality and vanity, self-pity and despair,”<sup>138</sup> evidently reacting to the gritty reality of the working-class lesbian dives that served as the only option for lesbian socialization at the time. In Leslie Feinberg’s semi-autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues*, butch Edna constructs an idealized future in reaction to the pain of her past: “I don’t want to go back to the bars and the fights. I just want a place to be with the people I love. I want to be accepted for who I am, and not just in the gay world.”<sup>139</sup> An utopian strain of thought can evidently be found in the lesbian-feminist practices of the 1970s in their attempts to construct separatist havens, envisioned as “utopia for women, an Amazon dream.”<sup>140</sup> While the physical spaces these lesbian-feminists constructed ultimately failed, the underlying strain of utopian imagination continued in

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<sup>137</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Lesbian Utopics* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 160.

<sup>138</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 183.

<sup>139</sup> Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*, 218.

<sup>140</sup> Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 218.

varying forms throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries: Lisa Hardie and Lynda Johnston find that by simply listening to music that reaffirms their queerness, lesbians can “consciously create” imaginaries that travel with them and provide protective and invisible safe spaces.<sup>141</sup> These imaginary spaces both within and without bars and nightlife allow lesbians to conceptualize environments of belonging, pointing to a basic yearning that permeates lesbian social space. This chapter will synthesize a number of queer theorists’ work in creating a unified image of spatialized and temporalized desire.

Woven throughout narratives of lesbian bars is a fundamental feeling of desire, both erotic and utopian. Judith Butler finds erotic yearning to be a key informant in the exterior performance of queerness, produced “in the surface of the body” and suggesting “the organizing principle of identity as a cause.”<sup>142</sup> Narratives of bar life often point to the erotic as a crucial motivation, as Kennedy and Davis find in the Buffalo lesbian community: “Romance—the search for it, the delight in finding it, and the hope that it would be perfect—was at the heart of this community.”<sup>143</sup> Lesbian desire goes beyond the erotic, however, as Muñoz elucidates in his theory of utopian queerness. In queer space Muñoz finds an underlying “economy of desire and desiring,” encompassing both sexual fantasy and “the fuller capacity for love and relationality.”<sup>144</sup> He finds a repeated queer yearning for the potentialities of the future: “This desire is always directed at that thing that is not yet here, objects and moments that burn with anticipation and promise... to live inside straight time

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<sup>141</sup> Lisa Hardie and Lynda Johnston, “‘It’s a way for me to feel safe in places that might not really be gay-friendly’: Music as Safe Lesbian Space,” in *Lesbian Geographies: Gender, Place and Power*, ed. Kath Browne and Eduarda Ferreira (London: Routledge, 2018), 121.

<sup>142</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2006), 136.

<sup>143</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, 236.

<sup>144</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 144.

and ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer.”<sup>145</sup> Following Muñoz, desiring becomes a radical act of resistance, which Joan Nestle confirms in her description of 1950s bars: “What could not be controlled was...our need to confront a personal destiny, to see our reflections in each other’s faces and to break societal ostracism with our bodies. What could not be controlled was our desire.”<sup>146</sup> Lesbian bar culture as it has manifested over time, in its layered nostalgia for the past and rejection of the present, thereby coheres into an intense desire that Muñoz identifies as “queer futurity’s core.”<sup>147</sup> Even if queer utopias are destined to fail, as Muñoz contends,<sup>148</sup> the fact of this continued desire and the imaginaries that surround it create a continued potentiality that fundamentally encourages hope for a queer future, which lesbian scholar Sarah Ahmed finds to be spatially enacted.

Sarah Ahmed employs phenomenology to expand on the relationship between desire, futurity, and lesbian orientations. She envisions orientation, and especially compulsory heterosexuality, as a vertical line, and lesbian desire as a “pull” that places the lesbian “in contact with others and with objects that are off the vertical line.”<sup>149</sup> Acting on lesbian desire creates “alternative lines” of deviation, traced physically in space, that ultimately create a “lesbian landscape.”<sup>150</sup> This “reorientation” is a difficult and even radical act, reframing desire as “a form of action that shapes bodies and worlds.”<sup>151</sup> Ahmed finds that the spaces that result from lesbian desire are often temporary, and “come and go with the coming and

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>146</sup> Nestle, “Restriction and Reclamation,” 61.

<sup>147</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 26.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>149</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 94.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 102.

going of the bodies that inhabit them”: “The points of this existence don’t easily accumulate as lines, or if they do, they might leave different impressions on the ground.”<sup>152</sup> This obliqueness of lesbian space is easily reflected in the turbulent and shifting landscape of lesbian nightlife in New York City. Ahmed further extends the radical possibilities of lesbian disorientation and desire into the future: “Such losses [of orientation] can be converted into the joy of a future that has been opened up...Orientations are effects of what we tend toward, where the toward marks a space and time that is almost, but not quite, available in the present.”<sup>153</sup> Again, queer sexual orientation becomes a temporal and spatial orientation, pointing towards the joy of hope in queer possibility.

