

Preface

Drunk History, or I Just Wanna Hear a Good Beat

This preface addresses my academic readers. If you don't have a stake in scholarly questions or methods, feel free to skip ahead to the introduction. But before you do, you'll likely want to take a gander at figure P.1 on page xvi.

Despite the omnipresence of gay bars and nightclubs, until recently we have had little published work that offers a panoramic historical analysis of them. Around 2008, I realized that no academic book had synthesized the cultures and politics of gay bars during the era when they have been most visible, so I set out to write one before they disappeared. A more personal impetus was that I felt starved for nightlife, which previously had been ingrained in my life rhythms, after moving into faculty housing for a new job; research became my peculiar way to manifest a connection to the broader queer world. This book presents fifteen years of researching, writing, and rethinking. My original goal was to complete this book before the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall riots in 2019, but these things—as well as school commitments, doom-scrolling, and life itself—take time. In this interval, many gay bars have closed and a few new ones have opened. As it turns out, this book is not an elegy. The gay bar as an institution has not died, nor have its cultures ended.

When I began working on this project and talking to other people, I quickly recognized that everyone had a different personal take on bar history, on what about it matters, and on which bars define those pasts. Bar

histories are inevitably subjective: what was reported, what was collected, what caught one's attention, where one went, who one talked to, if one had fun, and if one got lucky. One's understanding of the past depends on what one's looking for and what structures one's perspective, including taste, politics, generation, and location. Like a disco ball, which is "not made of a single mirror, but numerous tiny mirrors [that] each reflects and refracts light at different angles," historical interpretation and personal experience evoke the "generative flashes of nows in which pasts are present."¹ My title gestures toward plural histories and cultures because no singular experience of the past exists.

Scholars have produced historical work that recovers local pasts, social science studies that chart contemporary shifts, and performance theories that open up queer affects, liveness, mediation, and ephemera.² Significantly, much of the essential scholarship thinking with queer communities of color takes up the capacious framework of *queer nightlife* rather than focusing on bars per se, at least in part because bars have histories of exclusion, as I detail in chapter 3.³ I have worked to negotiate between and beyond these methods. Three intersecting books were published as I was completing this project: Jeremy Atherton Lin's *Gay Bar*, a memoir-driven set of reflections aimed at a popular audience; *Queer Nightlife*, a performance studies anthology on nightlife practices, capaciously conceived; and Greggor Mattson's *Who Needs Gay Bars?*, an ambitious nationwide sociological study of gay bars and their diversity in the present, based upon interviews with bar owners. Two more books have been in the pipeline concurrently with mine: Luis Manuel Garcia-Mispireta's *Together, Somehow*, which examines intimate collectivities on the queer dance floor, and Amin Ghaziani's forthcoming *Long Live Queer Nightlife*, which responds to a proliferation of queer happenings in the wake of gay bars' widespread closures. Each makes a significant contribution, and each has its own orientation that differs from my archival account of gay bar modes and meanings. This wave of scholarship suggests a belated critical mass of attention to gay bars and clubs. As I have argued previously, technologies capture our attention most intensely at moments of ballyhooed newness and apparent obsolescence; the same logic extends to bars and nightlife.⁴

My home discipline of cinema and media studies prepared me to think through the significance of the popular, the pervasive, even the pornographic; I'm drawn to texts, technologies, and infrastructures that achieve cultural saturation but that have been so obvious as to become overlooked. As a media scholar, I have in some senses invented my methods for this

project, but I effectively approach gay bars as a *medium*: a form that gives structure to social actions and worldviews, that poses expressive conventions, and that constrains what's possible given its inherent properties. Analyzing bars as a medium allows us to grapple with their affordances, limitations, and contradictions for cultivating queer sensibilities and for articulating community politics. Bars function as *queer forms*, as Ramzi Fawaz theorizes the concept: “*enabling structures*” that give shape to queer identities, experiences, and politics. Such forms “establish the conditions for something new to appear in the world, including previously unfathomable expressions and interpretations of gender and sexual being.”⁵ Bars constitute physical venues and cultural expressions—forms in both senses of the word.

