

'Oh my god, I'm home': Lesbian nightlife in 1990s central Auckland

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Abstract

This article uses oral history to explore the lesbian spaces of 1990s Auckland city, including their social, cultural and political significance. Drawing on interviews conducted with four women familiar with these spaces, I consider a number of themes, including contextual information about the spaces; the homophobic cultural climate from which they emerged; their significance for the lesbian community; the lesbian culture of 1990s Auckland evident within them; the impact of their sometimes contentiously exclusive nature; and the evolving understandings of queer identity held by the LGBT community.

Keywords

LGBT, queer, lesbian, community, nightlife, homophobia, gender

Introduction

During the latter years of the 1990s, Karangahape Road was the beating heart of lesbian nightlife in Auckland city. Lesbian women met in the dark, smoky confines of permanent venues dedicated to them. The laughter, the chatter and the consumption of alcoholic beverages would centre around a ubiquitous feature of all lesbian spaces: the pool table. As the rhythm of the night increased in tempo, the groups of women would migrate to larger, often mixed-gender queer spaces where dancing would take precedence. The meanings of these physical spaces will be explored within this article, based on my interviews with four women that I conducted between April and August 2019: Sarah Buxton, Annalise Roache, Lisa Howard-Smith and Margaret Talbot.¹

Undeniably, women-only bars and nightclubs in Auckland city granted groups of friends exuberant fun at the weekend. Yet Margaret's reflection that some of 'the best years' of her life were spent bartending at lesbian bar Lasso, and Annalise's jubilant declaration that the spaces were 'almost like a community centre with beer', suggest a deeper emotional significance. This article will cover several themes: contextual information about these lesbian spaces; the homophobic cultural climate from which they emerged; how they functioned for the lesbian community; the identifiable lesbian culture of 1990s Auckland evident within them; the impact of their sometimes contentiously exclusive nature; and the evolving understandings of queer identity held by the LGBT community. Prior to tackling these topics, I will discuss my subjectivity and the theoretical framework I employ.

This oral history project falls within the scope of the transnational field of queer/LGBT histories. While located among specific geographical boundaries (Auckland city) at a specific point in time (the 1990s), my project provides insights into wider themes and challenges that arise within the modern histories of queer communities. I am queer myself and hold a shared identity with the women who formed the basis of my research. From the outset, this academic project has been inflected by my own subjectivity. My insider position within communities of

queer women in Aotearoa/New Zealand has fundamentally shaped my approach to this project. I was drawn to the topic as it promised personal enrichment – a way of understanding the joys and struggles inherent in my own community’s past. Personal friendship with Sarah facilitated the interviews that enabled this project to happen. My position within the community afforded me a more nuanced understanding of the internal conflicts that arose. Likewise, my age informed my theoretical approach to the research: post-structuralist reflections, which that developed in the 1980s (before I was born), are inherent to my understanding of personal identity – and by extension, sexuality – as a discursive formation that is influenced and mediated by other social factors such as gender, race and class (Corber & Valocchi, 2003, p. 5). Finally, my enthusiasm for this project emanated from my personal connection to it, which also continually propelled it forward. Thus, I am grateful that my insider position has enriched my academic research. My experience with this project has affirmed my alignment with historians who advocate for an embrace of subjectivity within research, in order to produce robust and dynamic histories. As Susan Crane so rightly notes, subjectivity offers a ‘unique set of insights’ (2006, p. 454).