In her work “Heroic Desire,” feminist scholar Sally Munt also integrates lesbian desire and nostalgia in imagining utopian futurity. Like Ahmed, she defines lesbian desire as “heroic” in its resistance to the heteropatriarchy, finding it to be “the fuel of our existence, a movement of promise.”<sup>154</sup> This desire again builds from nostalgia, a “form of mourning for the lost object of desire” that moves “towards the past from the present, and back again.”<sup>155</sup> Munt also emphasizes the spatiality of lesbian desire as enacted between intimate bodies: desire “produces an erotics of distance and nearness; we are moved by it, to it, from it, and within it.”<sup>156</sup> This spatiality expands into the larger urban landscape as well: “As we move *through* space we imprint utopian and dystopian moments upon urban life.”<sup>157</sup> Munt finds the consequences of lesbian desire to represent utopian queer futurity: becoming a lesbian is “a

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>154</sup> Sally Munt, *Heroic Desire: Lesbian Identity and Cultural Space* (London: Cassell, 1998), 10.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 48.

perpetual expression of hope,”<sup>158</sup> a utopian wanting that “transforms the present” in expressing a “yearning, a movement toward possibilities.”<sup>159</sup> As her theory expands to the larger lesbian nightlife landscape in New York City, it offers a profound image of forward-looking confidence.

Following Munt’s logic and building from both Muñoz and Ahmed, lesbian desire becomes a vector of optimism that is both nostalgic and utopian and moves towards a perpetual queer future that is both spatial and temporal. These theorists construct this concept from complex academic and scholarly backgrounds, but its essence is fundamentally raw and emotional, personally felt and enacted in the sweaty, smoky, and sexually charged queer nightlife spaces that have emerged and shifted over decades and are built by and for queer women. Applied to New York lesbian bars, this utopian futurity is embodied in Gwen Shockey’s confident claim that even as spaces disappear, “nightlife will never go away, people will always find ways to celebrate and dance and have fun together.” Desire—for community, intimate connection, joy, and sex—will always continue, etched into a shifting nightlife world that offers never-ending possibility.

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<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

## Conclusion

In my work I have attempted to elucidate the many factors at play in the existence of lesbian bars in New York City via theoretical, archival, and individual source material. This thesis first traced the history of lesbian bars throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, finding a constantly shifting scene that reacted to changes in local, national, and community-specific economics and social politics. Chapter Two then focused on the circumstances of bar closings over time, exploring the numerous and interconnected forces that contributed to the loss of various spaces. It brought forward the individualized narratives of queer women who experienced these losses, exploring a communal rhetoric of nostalgia and mourning. Building from this context of shared memory, I then explored Gwen Shockey's art, which concentrates on the same themes and provides an important contribution to the documentation of lost queer spaces. The lesbian bar timeline that accompanies this section expands on her work as well as material collected from the Lesbian Herstory Archives, as well as other sources, in grounding these spaces in temporality and tracing their shifting existence in time. This focus on time is employed in the final chapter in constructing a theory of utopian queer futurity that builds on the work of Muñoz, Munt, and Ahmed in imagining an optimistic spatial and temporal queer future.

While this thesis approaches these themes, histories, and memories from multiple perspectives, it still leaves much work to be done. Foremost, the history of lesbian life in America is fragmented at best, and so much of its intricacies and realities are unknown due to its imperative for secrecy. The works of fiction and memoir that survive are remarkable

resources,<sup>160</sup> but there are still many stories that have been lost. The Lesbian Herstory Archives has done excellent work in preserving these narratives, but as the members of queer communities of the past continue to age, the risk that their memories will also be lost continues to grow. This possibility is both a sadness and an opportunity, and I hope that scholars and archivists continue to uncover the missing pieces of the past, both of New York City and of other queer communities.

2019, the year that I will complete this thesis, is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. This year's events will serve as both a celebration of queer joy and a commemoration of queer loss. In recent years, many of those within queer and trans communities have seen the annual Pride parade as being monopolized by straight partiers who ignore its more meaningful implications. Many also reject the increased police presence in and around the parade, especially in remembering the legacy of police brutality towards queer people that continues to this day. As the parade grows to take over most of Manhattan for the last weekend in June, actual queer spaces seem to disappear: even as this thesis was being written, one of the last lesbian bars in existence, the Bum Bum Bar, closed its doors. Only three lesbian bars now exist. But queer people still look for and desire these spaces, although they may be changing. The shift to impermanent parties, with their inherent flexibility and freedom, has also accompanied greater inclusivity and the breaking down of boundaries of identity. In accordance with the famous slogan "the first Pride was a riot," the annual NYC Dyke March will conduct their 26<sup>th</sup> annual protest march on the evening before

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<sup>160</sup> See: Karla Jay, *Tales of the Lavender Menace*; Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*; Audre Lorde, *Zami, a New Spelling of My Name*; Terry Galloway, *Mean Little Deaf Queer*; Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country*; Rita Mae Brown, *Rubyfruit Jungle*, and many more.

the Pride parade.<sup>161</sup> Their continued commitment to demonstrating for queer visibility and political freedom signifies that the past will not be forgotten, and that queer women and nonbinary people still find community, solace, and joy with and from each other. Over one hundred years have passed since the first recorded bar for women opened in New York City, and even though lesbian bar spaces have opened and closed in myriad manifestations over the decades since, the utopian desire for queer space has not and will never disappear.

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<sup>161</sup> NYC Dyke March, “Herstory of the Dyke March,” <https://www.nycdykemarch.com/herstory> (accessed April 20 2019).

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## **Appendix 1.**

### **Interview with Gwen Shockey**

**7:22 PM, February 13, 2019**

Gwen Shockey: It's funny being on the other end of this because I'm usually the one recording and interviewing women. It's been such a fun process, I love doing it. I feel like it's one of the best ways to get a true idea of what some of those spaces were like.

Zoe Wennerholm: I was wondering what drew you originally to the project, and how you first got the idea.

