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## Here I Am And Here I'm Not: Queer Women's Use Of Temporary Urban Spaces In Post-Katrina New Orleans

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Here I Am And Here I'm Not:  
Queer Women's Use Of Temporary Urban Spaces In Post-Katrina New Orleans

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Science in  
Urban Studies  
with a concentration in Urban Anthropology

By

Vigdís María Hermannsdóttir

Bachelor of Anthropology, University of New Orleans, 2013

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## **Abstract**

This thesis builds on previous work on the relationship between queer identities and urban space. Drawing from an analysis of two recurring New Orleans-based queer women's events, I examine how lesbians and queer women not only use but also actively produce social spaces of their own through participation in events organized specifically for lesbians and queer women. Using qualitative methods, I examine the ephemeral and transient quality of lesbian and queer women's social spaces in post-Katrina New Orleans and the processes through which such spaces come into being. I argue that lesbian and queer women's production of ephemeral social spaces provides an opportunity to ground informal social networks in urban spatial locations, to sustain internal visibility, and to create embodied impressions of a cohesive community by emphasizing the role of the body, not geographic borders, for reimagining social territories in urban landscapes. Within this context, attention is given to the class-based and racial projects that affect the trajectory of contemporary queer urban space formation and queer women's experiences therein.

**Key words:** [lesbians, lesbian bars, queer women, queer spaces, New Orleans, drag kings]

## Introduction

I moved from Iceland to New Orleans in the fall of 2009. At the time, the Rubyfruit Jungle on Decatur Street was the only lesbian bar in the city. When the Rubyfruit Jungle closed in 2012, its closing marked the end of New Orleans' elaborate history of lesbian bars, spanning over at least six decades. During the 1970s and 1980s, there were sometimes as many as nine lesbian bars open at the same time. By the 1990s, their numbers began to decline, and from 1999 to 2012, the Rubyfruit Jungle was the only lesbian bar still in business in the city.

The lesbian bars in New Orleans were mostly located around the periphery of the French Quarter, on North Rampart Street and Elysian Fields, where property values were relatively lower than in the middle of the French Quarter itself. The Tiger Lounge on Tchoupitoulas Street was one of the first lesbian bars in the city, followed by Brady's on North Rampart Street, and the Grog, the Soiled Dove, and Charlene's and Pinot's on Elysian Fields, among many more. These bars signified important spaces of emotional refuge for lesbians and queer women before there were any appropriate ways of being 'out' as a gay person. They represented the vulnerable space between the public and the private, the visible and the invisible, and for many, the first step of 'coming out' was going into one of these bars.

Since the disappearance of lesbian bars in New Orleans, some have suggested that lesbian bars are not needed anymore, that lesbians are not really in need of that 'one place to go.' Yet, Susan, who as a young person frequented the lesbian bars of New Orleans in the 1970s and 1980s, during the lesbian bar scene's heyday, expressed:

I wish there were women's bars still. It was a lot of fun starting from here and making your way through maybe six bars, all on the outskirts, all with a different kind of personalities. Sometimes I think it would be pretty cool if I could just go and know I'm going to be in a room full of other dykes.

Longstanding public institutions dedicated specifically to lesbians and queer women are, for the most part, unknown and the few remaining lesbian bars in the United States are rapidly vanishing across the country. The rapid disappearance of lesbian bars in the United States does not reflect a lack of demand, desire, or need for such spaces but rather reveals some of the cultural, economic, and social changes that have occurred following the gay liberation movement, the emergence of AIDS, the sweeping effects of gentrification in large American cities, the gendered inequalities that effect gay and lesbians' use of urban spaces, and an increase in acceptance of queer people within mainstream institutions.

The politics of queer visibility and belonging are rooted in the constructed, experienced, and imagined social spaces that gays and lesbians have made their homes and sites of resistance since the late 1960s. Following the Stonewall riots in 1969, many queer activists sought recognition through voluntary visibility in public space, using slogans such as "Out of the Closets and Into the Streets" and "We're Here! We're Queer! Get used to it!" (Hanhardt, 2013). However, the androcentric lens through which queer visibility is most commonly documented usually leaves out the narratives of lesbians of queer women.

After the Stonewall riots, most lesbians and queer women did not have the access to the resources that would have made it possible for them to take part in the conspicuous consumption of commercial queer spaces, or buying properties in newly established gay neighborhoods. Furthermore, many lesbian and queer women (as well as gay men of color) chose to avoid the risk of conflict or violence by opting for the safety of the private sphere, and thus were more easily made invisible in popular discourse.

In this thesis, I present an analysis of two recurring events organized for lesbians and queer women. When I began conducting this research, my overall research questions was: how



do lesbians and queer women use urban spaces to construct imagined spaces of their own in post-Katrina New Orleans? I conducted fieldwork at two events for lesbians and queer women over the course of two years, from 2013 to 2015. One of the events was held weekly at a bar in the French Quarter, and the other was held biweekly at a bar in the Marigny neighborhood. Both events took place on Tuesday nights and had a similar goal: to create a space for lesbians and queer women to gather, meet, and socialize in public. Although the demographics and overall character of these events varied, the construction of space during both events was a fluid project contingent upon the intent and organization of those in charge, the participation of attendees and their use of physical space.

Instead of framing the issue of lesbian and queer women's construction of temporary urban spaces as a matter of failure to obtain and sustain steady spaces of their own, I seek to highlight the unique nature of temporary spaces as something unique in and of themselves. In order to fully understand the spaces I studied for this research, they must be thought of as bridges between the queer urban enclaves and the dispersed social networks of lesbians and queer women. The temporary social spaces of lesbians and queer women only existed within particular places during specific times, and the creation of these spaces was a process that depended primarily on the participation of lesbians and queer women by attending and returning to these imagined spaces. I call for an understanding of these ephemeral queer women's spaces as operating in between the public and the private, as spaces where lesbians and queer women can seek each other's company in public, while still keeping the events relatively private.

The events I studied were not explicitly advertised in any mainstream mediums. Instead, information about events was mostly circulated through very specific lines of communication, through word-of-mouth and semi-private social media pages (which one had to both find and

‘like’ before receiving invites to events). Inside knowledge about these spaces was thus produced through participation, discourse, and manifested itself in the memories, conversations, and photographs of those who attended and returned to events. Therefore, although these events were welcome to all in theory, the target audience was specific to lesbians and queer women and the maintenance of a degree of invisibility was required in order to keep them that way.

Historically, lesbian and queer women’s use of urban space has never been about claiming territory. In my own research, I found that these ephemeral queer women’s spaces in post-Katrina New Orleans did not operate to challenge dominant heteronormative social structures, or to dismantle mainstream gay institutions. Rather, these spaces were much more reliant upon the use of the body, experiences, and participation rather than the establishment of geographic territories. The events moved between venues over the course of the two years I conducted this work and although the quality of the venues themselves varied in terms of management and physical space, the most important aspect in the creation of lesbian and queer women’s space was the active participation of lesbians and queer women by showing up and returning to the events each time.

This thesis offers a rethinking of the ways in which lesbians and queer women produce social space, and a new way of thinking about the interdependent nature of urban space and queer women’s bodies. With this research, I seek to go beyond simply mapping sexual territories in cities by opting to focus on the ways in which public urban spaces can be used to ground constellated social networks of lesbians and queer women, and help create an embodied representation of a cohesive queer women’s community.

## Chapter One: Literature Review

### Formation of Queer Identities

French social theorist Michel Foucault's inquiry into the relationship between power, knowledge, and sexuality built the foundation for contemporary academic work on queer subjectivity. In *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (1978), Foucault conceptualized sexuality not as a natural fact of human life, but rather a constructed category of experience that has social, cultural, and historical origins. Foucault noted that starting in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the discourse of sexuality became increasingly moralistic and sexuality became an issue that demanded truth constantly, a confession that had to be submitted to the public at all times.

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Western world, techniques of obtaining confessions on the truth of sex manifested themselves in various societal institutions in both scientific and religious discourse. These included the Christian penance, psychoanalysis, and the conceptualization of sexual deviance towards the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. During this time, sexual behaviors and desires were pathologized and depathologized at will, revealing the constant struggle of distinguishing whether "sexual deviations" or "perversions" were mental disorders, or unethical and immoral behaviors (De Block & Adriaens, 2013).

The power of the confession is that it constructs a narrative. Foucault traces Western society's preoccupation with the search for true personal identity to a history of public surveillance. Constant examinations and demands for confessions of sexual desires and behaviors actually created the framework for thinking about sexual minorities. According to Foucault, the emergence of the public discourse of the hazardous truth of sexuality gave way to constant talk about sexuality. By speaking about it, and by participating in dialogue about

sexuality, it became a part of social realities. And through this discursive process, knowledge of actual sexual subjects was produced.

Following Foucault's work on the construction of sexual subjects, Judith Butler conceptualizes the performativity of gender in *Gender Trouble* (1993) in which she considers the reproduction of specific gendered persons through the ongoing repetition of gender norms produced in discourse. Butler asserts that gender is really produced as a narrative that is sustained by the collective agreement to perform polar genders, and the belief in the discrete nature of these narratives. In this sense, gender is an ongoing performance of multiple human agents to maintain this regulatory gendered framework. In her discussion, Butler offers a new perspective of the materiality of the body and the discursive performativity of sexuality.

Both Foucault and Butler explain how the use and desires of the body determined the ways in which sexual and gender subjects were defined, and thus the body became the foundation of sexual and gender subjectifications. This also includes the body's dress and comportment. In Susan Crane's examination of Joan of Arc in "Clothing and Gender Definition: Joan of Arc" (1996), Crane argues that the perception of Joan of Arc's masculine dress as a soldier came from the position that gender encompasses both exterior social interpretations of gendered practices as well as the diffused expression of sexual desire. Self-correction and adoption to masculine dress distinguished Joan of Arc from the category of womanhood, but Crane considers Foucault's insights of institutional regulation of sexuality as not simply repressive, but rather productive, in the formation of Joan of Arc's identity. By looking at Joan of Arc's ongoing resistances to power, her identity can be perceived as a construction vacillating between two gendered poles. Finally, Crane argues that Joan of Arc's subjectivity is one "that

takes gender to be constituted in its performance rather than derived from a preexisting true self' (Crane 1996: 298).

The juxtaposition of 'true nature' and 'performance' in the literature exposes some of the ingrained dichotomized ideologies of Western thought. This implies that if one's 'true nature' deviates from accepted norms, the individual will always attempt to hide it while the public will always demand the truth. Building on Foucault's theories of the construction of sexuality through discourse, in *Epistemology of the Closet* (2008), Eve Sedgwick presents her argument of 'the closet' as a defining structure, a spiritual metaphor, for the mechanisms for comprehending the dynamics of queer visibility. Sedgwick argues that the binary oppositions of Western ideologies are limiting to the understanding of sexuality, and to the idea of the private and the public. She uses the metaphor of the 'closet' to explain the regulation of the lives of gay men and lesbian women and argues that the dichotomized view of the public and the private, of heterosexuality and homosexuality really limits the freedom to think about the complexities of social realities. Following Foucault and Butler, Sedgwick also bases her analysis on the idea that language and discourse impacts sexuality through labeled speech and confessions of the nature of true sexuality.

The conceptualization of sexual subjects exists within very particular spatial contexts. In his chapter "Foucault, Sexuality, Geography" in *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography* (2007), Philip Howell asserts that Foucault's delineation of the history of sexuality is really a 'spatial history' of bodies and spaces. Within this context, Howell provides a discussion of the geographies of sexuality in which he emphasizes the role of space in sexual normalization, and in the production of the boundaries of sexual tolerance and freedom.

## **Queer Urban Space Formation**

The literature on queer urban space formation is primarily framed around two things. On one hand, a significant proportion of scholarship focuses on mapping and interpreting the economic and social processes behind the geographic concentrations of sexual minorities within cities (Bell & Binnie, 2004; Browne, Lim, & Brown, 2007; Nusser & Anacker, 2013; Valentine, 2001). And, on the other hand, a considerable amount of research goes beyond mapping the geographic locations of sexualized territory, and draws attention to the constellated networks of queer individuals in dispersed public and private spaces (Hanhardt, 2013; Larry Knopp, 2004; Pritchard, Morgan, & Sedgley, 2002; Y. Taylor, 2008; Yvette Taylor & Addison, 2013).