Before I begin, let me explain the theoretical framework underpinning my approach to this project, elucidate the value of researching queer histories, and clarify my choice of terminology. Within the field of queer/LGBT histories there are two distinct theoretical approaches which are placed in binary opposition to each other: the identity-based approach and the queer theory approach. The former, also referred to as the ‘minoritarian model’, emerged out of the 1970s gay liberation movement in the United States (Corber & Valocchi, 2003, pp. 2-3). The identity-based approach to sexuality endowed marginalised sexual identities – predominantly gay and lesbian – with a sense of theoretical stability by pitting them against the dominant sexual norm: heterosexuality (Corber & Valocchi, 2003, p. 3). This approach was conducive to the activism of pioneering transgender people, lesbians and gay men of the 1970s and 1980s as it provided them with a fixed, shared identity from which to articulate their experiences of oppression and campaign for political equality (Corber & Valocchi, 2003, p. 2). However, in the 1980s, some academics grew frustrated by the limitations that punctuated the identity-based approach to queer/LGBT research. These wary scholars articulated a new theoretical approach to LGBT history: queer theory (Corber & Valocchi, 2003, p. 3). Embedded in queer theory are post-structuralist principles of identity, most prominently the notion that experience is constructed through discourse (Jagose, 1996, pp. 75-80). As such, sexual identity is inherently unstable, having held different significances for each distinctive human society (Jagose, 1996, pp. 75-80; Scott, 1991, p. 793; Corber & Valocchi, 2003, pp. 3-6). Queer theory was heavily informed by scholars of post-structuralism, such as Joan Scott, who argued that ‘Experience is a subject’s history. Language is the site of history’s enactment. Historical explanation cannot, therefore, separate the two’ (Scott, 1991, p. 793).

Both the identity-based approach and the queer theory approach to queer/LGBT histories hold benefits and limitations, and these arise not only in scholarly research, but in the lived realities of conflicts experienced by members of LGBT communities. Speaking of the identifiable lesbian sartorial styles of 1990s Auckland, Sarah articulated ‘a clash between this idea of old-school lesbian and new queer culture’. The discord existing between different generations of lesbian women was explored in a 1994 article in the esteemed feminist magazine *Broadsheet*, which claimed that ‘the traditional tenets of radical feminist activity are being ignored largely in favour of queer culture by younger lesbians’ (Goslyn & Cautlin, 1994, pp. 8-9). The attentiveness to this clash of cultures, voiced by Sarah and *Broadsheet* writers, demonstrates that the tensions between the two schools of queer/LGBT theoretical thought have resonance beyond the walls of the academy.

Relying too heavily on queer theory proves problematic for the historian seeking to make sense of the past. If sexuality is entirely fluid, then how can we possibly attempt to articulate the distinctions between identities that sit under the LGBT umbrella? Do these distinctions become trivial, despite carrying palpable meaning for many people? If sexuality manifests differently across human societies, then how do we fathom the very tangible forms of persecution that queer people have faced throughout history? I find resolution in the attention Regina Kunzel pays to the ‘productive interplay’ between queer theory and identity-based theory (2018, p. 1566). She argues that queer theory can inform identity-based approaches to LGBT history, and in doing so, can unite the two schools of thought. Kunzel combines the theoretical aspects of queer/LGBT research (the recognition that human sexuality is a social construct imbued with fluidity) with the practical dimension of research (the recognition that some members of the LGBT community find affirmation in conceiving of their sexual and gendered identities as fixed entities) (2018; also Lewis, 2013, p. 2). Western societies have often sought to deny queer people our humanity and agency; therefore, it is crucial that queer/LGBT histories restore mana rather than diminish it. I seek to do LGBT history queerly. Along these lines, queer theory informs my thinking about the history of the LGBT community in Aotearoa/New Zealand. I am attentive to the ways in which self-conception of sexual identity changes over time in relation to other social forces, but I also acknowledge the significant specificities of lesbian identity in the 1990s and how its rigid demarcations allowed women to find friends, build community and protect themselves against the hostility of heteronormative society in 1990s Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Let me turn now to my primary research methodology: orality. Orality is valuable within queer research for two primary reasons. First, it offers access to the history of less-documented members of the LGBT community, and second, it connects the scholarly iteration of queer history with its grassroots beginnings in the activist movements of the 1970s. A substantial portion of historical knowledge pertaining to LGBT lives and identities relies on the archival depository of police and court records – the results of a state-mandated regulation of non-normative sexualities that has occurred ubiquitously across Western societies (Kunzel, 2018, p. 1567). However, as Kunzel poignantly argues, this form of archival material is severely limited: it is overwhelmingly concerned with male same-sex desire and, consequently, ‘the field [of queer history] remains disproportionately focused on men’ (2018, p. 1577). Oral methodologies hold the potential to fill the void of historic experience of queer women, transgender people and gender non-conforming people because they connect historians directly with the voices of these marginalised members of the LGBT community. There is a striking lack of written source material regarding physical spaces for lesbian women in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Thus, this project would not have been possible without the use of oral history interviews.