GS: Where do I even begin...I guess it really goes back to about 10 years ago, after undergrad I moved to New York and I was coming out and just right away Googled lesbian bars, and started going out a lot, to bars, and parties, and just meeting people. The first lesbian bar I ever went into was in Paris, and I will never forget that feeling of walking in and just feeling like oh, my god, I could have a really beautiful life as a queer woman. And there are so many other people like this, I didn't realize. I've been living in New York for about a decade, and I started volunteering for this great organization called the Identity House, which is an all volunteer-run counseling service for the LGBTQ community. They do coming-out support groups and walk-in therapy, so I was hearing all these stories from people in crisis but also from people wanting to talk about coming out and how to find community and all these experiences, and also this frustration with an inability to find community because of dating apps and feeling kind of isolated and lonely, and missing in-person contact. Then the Pulse massacre happened while I was in graduate school, and I went to a vigil at Stonewall,

and then Cubbyhole, and I decided to just totally refocus my master's work around the idea of queer community and safe space. It was a little bit out of fear, a little bit out of sadness, but also just curiosity. So I started interviewing people who I knew about how they found community and space to meet other lesbians and queer women, and it led to just finding all these addresses that people kept mentioning. A lot of them were really vague, like "I got off the F train and walked three blocks, and there was this place" (laughs). So it became this amazing memory thing where people were telling me their memories, and it was so nonspecific and fuzzy, and drunk, and just amazing (laughs). So that's how it started, and it became so many other things over time.

ZW: I've been looking at the project a lot and for many places you have the addresses but not the dates, so where did you find all of that information?

GS: In a way it's a futile and frustrating project. Prior to the early 1970s, everything was mafia-owned, and it was illegal to serve a gay person alcohol in public, and it was illegal for gay people to dance. There was this dress code where if a person was caught wearing less than three articles of female clothing they could be arrested. So there's no documentation about any of these places. I used police records from bar raids, or tax photos at the Business Bureau, which is just images of storefronts. I also spent a ton of time at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn. That place is fantastic, it's a little bit disorganized to piece together the puzzle of everything, especially time wise, but I found a lot of addresses from there. Also from talking to people and from reading nonfiction: Karla Jay wrote a book called Tales of the Lavender Menace which mentions a lot of bars, and Lillian Faderman has written a lot

about it. So there are some books, but honestly they're not the best. I wish there was a more comprehensive timeline and history, but it's just so hard, and so many of these women who lived through the 50s, 60s, and 70s are dying now. I've also been working alongside the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project and we've been sharing information as we find it, because it is tough to uncover. I'm curious, are you finding it difficult to find information?

ZW: Yes, definitely. I have been working on a timeline of each bar, when it opened, and when it closed. But for all of the ones from the 30s and 40s I really just have a name.

GS: Yeah, there's this whole pocket of bars in Harlem that are really old and I can't find anything about them. I really want to get in touch with this group called Salsa Soul Sisters, because they were an activist group that went to a bunch of these bars, but they're all so hard to track down. Because everyone's moved to Miami (laughs).

ZW: So you're still working on it.

GS: Yeah, it's like a constant forever side project that I work on when I have time and when I find new information. I have still a lot to populate on the map and a lot of photos to take, but it's constant never-ending work and research, and I have a visual art practice that has to be more of my main focus.

ZW: You've touched on this a little before, but I'm wondering what the New York lesbian bar means to you? You've mentioned community and things like that...

GS: That's a good question. I've had so many amazing conversations about this with women I've interviewed because I think it's such a tricky thing to navigate, even the concept of the lesbian bar right now—because it has such history, and changes from generation to generation, changes in politics, changes in culture, changes in language. As we advance, or try to advance, as a society, I think spaces become what we as minorities or Othered people need them to be. So you think about butch-femme dynamics, and this super old school idea of the lesbian bar where no femme was with another femme, no butch with another butch, if you messed with a butch's femme you were beat up, it's a parody of gender and a role-playing that's so interesting. And then in the 70s there was a pushing against that and people were embracing more androgyny, and more integrated and mixed spaces. Like Alternate U, which had a lot of women's dances in the 70s and which fit in with civil rights and feminism. And then AIDS hit, and there was this backlash to tragedy, with disco culture and club culture becoming a celebration of life. Then in the 90s, pushing against that, with lesbians embracing "lesbian chic" and fashion and glamour and Madonna and all this media. And when you think about today, I'm 30, and I think I was coming of age at this weird moment right between the existence and nonexistence of dating apps, so it was this really interesting and weird shift where people were maybe feeling lesbian bars weren't important, that they wanted something different. And trans rights were becoming super forefront and people needed spaces that weren't just for gay men, or weren't just for lesbians. So for me it's become this bigger question of who needs space, and what types of spaces do we need. I think it's just so different for everyone. For me, for a while I really needed that kind of Cubbyhole-like space with tons of different types of women, lots of drunkenness, and kind of

dive-y. And then I really needed dance parties, and now as I'm going into my 30s I'm craving more intimate, more low-key gatherings and community. And I'm seeing that happen now. So I think it really shifts with time but I have to say, when things like Pulse happen and when trauma and tragedy strike the community, it just becomes so clear how important it is to have a space like Cubbyhole, that's open all the time and not just one night a month, that you can know the bartender and it's like a safe, safe home. So I don't think the idea of a bar like Cubbyhole will ever go away, but I don't know if it will be called a lesbian bar anymore. I think these spaces will start having other names. Like more queer spaces...but then there's that question of "queerness" disappearing into assimilation, and I feel I really need spaces where I know there's a queer precedent. Where it won't be a bunch of straight and cis men, and where I will walk in and it'll be a space controlled and owned and facilitated by women or nonbinary or trans people. I think somehow that needs to be more pushed to the front, and is being more pushed to the front. I kind of hate to say it but kind of love to say it, it really is the exclusion of straight men versus the inclusion of lesbians (laughs). It is such a different feeling to be in a space that's run by women and owned by men, in my opinion. And it comes with a lot of loaded history, like the first bar that was owned by women was the Sahara in the 70s. And they had such a goddamn hard time getting funding, at that time you needed a man's signature, a husband's approval or whatever. And they were the first women in the state of New York to get a liquor license. Which is crazy! And that wasn't that long ago.