The connection between sexuality to urban space is tangled in a history of secrecy and shame. Before 1962, engaging in sexual acts with persons of the same sex was a felony in every state in the U.S. (Painter, 1991). Central to the history of queer urban space formation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the significance of the public resistance to street violence and police brutality that launched the community action for gay liberation in the late 1960s. Emerging out of the momentum of a decade of social movements, such as the civil rights movement, the second wave feminist movement, and anti-Vietnam war demonstrations, marginalized sexual minority groups began to fight for liberation from violence and oppression.

At this time, there were no public institutions in United States that recognized same-sex relationships, and there were no public ways to be 'out' as a gay person. Some of the few places where sexual minorities could socialize were underground gay bars. Gay bars in large cities represented refuges for queer people. They were places where queer individuals could find like-minded people, and where they could seek out support and community. These spaces were, however, by no means safe. For a long time, gay bars were primary targets of police raids and

hate crimes. Finally, on a summer night in July of 1969, at the Stonewall Inn in New York City, patrons of the Stonewall Inn turned a routine bar raid into a symbolic resistance against anti-gay violence. Numerous gay liberation organizations arose in the aftermath of the Stonewall riots in the name of protection against street violence. But, an increase in queer visibility in cities made queer individuals also even more vulnerable to violence in many cases. This vulnerability to violence was in many ways combated through privatized claims to neighborhoods and ongoing commodification of queer cultures. As a result, queer urban communities became diffused with the models of differentiation regulated through neoliberal market restrictions and the defining functions of the city built on the belief in individual rights and faith in the equalizing powers of the free market.

### **Gentrification and Queer Urban Subjects**

In “The Rise of the Creative Class: Why Cities Without Gays and Rock Bands are Losing the Economic Development Race” (2002), Richard Florida conceptualizes the impact of the *creative class* as a group of artists, musicians, and young professionals that flock to cities such as San Francisco, Austin, San Diego, and New York. In his analysis, Florida discusses how the concentration of the “creative class” in these cities has worked to restructure the local socioeconomic hierarchies. Florida discusses the importance of visible diversity “as a signal that a community embraces the open meritocratic values of the creative age” (Florida, 2002, n.p.).<sup>1</sup> In his article, written three years before Hurricane Katrina, Florida states, “stuck in old paradigms of economic development, cities like Buffalo, New Orleans, and Louisville struggled

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2001/0205.florida.html>

in the 1980s and 1990s to become the next "Silicon Somewhere" by building generic high-tech office parks or subsidizing professional sports teams" (Florida, 2002, n.p.).<sup>2</sup>

The impact of Florida's discussion in this article has reshaped the discourse about diversity in contemporary cities, and the debates about gentrification in the United States. Yet, numerous scholars have found fault with the logic of his ideas. Critiques of Florida's work have pointed out its flaws in recognizing the consequences of the creative class making its way into urban communities, many pointing out that the very creative class of which Florida writes is in fact the culprit to economic inequalities that have caused the painful displacement of marginalized groups in American cities.

Richard Campanella, geographer and senior professor at the Tulane School of Architecture in New Orleans, maps out the spatial and social trends of gentrification in New Orleans in his article "Gentrification and its Discontents: Notes from New Orleans." Campanella's analysis includes a model of a four-phase cycle of gentrifiers, each phase representing a new influx of people into the neighborhood in question. According to Campanella, in New Orleans this process starts with gutterpunks squatting in poor neighborhoods that are close to tourist-attracting areas, this leads to hipsters moving in, which then attract the bourgeois bohemians, which then finally attract the "*bana fide* gentry," or the rich (Campanella, 2013). Although Campanella's article has received widespread criticism as well, it offers a view into the contested meanings of spatial belonging and identity in New Orleans.

The narrative of queer urban space formation has not only been focused on cities per se, but more specifically the actual neighborhoods that have been characterized by queer people's

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2001/0205.florida.html>



occupancy. San Francisco's Castro district, New York's Chelsea, parts of New Orleans' downriver neighborhoods (the Bywater, the Marigny, and parts of the French Quarter around Bourbon Street and St. Ann Street) have become gay meccas within cities that attract queer residents and businesses. This narrative of gay communities of territorialization in certain neighborhoods is contingent upon the economic and social factors that make such territorialization possible.

*Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities* (1995) by David Bell and Gill Valentine is considered by many to be the first book to really examine sexualities from a geographical perspective. As an anthology of the geographies of sexuality, the contributors offer various perspectives on the nature of sexuality, the body, and space. In "Authenticating Queer Space: Citizenship, Urbanism and Governance" (2004), David Bell and Jon Binnie focus on the impact of sexual minorities in processes of urban transformation. In their analysis, Bell and Binnie point out how sexual citizenship agendas have been productive in creating particular kinds of sexual spaces, at the exclusion of others. In this, they assert that gay men in particular have been key agents in urban development, gentrification, and the regulation of the kinds of sexualized spaces made possible in cities.

After the Stonewall riots, the spatial framework of queer visibility was certainly broadened. However, the access and power to claim geographic territories was not available to every queer individual. In *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* (2013), Christina B. Hanhardt brings attention to the class-based and racial projects of queer urban space formation as a part of a broader economic and cultural geography. Hanhardt places queer activism within the context of shifting neoliberal policies that have influenced the shape of cities in the United States. She explains that since the Stonewall riots many queer activists have

focused more on individual rights, and maintain faith in the free market, despite the fact that the first queer activists in the late 1960s and early 1970s were primarily concerned with fighting systemic inequality. Hanhardt asserts that the neoliberal forces that protect private property rights and business ownership often worked as the restricting factors of queer women's membership in the formation of gay enclaves and neighborhoods. Furthermore, through the homogenization of populations and state, "a wide mix of individuals inside and outside the city have pursued safety through strategies of discretion, individual self-protection, and varied, often unofficial group measures" (Hanhardt, 2013, p. 11).

Hanhardt's analysis provides a framework for understanding how violence and power affected the development of queer urban enclaves in large American cities. In a short time, debates on gay neighborhood formation were reported to involve primarily white gay men who had moved into neighborhoods that inhabited mostly low-income people of color, enforcing their displacement when property values rose. Manuel Castells' study of the Castro in 1983 marks the first major research done on gay gentrification, which Castell describes as an expression of "territorialization" restricted to gay men.

Inclusion in formal institution and neighborhood territorialization was never really an option for many lesbian and queer women during the height of these gay gentrification projects. Mainstream antiviolence ideologies showed how lesbians and gay men were affected differently by gay gentrification. Many new organizations were born, such as the Third World Gay Revolution (TWGR), which emphasized the importance of control over one's own body, rather than the territorialization of separate space. The TWGR pointed out that sexual and racial identities are not independent categories, that for many lesbians as well as gay men of color, queer separatism was neither feasible nor appealing. Thus, issues of bodily integrity, and

recognition of the multiplicity of marginalized experiences (and how such issues made land claim less desirable) became key factors in many future queer organizations.

One of the concerns of the organizations that challenged normative queer activist groups and gay gentrification was the systematic exclusion of lesbians and gay men of color from not only heterosexual institutions but normative gay institutions as well. The Black Gay Caucus of the San Francisco Bay Area expressed: “We want to provide an alternative to traditional white-oriented gay institutions. We want to share emotions and resolve problems through open dialogue” (Hanhardt, 2013, p. 124). One of the main targets was the bar scene.

Commercial queer spaces, such as gay bars, were especially vulnerable for queer women and gay men of color. The bars formed the social core of many queer people’s lives, but they also exhibited strict exclusion along race, class, and gender lines. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, various queer groups challenged gay bars that engaged in exclusionary practices, such as the ones that would “double card” (demand two forms of identifications from people of color and other members of targeted communities). They would also challenge normative gay cultural aesthetics, especially the white, masculine homogeneity of the “Castro clone” look.

Throughout the 1980s, lesbians were dispersed and less visible than gay men due to women’s relatively lower incomes and the character of their politics, which was less about ties to territory and more towards social change (Castells, 1983: 140; Doan, 2011: 35). Continued changing spatial patterns of cities throughout the 1980 gave rise to the construction of a normative form of queer visibility that was mostly limited to white gay men.

In his essay in “Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life”, Jeffrey Escoffier (2001) discusses the economic history of gay communities since World War II. Escoffier outlines what he calls the “territorial economy,” which was identified by the spread of

neighborhood development and gentrification. He suggests that the creation of gay neighborhood did not only entail the presence of bars, shops, and political organizations, but the highly important factor of home ownership.

In “Gentrification and Gay Neighborhood Formation in New Orleans: A Case Study,” (1997) Lawrence Knopp delineates the process of gay gentrification in the Faubourg Marigny, a densely populated neighborhood adjacent to the French Quarter. Knopp provides an examination of the underlying factors responsible to the gentrification in the neighborhood, which he attributes to an influx of predominantly gay middle-class professionals in the 1960s, a movement for historic preservation in the Marigny (primarily organized by gay men), and the arrival of developers (mostly gay), in the mid-to-late 1970s (Dews & Law, 2001). Knopp speculates that gay men chose the Marigny because of its multicultural social history, as it made it easier for them to settle there without feeling that they were employing racist standards to their decisions.

In the South, cities such Austin, Texas and New Orleans have reputations for being socially progressive cities within states that are much more conservative, making them regional hubs for queer populations. In a survey published by Gallup showing the highest percentage of LGBT populations in U.S. cities, New Orleans is reported to be fourth on the list. Out of a sample size of 2,674 for New Orleans, the survey shows that 5.1% of the respondents personally identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, making New Orleans the fourth city on the list of cities in the United States with the highest percentages of LGBT population in 2012 -2014.

*Highest Percentage LGBT Population, 50 Largest U.S. Metro Areas, 2012-2014*

LGBT percentages are based on responses to the question "Do you, personally, identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender?"

|   | <b>% LGBT</b> |
|---|---------------|
| San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward, Calif.       | 6.2           |
| Portland-Vancouver-Hillsboro, Ore.-Wash.    | 5.4           |
| Austin-Round Rock, Texas                    | 5.3           |
| New Orleans-Metairie, La.                   | 5.1           |
| Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, Wash.              | 4.8           |
| Boston-Cambridge-Newton, Mass.-N.H.         | 4.8           |
| Salt Lake City, Utah                        | 4.7           |
| Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim, Calif.      | 4.6           |
| Denver-Aurora-Lakewood, Colo.               | 4.6           |
| Hartford-West Hartford-East Hartford, Conn. | 4.6           |

Gallup Daily tracking

GALLUP

**Figure 1: LGBT Population in U.S. Metro Areas, 2012-2014**

Source: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/182051/san-francisco-metro-area-ranks-highest-lgbt-percentage.aspx>

Still, queer women and gay men of color are most commonly found dispersed across urban areas rather than concentrated in particular neighborhoods, and hardly considered significant motors of gentrification.

### **Lesbians and Queer Women in Urban Space**

The literature shows that the homonormative relations that shape gay neighborhoods have been complicit in the creation of queer spaces that are most often commercially represented and depicted by hegemonic relations that lie in the hands of gay men. Four things must be taken into account in looking at these different patterns in spatiality. First, according to the 2012 American Community Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau, women in the United States make on average \$0.77 for every \$1 men earn. In New Orleans, women who have a full-time job are paid on average \$34,862 per year, whereas full-time employed men are paid \$45,970 per year. This means that women in New Orleans earn \$0.76 for every \$1 paid to men, which sums up to a

yearly wage gap of \$11,108 between full-time employed men and women in New Orleans.<sup>3</sup> Second, the sweeping effects of gentrification have had adverse effects on queer women who tend to rent longer than men (and therefore are negatively impacted by rises in property values in burgeoning neighborhoods). Third, lesbians and queer women have historically been known to meet in private spaces, a stark contrast to gay men's history of cruising in public parks and bathrooms. And forth, as presented in the literature review, the shift from a dichotomized gay/lesbian perspective on homosexuality towards a collective queer identity, in which classifications of gender and sexuality are considered to be fluid, has in many cases positioned women at the margins of queer culture.