The necessity of interpersonal engagement in queer research is a point that has been endorsed by prominent lesbian activist and academic Alison Laurie, who claims that a ‘major resource for primary study is contemporary New Zealand lesbians ourselves’ (2001, p. xvii). Moreover, queer history initially began outside of universities – it was pioneered by community historians, archivists and researchers, such as Miriam Saphira, who publicised the experiences of lesbian New Zealanders by curating the Charlotte Museum, located in the Auckland suburb of New Lynn (Saphira, 2019; see also Kunzel, 2018, p. 1560; McPherson, 2008, pp. 5-11). Therefore, as historians researching queer topics, we should seek to make our work accessible to the communities we represent and not confine ourselves to impermeable theoretical discussions. Oral histories represent an exciting terrain within the field of queer history; they enable historians to reach the experiences of traditionally subjugated members of LGBT communities and simultaneously foster connection between academics and grassroots researchers.

Finally, my use of terminology pertaining to the LGBT community will mirror Kunzel's own application. LGBT is an 'umbrella term' used to describe various sexually and gender diverse identities, which are united in their 'political collectivity' (Kunzel, 2018, p. 1564). These identities are non-normative in that they are not heterosexual (or cis-gendered). Lesbianism constitutes one part of this collective term. My interviewees defined their sexual identity in various ways – they used terms including 'dyke', 'lesbian', 'queer' and 'gay', as well as combinations of these. I use 'lesbian' to describe their collective identity as it was the term adopted most consistently by all four women. 'Queer' is steeped in political anarchic energy; it is a term that was previously used contemptuously against the LGBT community by their opponents (Kunzel, 2018, pp. 1564-1565). It has since been reclaimed by the community, holds connotations of social defiance and, simultaneously, operates as 'a critical lens to investigate challenges to normative modes of gender and sexuality' (Kunzel, 2018, p. 1565). In a nutshell, then, the LGBT community forms the subject matter of this essay, and I have used a queer analytical framework to explore and transmit their history.

Lesbian spaces

The physical spaces for lesbian women in 1990s Auckland were diverse. Some were social spaces, oriented around the consumption of alcohol and an embrace of nightlife, whereas others existed for the purposes of activist organising. The focus of this essay lies in the social spaces that thrived from 1995 to the early 2000s when they gradually began to disappear from Auckland's urban landscape. In their individual judgements of why these spaces were opened, my interviewees had varied opinions. Sarah felt that New Zealand women who had been living overseas were energised by the flourishing queer clubbing scene in cities like London and strove to replicate their experiences back home in Auckland. Margaret, however, ruminated on how these spaces were made possible by the groundwork laid by an older generation of lesbian activists. Hindsight prompted Margaret to conclude that partying in these spaces was a 'luxury'; she and her group of friends were among the first generation of 'party girl lesbians that hung out with the gay boys and weren't political'. Here, we gain insight into the social trajectory of the queer community in Aotearoa/New Zealand: while their identities still carried a sense of political potency due to the transgression of heteronormative cultural expectations, Margaret, Sarah and their friends were able to explore their identities in a more celebratory, casual manner than the older lesbian women who came before them.

In May 1992, the Midnight Club opened its doors to Auckland's LGBT population at 37 Albert Street ('Midnight Club', 1992, p. 3). The Midnight Club was a mixed space, which Margaret remembers was owned by 'two lesbians, one gay and one straight man', and as Lisa recalls, the atmosphere embraced a united sentiment of 'us queer folk'. Annalise, Margaret and Sarah only had brief encounters with the Midnight Club, as it closed with the advent of queer clubbing culture exploding in Auckland. In recounting her first impression of the club, Sarah revealed its traditional inclination: 'It was like walking into some lumberjack tavern. It was terrible!' Further, an advertisement in the *Tamaki Makaurau Lesbian Newsletter* admitted that although 'the disco is "not high-tech orientation like the Staircase"', efforts were being made 'to bring in the latest overseas dance music' ('Midnight Club', 1992, p. 3).