ZW: There is kind of a stereotype that the lesbian bar dying. Do you think that's happening? Or is it more complicated than that?

GS: I do feel like there's been a lot of emphasis on that. Like the end of "lesbian." It's not even the lesbian bar; it's the word too. In a way again I feel really conflicted about it. It means something really amazing, it means inclusivity, and it means more freedom for people to express themselves in a grander category. "Queer" could mean and does mean so many things and such different things for so many people. But I fucking pray that the word lesbian and everything associated with it won't ever disappear or die, because it carries with it a history of so much. There's a history of feminism, of women supporting and uplifting other women, even in the feminist movement. So I always flip-flop between calling myself queer and calling myself a lesbian. Because it's still a dirty word, you know! *The L Word* maybe helped with that, but people don't want to call themselves lesbians, and I sometimes don't understand why. I think it's still sexism.

ZW: My lesbian/queer friends and I talk about it and some of them just feel like the word sounds ugly. But again is that a function of how you learn about it growing up, or a function of the word itself?

GS: I'm curious, when you guys talk about it what are your thoughts on it? How do you identify?

ZW: I usually say queer woman. But as I've been doing this research and reading about the debate between "queer" and "lesbian" I've been using lesbian more, even though I don't think I'm exclusively romantically interested in women. I guess it's a little bit of a reclamation.

GS: Totally! I think for me it has more to do with the politics and the recognition of history than the sexual aspects. It's funny, I think you're the youngest person I've really talked to about this and I would really like to interview and talk to people in their 20s because I'm always wondering if you guys feel differently than I do (laughs), though I'm not that much older.

ZW: One thing I've noticed with people my age and younger is that being gender nonbinary or queer has become way more common than even it was when I was a freshman in college.

GS: Wow. That's not a long period, like 3 or 4 years. How do you feel about that, do you feel like it's liberating?

ZW: Definitely, at least among the people I know who have started to come out as using they/them pronouns it's really liberating for them.

GS: It's cool what it can do, not only for an individual person but with language, in such a big way.

ZW: And it's interesting to hear about how that's influenced the nightlife scene. I have been reading about trans people feeling uncomfortable in lesbian spaces in the 2000s, and that possibly contributing to bars dying out.

GS: Yeah, that's absolutely the case. There's a huge history of discrimination in the LGBT community, even in the first pride parade. Lesbians were not included in the GAA, and Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P Johnson were booed offstage, while they were begging the gay male community to support them and the work they were doing with the trans community. No one would help them, and they were being fucking murdered and dying, it's horrifying to read about. But when I talked to Karla Jay who was in the GLF, she was friends with Marsha and the GLF was really known for being super inclusive and I almost feel like that's a model that a lot of people are really identifying with now. It is consensus-based organizing and total inclusion, giving everyone equal voice. Almost socialist, I guess.

ZW: Do you think that is manifesting in current nightlife spaces?

GS: I do! I think there will always be people and communities who want exclusionary spaces, and I think it's natural and normal to want to be around people who are a lot like you. Like gay men, or lesbians, or the leather community, or people into BDSM—people with really specific interests and identities. But I think there's a bigger push and bigger sensibility right now of laying down framework for safe space, not having to do with who we're going to exclude but making very clear the terms of inclusion and safety. Which I think really is modeled amazingly with the GLF and the work they were doing in the 70s and 60s. So it's funny how history repeats itself (laughs). There are a lot of parties now that are one-night takeovers of club spaces and bars, and they're just queer, and anyone can come. And there are some nights that are super lezzie, some that are a lot of guys, some with an amazing mix of people—it just seems open. But there's still loneliness, especially in the trans and

nonbinary community. They feel like they don't know where they belong, and still feel like the language is oppressive.

ZW: I'm curious to hear about the parties you know of and go to, and how you know when one will have more lesbians?

GS: I think that's actually what makes it hard, is so much of this information is disseminated on social media now, like Instagram mostly, and I think people often don't know. Especially if you're new to the city, you really have to meet people and talk to people and network and make a huge effort to find out what's going on. New York is huge, but the community is small, and once you meet enough people and once you've been here long enough, things get passed around pretty fast by word of mouth. There are a lot of parties! There's PAT, which JD Samson and Amber Valentine DJ, at this bar called Union Pool in Bushwick which its always pretty heavily women. But it's queer, anyone can come, it's a queer takeover and it's really fun and fantastic. There's a bar called the Woods in Williamsburg that has a weekly queer night, it used to be a lesbian night and now it's become a queer night, called MISSter at the Woods. And then you've got more play parties, like Gush which is a POC friendly party, they have queer strippers and its really inclusive and body and sex positive. It's maybe more like the Clit Club in the 90s. Friends of mine have been starting their own things, I have a friend who's started a figure drawing group for lesbians and nonbinary people called Ladies Life Draw, and it's gotten huge. It's every other week and created a big community, and can be found on Instagram. Another friend of mine started a space in Bushwick called Eleven, which is a performance/gallery/party space which is also women and nonbinary inclusive.