Thinking about and with gay bars demands negotiating between bars' material conditions (such as their status as businesses, their built environments, and the various transactions that happen between men inside them) and their ideological functions (expressed in advertisements, the gay press, and activism) as representations of and even *as* the LGBTQ+ community. I understand my access to bygone gay bars as mediated by representations and texts—from gay press reporting, ads, and party flyers to songs that I streamed to simulate how the past might have sounded and felt. I am present throughout this book to situate my interpretations and historiographic vantage point.

In many cases, advertisements are what remain of bars that have closed and buildings that have been razed. Such ads have always been *texts* that construct enchanting images of bars for their prospective clientele rather than indexically record their actuality. Early on in this research, I became fascinated by an ad featuring a perverse sketch of a lion mounting a macho clone from behind (see figure P.1). This ad, for the Lion Pub in San Francisco, was part of a series that traded in problematic safari and conquest imagery; the campaign ran in the *Advocate* and the *Bay Area Reporter* over the course of a year and was so popular that the bar produced posters and T-shirts from it. As in most bar ads, the space and the people who go there remain out of sight. This ad expressed a *sensibility* rather than documented a place; the slogan “midnight thinking” suggests a logic—even a form of knowledge—unique to the gay bar milieu. Like the ad's scene of bestiality, its come-on, “animals love maneaters,” was confounding, titillating, and evocative; the artist lovingly sketched the image so that the lion's curled tongue appears both affectionate and primal. The viewers' identification likely shifted between wanting to be the lion and

animals love maneaters

the LION PUB
where midnite thinking begins daily at 5pm
sacramento & divisadero ~ san francisco

WEAR IT or NAIL 'EM TO THE WALL!
T-Shirts \$5.00 by Mail Order (\$3.50 at the Pub) or Posters [20x26] \$2.00 by Mail Order (\$1.00 at the Pub).

Please send me _____ T-Shirts Small Medium Large / and _____ Posters. Check or money order payable to THE LION PUB enclosed for the total amount \$ _____. California residents please add 6% sales tax.

Name _____ Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Mail to: THE LION PUB, 2062 Divisadero, San Francisco, CA 94115.

FIGURE P.1 “Animals Love Maneaters” was the most popular in a series of mid-1970s safari- and conquest-themed fantasy advertisements for the Lion Pub in San Francisco. This image appeared in the local and national gay press and was available on posters and T-shirts (see the order form at the bottom of the image). *Bay Area Reporter*, November 26, 1975. Courtesy of ONE Archives at the USC Libraries.

desiring to be the man. This ad constructed a dreamworld that radically transgressed sexual taboos and fostered versatile subject positions. More people would have seen this ad than ever crossed the bar’s threshold, so the bar remained in many readers’ imaginations a place where men hunt for and submit to whatever pleasures may come. I have been attracted by the ad’s audacity and sense of fabulation; it queerly refused plausibility or convention in favor of envisioning wild possibilities.⁶

I have sought to be a rigorous queen in my research without losing sight that people go to bars to have *fun*. Following the philosophy usually attributed to Mae West and Liberace, I believe that too much of a good thing can be wonderful. One might claim that indulgence has been my primary method for conveying bars’ vivacity. For more than a decade, I spent days

working through materials in community archives and nights exploring unfamiliar cities to try to map the past on to the present landscape. I have relied on the kindness of strangers and near-strangers as gateways to their cities: archivists who welcomed me, colleagues I cold-contacted, people I met on apps, and men with whom I danced to Rihanna at Twist in Miami Beach and to Britney Spears at the Max in Omaha.⁷ Most of the bars I write about closed long before I began my research, so I can only infer what they were like by listening to others' accounts. Throughout this book, I draw on anecdotes as evidence of gay bars' meanings. Recounted bar stories tend to be 80 proof, spiked with innuendo and embellishment, but it may be these excesses that precisely reveal the thirsts that bars sought to satiate.⁸