In contrast to the Midnight Club, the mention of Staircase excited Annalise – 'it was phenomenal, it was mind-blowing!' Located on Karangahape Road, Staircase was, in Sarah's view, 'the premier gay club in Auckland'. It existed mainly for men, but played host to hordes of lesbian women too. At the top of Staircase was Lasso – a popular bar for lesbian women with

with a separate entrance on Galatos Street – where Margaret worked as a bartender between 1995– 1996. Situated a short walk away from Karangahape Road, in Newton Gully, was the other permanent lesbian social space, the Footsteps pub. Annalise described Footsteps as a versatile venue owned by two ‘staunch’ lesbians; it functioned as a relaxed pub in the afternoon and early evening, before turning into what Lisa called a ‘pumping’ nightclub as the day turned to dusk. With its substantial capacity, Annalise recalled the hundreds of women who passed through its doors during its acclaimed New Year’s Eve parties.

Queer, mixed-gender venues were frequented by the lesbian community too. Directly across the road from Staircase was Legends, a place where ‘the wickedest shit used to happen’ (Sarah), and where Annalise remembers the resident drag queens, as kaitiaki of the space, keeping a watchful eye over the euphoric crowd. Numerous additional queer venues and monthly women’s nights cropped up during this time: Sinners, Karmo, Surrender Dorothy, Tongue and Groove, and Alfie’s. But Lasso, Footsteps and Legends featured most prominently in the memories of Sarah, Annalise, Margaret and Lisa.

Alongside these social spaces, my four interviewees spoke about key venues aimed at activist organising in which lesbian women congregated. Eminent in the latter category of lesbian spaces were Womenspace at the University of Auckland, Auckland Women’s Centre (originally located on Ponsonby Road but later on Warnock Street in Westmere), the Rainbow Youth offices on Karangahape Road and the Broadsheet Collective offices which had several incarnations (first on Karangahape Road, then on Poronui Street in Mount Eden, before shifting finally to Grey Lynn) and was home to the editorial team of feminist magazine *Broadsheet*. Additionally, Clown’s Restaurant and Indigo Café were lesbian-owned eateries that drew a queer crowd.

‘The case of the vanishing venues’

Lesbian-only social spaces began to disappear between the late 1990s and early 2000s, and with their departure, the notion of nightlife specifically for lesbian women became less common. The reasons offered by my interviewees for the sudden collapse of the venues were practical logistics and the evolving nature of queerness. Lisa and Annalise emphasised that the venues were not financially viable. Permanent venues Lasso and Footsteps struggled to make money during the week, and this was compounded by the fact that they appealed to a niche group of people. Lisa’s memories of her ex-partner almost declaring bankruptcy during her ownership of Tongue and Groove is reflected in an article in the *Tamaki Makaurau Lesbian Newsletter* entitled, ‘The case of the vanishing venues’ (1994, p. 3). The article aptly captured the decline among lesbian venues in its claim that change was ‘the only constant with women’s venues’. Lisa also cited the gender pay gap as a key cause of the bars’ financial implausibility. Across society, the combined forces of patriarchy and capitalism have long dictated that women do not earn as much money as men (Lerner, 1986, p. 235). As Lisa elaborated, ‘the lavender [lesbian] economy is not as robust [as the pink economy] ... so running clubs exclusively for women was really, really hard. They didn’t have the money’.²

For Sarah, the most compelling reason underlying the ‘death’ of lesbian social spaces was the rising rent costs on Karangahape Road and Ponsonby Road as the result of gentrification. Annalise echoed Sarah’s sentiment, stating ‘the nail in the coffin for me, on Ponsonby Road, was when Pumpkin Patch moved in seven or eight years ago’. Queer spaces were forced out of the Karangahape Road and Ponsonby Road locality to make space for wealthy, well-established brands. The radical energy of the area was diluted by the arrival of soulless shop-fronts seeking profit at the expense of community-building. But concomitantly, the conceptions of queerness

held by the lesbian community were developing and moving, from solidarity based on identity-specificity towards a more holistic and inclusive articulation of community. As Annalise and Margaret both noted, alongside increased societal ‘acceptance’ of queer identities, women were drawn towards less exclusive venues – places where their bisexual and gay male friends, as well as straight women allies, would be welcome too.