The growing body of academic work exploring queer subjects in cities has not only been concerned with the issues and nuances of queer urban territories. In the introduction to *Queer Visibilities: Space, Identity and Interaction in Cape Town*, Andrew Tucker (2009) brings attention to the shortcomings of the unifying "queer" perspective, pointing out that there are indeed different ways in which gay men and lesbians have appreciated sexual diversity and the acknowledgment of difference. Tucker suggests that the concern with visibility and acknowledgment from dominant culture reiterates the very Western fixation with the 'closet.'

Many researchers have sought to go beyond the fixation on neighborhoods, especially noting that unlike gay men's neighborhoods, lesbians and queer women are rarely known to own and sustain actual territories within urban regions. Academic literature on lesbian bars is scarce and most commonly either historical, focused on comparing them to gay men's bars, or documenting their disappearance. Early academic analyses regarding queer geographies commonly concluded that the creation of gay male enclaves could be attributed to men's

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<sup>3</sup> [http://go.nationalpartnership.org/site/DocServer/Wage\\_Gap\\_NewOrleans.pdf](http://go.nationalpartnership.org/site/DocServer/Wage_Gap_NewOrleans.pdf)

territorial 'nature' as well as men's higher levels of disposable income (Castells, 1983). In later work, other scholars made more critical assessments of queer women's dispersed spatial locations in cities (Bell & Valentine, 1995; Gieseeking, 2013; Podmore, 2006). In "Gender Differences in the Use of Gay Clubs: A Place to Resist Gender Norms for Gay Men and Place of Diffusion for Lesbian Women," (2012) Kimberly Eichenberger argues that the diffusion of queer women into shared queer spaces mainly helped gay men dominate such spaces, and caused lesbians to be pushed to the periphery.

The adverse effect of gentrification on lesbians and queer women (as renters rather than property owners) plays an important role in the ways in which these issues are framed. Lila Thirkield, proprietor of the soon-to-be-closing Lexington Club in San Francisco (San Francisco's last lesbian bar), explained that when "a business caters to about 5% of the population, it has tremendous impact when 1% of them leave. When 3% or 4% of them can no longer afford to live in the neighborhood, or the city, it makes the business model unsustainable" (Lucchesi, 2014, n.p.).<sup>4</sup>

In "Gone 'underground'? Lesbian Visibility and the Consolidation of Queer Space in Montréal," (2006) Julie A. Podmore explains that while gay men are known to produce visible territorial enclaves in urban areas, lesbians and queer women's forms of territoriality have been relatively 'invisible' because their communities are formed through social networks instead of commercial sites. She points out that since lesbian and queer women's residential territories are more dispersed, they employ strategies to appropriate territory in other spaces.

Building on research on queer women's community construction, Podmore found that "lesbian communities were constituted in space through fluid informal networks that linked a

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<sup>4</sup> <http://insidescoopsf.sfgate.com/blog/2014/10/23/the-missions-lexington-club-announces-closure-cites-a-neighborhood-that-has-dramatically-changed/>

variety of public and private sites and, as a result, were quasi-underground in character and imperceptible to outside observers” (Podmore, 2006, p. 596). In her own research she found that lesbian bars rarely appear in the literature because they have not been in the residential territories under study.

In “Lesbians as Village ‘Queers’: The Transformation of Montréal’s Lesbian Nightlife in the 1990s” (2013) Podmore describes the 1980s in Montréal’s Plateau district as a ‘golden age’ for lesbian public visibility. Over that decade, lesbian communities were largely dispersed yet still territorially based on the Plateau. During those years, lesbians and queer women created and used a visible concentration of bars and commercial spaces in the district. They included commercial clustering of restaurants, bookstores, and a high concentration of lesbian bars.

By the 1990s, as public visibility had increased for lesbian and queer women in Montréal, their occupation of urban spaces had changed in the opposite direction. By the mid-1990s, there were only a few lesbian bars left in the city and they were increasingly dispersed. Over the course of the years between 1992 and 2003, the total number of lesbian bars in Montréal went from seven to one. At the same time, Montréal’s androcentric enclave, Village Gai became an economic engine for the expansion of queer commercial sites and tourism in Montréal.

Podmore argues that lesbian and queer women’s use of Village Gai as productive in terms of reworking lesbian identities in the 1990s. She states that lesbian and queer women’s use of lesbian-specific spaces in Village Gai during the 1990s was central to the production and expression of new forms of lesbian identities. Podmore’s argument is based on the notion that although women did experience exclusion in Village Gai’s nightlife in the 1990s, the production of temporary lesbian spaces within the village created a degree of ‘inclusion’ in Village Gai.



Podmore is one of few scholars in the urban studies literature who has focused on lesbian and queer women's community construction in queer enclaves. She argues that although lesbians had to compete with gay men for limited space, they still valued having lesbian-specific spaces within the site, because "it confirmed their place as queer subjects in the gay village and also supported development of lesbian networks" (Podmore 2013: 224).

Podmore finds that queer women's exclusion from the literature seems to reflect the general tendencies to subsume their experiences into larger categories of gay people in general. Many researchers have also chosen to explicitly focus on gay men only to avoid misrepresenting lesbians and queer women. Furthermore, she assesses that the lesbian half of gay and lesbian is often simply additive rather than integrative, and that in critical geography, gay villages have really become synonymous with homo-patriarchy and neoliberal urbanism (Podmore, 2013, p. 223).

In her discussion, Podmore links the Plateau's transformation from a flourishing lesbian commercial scene into 'underground' geographies of lesbians and queer women to queer politics and the unification of lesbians, gays, and queer population overall. The specificity of queer politics in the 1990s and their impact on queer urban space use, such as the disappearance of lesbian bars, reveals how unifying projects of queer inclusivity had unforeseeable adverse affects on the commercial spaces on which lesbians and queer women relied for socialization and support.

In "'The Night They Took Over': Misogyny In A Country-Western Gay Bar," (2005) Corey Johnson and Diane Samdahl document the misogynistic behaviors of gay men toward lesbians in shared spaces. In this, the authors refer to the behavior witnessed at Saddlebags on "Lesbian Nights" as an exercise of hegemonic masculinity, that "others" women and that by

doing so, “gay men seemed to be suppressing the commonality of a non-heterosexual orientation that they shared with lesbians, and reaffirming the dominant heteronormative discourse that privileges men over women” (Johnson & Samdahl, 2005, p. 343). The authors point out that queer men sometimes perform (and benefit from) hegemonic masculinity within shared spaces with queer women, therefore making said space “unsafe” for those women. For this reason, designated “queer spaces” comprised mostly of men may not feel as safe and welcoming to queer women.

In an interview aired on Oregon Public Broadcasting, playwright and journalist Alexis Clements stated that the word *queer* as an umbrella term has provided another system “in which power structures that are in the larger culture are being replicated. [...] I mean, if we’re in a queer umbrella, does that mean that men, by and large, end up in leadership roles?” (Clements in McGurran, 2014, n.p.).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Clements states, that “there really isn’t a lesbian community, so to speak. There’s hundreds of thousands of people who live in very different spaces and have different experiences of the world” (Clements in McGurran, 2014, n.p.).

Clements’s points relate very clearly to Foucault and Butler’s theories of the fluidity of gender as being composed of multiple categories in various contexts. The importance of Clements’ discussion is that lesbian and queer women are not known to be found in concentrated urban enclaves, and thus their experiences are dispersed and cannot be defined or generalized in simple terms. Clements goes on to explain that very few spaces where lesbians and queer women gather are comprised solely of lesbian and queer women. For decades, trans and gender-nonconforming individuals, straight women, and men of all sexualities, have participated in and helped to maintain, or otherwise helped to support these spaces. “All of this represents some of

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.opb.org/radio/programs/thinkoutloud/segment/documenting-the-dwindling-number-of-lesbian-spaces/>

the complexity of defining and maintaining any space for any group of people, but particularly lesbian and queer spaces that espouse feminist or radical politics” (Clements in McGurran, 2014, n.p.).

In her chapter in *Queer Presences and Absences* (2013) titled “Queering the Meaning of ‘Neighbourhood’: Reinterpreting the Lesbian-Queer Experience of Park Slope, Brooklyn, 1983-2008,” Jen Jack Giesecking brings attention to the fact that the economic and social factors that hinder women in general from being able to claim specific territories in urban sphere also hinder lesbians and queer women from being property-owners within queer urban enclaves. Her discussion is not framed around lesbian and queer women’s community construction as failed attempts to acquire access or ownership over stable spaces, but rather brings attention to a new understanding of neighborhoods that questions the powers of the purported ‘normal.’

Giesecking uses queer theory in this context as a way of understanding certain practices and ways of being as refusals of the normative. Her examination employs an examination of intersectionality as a means to illuminate how spaces and identities are co-produced through subjectivities of gender, sexuality, race, class, and age. She argues that lesbians’ and queer women’s production of space in an urban context takes on the form of constellations in which material places, experiences, and bodies which are understood to be lesbian or queer serve as markers by which participants make connections to confront patriarchy and heteronormativity.

In “Living in an (In)Visible World: Lesbians’ and Queer Women’s Spaces and Experiences of Justice and Oppression in New York City, 1983-2008,” (2013) Giesecking argues that lesbians’ and queer women’s production of urban space is not necessarily tied to specific places in the built urban environment, but rather manifested in constellations that are made up of material and imagined places, experiences, and bodies that are understood to be lesbian. She

argues that these constellations operate as nodes that participants use to confront the existing social structures that emphasize the importance of visibility as a vital form of acceptance.

Giesecking explains that unlike gay men's neighborhoods, "lesbians and queer women are rarely known to possess and retain actual territories within urban areas via mass property ownership" (Giesecking, 2013: 181). Furthermore, she asserts that thinking about lesbian and queer women's spaces as constellations dispels "the idea of lesbians and queer women as "invisible" against gay men's "visibility" through evincing this group's own unique ways of producing places and spaces" (Giesecking, 2013: 48).

Through this lens, Giesecking unpacks the unjust spatial models of neighborhoods formed within processes of neoliberal urbanism. In her account of Park Slope in New York City (which she considers the only lesbian neighborhood in the United States) she suggests that the survival of Park Slope is not predicated on retaining physical territory, but rather derived from the fragmented social, cultural, and historic elements of the neighborhood. The ways in which lesbians and queer women piece these elements together is not only done in order to claim a politics of visibility but also to recognize the different ways in which communities are constructed. This perspective goes beyond simply looking at bars as public social spaces, as she explains that "bars are no longer the core material sites of lesbian-queer community in participants' everyday lives because as the forms of oppression have shifted and, in some ways, relaxed, bars no longer *need* to be that *one* place to go" (Giesecking, 2013: 141).

In the following chapters, I will address the blind spot in the literature on queer urban space formation that either focus on the geographic concentrations of queer populations or on the non-place-based social networks of queer individuals. In my own research, I highlight the

unique nature of temporary lesbian and queer women's spaces as important social spaces that are brought into being through the combination of three things: time, space, and the presence of lesbians and queer bodies. My perspective is different from scholars who seek to map and analyze the specific territories of sexual minorities. It also goes beyond the work that focuses primarily on the private relationships and informal social networks of queer populations in cities. But, by considering the use of public urban spaces as a critical component in grounding an otherwise invisible group of people, I seek to bridge the gap between these two camps and offer a new way of thinking about queer urban space, and broaden the framework within which lesbians and queer women have been subjectified.

## **Chapter Two: Methodology**

### **Research Question**

My overall research question has been: how do lesbians and queer women use urban spaces to construct imagined spaces of their own in post-Katrina New Orleans? In order to answer this question thoroughly I had to make myself familiar with the scene within which organized queer women's nightlife activities occurred. My mode of inquiry was to hone in on two New Orleans-based groups that had recurring social gatherings specifically organized for lesbians and queer women. These were events that took place weekly and biweekly in the French Quarter, and the adjacent neighborhood, the Marigny.