They do art openings, performances, and dance parties on the eleventh of every month. Another friend started a queer and lesbian and nonbinary movie night/festival called the Bush, and she just started it in her backyard and now it's become pretty big. And yeah, there are so many parties (laughs). Most of them are monthly. There's Holy Mountain and Hey Queen, which happen every month. There's Be Cute at Littlefield, which is also a POC-oriented dance party. And there's Brooklyn Boihood, which is a great collective of boi-identified people that throws pretty open parties. But I have to say there really aren't any lesbian-specific parties anymore. I can't think of one (laughs), which is interesting. And I don't know that many people that go to Henrietta Hudson, which is an amazing historic place. That and Ginger's, and this place in Queens are the only actual lesbian bars. I just don't know many people that go to them anymore.

ZW: Do you mean the Bum Bum Bar? I think they actually just closed a few weeks ago.

GS: Did they? Oh my god! I'm shocked, are you serious? Wow, holy shit, I'll have to look that up (groans). I have to say that doesn't surprise me because the couple times I went there was no one there and I ended up just drinking tequila with the bartender. It's just bound to happen at some point I guess.

ZW: So do you think that the future of queer and lesbian nightlife is moving towards these monthly or irregular parties?

GS: I think so. A lot of this has to do with the economics of New York right now. New York is a really spectacularly hard place to create anything anymore. Whether its art or opening a business, it's totally overpopulated and expensive and there's no wiggle room anymore, it's really sad. I think spaces that opened years and years ago opened because there was a lot of opportunity. There were tons of vacant buildings and rent was literally nothing. Now its just really hard, you need a huge amount of income generation and I think that makes it impossible to even conceive of a bar only for women, or only for trans people, because there's just not enough money in the community. I don't know many lesbians who have the capital to start something.

ZW: How have your friends found it in starting up their projects? They seem to have started small and then grown.

GS: I think there will always be these same dynamics. The more older women I talk to, the more I'm so happy and also deeply depressed by how similar their stories are to mine. They had this amazing time in their youths of partying and finding community and being together, and amazing nightlife, but then you step out of it for a little while, and maybe its hard to reenter, or people start having families, or move away. It has to do with age, and shifts in life and culture. Most of my friends are between 30 and their mid 40s now, and I just think people really crave more care and beauty and sophistication—I don't know why I want to say sophistication. I guess just diversity and options, different things to do besides just getting fucking blackout drunk at dive bars (laughs). Which is why my friends' drawing group and film festival have been fun because they've offered such different things for people.

Everyone loves to go dancing and party in the summertime, and those parties get really packed in the summer. But people want different fun things to do, and I don't think there's any lack of creative talented DJs and musicians and artists who are creating nightlife.

Nightlife will never go away, people will always find ways to celebrate and dance and have fun together. Even in the most expensive places in the world (laughs).

ZW: One of the things I've been thinking about is that in narratives over time, there are rhetorics of nostalgia for past places and also the concept of lesbian utopia. I often hear about lesbians and queer women who are dissatisfied with their current situation, and it seems to come up throughout the history of what I've been reading. So I'm wondering what the ideal lesbian bar would be for different people. What is your ideal queer lesbian nightlife space?

GS: I guess I have two answers. One would be how it is now, this shifting of types of party spaces and shifting of needs to accommodate crisis, and space availability, and music tastes. But I've been going to a couple parties thrown by Wanda Acosta who threw parties and owned bars in the 90s. If you've watched the L Word, when Bette goes to New York and picks up a woman in a lesbian bar and takes her back to her hotel—that was a real bar. This woman Wanda owned it, and she also threw the Sundays at Café Tabac parties, which a lot of celebrities went to and which totally changed the aesthetics of lesbian identity and fashion and presentation. She started throwing some parties again once in a while in New York and it feels really different. I've heard so many older women talk about it and now experiencing it myself I just really felt it. Wanda herself is just so warm and caring, and welcomes people into the space, really remembers most people's names, and if she notices someone

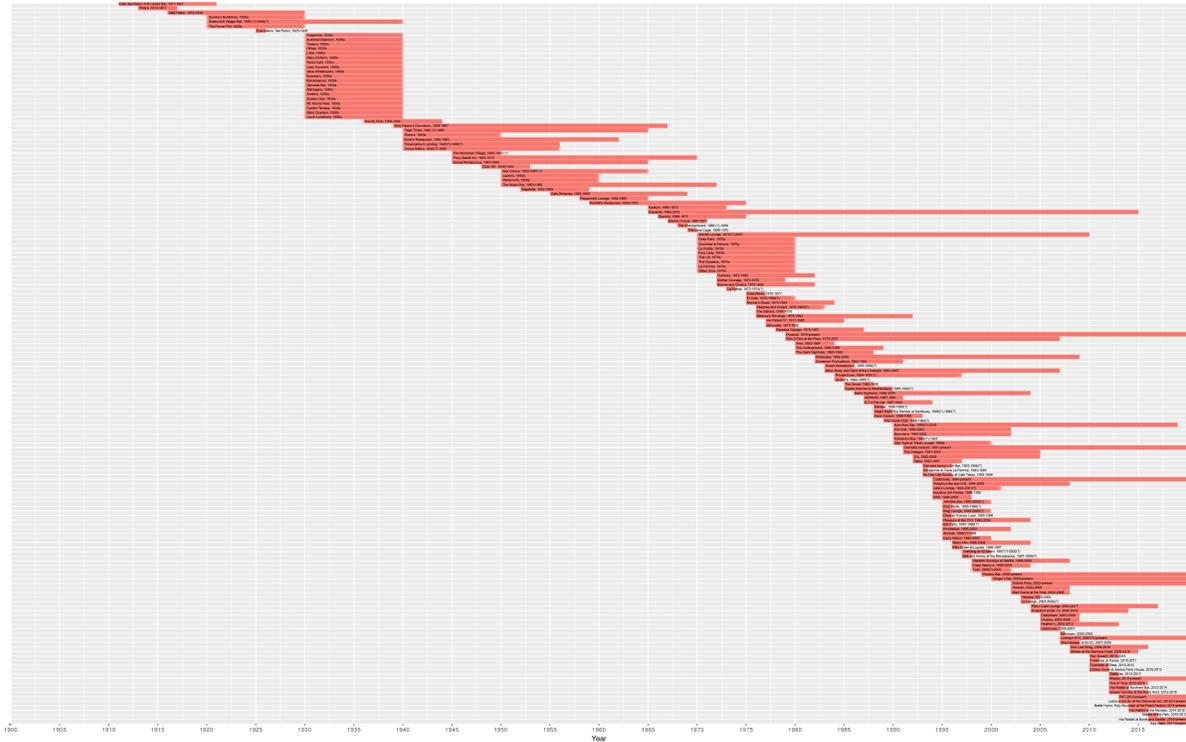
uncomfortable she ushers them in and makes them feel comfortable. I would have to say my ideal space would be a space where people are not on their phones all the time. I feel like a lot of parties now are really seamy and people are kind of insecure and only care about how cool they look, and it can feel cold. These parties Wanda throws, they're just so warm and sexy. And super diverse, like anyone can come. There are women in their 60s and 70s, 20s, 30s, 40s—a huge age range. Also really good music and performers: one time she had a belly dancer, one time she had a bondage rope performer. So it's sexy and there is a lot of attention to space, she has them in really classy spaces. So for me that's ideal, having age diversity, race diversity, class diversity, and having it be warm and not about Instagram. I have a lot of feelings about Instagram right now (laughs). I feel like it's changing the way we interact with each other in really weird ways.