Lesbian social spaces existed in response to the needs of the 1990s lesbian community in Auckland and fulfilled several functions. They provided safety, affirmed womanhood, facilitated community building and, perhaps most explicitly, they were fun. The Homosexual Law Reform Act of 1986 brought issues regarding the persecution of LGBT people in Aotearoa New Zealand to the forefront of collective consciousness – the campaign and ensuing legislative act represented a significant ‘turning point’ for the LGBT community (Laurie, 2004). However, legal decriminalisation of homosexuality did not end social stigmatisation of LGBT identities. Homophobia persisted and manifested most prominently in the verbal and physical abuse of LGBT people. Annalise remained closeted at her workplace after overhearing a conversation in the breakroom in which a colleague used a homophobic slur and boasted about how he intended to discriminate against a gay couple who had approached the government housing service. Both Annalise and Margaret were recipients of homophobic violence. Annalise was hit by a man on Karangahape Road following a night spent at Footsteps, and Margaret was knocked unconscious by a group of men during a ‘Hero’ festival (the precursor to Pride festivals) on Ponsonby Road. The sad irony linking these two instances of homophobic violence is glaringly obvious: they took place within the geographical area home to Auckland’s most renowned queer venues. Homophobic violence penetrated the spaces in which the LGBT community should have been safest. Verbal abuse was pervasive too. Annalise spoke of being yelled at by passing cars, recalling that ‘you’d be walking down K [Karangahape] Road and you’d get people driving past yelling out the window, “lesbian!”’ before continuing on with a defiant smirk, ‘like, yeah, good spotting dude! You’re onto it!’ Margaret commented on the casualness of homophobia manifest in verbal abuse, saying ‘you’re aware of it all the time ... you’re so gay... anytime anyone says that’. Both Annalise and Margaret embodied gutsy resilience, a skill that LGBT communities across the world are proficient in, as they ruminated on their encounters with homophobia. ‘You can either act like that sort of thing ruined your life’, remarked Margaret, ‘or you can just get on’.

Despite the women’s stoicism, spaces in which lesbian women could socialise and be openly romantic with other women without fear of repercussion were essential for the lesbian community in 1990s Auckland. The clubs functioned as sanctuaries – this was emphasised by all four women repeatedly. Lisa likened the clubs to heaven: ‘Going into a place that was exclusively lesbian was wonderful, it was indescribable, it was nirvana’. Sarah spoke to the ‘internal personal freedom’ the spaces provided, a sentiment echoed by Annalise: ‘It was like coming home. Walking through the door like, ah, I can take the armour off’. Evidently, then, lesbian nightclubs and bars were more than arenas for alcohol-soaked antics. They were havens in which refuge from an often-hostile society could be attained.

The safety ensured by lesbian social spaces meant they were fertile ground upon which to foster community. Pre-established friend groups would enter the spaces together and emerge broadened because of the new connections they made. Due to working as a bartender at Lasso, the most prominent lesbian bar in Auckland, Margaret was frequently invited to parties and found herself immersed in a thriving queer social scene: ‘Everything was lesbian parties, lesbian friends, and the comradery ... it was just incredible’. Reflecting on how women would have responded on the rare occasions that men attempted to enter the spaces, purposefully ignoring the women-only door policy, Annalise declared that ‘it would have been war’.

Despite the endurance of the friendships fostered amidst the electric energy of Lasso and Footsteps, all my interviewees expressed a definitive opinion that the spaces could not be recreated today. Alongside the idea that lesbian spaces are too exclusive to function as financially viable businesses, Annalise voiced a belief that the spaces responded to the immediate needs of the community in that specific moment: ‘The right things happen at the right time and then it has to stay there and we move on, we broaden our understanding of humanity’. Likewise, Margaret told me that ‘the need [for lesbian bars] slowly disappeared’. Residing in the spaces was a distinctive sense of togetherness and solidarity between lesbian women, but over time, understandings of solidarity within the LGBT community changed, resulting in less of a need for exclusive lesbian social spaces.