I employ the use of qualitative research methods and archival research, and draw connection between the two. This methodology connects the individual to collective experiences and imaginaries by displaying how individual stories from the field can resonate with the theories of the literature. By fusing the literature review with first-hand narratives I am able to comprehensively draw connections between the use of lesbian and queer women's spaces in New Orleans and larger patterns of the effects of queer urban space formation.

### **Gaining Access**

I have been engaged in this research over the course of the last two years, although it has been in different stages. In the fall of 2013 I began conducting research at a weekly drag king night event that took place on a Bourbon Street bar every Tuesday. I attended events, examined their social media presence, and interviewed their general manager and host. I also made a brief documentary video about the event, which included footage of drag king performances as well as an interview with their host.

In the following spring, I began my fieldwork at another recurring queer women's event, Deep Lez, which took place at a small neighborhood bar in the Marigny neighborhood. I employed the same qualitative methods that I used at the drag king night event, and began attending their biweekly events, examining their social media presence, and reached out to the organizer of the event for interviews.

During the course of the year from late 2013 to early 2014, I began compiling relevant literature that applied to my studies. Later into the year, I had accumulated a vast amount of data, observations, and information gathered through conversations with lesbians and queer women who frequented these events. This was often challenging, as both events changed locations numerous times during the course of my fieldwork. Descriptions of spaces I had written in the fall of 2013 did not apply anymore in 2014, and were merely descriptions of something from the past. I had to constantly readjust the data to keep it relevant, while still honoring the trajectory of the narrative.

In the fall of 2013, I began attending the lesbian and queer women's-specific event, drag king night, at a Bourbon Street bar in the French Quarter of New Orleans. I had known about the event since I moved to New Orleans in 2009, and had attended various times over the years. I became acquainted with the general manager of the drag king troupe when my friend performed with the troupe in 2010. When I began my research on drag king night, I sent Sam, one of drag king night coordinators, an e-mail in which I explained my research and asked if she would be able to sit down with me for an interview. She agreed to an interview, and we decided to meet in a small public park in Mid-City New Orleans in November 2013. The interview was audio recorded, and I had with me a notebook that I used for jotting down key words for follow-up questions, or to make note of specific points I wanted to get back to later on.

In January 2014, I began attending the biweekly Tuesday night dance parties in the Marigny. This event targets a different audience of lesbian and queer women, which may account for the overall ease of throwing both the drag king night event and the Deep Lez party on Tuesday nights. There was not much overlap in attendees between the two events in terms of age and class. The attendees of Deep Lez were noticeably older than the crowds at the drag king nights, an age gap of about five to fifteen years on average (according to the organizers' descriptions of the usual crowd, and my own observations). Additionally, the crowd at Deep Lez would by and large be transplants from other parts of the country that had either moved to New Orleans to attend one of its universities, work at non-profits, or engage in creative work.

I interviewed the main organizers of both events during the 2013-2014 period, and then again in early 2015. When I talked to them in 2015, the drag king troupe had moved between three different bars, and Deep Lez had moved between three different bars as well, and had retired at the point of our last interview. Descriptions of the nuances that led to the changes in space will be presented in detail in the next chapter.

### **Ethical Issues**

Every participant's name has been changed, as well as the names of the actual bars at which the case studies took place, to protect their identity and privacy. Interviews were conducted as a means to gain insight into the culture, and not to specifically address the interviewees personally. This study does not inquire about the quality or character of the bars themselves, or the ways in which they are managed. Instead, it focuses strictly on the intentions of the organizers of queer women's events, and how they use the spaces at hand.

All interviewees were informed about the intent of the study beforehand, and were given the option to opt out of taking part of the study at any time.



I decided to include the names Deep Lez and the Carnival Kings, as they encompass real social phenomena that are important to my analysis. Their names are meaningful because they were chosen and branded not only by the people who chose them but by the participants and attendees that helped produce these spaces through dialogue to support a community rendered invisible and silent in most contexts.

## **Participants**

I chose the participants of this study based on their level of participation in organizing, managing, and experiencing queer women's spaces. As this study is focused on the way in which queer women's space is created at the two events in question, I wanted to interview the creators of those spaces. In both cases, I began by attending the events and making myself visible within the spaces before I reached out to the event organizers.

For this study, I conducted five semi-structured interviews. Interviews were open-ended and were all recorded on a voice recorder. I created a two-page interview guide beforehand, which included of the questions that I wanted to cover during each interview. However, I considered it highly important to engage in active listening during the interviews, and to bring up follow-up questions based on the interviewee's responses to each question. This allowed me to get to the heart of the matters that the interviewees considered the most meaningful.

The first interview was conducted with Sam, the coordinator of drag king night, at a public park in Mid-City New Orleans in November 2013. The interview was recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The second interview was conducted with Laura, an organizer of Deep Lez, in a courtyard of The University of New Orleans' campus in March 2014. The third interview was conducted with Sam again at a coffee house in the Mid-City neighborhood of New Orleans in February 2015. The fourth interview was conducted with Laura at her work, a bar in

the Marigny neighborhood of New Orleans, in March 2015. The fifth interview was conducted with Susan on The University of New Orleans' campus in the Gentilly neighborhood of New Orleans, in March 2015.

Right before each interview started, I would place in front of me my two-page interview guide, a small notebook, a pencil, and my voice recorder. I would always arrive at least ten minutes before the scheduled meeting in order to prepare my recorder, set up my notebook, and to be respectful of the interviewees' time.

### **Conducting Research in Cyberspace**

One of the benefits of doing qualitative research in the age of the Internet is the ability to access the wealth of information available online at all times, including social media sites. The Internet, as a research site, offers vast potential. Researchers working in the social sciences often apply the method of content analysis to examine artifacts of social communication and traditionally this method is used to analyze photographs, videos, and other media by which patterns of human activity can be examined. The two groups I studied for this research both run their own Facebook sites, and use them as a prime medium to communicate with their audience and attendees outside of their actual events. Using the method of content analysis, I began examining the Facebook sites in terms of marketing events, branding of groups, inclusion of members, and communication patterns. The Facebook sites include photographs from past events, posters to advertise upcoming and past events, and provide a medium for sharing comments and questions.

Facebook was the main medium for both groups to reach out to their attendees. There were a few times during the course of my research that I missed an event because I had not checked Facebook, and therefore missed the invites. Many chose to bring up discussions on the

Facebook sites, sometimes about past events or on future ones. The Facebook sites thus provided an extension of the actual spaces into virtual space, which could be visited outside of the events themselves.

### **New Orleans as a Research Site**

The benefits of doing anthropological research in the New Orleans was having access to my research site at any given moment. Even when I did not consider myself to be “doing fieldwork,” I was still in the field at any given time. Habitually, I would ask myself: “what’s going on here? Who is occupying this space, and how?” Eventually, this acquired analytical mindset I carried with me all the time helped me understand the connection between theory and practice, and how social realities are studied and documented in real time, and how real life can be made sense of in literature.

Over the course of the two years I have been involved in conducting this research, I have attended various events organized for queer women. In the fall of 2013 I began attending a queer women’s writing group, which was a small group of queer women who met weekly to sit down together and write. The topics at the writing groups were different each week, usually chosen at random from a book. The group was composed of about four or five women, the turnout varied each week.

I attended a play in the spring of 2014 by a young queer theatre group called the New Orleans Queer Youth Theatre. There, I met one of the women behind the New Orleans Dyke Bar History Project, which in as ongoing oral history project intended to create an oral history archive, and to set up a performance about the past lesbian bars of New Orleans. Earlier this year, they launched a podcast and had a podcast launch party, which I attended. A week later, the local book-making organization The Neighborhood Story Project hosted an event presenting

queer cartography in New Orleans. Out of the five maps presented at the event, one was a hand-drawn map of the lesbian bars that have come and gone in New Orleans. I bought a copy of the map and asked one of the Neighborhood Story Project's directors for permission to use the map in my research. I was given permission, and the map will be presented below on page 35. At this same event, members of the Dyke Bar History Project were there to promote their podcast. I talked to them about sharing our resources, and they were more than happy to work together. They also asked if I wanted to do interviews for their podcast, which I expressed much interest in.

The cyclical process of conducting qualitative research often brings the researcher from one place to the next in unpredictable ways. From findings in the field, to connections to the literature, to new sources, to people, ethnographic work constantly tumbles the narrative around in time and space. For me, my ethnographic path required me to attend events, interview the event organizers, and be present in the spaces that I studied. I did not only benefit from this process ethnographically, but also as a queer woman living in New Orleans.

### **The Ethnographer's Path**

In *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (2011), Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw emphasize the reflexive character of all ethnographic research. In the production of fieldnotes, defining people, events, and scenes gives shape and substance to the matters of the research. Reflexivity helps us understand the worlds of others, and "to see those worlds as shaped not by variables or structures that stand above or apart from people but rather as meaning systems negotiated and constructed in and through relationships" (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 2011: 216).

In *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology*, Roger Sanjek (1990) explains that all ethnographic research is an intensely personal experience. According to Sanjek, fieldworkers

will develop a variety of relationships that will determine the outcome of the research enterprise. Effective anthropologists develop social networks in the process of doing fieldwork, and Sanjek's argument is that this network must be specified in detail in order to provide the reader with a clear portrait of the ethnographer's path. Sanjek states that

the interpretive power of ethnography also requires that we understand the ethnographer's path. As a measuring stick of ethnographic validity, accounts of an ethnographer's fieldwork path should be incorporated in ethnographic writings (Sanjek 1990: 400).

This also means that a fieldworker develops specific theories of significance about people, events and places that determine much of the listening and looking that are documented in fieldnotes, which are in turn confirmed in theories.

As a part of my research path, I realized how important it was to be aware of the outside forces that had an impact on the course of my research process. I was not simply to create a strict research path to follow, but also to stay alert for the elements in my environment that could lead to finding answers to my question. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1990) state that the analysis of ethnographic data begins with the concepts which are grounded in intimate familiarity with the setting and from close attention to fieldnotes as data, from which the ethnographer seeks to generate as many ideas, issues and themes as possible.

## Chapter Three: Case Studies

### Introduction

The culture of New Orleans during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterized, in part, by the Storyville red-light district, the birth of jazz, and private gay socializing. The city is home to the country's oldest gay bar, Lafitte Blacksmith Shop on Bourbon Street, and gay Mardi Gras krewes have been reported to have been around since as early as 1958. However, the history of queer socializing in New Orleans has some very dark moments. In 1973, The Upstairs Lounge, a gay bar on Chartres Street, was deliberately set on fire, claiming the lives of 32 people. It has been known since as the deadliest attack on the queer community in American history.

Despite the risk, the gay bars in the city have long played a significant role in providing an introduction to queer culture for queer youth. Susan, who was a teenager in New Orleans during the 1970s, explained that although it is not as dangerous to be seen in gay bars anymore, in her opinion the idea that they are not needed anymore is invalid. She says:

tell that to a kid in Eunice<sup>6</sup> who wants to know: 'how am I going to be gay? I need to go somewhere where I can be that.' It seems pretty important to me, almost like a baptism, to find your people and go through that change of getting to accept yourself and who you are. You do that by being immersed in it. I think there's still enough violence or prejudice against gay people that we know that it's necessary. It's part of survival, to coexist without harming one another. Gay people will always be looking for signals, 'am I safe here? Are you a member of my tribe?'

Before the Stonewall riots and the gay liberation movement that followed, there was a bar on Tchoupitoulas Street by the Mississippi River in uptown New Orleans called the Tiger Lounge. In 1957, the seventeen-year-old high school student Charlene Schneider walked into

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<sup>6</sup> A small town in North-Central Louisiana.

the Tiger Lounge for the first time. At sixty-two, Charlene recalls, “I felt at home, because finally, I knew where I belonged. It was wonderful seeing people like myself [...] I saw eight of the butchest women you’ve ever seen in your life. I fell in love with each and every one of them” (Anderson-Minshall, 2011, n.p.).<sup>7</sup> In 1977, Charlene opened her own bar for lesbians, Charlene’s, right by the corner of Elysian Fields and St. Claude. In *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, James Thomas Sears discusses the gay bars in New Orleans in the 1970s, and explains that they were

generally segregated by race and gender. Gigi’s on North Rampart bar strip, the Safari House, and Lafitte’s were the only ones to genuinely welcome men of color. Charlene’s (which routinely had a Mardi Grad sign hanging from its Elysian Fields door that announced “If You Ain’t Gay, You Can’t Stay”) served women (Sears 2001: 96).