ZW: Thinking about the Internet and Instagram—I definitely see or have felt a lot of anti-phone sentiment, but also at the same time it seems like a useful tool for people finding these spaces.

GS: I agree with you, I think there's so much merit to social media because it makes the world feel smaller which is a beautiful and terrible thing. It kind of takes away the mystery, and a lot of those chance encounters... I just lately have been feeling disillusioned, and that might be because I've been living here for too long, but it's the same people—I might need to broaden my horizons, but it just feels small.

## Appendix 2.

### Timeline of New York Lesbian Bars



Please visit <https://imgur.com/BhHNoRy> for a full-size version. Each bar on the graph represents a bar, club, or party meant for lesbians or queer and nonbinary people over the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Below is a table listing the bars along with their dates of opening and closing and addresses, if known. For those whose specific dates are unknown, the decade in which they were open is listed. Those for which no temporal information could be found are listed at the bottom.

Bar Name	Year Open	Year Closed	Location	Decade	Notes
Cafe des Beaux Arts Ladies Bar	1911	1921	80 West 40th Street		
Polly's	1913	1917	137 MacDougal Street		

Mad Hatter	1916	1930	150 West 4th Street		
Gumby's Bookstore	?	?	5th Avenue between 131st Street and 132nd Street	1920s	
The Flower Pot	?	?	Corner of Gay Street and Christopher Street	1920s	
Eve Adams' Tea Room	1925	1926	129 McDougal Street		
Louis' Luncheon	?	?	116 MacDougal Street	1930s-40s	
Zodiac Club	?	?	2nd Avenue between 126th Street and 127th Street	1930s-40s	
Mt. Morris Park	?	?	East side of Marcus Garvey Park between 122nd Street and 124th Street either on Madison Avenue or Park Avenue	1930s-40s	Is this a cruising ground? Unclear
Carlton Terrace	?	?	Columbus Avenue between 104th Street and 105th Street	1930s-40s	
Blind Charlies	?	?	110th Street between 5th Avenue and Madison Avenue	1930s-40s	
Andre's	?	?	126th Street between Frederick Douglass Boulevard and Morningside Avenue	1930s-40s	
Grapevine	?	?	Broadway between 157th Street and 158th Street	1930s-40s	
Audobon Ballroom	?	?	Amsterdam Avenue between 156th Street and 157th Street	1930s-40s	
Tubby's	?	?	West 155th Street and St. Nicholas Place	1930s-40s	
Hilltop	?	?	155th Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard	1930s-40s	
L Bar	?	?	Broadway between West 145th Street and West 146th Street	1930s-40s	
Mary Archer's	?	?	146th Street between Frederick Douglass Boulevard and 7th Avenue	1930s-40s	
News Cafe	?	?	Lenox Avenue between 145th Street and 146th Street	1930s-40s	
Lady Cunard's	?	?	143rd Street between Lenox Avenue and 7th Avenue	1930s-40s	
Alice Whitehead's	?	?	St. Nicholas Avenue	1930s-	