Inside Lasso and Footsteps, women dressed in keeping with the lesbian trends and culture of the day. According to Heather McPherson and Fran Marno, lesbian identity is manifest in numerous aspects of personal expression, including ‘our lifestyles, the way we dress, our body language’ (2008, p. 26). Thus, lesbian identity is symbolised and represented through aspects of physical appearance. During all four interviews, when the women spoke about the protocols of lesbian-only spaces and lesbian culture discernible in fashion trends, I was reminded of Kunzel’s assertion that the history of LGBT people is ‘bounded both temporally and geographically’ (2018, p. 1563). Lisa described the sartorial styles of New Zealand lesbians as ‘androgynous’, while Sarah similarly defined them as ‘gender-neutral’. There were clear-cut rules regarding the physical appearance of lesbians – what Annalise and Margaret referred to (respectively) as the ‘dyke uniform’ and ‘lesbian uniform’. As Annalise and Sarah both noted, failure to comply with these rules could culminate in denial of entry to bars and derision from other lesbian women. Internal community politics were at play, and while the benefits of belonging were abundant, membership was based on adherence to a static, narrow conception of what constituted lesbian identity. As Sarah explained, ‘women-only spaces were still quite stereotyped, you know? You came out as a lesbian and there was nothing else. And their interpretation was that lesbians were a certain way and looked a certain way.’ When I inquired about what lesbian fashion in the 1990s looked like, my four interviewees’ responses aligned almost word for word: Dr Martens boots, short haircuts, black jeans and a distinct lack of lipstick. Certain symbols were worn as pieces of jewellery to indicate lesbian identity. The labrys – a double-headed axe holding associations with warrior women from Greek mythology – is the most notable symbol pertaining to lesbian identity (McPherson & Marno, 2008, p. 39). Additionally, Lisa recalls that purple and lavender colours were connotated with lesbianism. These lesbian fashion trends, perceivable in the queer social spaces of Auckland during the 1990s, functioned as visual identifiers of sexual identity and carried significance for women who used such styles to navigate their social interactions.

A changing community

I gained an understanding from Sarah, Annalise and Margaret that they felt their generation of lesbian women had been a community on the precipice of change during the latter years of the 1990s. This was apparent in their conflicted feelings regarding the politics of inclusion and exclusion that determined admittance to the social spaces they had spent time in during their twenties. The identity-specific nature of the lesbian social spaces benefitted young lesbian women in many ways, but the guidelines by which entry was premised concomitantly precipitated the exclusion of others. My interviewees expressed a shared sentiment of unease regarding the exclusivity of lesbian spaces, which periodically culminated in marginalisation

of other members of the LGBT community. Some aspects of the exclusionary entry policies were undeniably conducive to the wellbeing of young lesbian women. As has been previously established, the policies guaranteed women's safety; Annalise emphasised the uniqueness of being able to pursue romantic and sexual relationships with other women without fear of homophobic retaliation: 'You couldn't do that easily in other spaces safely'. Moreover, LGBT identities are frequently subject to politicisation through campaigns to end legislative discrimination spanning a range of issues, such as marriage and adoption rights, and the right to self-identify our genders (McDonald, 2001, p. 144; Lomax, 2004). The politicisation of LGBT identities can be stifling and confronting for young people in the nascent stages of developing their personhood.

Despite being politically active personalities, both Margaret and Annalise prioritised their well-being over political activism after coming out as lesbian. 'I was political before I came out', noted Annalise, 'but I think my own personal need overrode my own social conscience. I was more interested in my own, getting to know myself I guess, because coming out for me was like a second adolescence. I felt like I met myself for the first time'. Encoded in Annalise's testimony of her coming-out experience was the articulation of a need for spaces in which members of the LGBT community can flourish, free from pervasive political argumentation seeking to regulate our bodies, relationships and lives. Related to the physical safety and freedom from politicisation provided by queer social spaces, Lisa argued that women-only spaces allowed lesbians to escape the male gaze: 'It's like, well, the intention wasn't for men to get off on anything'. While women-only door policies and the lesbian separatist values evoked in the *Tamaki Makaurau Lesbian Newsletter* may have seemed excessive to some, they nevertheless emanated from a deep-seated desire to guarantee lesbians freedom from violence perpetrated by men, as well as freedom from the trivialisation of their identities. The policies excluding men and heterosexual people created uniquely affirming spaces for lesbian women, but, as I will explore next, the exclusive policies became counter-intuitive at times.