Susan was still in high school in 1977 when she began going to the lesbian bars in New Orleans. I asked her about the very first time she went to a lesbian bar, and she told me she had heard about Brady’s, a lesbian bar across from Louis Armstrong park on North Rampart Street, and she said:

A straight friend of mine had gone into Brady’s, and she came out and she’s like: ‘it’s all women in flannel!’ I think that stopped me from going in to a gay bar for maybe a little while longer. Then Charlene’s opened, I was still in high school and so we started going there. She had this great logo, it was kind of jazz age logo and it was two women dancing. It was on the matches and things. So if somebody had those, you knew, you’re one of us.

Attending lesbian bars was thus not the only means of using queer women’s space, but using symbols, such as Charlene’s matches, outside of these spaces was also important in extending the boundaries of imagined queer women’s space.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://archive.is/mjE51>



**Figure 2: Charlene's Logo**  
Source: Ambush Magazine

Sam, who grew up in New Orleans in the 1980s and 1990s, told me about her first experience in the lesbian bar scene, which happened to be at Charlene's:

We went out to Charlene's and it was too much, I was not prepared. It was too comfortably gay. It wasn't even that they were swinging from the chandeliers in chaps. It was that there were all these people just existing, and being gay, and looking at the weird little teenage kids that just popped in, knowing that we were underage. But they didn't have the heart to send us away, because, who knows, maybe we were just as lost as they were.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, lesbian bars thrived in New Orleans. At any given moment in time during those years, there were at least five to seven lesbian bars in business in the city, in different locations, attracting different crowds, offering different experiences. The lesbian bars were mostly located around the periphery of the French Quarter, around North Rampart and Elysian Fields, where property values were not as high as in the center of



downtown New Orleans' French Quarter. Most of the gay male bars were on Bourbon Street by the corner of St. Ann Street.

On North Rampart Street was the Soiled Dove and Brady's, on the block across from Louis Armstrong Park. Further down towards the Marigny, by the corner of Elysian Fields and St. Claude, was the infamous lesbian bar Charlene's. The owner of Charlene's was Charlene Schneider, an outspoken gay-rights advocate in New Orleans, who ran the bar from 1977 until 1999. Her bar was known across the nation for Charlene's effusive personality, and because it represented a safe place for lesbians and queer women at a time when attitudes towards them were less tolerant (Pope, 2006).

Susan tells me that in the 1980s, some of the gay bars in the French Quarter began setting new exclusionary rules in order to filter what people they let in. These measures were often meant to keep the gay bars free from straight people, women, and gay men of color, similar to Hanhardt's discussion of queer women and gay men of color's lack of inclusion in gay institutions and neighborhood territorialization. She even mentions that the gay bars would ask undesirable patrons for three forms of ID. In her own words, she explains:

There was this long period where women coming up to the door, or black gay men who weren't necessarily part of somebody's clique, you'd be asked for three forms of ID and, you know, no one's carrying three forms of ID. So, that became kind of a scandal.

During my interview with Susan, she explained that there was a ten-year period, from around '77 or '78 until late '80s, where it was "pretty golden." On this note, she points out that this was at the same time that lesbians and queer women were pushing for broader recognition. Some of my own archival research supported her descriptions. Articles, advertisements, interviews, and bar schedules from *Ambush Magazine* (The Gulf South LGBT+Entertainment/Travel Guide) shows that there was, indeed, much activity in the lesbian

scene in the 1980s and early 1990s. Additionally, the narratives of the interviewees of the New Orleans Dyke Bar History Project, similarly, reveal that the lesbian bars in New Orleans were eclectic, vibrant, and exciting spaces for women to gather, meet, support each other, and feel accepted.<sup>8</sup>

Susan's account runs almost paralleled to Julie A. Podmore's descriptions of Montréal's Village, when lesbian bars were in bloom. In Podmore's account of the Village, she points out that during the 1980s in the Village, posters displaying women as well as lesbian magazines played a big role in identifying the neighborhood. Podmore explains, for example, that the glossy lesbian magazine *Gazelle* "led to the production of new sets of imagery that linked lesbian identities to Village spaces in distinctive ways" (Podmore, 2013, p. 243). Susan recalls this transitional time in her life:

When I'm first coming out I worked at Café du Monde and I would go down to Sidney's on Decatur. There was porn in the back, and of course right in front of the door where you'd go in for the porn was the gay section. It was completely mixed up with sex magazines and political magazines. So, there would be Blue Boy next to Off Our Backs. That was kind of an introduction, that's one way people would introduce themselves to gay culture and to find out where it is. But it felt transgressive, you know, 'what you're looking for is there in the back.'

Susan, looking up and away into the distance, began mapping out the past lesbian bars of New Orleans in her mind:

There was the Soiled Dove, that was a country bar and they had a drag night. That was probably the first place I saw a drag king. Then, that corner right across from Armstrong Park, one end was Brady's and that's Alice Brady, then she retired and it became Diane's. On the other corner was the Grog, it stayed that way for a long time. Then there was a stretch of men's leather bars and drag bars, then further down it becomes St. Claude as you cross Esplanade Avenue. There was at least one for a long time next to Gene's Po-Boys, first there was one called Tonye's. It was in an old mechanic's shop, so it was Tonye's Garage Disco. She was so sweet, she was very feminine, everything was

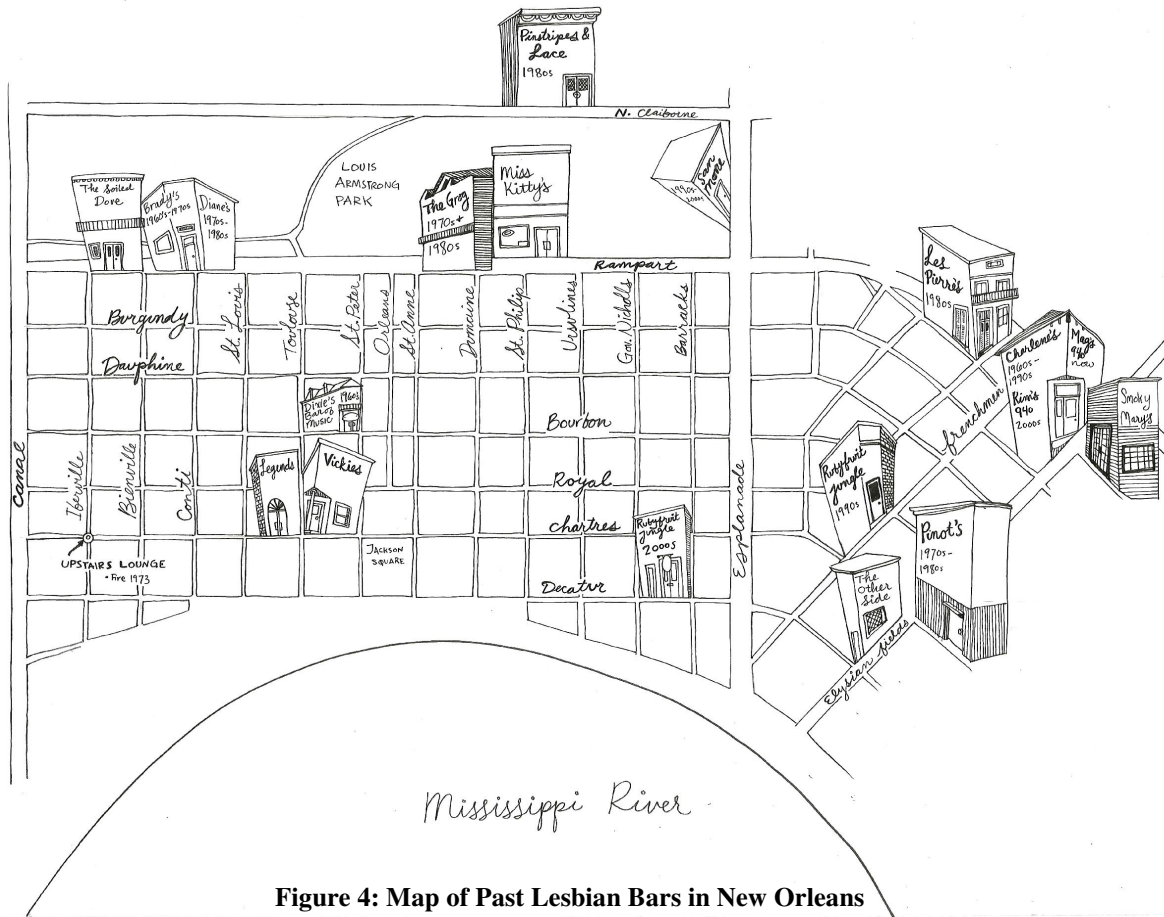
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<sup>8</sup> <http://nolavie.com/nola-dyke-bar-project-stormes-daughters-43516/>

pink, even her little garbage bags. And then right around the corner from that was Charlene's and then down and over where Aquatic Gardens is was Pinot's.

Before the Rubyfruit Jungle moved to Decatur Street, it was located on the corner of Frenchmen Street and Royal Street, right by Washington Square Park. Susan explains that the Rubyfruit Jungle was pushed out through noise and garbage complaints from a neighboring business that wanted to move to that corner by the park, she tells me:

Rubyfruit Jungle was the last one, they were really under attack. The restaurant that's there now is owned by two gay guys. Before, they were a block over on Royal and they couldn't get a liquor license there, and they really wanted that corner, they wanted to expand. So, they started filing noise complaints and garbage complaints, and they organized with some of the property owning neighbors right around Washington Square and basically got Rubyfruit Jungle kicked out, then took over the lease.



**Figure 4: Map of Past Lesbian Bars in New Orleans**

Source: Map by Harriet Burbeck, with data from Last Call. Image is courtesy of the Neighborhood Story Project.

As the map shows, these bars were mostly located around the periphery of the French Quarter. Most of the gay male bars were located around the center of the French Quarter, where property values were relatively higher and there were other businesses around. Susan discusses the complexities of being openly gay in the late 1970 and 1980s, explaining that public and private components of people's lives often became conflicted. Some people had to face the risk of losing their jobs, their reputation, or their families, had they been caught inside of the gay bars.

This connects very clearly to Eve Sedgwick's (2008) conceptualizations of the closet, in which Sedgwick found the binary oppositions of the idea behind the closet restricting and overly simplistic in defining the nuances of queer life. When Susan starts to think about the years before the Internet, and before gay people had the chance to be assimilated into dominant culture, she explains:

The idea of taking pictures of someone in a gay bar was pretty verboten, you wouldn't do that. And you wouldn't even think in another context, you wouldn't mention that you saw someone out like that. I wouldn't even call that being in the closet, it's just, I don't know what your work situation is or what your family situation is. Being in the closet is always hard to define, I mean, here I am and here I'm not, there I am and there I'm not. The gay bars made that much easier. To some degree, you had to associate with one another because that's where you were safe, that's where you could meet other people, that's where you could be yourself. People could be closeted and still completely live an out life within the confines of certain spaces.

Well into the 1990s, lesbian bars were still prevalent around the periphery of the French Quarter. But by the late 1990s, their numbers started dwindling. In 1999, Charlene's closed after 22 years in business. When Charlene's closed, Rubyfruit Jungle was the last remaining lesbian bar in the city. Susan asserts that the emergence of AIDS in the 1980s changed some of the relationships between men and women at the time, that there was a lot more mingling then as

a lot of lesbians became activists in AIDS awareness, AIDS movement, and taking care of friends who had AIDS. The emergence also propelled the continued unification of queer activists, both men and women.