			between 139th Street and 140th Street	40s	
Snookie's	?	?	Amsterdam Avenue between 140th Street and 141st Street	1930s-40s	
Renaissance	?	?	7th Avenue between 136th Street and 137th Street	1930s-40s	
Zamezie Bar	?	?	132nd Street between Frederick Douglass Boulevard and 7th Avenue	1930s-40s	
Mahogany	?	?	132nd Street between 7th Avenue and Lenox Avenue	1930s-40s	
Greenwich Village Ball	1931	?	119 East 11th Street		
Howdy Club	1936	1944	47 West 3rd Street		
Tony Pastor's Downtown	1939	1967	130 West 3rd Street		Mostly gay men; shut down by SLA
Ernie's Restaurant	1940	1962	76 West 3rd Street		
Provincetown Landing	?	?	Corner of Bleecker Street and Thompson Street	1940s-50s	Open 1955
Jimmy Kelly's	?	1956	181 Sullivan Street		
Mona's	?	?	135 West 3rd Street	1940s-1950s	
Page Three	?	1965		open 1940s	
The Moroccan Village	1945	?	23 West 8th Street	closed 1950s	
Pony Stable Inn	1945	1970	150 West 4th Street		
Swing Rendezvous	1945	1965	117 MacDougal Street		Where Kitty Genovese met her girlfriend
Club 181	1948	1953	181 2nd Avenue		
Sea Colony	?	?	52 West 8th Avenue	1950s-60s	
Laurel's	?	?		1950s	
Wellsworth	?	?	126th Street and 7th Avenue	1950s	Black lesbian bar in back, straight bar in front
The Music Box	1950	1972	121 West 3rd Street		Mostly gay men
Bagatelle	1952	1959	86 University Place		
Cafe Bohemia	1955	1969	15 Barrow Street		
Peppermint Lounge	1958	1965	128 West 45th Street		
Portofino Restaurant	1959	1975	206 Thompson Street		Not a bar, but popular among discreet lesbians

Kooky's	1965	1973	149 West 14th Street		
Escuelita	1965	2015	301 West 39th Street		Trans/drag
Gianni's	1966	1975	53 West 19th Street		
The Checkerboard	?	1969	Christopher Street Between 7th Avenue and Bleecker Street		
Electric Circus	1967	1971	19-25 St. Mark's Place		Warhol club scene, not just lesbian
The Love Cage	1969	1970	3rd Street near 6th Avenue		
La Femme	?	?	85 Washington Place	1970s	Either before or after 1974
Kitten Club	?	?	277 Bleecker Street	1970s	Klub?
Chez Pat's	?	?	23 East 74th Street	1970s	
Churchez La Femme (party at Cheetah)?	?	?	108 West 43rd Street	1970s	
La Chatte	?	?	232 Park Avenue	1970s	
Foxy Lady	?	?	232 Park Avenue	1970s	Maybe related to La Chatte?
The Lib	?	?	305 East 45th Street	1970s	
The Goddess	?	?	24 East 22nd Street	1970s	
Duchess	1972	1982	101 7th Avenue South		Duchess-->Duchess Caffe(1983)-->Grove Club (1985)-- >Duchess2 (around 1988)
Mother Courage	1972	1979	342 West 11th Street		Feminist restaurant, not a bar; did serve alcohol
Bonnie and Clyde's	1972	1982	82 West 3rd Street		
La Palma	1973	?	370 Myrtle Avenue		
Casa Maria	1975	1977	53 West 19th Street		
El Cafe	1975	?	116 MacDougal Street		
Ronnie's Roost	1975	1984	2130 Broadway		
Peaches and Cream	1976	?	1201 Lexington Avenue		Still open in 1983
The Sahara	1976	1979	1234 2nd Avenue		
Medusa's Revenge	1976	1992	10 Bleecker Street		First openly lesbian theater
Ice Palace 57	1977	1985	57 West 57th Street		
Silhouette	1977	1980	53 West 19th Street		Related to Casa

					Maria?
Paradise Garage	1978	1987	84 King Street		Club, no alcohol, just dancing--not lesbian, mostly gay men
Pyramid	1979	now	101 Avenue A		Not just lesbian--drag/gay
Fem 2 Fem at the Roxy	1979	2007	515 West 18th Street		
Starlite Lounge	?	2010	1084 Bergen Street, Brooklyn	open 1970s	Not just lesbian--inclusive gay bar
Ariel	1980	1984	53 West 19th Street		Came after the Silhouette
The Underground	1980	1989	860 Broadway		
The Saint Nightclub	1980	1988	432 Lafayette Street		Usually only gay men (women not allowed); but there were lesbian nights (Shescape?)
SheScape	1982	2009	Multiple locations		Traveling event producer
Cinnamon Productions	1982	1991	130 West 43rd Street		
Sweet Sensations II	1983	?	6322 20th Avenue, Brooklyn		
Mind, Body, and Spirit at the Limelight (party)	1983	2007	660 6th Avenue		Club scene; party was (only?) in 1988
Private Eyes	1984	1997?	12 West 21st Street		Gay bar
Jo Ann's	1984	?	73 8th Avenue		Related to J'Taime?
The Grove	1985	1988	101 7th Avenue South		
Tracks (Women's Wednesdays)	1985	?	531 West 19th Street		
Nell's Nightclub	1986	2004	246 West 14th Street		Chic; not just lesbian
GirlWorld	1987	1991			Regular event at the WORLD (now an evangelical church)--Sarah Schulman
D. T. Fat Club/D. T.'s Fat Cat	1987	1994	281 West 12th Street		
Savage	1988	?	208 West 23rd Street		
Magic Night Tea Dances at Sanctuary	1988	?	41 West 8th Street		
Cave Canem	1988	1993	25 1st Avenue		
The Crane Club	1989	?	408 Amsterdam Avenue		