My primary sources for this project come from the archives. Queer archives and collections are usually local, subjective, partial, and idiosyncratic. What makes these archives *queer* is not only the sexuality of their caretakers but also what they *value* as significant expressions of our cultural heritage and what erotic, campy, or glittering forms they may take.⁹ Only in queer collections was I likely to encounter newspaper clippings pasted to letterhead for the movie *Beaches* or rhinestoned disco shoes lovingly preserved in tissue paper.¹⁰ When I came across an ad for the Copa Disco in Fort Lauderdale announcing appearances by both Madonna and Divine during the same weekend in 1983, I squeed as I imagined having been there.¹¹ Other times, when I flipped through photo albums, I found myself looking at pictures of unidentified men from another time in bars that had closed long ago. Such photos showed someone else's memories, like intimacy without familiarity or context; they communicated what I couldn't know for sure yet stimulated something like recognition for me.

Outcomes, rather than intentions, remain speculative in the queer archive.¹² I have encountered numerous fragmentary documents of bar activism in process: flyers soliciting participants for protests, anticipatory reporting in the gay press, proposals for organizations and for policy reform, and handwritten notes and edits on drafts. What I have found far less often are follow-up accounts or any kind of closure that confirmed what actually happened, who showed up, or what changed. Likewise, numerous collections contain matchbooks and trick cards from bars, which include blank lines for information such as name, phone number, type, fetish, or sexual position. Hula's in Waikiki produced matchbooks with a line for designating "island." Others, such as a matchbook from Tiffany's in Detroit, offer space to collect multiple numbers, thereby promoting a culture of promiscuity.¹³ These objects point to the *potential* for social

and sexual contacts in bars, but they do not document whether the men ever actually called, how the sex was, or whose heart was broken. As Lin suggests, “Gay history is a palimpsest of *what ifs*,” and “gay bars are about potentiality, not resolution.”¹⁴

Queer theory has for decades embraced ephemera over permanence and exploded the concept of the archive to suggest that any text, object, or even affect might operate as an “archive.” Archives, including queer archives, have been critiqued for excluding marginalized perspectives as unworthy of documenting and for reinforcing definitions of “evidence” that serve to delegitimize queer, women’s, trans, and BIPOC scholarship and lives.¹⁵ Still, I insist that both actually existing queer archives and the gay press provide essential access to how queer life and culture were represented *by* LGBTQ+ people *for* LGBTQ+ people. The gay press (now typically housed in queer archives) remains a largely untapped resource for historians and one of the few sites where the LGBTQ+ past was narrated in its present. In the archives I have found, again and again, that so many of our current critiques, frictions, and activisms among and between queer people were previously incisively debated decades ago; we have much to learn from this well-documented record that has become neglected. We must engage and learn from these collections, even as we remain cognizant of the ideologies that shape and buttress them.

As a study of US gay bars, this book inevitably examines many predominantly white male venues that effectively defined or reflected public gay cultures and histories. In my research, I have found that gay bars by and large really were *that white* and *that male*. To suggest otherwise would be misrepresentative and ahistorical; this book’s emphasis on predominantly white male venues derives from my attempt to accurately reflect my research findings. The overwhelming whiteness of this book’s exemplary bars—and its images that reflect what bars looked like and who they sought to attract—demonstrate the necessity for the protests and alternative venues in chapters 4 and 8. I attempt, however imperfectly, to study these venues in their full complexity: to recognize their potentials for personal and social transformation while also holding them accountable for their past and present wrongs. Rather than reductively position bars as good or bad, however, I look to them to understand how they made gay subcultures intelligible and inspired political debate.