It became a whole industry. There was a lot more overlap and we lost a lot of men in my generation, men who were my age, a lot of them died. So, that changed some of the culture of the bars. It's startling to think about.

Although Susan eventually started attending the bars less and less due to work responsibilities, and changes in her personal life, she explains that somewhere between the increased gentrification in New Orleans and the assimilation of queer people into the dominant culture, the lesbian bars started disappearing. There did not seem to be a generational continuation of the lesbian bars, and this was partly due to changes in the politics of the 1990s. Shifting from the dichotomized gay/lesbian stance of the gay liberation movement onwards, the blurred lines between heterosexuals and sexual minorities, between gay men and lesbian women, and among groups that identified as trans, the notion of the all-inclusive 'queer umbrella' changed not only the politics, but also the shape of the urban landscape. Susan explains:

If everyone is queer then no one is queer. Maybe that's the goal. That's harder to see when part of your whole coming out experience was struggling to be gay, and to be safe, and to find your place, and to have other people, and to say: 'we're here, we're queer, get used to it.' And then, why labels? Because we've all been labeled for so long. We're claiming our labels. Right about the time we start claiming our labels, suddenly y'all decide: 'oh, we don't need labels.' I think that's why we see the borders of that idea that this is sort of the gay area becoming fuzzy.

Finally, I ask Susan what neighborhood in the city she considers to be more lesbian-oriented than others, and she replies:

Mid-City has always been lesbian, hasn't it? I don't know about now because it's so expensive. But for a long time, for decades, Mid-City was associated with dykes all the way from Banks on over to around the park.

I ask her: "how can this be observed?" And Susan responds:

Lesbians walking around in it? I mean, really, spot the dyke.

Fran Tonkiss suggests that the issue of gender and sexuality in the city “is not merely a question of what kind of body is walking down the street, but of the social and physical environments which they inhabit and reproduce” (Tonkiss, 2005, p. 94). The fact that Susan says that Mid-City is thought of as a lesbian neighborhood, because lesbians can be ‘spotted’ walking around in the neighborhood, shows how lesbians and queer women navigate public space rather privately, and the boundaries of their imagined social territories are defined by their bodies, not easily definable geographic boundaries.

## **First Case Study: The Carnival Kings**

The Carnival Kings were initially a cooperative effort between drag kings and drag queens, but as the drag queens began pursuing their own individual interests the drag kings continued performing together. It was during my first year working at the University of New Orleans's Women's Center in 2010 when I heard about the drag king show at a bar on Bourbon Street. My co-worker at the Women's Center became briefly involved with a drag king troupe called the Carnival Kings, and performed with the group a few times over the course of that year. The drag king shows on Tuesday nights at the bar on Bourbon Street were referred to as dyke night by many of its regular attendees, while some called it drag king night, lesbian night or even ladies night.

From 2002 until 2014, the Carnival Kings hosted their show at the same bar on Bourbon Street. When I began this research in 2013, I did not know that that would be their last year at that bar. The show took place every Tuesday night, only in the upstairs area of the bar. However, during those nights, queer women occupied the spaces both within and around the building, the balcony, and the sidewalk outside. When guests arrived to the bar, they would enter the building through side doors where they were met with two people, one of whom checked identification cards and the other accepted the \$6 admission fee. Upon paying, guests could walk up the two flights of stairs to arrive on the second floor of the building, where the drag king shows took place.

Most of the guests who attended Tuesday nights at the bar on Bourbon Street were between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, and the majority was white and female. Many came from the nearby suburbs of Metairie, the West Bank, and Kenner and some travelled from the city of Baton Rouge, or even as far as the state of Mississippi. Before the drag king shows

started, the drag kings and the audience would roam around the second floor. Many would get situated around the bar while waiting for the drag king show to start, while some would stand out on the balcony, or outside on the street and sidewalk.

At midnight, the background music would be turned down and all eyes would hit the stage, which was located by the end wall of a large dance floor. The show's host, Sam, begins the show with a short monologue followed by "the rules." The rules are: no drinks on the stage, no drinks on the balcony, no fighting, tip your bartender, do not drink if you are under twenty-one, and do not buy your underage friends drinks if you are of age. Right after the rules are announced to the audience, the drag king performances begin. When the show starts, drag kings emerge one by one from the left side of the stage and onto the stage where they dance and lip sync to songs of their choice, primarily R&B, rap and hip-hop. In the meantime, audience members cheer, sing along, and hand out \$1 bills to performers while they dance.

There were three different "screens" through which guests and performers had to pass in order to enter the space of *dyke night*. First, for those who did not intend to go to the "gay part" of Bourbon Street would usually not go as far as St. Ann Street, making the space safer for those who chose to spend their time there. Second, as the event took place only on the second floor of the building, monitoring the space was more challenging for outsiders. And third, the \$6 cover charge that granted admission to the second floor of the bar created the conditions within which it was understood that those who were there wanted to be there.

Attendees of the drag king shows were not just there exclusively to see the drag kings perform. The shows operated as catalysts for mixing with like-minded people and conspicuously consuming queer female space. The space did not only function as a site of entertainment, but more importantly as a site of social stimulation and expression. As for as the drag kings



themselves, many of them relied on the other kings or the troupe's coordinators for financial or emotional support due to a lack of support from other institutions or family members.

According to Sam, the show's coordinator, the show offers a safe place for the drag kings and the audience. She explains that a lot of the young people who attend the show are still living with their parents, and adds:

what they're going home to is not necessarily the nicest environment, probably don't have any money, probably don't know what they're doing with their lives right now. But you couple that with depression, you couple that with an innate sense of rejection over your entire youth, and people have been telling you that you're invisible because you don't look gay enough, I could go on and on. The rejection is crippling.

When I ask Sam where most of her kings and audience members come from, she responds:

It's a pocket of queer women and female-bodied people that get left out of the academic crowd, which is very strong in New Orleans, more and more. Universities, they bring in queer people from all over the country but this is the blue-collar, working class corner of the world down here where prospects are few, education is scarce, and they're just trying to figure it out. A lot of them come from broken homes and the bar scene is a good place for them, and our show is a great place for them because we don't lecture them, it isn't political drag, it's just gender bending and music they know. And now there's no place for that, there just isn't. They're all gay male bars that we perform at.

When Sam and the Carnival Kings look for new performers to join their troupe, they have a soft spot for people who have no one in their lives, who have nowhere to go, and have no prospects. They want to help those who do not have a job, who are underemployed, or homeless.

As she puts it:

We look for train wrecks. We want people who need what we needed.

The Carnival Kings' performance acts to uncensored hip-hop music poses a sharp contrast to queer women's activities organized more towards feminist activism or queer politics.

In the American South, rap and hip-hop music emerged from poor and working-class African American neighborhoods in the 1980s, a response to the growing hip-hop culture in New York and Los Angeles at the time (Palmer, 2005). Hip-hop music is central to working-class youth from Southern cities, and Sam explains that “rap and hip-hop is innate here, it’s everywhere. To deny that it exists, by not doing it at our shows, is disingenuous at best and ignorant at worst.” Explaining the difference between the two groups, Sam adds

they use their education like this [clenches fist], not like this [gestures an open palm]. If you come at our audience like that, or our drag kings, what do you think we’re going to say?

Since my fieldwork is conducted between the years of 2013 and 2015, I explicitly position this study in post-Katrina socioeconomic climate due to the immense changes in demographic that took place in New Orleans after the hurricane in August 2005. In “Young Professionals as Ambivalent Change Agents in New Orleans after the 2005 Hurricanes” Renia Ehrenfeucht and Marla Nelson discuss the influx of newcomers to New Orleans after the storm, and they identify these newcomers as mostly a group of postgraduates and young professionals who came to New Orleans to help rebuild the city. Ehrenfeucht and Nelson point out that although many newcomers may have sought to preserve and retain the unique culture of New Orleans, the city was intrinsically altered by their presence.

Most of the drag kings who perform with the Carnival Kings, and many of the attendees of their performances live in the suburbs, neighboring small towns, or rural areas. Sam discusses the difference between the Carnival Kings and other lesbian and queer women’s groups in the city. She identifies the queer ‘academic crowd’ as those who are mostly not from here, and can afford to live in New Orleans proper. She says:

I think people in Orleans parish, the queers who live here, look down on what we do because the politics have changed. We do rap and hip-hop, and even though

we have a diverse cast, it just doesn't matter. It's a lot of white kids policing white kids and telling them they can't do this, that they're offending somebody or offending them.

The class-based difference in the sexual politics hinders the two groups from being able to share space, or intermingle. In "Rethinking Class in Lesbian Bar Culture: Living 'The Gay Life' in Toronto, 1955-1965," Elise Chenier (2006) explains that it is sometimes assumed that working class women are more willing to risk being publicly identified as a lesbians because they have "less to lose" compared to their middle class counterparts. She points out, however, that "this undervalues the significance of what working class and underemployed women had, and what they needed to survive. It also detracts from a full consideration of the meaning and the impact of the choices they made" (Chenier, 2006, p. 87).

The material manifestation of social class and sexuality gets tangled up in the notion of the "lesbian lifestyle" whereby lesbians gain success through education and career opportunities. Yvette Taylor (2007) highlights the unlikelihood of simply adopting another lifestyle, or leaving a working-class position in *Working Class Lesbian Life: Classed Outsiders* (2007). Taylor discusses the material, emotional, subjective, and embodied consequences of occupying a working-class lesbian identity and explains that the expectations of working-class women in home life and in schools strike working-class lesbians especially with feelings of shame and embarrassment, rather than inspiration. She explains that working-class lesbians lack the economic and social capital to buy, work, or network their way into "scene spaces" of gay liberation. Furthermore, 'coming out' or identifying as a lesbian can put them at a disadvantage within their working-class networks. For working-class lesbian and queer women seeking job opportunities, homophobia can operate as the main obstacle for obtaining a job. Sam discusses what the drag king show really signifies for the drag kings, and how it extends into other parts of

the kings' lives, she says:

Some of them genuinely just feel lost. They don't feel like they belong. Performing makes them feel important, and also gives them a place to be. If you're stuck in Mississippi living with your grandma and you need a way out, you call me or call any one of the kings. For them, it's really about community and ultimately, they don't realize it, but it's getting their lives together.

One of the problems of not owning the business where they perform was that the Carnival Kings had to adapt to changes in management, and had to follow new policies when they were made. In 2014, when the drink prices were raised at the bar where the Carnival Kings had performed for years, the drag kings experienced a significant cut in audience. Around the same time, a new bar across the street reopened and wanted what the Carnival Kings had to offer in terms of attracting a large crowd on Tuesday nights. After receiving an offer from the bar across the street that was more lucrative than the deal they had in their original venue, the Carnival Kings decided to move.

They started performing at the bar across the street, but no official contract was signed with the bar, and there was no paper trail of offers that had been given to the troupe. Moving from the first Bourbon Street bar to other turned out to be a bad choice. Soon after the move, the general manager of the bar broke his initial promises of giving the troupe all proceeds of the entrance fee, and began charging them taxes in addition to the taxes the group paid through their LLC. Sam has struggled since they first left their initial bar on Bourbon Street to establish a steady space for the Carnival Kings, but with limited access the resources this quest has proven to be extremely challenging. She explains that gay male bars

they squeeze us, so we have to leave when it doesn't make financial sense for us anymore to be there.

The troupe tried to find places that would be able to host their show, but according to Sam, they often they ended up being too uncomfortable, and unfamiliar with what the troupe does. Sam feels that the gay bars understand drag queens, but

drag kings are not sexy, we don't have that appeal. Gay men are okay to laugh at, or be entertained by, but we have to be invisible.

After a few months at the second Bourbon Street bar, the troupe moved the show again. Due to the tension that developed from the business decision Sam had to make for the troupe, she decided to step back and allow other members of the troupe to find a space for them to host their show. Two other members of the troupe booked a suburban bar in Metairie, located right on the service road by the Interstate. Sam tells me that they all knew moving to Metairie meant that they could not sustain a weekly show, so they had to make the show a monthly event. The venue is small, and the location is not accessible to those who do not have the option to drive to the suburbs.