Among the detrimental consequences of lesbian-only spaces were their insularity, practical inconvenience, and most compellingly, the perpetuation of marginalisation of other oppressed minority groups within the LGBT community. Annalise expressed regret over how socialising predominantly in queer spaces led to her friendships with straight people falling 'by the wayside'. Likewise, Margaret admitted to feeling 'claustrophobic' at points due to her full immersion in the queer social scene. This sense of claustrophobia motivated Margaret to seek 'a bit more balance', and, as a way of honouring this pursuit, she came out to straight friends from her adolescence spent in Papakura. In terms of practicality, the identity-specific policies of lesbian-only spaces proved to be a logistical nuisance at times. From March 1990 until the magazine's end, Lisa was an employed member of the Broadsheet Collective (see 'Fronting Up: Collective Changes', 1990, p. 4). She related to me a 'conundrum' experienced by the collective at one of their fundraiser dances, when it transpired that the drummer of the band booked to play was the brother of the lead singer. The presence of a man was jarring for many of the women, who had arrived at the dance anticipating a space free from masculinity.

However, the feature of lesbian-only women's spaces that Sarah, Annalise, and Margaret felt most conflicted over was the way in which their identity-specific policy caused feminine-presenting lesbians, bisexual women and transgender people to be excluded from the lesbian community. Annalise recalled that feminine-presenting lesbians and bisexual women were 'ogled' and 'harassed' for their transgression of community expectations, which dictated that lesbians would present androgynously, in the aforementioned 'dyke uniform', and be romantically interested solely in women. Both Lisa and Sarah relayed stories to me in which their friends were denied entry to lesbian clubs for donning a dress or wearing lipstick. Margaret

lamented the derision shown by the lesbian community to bisexual women, recognising the predicament inherent in one marginalised community further marginalising others: ‘Everyone was quite damning of one another, and I remember thinking, God it’s hard to come out. Why are we doing this to other people?’

While bisexuality was ridiculed and feminine presentation discouraged, transgender identity was invisible in lesbian spaces, a point reiterated by all my interviewees. When transgender people were occasionally present in these spaces and open about their gender identity, it tended to be controversial, inciting debate, as Sarah noted, over ‘who was welcome where’. The debate infiltrated lesbian and feminist publications too. It first entered the *Tamaki Makaurau Lesbian Newsletter* in April 1995, where various views were expressed on the matter. One woman, espousing sentiments from the lesbian separatist movement of the 1970s, remarked that while transgender people should not be oppressed by lesbians, there was no place for them in lesbian spaces, as incorporation of their struggles would lead to a ‘loss of focus’ (‘The transexual debate’, 1995). Contrarily, another contribution to the same edition of the newsletter (‘Sexual apartheid’, 1995) reflected the more all-encompassing attitudes held by my interviewees. The contribution ended on an impactful rhetorical note, stating: ‘Surely the struggle for lesbian pride has taught us the pain and cost of intolerance?’ (‘Sexual apartheid’, 1995).

The unwavering certainty expressed by all four of my interviewees over how lesbian-only social spaces could not, and should not, be re-established was directly related to their desire for LGBT communities to move towards unconditional acceptance of divergent identities within the political collectivity. This was also informed by their knowledge that transgender people continue to experience exceedingly harmful persecution at the hands of much of contemporary society. In the early 2000s, non-governmental organisation Rainbow Youth – formerly Auckland Lesbian and Gay Youth (ALGY) – aided understanding of divergent gender identities within the wider LGBT community and set up a support group for young transgender people (Rainbow Youth, n.d.). Margaret’s involvement with Rainbow Youth as a supportive adult was the environment in which she became aware of and empathetic towards trans issues. Referencing the contemporary rise of ‘trans exclusionary radical feminists’ (TERFs), Annalise expressed deep sadness that some factions of the lesbian community continue to discriminate against transgender people today: ‘How dare you [TERFs] be so cruel ... when that was done to us we were told that we were having a phase, we were told that it was unnatural, we were told that we didn’t actually exist!’