Bum Bum Bar	early 1990s	2019	63-14 Roosevelt Avenue, Queens		
Skin-Tight at Tribal Lounge	?	?	22 7th Avenue South	1990s	
Put a Scandalosa at Mother	?	?	432 West 14th Street	1990s	Same location as Clit Club; party thrown by Wanda Acosta
Yummy at Cafe Melville	?	?	110 Barrow Street	1990s	Party thrown by Wanda Acosta
Soho Groove at Sticky!	?	?	386 West Broadway	1990s	Party thrown by Wanda Acosta
Clit Club	1990	2002	432 West 14th Street		
Philippine Garden	1990	?	455 Second Avenue		Restaurant
Brownie's	1990	2002	169 Avenue A		Music venue, not necessarily lesbian
Henrietta Hudson	1991	now	38 Hudson Street		
The Octagon	1991	2005	555 West 33rd Street		Mostly men?
Pandora's Box	?	1993	70 Grove Street		
2is	1992	2005	248 West 14th Street		Traveling party; grand opening april 15
Tatou	1992	1997	151 East 50th Street		
Deb and Jenny's Girl Bar	1993	?			Traveling event--at Boy Bar, Southern Funk Cafe
Indulgence at Casa La Femme	1993	1993	150 Wooster Street		Party thrown by Wanda Acosta--only twice
No Day Like Sunday at Cafe Tabac	1993	1996	232 East 9th Street		Party thrown by Wanda Acosta
Cubbyhole	1994	now	281 West 12th Street		
Rubyfruit Bar and Grill	1994	2008	531 Hudson Street		
Julie's Lounge	1994	?	305 East 53rd Street		Still open 2001?
Industria Girl Parties	1994	1998	775 Washington Street		
Orbit	1994	1998	46 Bedford Street		Restaurant
Her/She Bar	1995	?	229 West 28th Street		Still open 2000
Club Berlin	1995	?	1 West 125th Street		
Stag Lounge	1995	?	31 Union Square West		
Circa at Trompe L'oeil	1995	1996	55 Carmine Street		Party thrown by Wanda Acosta
Pleasure at Bar D'O	1995	2004	29 Bedford Street		

Girl Party	1995	?	15 St. Mark's Place		Location of Boy Bar
Wonderbar	1995	2002	505 East 6th Street		Owned by Wanda Acosta
Carry Nation	1995	2000	363 5th Avenue, Brooklyn		Now is Ginger's
Bra Bar (traveling party)	1995?	1998	251 West 30th Street;150 1st Avenue		
Meow Mix	1996	2004	269 East Houston Street		
Kitty Glitter at Liquids	1996	1997	266 East 10th Street		Party thrown by Wanda Acosta
SheBang at 40 Below	1997	?	40 West 8th Street		
Milk and Honey at the Renaissance Lounge	1997	?	33 East 73rd Street		
Starlette Sundays at Starlite	1998	2008	167 Avenue A		Party thrown by Wanda Acosta, bar owned by her
Twirl	1998?	2002	208 West 23rd Street		Large dance venue, maybe not gay
Crazy Nanny's	1998	2004	21 7th Avenue South		
Phoenix Bar	1999	now	447 East 13th Street		Mostly gay men but all welcome
Ginger's Bar	2000	now	363 5th Avenue, Brooklyn		
Submit	2002	now	Park Slope		
Heaven	2002	2008	579 6th Avenue		
Mad Clams at the Hole	2002	2008	29 2nd Avenue		
Viscaya	2003	2005	191 7th Avenue		
Q Lounge	2003	?	220 West 19th Street		
Pillow Cafe Lounge	2004	2017	505 Myrtle Avenue, Brooklyn		
Snapshot at Bar 13	2004	2014	35 East 13th Street		Inclusive
Cattyshack	2005	2009	249 4th Avenue, Brooklyn		
Chueca	2005	2009	69-04 Woodside Avenue, Queens		
Heather's	2005	2013	506 East 13th Street		
Clubhouse	2005	2007	700 East 9th Street		Owned by Wanda Acosta
Girlsroom	2005	2005	210 Rivington Street		
Bordello at Nowhere Bar	2006	?	149 West 14th Street		Party thrown by Wanda Acosta
Showstopper at	2007	2009	199 Bowery		Party thrown by

BLVD					Wanda Acosta
One Last Shag	2008	2016	348 Franklin Avenue		Originally Sweet Revenge (name change)
Stiletto at the Maritime Hotel	2008	2015	363 West 16th Street		
Hey Queen!	2010	2013	221 North 9th Street		Regular party at Sugarland (now closed)
Truckstop at Pacha	2010	2011	618 West 46th Street		
Truckstop at Slate	2010	2012	54 West 21st Street		
Choice Cunts at Santos Party House	2010	2012	85 Avenue A		
Dalloway	2012	2013	527 Broome Street		
Misster (party)	2012	now	48 South 4th Street, Brooklyn (The Woods)		Regular party at the Woods
This N' That	2012	2016	108 North 6th Street, Brooklyn		Alt-queer, not lesbian; included drag
Hot Rabbit at Nowhere Bar	2012	now	322 East 14th Street		Still going; not sure when started
Scissor Sunday at the Rusty Knot	2012	2016	425 West Street		
PAT (party)	2013	now	484 Union Avenue, Brooklyn		Regular party at Union Pool
Lesbo-a-Go-Go at the Stonewall Inn	2013? earlier?	now	53 Christopher Street		
Hot Rabbit at the Monster	2014	2016	80 Grove Street		
Battle Hymn, Holy Mountain at the Flash Factory (parties)	2016, 2014	now	229 West 28th Street		Inclusive
Stiletto at the Park	2016	2017	118 10th Avenue		Party?
Hot Rabbit at Boots and Saddle	2016	now?	100A Seventh Avenue South		
Bad Habit	2017	now			Traveling event--at Lot 45
Lovergirl NYC	?	now?	28 East 23rd Street		Traveling event?
Grand	?	?	275 Grand Avenue, Brooklyn	???	
Butterfly's (S.O.S.)	?	?	20 West 39th Street	???	
The Madison Mansion	?	?	29 East 32nd Street	???	
Serena	?	?	222 West 23rd Street	???	

Her Bar	?	?	113 Jane Street	???	
Eden	?	?	432 Lafayette Street	???	
B. Babes	?	?	507 Jane Street	???	