Towards the very end of this research, I noticed that the Carnival Kings announced on their Facebook site that they had moved back to their original venue. I contacted Sam to ask her about it and she told me that it had happened because of a controversy a few weeks back involving a burlesque dancer who was having issues at the same bar that the Carnival Kings performed after moving from their original bar. After the burlesque dancer decided to quit performing at the bar, Sam asked her if there was anything she could do to support her. She then asked Sam for help finding a new venue. So, Sam sent an e-mail to the owner of the bar where the Carnival Kings originally performed, suggesting that the owner would get in touch with the burlesque dancer. The owner of the bar then asked if the Carnival Kings had any interest in a monthly gig, so they settled the details, both agreed to them via e-mail, and they decided to bring the Carnival Kings back to their original venue.

## Second Case Study: Deep Lez

In the spring of 2013, a woman in her twenties walked into my office at the University of New Orleans Women's Center, handed me a paper flyer, and said that she had just started organizing a dance party for queer women. After she left, I took a look at the flyer and it had a picture of a big overweight cat sitting down with an upside-down triangle printed right next to it. Above the cat, the words read: DEEP LEZ, a night to mix and mingle with ladies of all homosexual persuasions. Superimposed on the photo of the cat were different categories and terms for homosexual women: tuff femmes, soft butches, power bottoms, baby dykes, sissy bois, riot grrls, silver foxes, scissor sisters, witches, saphic lovers, bull daggers, timid tops, dyke hags, pillow queens, flannel hunx, hot studs, bieberians, sexxy sluts, lipstick lesbians.

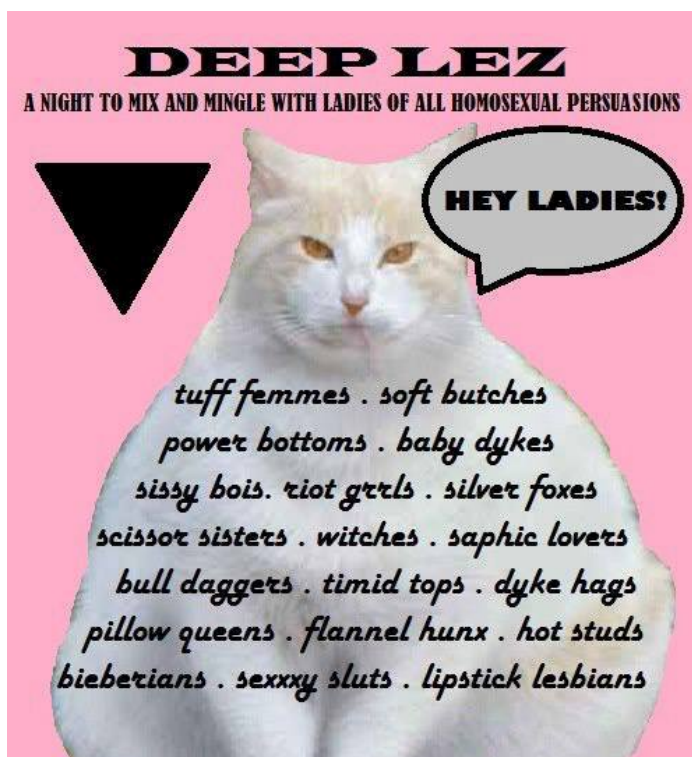


Figure 4: Flyer for Deep Lez

Source: [https://scontent.xx.fbcdn.net/hphotos-xaf1/v/t1.0-](https://scontent.xx.fbcdn.net/hphotos-xaf1/v/t1.0-9/164268_221036551379242_1819620644_n.jpg?oh=0c832936645242a380caef3e1c4b99e9&oe=55D042CF)

[9/164268\\_221036551379242\\_1819620644\\_n.jpg?oh=0c832936645242a380caef3e1c4b99e9&oe=55D042CF](https://scontent.xx.fbcdn.net/hphotos-xaf1/v/t1.0-9/164268_221036551379242_1819620644_n.jpg?oh=0c832936645242a380caef3e1c4b99e9&oe=55D042CF)

I did not attend the event until I began conducting research at Deep Lez in spring 2014. I started by making myself familiar with the event and the space by attending the parties at its location at a small neighborhood bar in the Marigny, to get a sense of how the space was used for the Deep Lez events. To compare, I also went to the bar when Deep Lez was not going on, to experience the difference. On most other nights, the bar was quite slow. When I conducted the first interview with Deep Lez's organizer, Laura, in the spring of 2014, she explained to me that although the word "lez" is in the title of the event (referring to the word lesbian), the event is open to whoever wants to show up. It is however female-focused, with the intention of giving queer women the opportunity to meet, develop friendships or romantic relationships, or simply spend time in the presence of other queer women. Laura said:

Me and my girlfriend at the time, the two of us were friends with two of the bartenders and we were complaining about how there is not a lesbian bar and he said that we could have a lesbian party there whenever we wanted, as often as we wanted, so we decided to do it twice a month. Really, it was kind of our space on those two Tuesdays a month.

During the interview, I asked her how most people find out about the Deep Lez event, to which she replied that it was mostly through word-of-mouth, Facebook and flyers. I then asked where she would bring the flyers, and she said that she brings them to university campuses, coffee houses, and bars mostly. She explained some of the intentions behind the use of the space, and how she imagined beforehand how guests of the event could use material things, such as the pool table, to play and engage in conversations with other women, she says that:

Deep Lez was created with the intention to create the illusion of a lesbian bar. We didn't have the resources to create our own bar, so we just tried to create the energy of a lesbian bar a couple of times a month. The pool table was a big focal point of it for a long time, a lot of people hung out and were excited to shoot pool, and it was cute, we were trying to replicate a lesbian bar.

On any other night, this bar would be the place where workers of the service industry would have drinks after work, due to the fact that the bar is open 24 hours a day, 7 days of the week. On the nights of the Deep Lez event, the bar was crowded with more people than on any other night of the week. Most would show up around 11:30 PM to midnight, although the DJ started playing music at 9 PM. At each Deep Lez event, there was free food available on a little table and some would show up early enough to enjoy the food before the crowd arrived. Around midnight, the front door opened more frequently and people began to make their way into the space.

Most would arrive in pairs or in groups of three. Usually, people enter and make their way directly to the bar if there were no people on the dance floor, which is located right in the center of the bar. If there are people on the dance floor, the newly arrived tend to skim over the dance floor before heading to the left, where they can order a drink at the bar or mingle with others. The space is small, so people must “elbow” their way through the bar, if they intend to make their way to the back where the pool table and the restrooms are located. I noticed that this closeness often became a conversation starter among people, who perhaps accidentally bumped into each other or stepped on each other’s toes. Sometimes this developed into a longer interaction, and sometimes this just gave way for people to look each other in the eye and say “excuse me.” These interactions are momentary, but they give people an opportunity to see who is present within the space and perhaps identify each other outside of the space itself later.

During my fieldwork at Deep Lez, I conducted informal interviews with the bartenders, friends of the bartenders, and some other regular guests. In a conversation with one the bartender from a bar next door, I learned that these two bars used to be popular gay male bars when the Bywater was inhabited by a large number of gay men. He told me a lot had changed



after Hurricane Katrina, and that the change in demographic in the neighborhood subsequently changed the clientele at the bar.

We set up a time and decided to meet in a courtyard on the University of New Orleans campus. Before the interview took place, I conducted content analysis and examined Deep Lez's Internet presence and promotion through Facebook. Deep Lez has a Facebook site, which can be "liked", and all members of the page receive event invites before scheduled events. Event invites usually contain information about the upcoming event such as time and date, names of DJs, specific themes and so on. These invites only go to those who have liked the page, and therefore, anyone who gets an invite must already have liked Deep Lez's Facebook page. The event invites do not go outside of this group. Another means of promoting this event is the distribution of flyers, which turned out to be the way I first learned about it. I asked Laura if there was such a thing as a queer women's community in New Orleans, and she responded:

I feel like creating public spaces helps getting everyone together in the same spot, helps solidify the idea of a cohesive queer community. Seeing everyone in the same physical space creates this reality in the collective unconscious, like "oh, there are other people like me, I do have a community. I'll see them all at the party next week." That's a huge reason why I throw parties, because I think it's important. I crave being around other people that are like me and I like to create those spaces for stuff like that to happen. I think it's important for us to get out and be in public and be around like-minded folks. I think we do think about the world in specific ways that the majority of the population doesn't, so I think it's important. But a huge factor is that we don't have the resources to have permanent spaces, we don't own bars, or very few of us do. There's no lesbian bars here, there's not a lot of regular queer events here towards women. So, I think people are craving that. A community is like family and I need those people around, just to feel sane.

At first, Deep Lez was supposed to be a small event for lesbians and queer women to hang out, dance, drink, and meet each other. Laura's idea was to create the illusion of a lesbian bar for those two nights each month. But, as the party got more popular with both lesbians, and their straight or gay male friends, the vibe changed. Additionally, another neighborhood bar in

the area lost a lawsuit filed against them by the neighborhood association, leaving Deep Lez as an attractive option for those who used to frequent that bar. Laura explains that:

It didn't feel like a dyke party, it wasn't queer, it was some of the folks that was still our old regulars that had been coming to Deep Lez for a couple of years but at that point they really only made up half the population that was in there. We weren't pushed out, we decided to leave but we knew that it was getting to the point where the neighborhood association sent a letter to [the bar] saying that if they didn't start bringing the noise levels down at night that they were going to bring a lawsuit against them, they didn't start it yet but they had threatened to do it and I didn't want to be caught in the middle of making that happen for that bar because they had done so much for us so we just opted to move the party. We couldn't do what we used to do, no one was allowed to go out and socialize outside, we had to keep the music down, we had to turn off the music at a certain point, it was not the way that we had started the party, we just decided to move.

Laura tells me that as the party got more popular, after midnight on Tuesday nights the bar and sidewalk outside of the bar became packed with straight hipsters and punks, and it just was not a lesbian bar anymore. She says:

The neighborhood was changing. When we first started the party out there it was a really quite gay neighborhood bar where not a lot of people hung out, maybe late night a few service industry folks because it was a 24 hour bar, and then it was a couple of old queens, older gay men that would hang out in there. [The bar] has definitely changed after we brought that party there. I think part of it was bringing Deep Lez there, and I think a lot of it was also the other bars in the neighborhood closing. But ultimately, I think when you do bring a young, new, queer, hip party to a neighborhood bar, it does change it, and it kind of puts it on a different map and maybe that's not the best thing for the populations that hung out there before.

After two years at the bar in the Marigny, Laura moved the Deep Lez party to a gay bar in the French Quarter. She explains that the idea to move the party to the bar in the French Quarter was decided based on the fact that she wanted the bar to be a neighborhood bar, she wanted it to be gay owned, and she wanted there to be a pool table. So, she thought,

well, French Quarter, we can be loud, the noise complaint isn't going to be an issue. It seemed like a good fit, they loved us, the manager and the bartenders were really happy with us having the party there and it was okay for a minute.

But, there were a few issues with that space and Laura ultimately decided to move the party again.

I think maybe because it's in the French Quarter and its proximities to Bourbon Street, a lot less dykes came out. It was a lot more gay men that were coming out. It was a fun, queer dance party but it wasn't what Deep Lez was supposed to be, Deep Lez was meant to be a sort of chill lesbian dyke hang out to socialize and party. That's also why we had the pool table, we wanted people to socialize and meet other girls and stuff like that, and it didn't happen that way at [French Quarter Bar]. People didn't shoot pool as much, they started covering up the pool table at some point because there were so many people trying to dance. It really changed the dynamic. It seemed like a good idea at first, but we quickly realized that it wasn't a great idea and we wanted to recognize that there were other types of queers and people in the gay community that hung out at that bar before Deep Lez moved there.

Laura moved the party to another small bar in the Marigny, but only threw the party there a few times before she retired the party altogether. Finally, Laura decided to stop throwing the Deep Lez parties.