This book takes an admittedly urban framework, both because what we think of as gay bars have primarily existed in cities and because the gay press and community-based archives that have documented gay bars

are likewise usually products of urban densities. Challenging the logics of the urban-rural dichotomy, my generation of scholars argues for the significance of suburban and small-city “micropolitan” formations.¹⁶ Today, outpost gay bars, which serve as the only gay bar in their town or region, have become one of the most pervasive kinds of gay bars; there are more towns with one gay bar than cities with multiples.¹⁷ The documentary *Small Town Gay Bar* demonstrates that such places can also be wilder than what one finds in cities.¹⁸ There are also remote regions of the country where gay public spaces simply do not exist, so patrons must drive hours to access a bar—if they can find one at all.¹⁹ I grew up on the northern plains in a small town without a gay bar; as an adult I have chosen to live in New York City, Minneapolis, and Los Angeles (and have moved back and forth between them). I recognize that queers exist beyond cities, but my own story nonetheless resembles those of many others who looked to urban beacons to imagine and make new lives.

This is but one necessarily partial chronicle of the more complex histories and cultures of gay bars in the United States after 1960. I allowed the serendipity and the *punctum* of the archive to reveal which stories I could tell and in which cities they would be set.²⁰ Half the chapters developed out of local archival collections (in the cases of Chicago, Kansas City, Atlanta, and Houston) and others out of flurries of articles in the local gay press that I paged through at the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles (in the cases of Boston, New York, and San Francisco). The Los Angeles chapter came out of living there and collaboration, which afforded a hybrid methodology and voice. Some of the bars that I write about wouldn’t have been my own choice of scene, but they nonetheless exemplified their cultures, their cities, and their times.

I conducted research in more cities than I could include, and this book does not pretend to be encyclopedic. I do not discuss resort areas such as Provincetown and Palm Springs, nor do I emphasize the most iconic gay ghettos, including the Castro, the West Village, or West Hollywood. Likewise, various genres of bars do not get their own chapters, including lesbian, country-western, piano, hotel, hustler, hipster, video, sports, stripper, wrinkle room, and chicken bars.²¹ (However, I do note that my boyfriend, Ernesto, fondly recalls singing “Part of Your World” atop the piano as a pretty young thing at the Townhouse of New York piano bar, which attracted older midtown gentlemen; he was proud that he rarely had to buy his own drinks there.)²² Throughout, I prioritize attention to the spaces that gay men have created and the community debates that

they raised rather than to external forces that have constrained them. This means that I reference liquor laws, zoning, police payoffs and raids, and organized-crime ownership of bars as context rather than centering these issues. Not everything I learned could be included; for instance, in San Antonio I was told that after World War II, military police raids and inclusion on “off-limits” lists simultaneously prohibited and publicized gay bars near military bases for servicepeople in an era before they could be openly gay.²³ Gay bar history also includes an alarming prevalence of fires from electrical malfunctions and arson—by homophobes, aggrieved patrons, competing entrepreneurs, and bar owners themselves. In New Orleans I conducted research on the June 1973 Up Stairs Lounge fire, which killed thirty-two patrons, but this tragedy has been thoroughly documented elsewhere.²⁴ Finally, although I have experienced the invasion of gay male bars by straight bachelorette parties, I do not dwell on this or other tensions caused by the dilution of queer spaces in recent decades.²⁵

My own bar years span the mid-1990s to the present. My formative exploration of gay bars happened in the company of (then) female-identified queer friends. These outings just predated the transformative effects of both the internet and highly active antiretroviral treatments for HIV/AIDS. What I’ve found in the archives has often felt familiar, insofar as virtually everything I know of gay bars has had precedents. It appears that gay bars of the recent past and present are ingrained cultural institutions that adapt to current tastes and trends rather than creating wholly new paradigms. For instance, now-ubiquitous karaoke nights—which arguably replaced the old-school piano bars—incorporate the attraction into preexisting spaces.²⁶ Nonetheless, gay bars can still feel essential and ingenious (see the Denton interlude). I’ve recognized that my students perennially experience going out with a euphoric sense of discovery. I have tried not to kill their joy but have tried to train them to think critically about these spaces and to recognize that they have histories. I hope I have done the same here for you, my readers.