Herein lies the fundamental dilemma of identity-specific social spaces: while well intentioned, the sexual and gendered expressions of the LGBT community are too diverse to be confined within restrictive boundaries. In their yearning for LGBT social spaces to become more inclusive, my interviewees encapsulated the dynamic spirit of LGBT self-conceptualisation, which began to transition in the 1990s from identity-based understandings to the more fluid iteration of ‘queer’, as advanced by post-structuralist theory. This theory had practical reverberations and influenced how lesbian women thought of their social spaces. Consequently, ‘the concept of a pre-discursive, unified identity’ was abandoned ‘in favour of multiple identities cutting across each other in their permanent alteration’ (Koller, 2008, p. 114). The evolving understandings of identity held by the LGBT community took shape alongside developments in queer theory, and were accompanied by aspirations rooted in human empathy to expand the supportive reach of the venues.

Concluding thoughts

The bars and clubs for lesbian women in central Auckland during the 1990s did not prosper financially and their doors only remained open over the course of a five-year period. Perhaps this explains why written evidence of their existence is hard to find. But such an omission from the history of LGBT communities in Aotearoa/New Zealand is unforgivable, for they were spaces in which community was built, enjoyed, critiqued, restructured and ultimately, broadened. By delving into their history through oral testimonies I discovered sites of resistance which offered shelter from pervasive homophobic violence. Sites in which lesbian women felt safe being honest about their sexuality for the first time in their lives. Sites in which hedonistic fun and an earnest quest for solidarity occurred simultaneously. Sites in which women initiated nuanced conversations regarding the nature of belonging to a community. Thus, women leant against walls inscribed with the spirit of collective resilience.

For a time, lesbian women needed these social spaces. They were sanctuaries. The internal politics of these spaces were unique to Aotearoa/New Zealand, but the meaning they held for the lesbian community reveals a transnational consistency. For, the history of LGBT communities in the United States and United Kingdom likewise points to the relevance of bars as places in which LGBT people congregate and ‘develop a sense of shared experience’ (Beemyn, 1997, p. 3). Turning our attention now to the future, we can see that global politics form an increasingly frightening landscape, within which those with xenophobic attitudes are becoming emboldened. In light of this treacherous cultural climate, history has become an anchor for communities like mine, allowing us to stand up against bigoted violence and in spirited solidarity with each other. As eminent historian and advocate of women’s history Gerda Lerner professed, ‘In preserving the collective past and reinterpreting it to the present, human beings define their potential and explore the limits of their possibilities. We learn from the past not only what people before us did and thought and intended, but we also learn how they failed and erred’ (1986, p. 221). Against the backdrop of resurgent homophobic violence lies an enduring need for inclusive spaces in which queerness is celebrated. The lesbian spaces of 1990s Auckland were not without their problems, but they offer a sturdy foundation from which to build upwards.

HARRIET WINN lives in London and is a support worker within the homelessness sector. She is passionate about queer community, social justice, and believes in the power of public history to create a more empathetic world. She has an Honours degree in history from the University of Auckland, and hopes to undertake a Master’s degree in queer history sometime in the future.

Notes

1. The content of this article is based on interviews with four LGBTQ Aucklanders: Sarah Buxton, Annalise Roache, Lisa Howard-Smith and Margaret Talbot. Sarah was interviewed by Harriet Winn on 20th April 2019; Annalise on 5th August 2019; Lisa on 9th August 2019; and Margaret on 10th August 2019. All four women have given informed, written consent for this article to be published and for their names to be used. Any information pertaining to the bars and the nightlife scene, as well as quotes, are taken directly from these four interviews.
2. For more on the ‘pink dollar’ versus the ‘lesbian dollar’, see Hyman (2001, p. 123).

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