I took a break from it for a couple of months and I decided to retire the party altogether because I think it was very specific to a certain time in New Orleans and the neighborhoods have changed where we started the party. I don't think a bar like [Marigny Bar] exists anymore the way that it did three years ago, and I think even the queer community has changed with so many new people moving here. We used to start the party at 9 PM and the pool table was a big focal point of it for a long time, a lot of people hung out and were excited to shoot pool, and it was cute, we were trying to replicate a lesbian bar. Deep Lez is just a very special thing that happened at a point in time in New Orleans, and I just don't know if it exists anymore. Deep Lez ultimately became a wild time dance party, but it really honestly wasn't meant to be.

Laura tells me that although Deep Lez is over, she has not given up on creating spaces for lesbians and queer women in New Orleans. She is currently in the process of planning a new party, which will take place at another bar in the Marigny neighborhood, but this bar is closer to the corner of Elysian Fields where a few other bars are close together in a little strip. She says:

I think with the new party I'm really just throwing a dyke dance party. It's definitely all focused on women, I'm only booking lady DJs. I put a lot of thought into physical space before I actually throw the party. I definitely look for

bars that already are going to serve the purposes of what I'm trying to create. So, with this new party, the focal point is definitely going to be dancing but also I want there to be areas where people can hang out and socialize and talk, and then there are dark corners where people can make out, or hook up, or do whatever they want. This wasn't a reality before.

Laura's use of space goes beyond choosing the right venue, as she really pays attention to the layout of the spaces where she throws her parties. Laura explains in great detail how she intends on using the space:

I definitely looked at a handful of different spaces. I think that place is going to be really ideal, because people can hang out and smoke in the back courtyard, they don't have to be out front of the bar, which makes it feel a little bit more, not secret, but just private, or just our own. I feel that when you get a bunch of cute girls all dressed up standing outside of a club, people are going to want to come in. So, I think the smoking patio at the back of the bar is really nice, and it's kind of cute and romantic out there. Off to the right of the stage, there's a little lounge area where we're going to dim the lights and there's couches and books in there, so I think people can go in there and talk and make out and do whatever. You walk in and there's tables to the right where people can sit and talk if they don't feel like dancing, and hang out by the bar. There's a huge dance floor and a big stage.

Laura thinks the crowd will be very similar to Deep Lez.

It's definitely a younger crowd within their twenties and thirties, kind of hip, a lot of people who live downtown, people who by enlarge identify as queer.

Many of the attendees of Deep Lez, and those who are expected to attend the new party, are by enlarge people who have moved here since Hurricane Katrina.

The queer community has grown exponentially post Katrina. I think that the queer scene here in New Orleans is becoming more and more transplants, more people are moving to New Orleans who aren't from here as it's becoming more of a "hip city." We flock to specific urban centers. Places like New York and San Francisco are getting entirely too expensive for people to live in. Moving here, they're driving up the rental rates for sure.

I ask her about the impact of having to move the party, and then having to retire Deep Lez altogether, and she says:

I think that queer culture is fluid, they're constantly changing with time and also changing in physical space within cities and between cities. I think perhaps these two things are connected because the parties are temporary.

This shows that although lesbian and queer women are certainly spatially vulnerable in urban landscapes, the vulnerability of queer women's spaces can however be thought of in productive terms. When the Deep Lez party had to move, each different venue offered a new setting for starting over. In this sense, the space was not only temporary in terms of time, but also in space and experience each time.

## Chapter Four: Conclusion

As of 2012, there have been no lesbian bars or other commercial public institutions designated specifically to lesbians and queer women in New Orleans. When I began conducting this research in 2013, I was curious to find out how lesbians and queer women constructed social spaces of their own, and what these spaces meant for the women who participated in their production. The preoccupation with public visibility as a prerequisite for recognition of queer subjects in urban spaces negates the interdependent quality of lesbians' and queer women's experiences within imagined, remembered, and embodied spaces. The problem with adhering to the same neighborhood development models of that have been mostly limited to white gay men through the territorialization of queer urban enclaves, is that it overlooks the creative ways in which other groups have chosen to socialize and construct their own spaces of belonging.

The lesbian bars that existed in New Orleans during between the 1970s and 1990s were very spatially vulnerable to gentrification, the patrons were vulnerable to the threat of being 'outed' or to fall victims to hate crimes, and queer women were generally very vulnerable to becoming invisible under the 'queer umbrella.' The lesbian bars did, however, offer supportive spaces to those who needed them. Now, the temporary social spaces available to lesbians and queer women operate for that same purpose, to provide spaces where lesbians and queer women belong. For many working-class lesbians and queer women, the drag king shows provided a space of important financial, social, and emotional support. Likewise, the construction of space at Deep Lez's shifting locations provided the spatial representation of community belonging that an otherwise spatially vulnerable, dispersed group of lesbians and queer women did not have.

Although the existence of temporary queer women's social spaces only lasts as long as their events, an important component of extending the production of these spaces outside of

physical places themselves is based in the participation in dialogue about experiences and sharing stories from events. When the events themselves were not in session, symbolic discursive practices on social media sites extended the existence of these social spaces from their ephemeral spaces into virtual social imaginaries. On all other nights of the week, the spatial impact of the ephemeral queer women's spaces took on less physical forms and extended into virtual cyberspace via social media usage, through the sharing of photographs, and participation in discussion threads. Social media sites thus provided the platform for offering these spaces continuity and relevance outside of their allotted times and physical spaces.

It proved to be very difficult for both of the groups in my study to maintain the same space for an extended period of time, to keep their spaces female-focused, and to avoid conflict, but they always sought out ways to continue. The two events attracted very different crowds and thus constructed different kinds of spaces, but the overall goal of both events was the same: to offer a space for lesbians and queer women to gather in public. The notion of visibility within temporary queer women's spaces is different from other popular commercial queer institutions. Within these spaces, visibility is mostly internal. By being internally visible, participants were not necessarily seeking to become visible beyond the limits of the group. What was more important was being visible to each other, not to the public or anyone else.

I could not have predicted the frequent changes in venues for the two events I studied. At first, I thought that my research would be irrelevant and that my observations were immediately outdated. But, as I followed the events from one space to the next, I realized that the most important aspects of the creation of queer women's spaces were the queer women themselves. Using Jen Jack Giesecking's (2013) conceptualization of queer women's production of urban space as constellations, I found that the production of the queer women's spaces I studied for this

research worked to spatially ground a constellated network of lesbians and queer women in the city. Giesecking explains, with no

political, social, or economic resources to territorialize or memorialize, lesbians and queer women produce spaces through a mix of materiality, memory, and imagination that they pass on, reinterpret, and reinvent generation after generation (Giesecking, 2013, p. 274).

In this context, I particularly highlight the use of the body in rethinking social territories. By physically attending and returning to these events, the temporary queer women's spaces studied for this research were not just shared and experienced by various queer women, but more importantly, lesbians and queer women produced these spaces themselves each time, by being present. Every attendee took part in this production. Temporary spaces thus allowed queer women to be active members in the co-production of space and identity, just by showing up. When lesbian and queer women's bodies were absent from these imagined spaces, the spatial settings were emptied of their meaning as lesbian and queer women's spaces, and become what they were before.

This research was not done with the intention of charting lesbian and queer women's failure to sustain businesses of their own, or to specifically highlight the loss of past lesbian bars in New Orleans (although there are real emotions behind the loss of the past lesbian bars in the city). Instead, this research was done with the intention of giving shape to the visceral spaces between the public and the private, where belonging is only real for a limited time. I offer powerful narratives of the resilience of lesbians and queer women in contemporary New Orleans in navigating the challenges of organizing events for a dispersed, and spatially vulnerable group of lesbians and queer women. With this work, my main contribution is to bring attention to the cultural creativity employed by lesbians and queer women in using urban space to construct their own spaces of emotional refuge, social stimulation, and a spatial manifestation of belonging.



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## Appendix One

Date

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Professor Anna Brand in the Department of Planning and Urban Studies at the University of New Orleans. I am conducting a research on queer women's use of urban space in New Orleans, and the ways in which queer women produce, experience and manage urban space. I am requesting your participation, which will involve a 30 - 40 minute interview. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty, (it will not affect your treatment). The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used. If you have any questions concerning the research, please call me at 504-579-6225 or Dr. Brand at 504-280-7102. If you have any questions about your participation in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact Dr. Ann O'Hanlon at the University of New Orleans at 504-280-3990.

Sincerely,

Vigdís María Hermannsdóttir

**Appendix Two**  
Informed Consent Statement

**Queer Women’s Use of Urban Space in Post-Katrina New Orleans**

You are invited to participate in a research study about queer women’s use of urban space in post-Katrina New Orleans

If you agree to be part of the research study, you will be asked to answer questions about your experience, participation, or organization of female-focused queer spaces and events.

The interview will take between 30 – 40 minutes.

The benefits of the research may not affect you directly but will contribute to the body of knowledge on queer women’s experiences in New Orleans.

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. Even if you decide to participate now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You may choose not to answer any survey question for any reason. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty, (it will not affect your treatment). The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used in any public documents. Upon completion of the thesis research, voice recordings, notes, and transcriptions will be deleted by shredding paper documents and erasing digital files.

Your participation in this study indicates that you identify yourself as queer person. Thus, the primary risk of participation is that your status as a queer individual may be revealed to others should your participation in this study be discovered. To protect you from that risk, details about your personal identity will not be used in any part of the thesis and you will be assigned a non-identifying alias.

If you have questions about this research study, you may contact Dr. Anna Brand at (504) 280-7102.

Do you agree to participate in this study?  
Do you agree to have our interview recorded?

I agree to participate in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, please contact Dr. Ann O’Hanlon at the University of New Orleans (504) 280-3990.

**Appendix Three**  
Interview Guide

**Queer Women's Use of Urban Space in Post-Katrina New Orleans**

Interviewee:  
Interviewer:

Date and time of interview:  
Location of interview:

Brief background information on interviewee

Where are you from?

How long have you been in New Orleans?

Where do you live?

What is your occupation?

What is your educational background?

Could you tell me about your involvement with the queer women's groups in New Orleans?

Can you describe your experiences within female-focused queer spaces?

What neighborhoods in New Orleans do you consider "safe" for lesbians and queer women?

Are there neighborhoods/other specific urban areas that you aim to avoid?

If so, why?

Community

What is your perception of a "community?"

Is there a gay/queer community in New Orleans?

If yes, how is it maintained?

If no, is the lack of "community" a problem?

Is there a gendered divide within LGBT groups?

Elaborate.

On the group

What group of people comes to mind when you think of queer women in New Orleans?

Tell me about the Carnival Kings/Deep Lez/Other

Who are the group's members?

How did the group start?

How do members establish membership?

How do people hear about this group?

On scheduled events/meetings/gatherings

Who attends the events?

Who is the intended audience?

What goes on at these events?

How are events/meetings/gatherings advertised?

Who has access to the places at which information on events/meetings/gatherings is circulated?

Can you think of groups that may not have access to the information on these events/meetings/gatherings?

How do attendees get to the events/meetings/gatherings? Are they accessible?

How do attendees and organizers interact?

Is there a charge that attendees have to pay in order to participate in events/meetings/gatherings?

Can you briefly tell me about a typical event/meeting/gathering from beginning to end?

On space

Where do events/meetings/gatherings take place?

How did this group establish this space?

Why was this space chosen?

Can you describe the neighborhood in which this space is located?

How is this space used?

Who manages the use of this space?

What is the process of establishing space for queer women's use?

Are these events/meetings/gatherings to be visible and open to the public?

If yes, why?

If no, why not?

Is there a question that I did not ask that you think should be included in this interview?

## **Vita**

Vigdís María Hermannsdóttir was born in Reykjavík, Iceland in 1990. She lived between the city of Reykjavík, its suburbs of Kópavogur, a small village within the German city of Bielefeld, a farm in the countryside of North Iceland, and the small town of Akureyri, before moving to New Orleans in 2009. Her interest in the construction of social space stems from a life of moving and exploring, and the constant contemplations of what it means to belong. She graduated with a BA in Anthropology from the University of New Orleans in 2013.